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The Business Of Endorsing Alexei Navalny

By Kevin Rothrock

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One of the mainstays of Russian politics for the past 10 years has been that Russian business stays out of politics. Late last week, 37 Russian Internet entrepreneurs tried to shatter that taboo, when they signed a public "social contract" endorsing opposition leader Alexei Navalny's run for mayor of Moscow.

Many in the blogosphere and the independent media have responded to the "Letter of 37" with exclamations that Russia is experiencing a watershed moment in the political consciousness of its business class. Analyst Tatyana Stanovaya called the contract "the first vocal claim by entrepreneurs on an active political position." A Vedomosti editorial said the document set a new precedent for businesses that previously never risked openly supporting the opposition. RuNet guru Anton Nosik said his colleagues had finally spoken out instead of turning to various Kremlin clans for patronage and protection.

The "Letter of 37" is not without its shortcomings, of course. While the pledge

of entrepreneurial support is undeniably symbolic, that, so far, is where the pact begins and ends. Navalny's campaign manager, Leonid Volkov, admitted on Aug. 7 that they've yet to receive a single donation from any business.

Some liberal-leaning news outlets like Slon.ru and Novaya Gazeta have reported on blogging group vvv-ig, which has led a campaign of vitriolic attacks against each of the entrepreneurs who endorsed Navalny.

Vvv-ig's screed, drenched in anti-Semitism and homophobia, is in many ways a typical example of the hate-blogging often directed at opposition figures like Navalny. Buried in places throughout the post and articulated in its conclusion, however, is a provocative conspiracy theory about what brought together 37 seemingly random Internet entrepreneurs. According to vvv-ig, Navalny's social contract signatories owe their success to venture capitalists such as Anatoly Chubais, head of Rosnano.

While accusations against Chubais might seem like wild speculation, the idea's basic premise is that bigger financial interests lie behind Navalny's "independent backers." Meanwhile, Navalny's political frenemy, Vladimir Milov, credited tycoon Mikhail Fridman with organizing the contract.

Kevin Rothrock is project editor of RuNet Echo. A version of this story was originally published on globalvoicesonline.org.

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