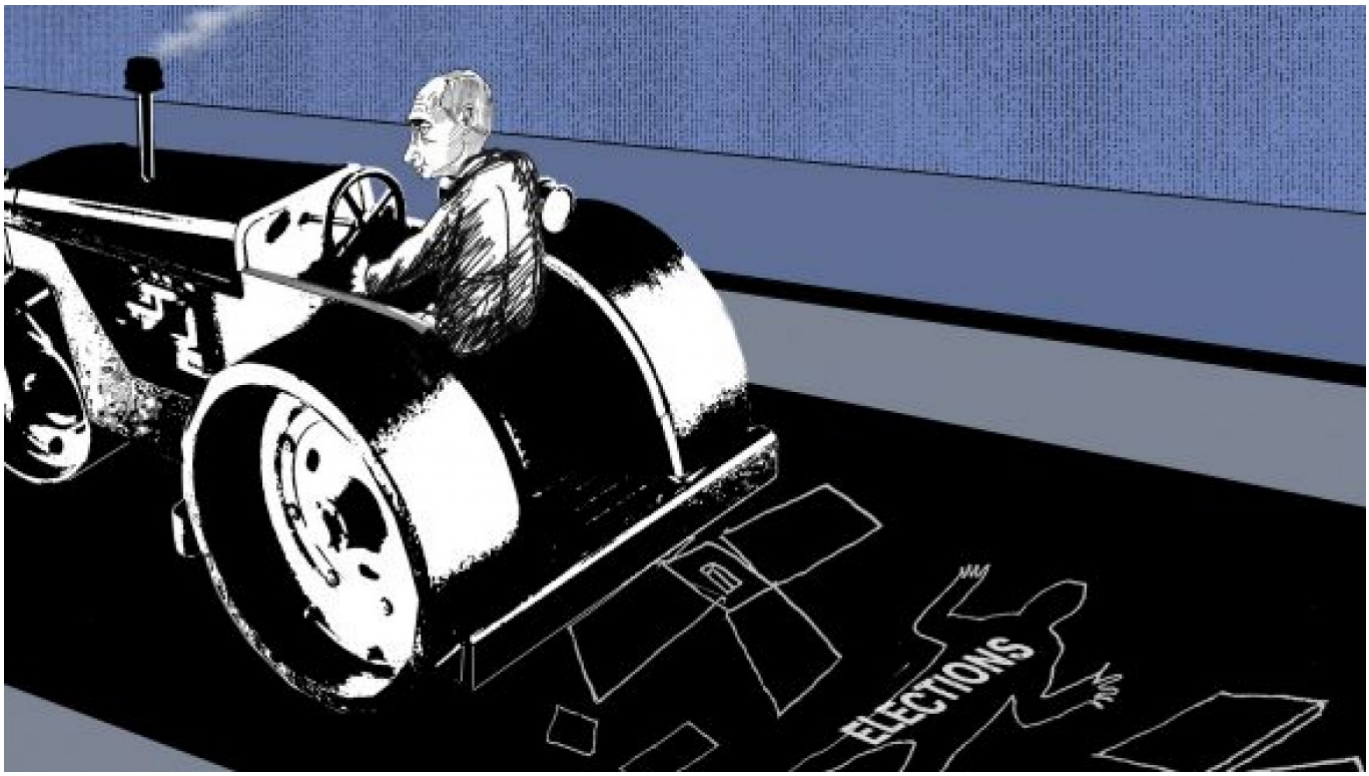
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Attack on Mayor Has Kremlin Traces

By Georgy Bovt

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Until recently, Yaroslavl Mayor Yevgeny Urlashov was almost an icon of the opposition. He came to power through a democratic election and served as mayor in a major city. But on July 3, he was arrested and charged with "attempted bribery." Investigators usually prefer to catch someone in the act of taking a bribe with money in hand, but this time they decided otherwise. The transcripts of Urlashov's bugged phone conversations were leaked to the public through - LifeNews, a sensationalist, pro-Kremlin website the authorities have repeatedly used to discredit politicians who have fallen out of favor.

Although some United Russia leaders reportedly warned against filing charges against the popular Yaroslavl

mayor, it seems
that the Kremlin
dismissed those
concerns.

Now people who are opposed to Urlashov, as well as those with never heard of him before these criminal charges were filed, are likely to conclude from media reports that he did, in fact, extort money from a businessman who had won a contract for cleaning the city streets. But his supporters argue that the recordings of the conversations are likely fabricated. They claim that the whole case has been invented to prevent Urlashov, a popular opposition leader, and his party, Civil Platform, from taking a majority of the seats in the Yaroslavl legislative assembly elections on Sept. 8. United Russia has a majority in every legislative assembly in the country's 79 regions, and the Kremlin is apparently doing everything in its power to keep it that way.

Urlashov supporters point to several suspicious circumstances in the case. For example, investigators argue that the mayor extorted kickbacks from businessman, city councilman and United Russia member Sergei Shmelev, who had won two major tenders for cleaning up areas of the city. But why would Urlashov be foolish enough to extort money from a political enemy, especially after United Russia had mounted a serious, if not vicious, campaign against him in the mayoral race last year in which he won with almost 70 percent of the vote?

As a rule, mayors on their own don't have enough sources of tax income on a municipal level to fulfill all of their responsibilities, forcing them to beg governors who oversee their regions for funds. If the mayor is on bad terms with the governor, however, the governor can easily block the disbursement of funds on any pretext, while publicly blaming the mayor for the subsequent failures in performing his duties, thus all but ruining his political future.

In addition, there are other methods of ruining an opposition politician's career: criminal charges. The peculiarities of Russian law enforcement make it very easy to prosecute a mayor for misuse of budgetary funds, abuse of office or the all-encompassing "negligence in carrying out his duties."

It was pretty much a given that sooner or later Urlashov would be pushed out in some fashion. About 90 percent of the mayors who were not from United Russia have been eliminated from the political arena, mostly as a result of criminal charges filed against them. Of course, it is possible that Urlashov had hoped to make some money under the table to finance his election campaign or to pay off debts from his previous one. After all, election campaigns in Russia are typically paid for with nondeclared "private donations." Or else he might have been involved in the widespread practice by which some municipal contracts are on the books, while others are off.

Most Yaroslavl citizens believe that the case against Urlashov was fabricated by the authorities, and according to the local media his popularity rating soared to 90 percent immediately following his arrest. Taking advantage of that situation, the Civil Platform party, which is led by billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov moved Urlashov to the top of its party list for the September legislative assembly elections.

According to my sources, many members of the United Russia party leadership did not want to file charges against Urlashov for the simple reason that it might backfire against the party if local voters become enraged at the heavy-handed tactics against a popular mayor. One possibility is that the Kremlin dismissed United Russia's concerns and ordered the campaign against Urlashov anyway. If that is true, it confirms that the Kremlin has not changed course and is bent on cleansing the political playing field of the strongest and most popular opposition politicians.

This task is made even easier by the opposition members themselves, whose actions often provide grounds for their own incrimination. And this should come as no surprise. With the ruling elite so deeply enmeshed in corruption, it would be naive to expect the ranks of the opposition to be filled exclusively with absolutely honest and upright individuals. To some degree, it would be fair to say that the ruling authorities and the opposition are both cast from the same mold.

Once the majority of voters realize this, they could quickly become disillusioned with all of Russia's parties and politicians. At that point, discrediting opposition leaders would not lead to a corresponding rise in the popularity of the ruling party. Voters could lose faith not only in elections but all democratic institutions as well. This path could easily lead to the destruction of these political institutions and, ultimately, chaos in the country.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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