

Onishchenko Resignation Announced, Then Denied

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Gennady Onishchenko **Igor Tabakov**

The job status of Gennady Onishchenko, the influential longtime head of the country's consumer protection service, became the subject of much speculation Tuesday after Deputy Prime Minister Olga Golodets announced that he was resigning.

“Onishchenko's term as head of the Federal Consumer Protection Service has expired,” Golodets told journalists in Beijing, where she was accompanying Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev on a state trip, news agencies reported. “This is why he is stepping down.”

But Onishchenko, who as head of the service has waged politically charged trade wars with Georgia, Moldova and other former Soviet states, quickly denied the news, telling Interfax that the “strange individual” who had announced his resignation was not among those deciding his fate.

And Medvedev's spokeswoman, Natalya Timakova, confirmed that no order of resignation had been signed regarding Onishchenko, saying a decision would be made at a later date, RIA Novosti reported.

The seemingly conflicting statements signal that a battle could be taking place behind the scenes over Onishchenko's role in the government.

If Golodets' announcement holds true, however, it could spell the end of Onishchenko's controversial career as the powerful and eccentric protector of Russians' well-being and a trade warrior for President Vladimir Putin.

Onishchenko has served as head of the Federal Consumer Protection Service since 2004 and as Russia's chief sanitary inspector since 1996. Golodets said in her comments Tuesday that he would be replaced by his deputy Anna Popova, whom she called a “qualified doctor and good professional.”

The physician began his career in 1973 at the Soviet Transportation Ministry and occupied a series of high-ranking positions in the field of sanitation throughout his career, including at the Moscow Metro and the Soviet Health Ministry.

While the motives behind the resignation announcement remain unclear, Onishchenko's detractors throughout the former Soviet Union can sneer at the prospect that maybe — just maybe — he is bowing out because of an extreme case of food poisoning from Georgian wine, Lithuanian cheese or Ukrainian chocolate.

Onishchenko is notorious in former Soviet republics for banning food products deemed unsafe for consumption in Russia, including Georgian and Moldovan wine, Lithuanian and Belarussian dairy products, and, recently, chocolates from Ukraine. Product safety, however, never seemed to be his primary concern.

“Onishchenko was out to realize political objectives, among other things” said Stanislav Belkovsky, founder and director of the National Strategy Institute, a Moscow-based NGO and think tank.

Just this week, the European Union urged Russia to stop using trade restrictions and threats to penalize Eastern European nations from seeking closer ties with the bloc.

Earlier this month, Russia suspended imports of Lithuanian dairy products over sanitary concerns, a measure announced by Onishchenko. Lithuanian President Algirdas Butkevicius alleged that it was meant to sabotage Lithuania's plans to bolster EU relations with Ukraine and other former Soviet countries at a summit that the Baltic nation will preside over next month in Vilnius.

Ukraine's Roshen chocolates were also victims of Onishchenko's vigilance. The Ukrainian delicacies were deemed unsuitable for consumption in July after benzopyrene, a carcinogen that can naturally occur in roasted cocoa beans, was detected in the products. The ban came shortly after Ukraine's adoption of an additional import tax on cars that Russia believed would imperil the Russian automobile industry, and amid a push by Moscow to convince Kiev to join its Customs Union with Belarus, Kazakhstan and Armenia.

The timing of Onishchenko's interventions often has raised questions about the rationale behind his decisions. The 2006 ban on Georgian wine came, for instance, against the backdrop of escalating tensions between Russia and Georgia.

“I think that everything that happened between our two countries, including on the trade side, was a political story,” said Georgy Margvelashvili, president of Tbilvino, a Georgian winemaking company, in a telephone interview. “Onishchenko, of course, represented a certain political force and fulfilled his political role.”

Russia finally lifted its seven-year embargo on Georgian wine in June, having caused much damage to the Georgian food and drink industry. Before the ban, Georgia exported about 60 million bottles of wine annually, 50 million of which were destined for the Russian market.

“I only wish that politics would not meddle in business and that regulatory agencies would control quality strictly and fairly,” added Margvelashvili, who burst into cheerful laughter when told by a reporter of Onishchenko's announced resignation.

Onishchenko was also a virulent critic of the Richard G. Lugar Center for Public Health Research in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi, a U.S.-funded facility that researches the prevention of the spread of human and animal diseases. In July, Onishchenko alleged that the laboratory was in fact responsible for an outbreak of African swine flu among Russian cattle.

Despite his reputation as the executor of political orders, Onishchenko often “acted faster than Putin wanted him to,” according to Belkovsky.

While Onishchenko built his reputation largely as Russia's loyal guardian against “harmful” foods at its borders, he also fought against internal plagues.

In 2000, Onishchenko embarked on a nationwide campaign to exert government control over the production and sale of beer. He advocated the ban of beer commercials on television, the re-classification of stronger beers as alcoholic drinks, and the banishment of beer brands with an alcohol content of 6 percent or higher.

He is also known for advising Russians to ignore fashion trends in favor of practical attire during the winter months, and for promoting folk remedies to stay in good health.

Onishchenko may entertain the lofty goal of keeping Russia's population healthy and safe, but some of his policies have had the opposite effect.

In the summer of 2010, he downplayed the dangers of toxic smoke from peat fires that veiled Moscow and many other Russian cities even while Moscow authorities witnessed a doubling of the city's death rate.

He has also been ridiculed for his imaginative warnings about the dangers of eating watermelon in summer and of drivers drinking kefir, the popular fermented milk drink.

Some prominent political figures have praised Onishchenko's ability to safeguard Russia from malignant forces, however. The exuberant Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, leader of Russia's nationalist Liberal Democratic Party, declared Tuesday that “there has never been a better sanitary doctor in the history of Russia,” RIA Novosti reported.

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