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Was a Russian Politician's Daughter Sacked for Political Reasons? The BBC Doesn't Think So

By Eva Hartog

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Sergei Zheleznyak (L) and Alexei Navalny (R) **TASS / AP / Modified by MT**

The account of a leading United Russia politician over the employment of his daughter by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has been undermined in comments given to The Moscow Times.

Sergei Zheleznyak recently claimed his daughter Anastasia had worked for the BBC in the past on "organizational work concerning humanitarian, not political projects," and hinted the BBC had ended the arrangement because of political reasons.

"As for the freedom of speech, the BBC stopped working with her precisely because she is my daughter, so her conception of the realities of life is based on her personal experience," he

wrote on
Facebook.

Commenting to The Moscow Times, the BBC's press office said that Zheleznyak's daughter Anastasia had "worked intermittedly for BBC Studioworks in a freelance capacity," referring to a commercial company of the BBC that is involved in studio production work. It had "no record of her ever being dismissed," it said.

Zheleznyak was put on the spot recently after anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny accused the politician of having double standards.

The Duma deputy is the author of several notorious parliamentary bills — from a controversial law forcing "political" NGOs to register as "foreign agents" if they receive foreign funding, to measures banning the adoption of Russian children by foreign citizens.

"Patriotism should not be a matter of words, but action," Zheleznyak said during a roundtable in 2013, extolling the benefits of a patriotically-oriented education system.

And yet, as Navalny pointed out, Zheleznyak's own daughters studied abroad at elite educational institutes in Europe. They now live in Britain, and appear to be building a life there. One of the daughters, Navalny claimed, had just got married to a Scot and previously worked for the BBC — "the very den of Russophobia, if her father is to believed."

Painful Exposure

Zheleznyak has built his political career around the brand of patriotism that has become typical of Putin's Kremlin. For all the bluster, exposure is likely to be "painful," suggests political analyst Stanislav Belkovsky.

Navalny's expose came on the heels of a report by the Yekaterinburg-based
Znak.com
website, which claimed the presidential administration had advised all officials to return their children to Russia. Not doing so would have consequences for their careers, the report said, citing several unidentified sources.

Some interpreted the news as a sign the Kremlin was preparing for a hot war with the West. Others saw it as proof that the Kremlin's patriotic line had come knocking on its own door, and the new rules would be used as a pretext to get rid of political adversaries.

The surprise dismissal of the head of Russian Railways Vladimir Yakunin last year was rumored to have been precipitated by his son's application for British citizenship. At the time, Yakunin dismissed the reports, noting that he was not alone in sending his children to the West for their education. He was right: The progeny of many of the country's most patriotic politicians — from Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to ultraconservative senator Yelena Mizulina and former children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov — were educated abroad.

As relations between Russia and the West have soured, however, rumors began to circulate that the practice would soon be restricted. In 2014, United Russia deputy Yevgeny Fyodorov

proposed to bring home the children of government officials, arguing foreign governments could use the situation as leverage.

This summer, the head of a patriotic business organization floated the idea to ban the practise by law once more. This time, he warned, Russian officials' children themselves could be recruited by foreign security services.

So far, however, moves to limit foreign education have not come close to the statute books. "It's not going to happen," says analyst Dmitry Oreshkin. "Putin's regime relies on mollifying the elite."

Moreover, Putin's own daughter is reported to have married a Dutchman and moved to The Netherlands. The children of spokesman Dmitry Peskov live in Paris.

The only scenario in which such a ban would be plausible, suggests Oreshkin, is in the case of open confrontation, or a "hot war," with the West. "Then public pressure will place the elite before the choice: are you here with us, or there?" he says. "In fact some security strongmen are secretly dissatisfied and are already pushing for such a bipolar world."

Meanwhile, several commentators have suggested that, for all their belligerent talk, Russian officials' personal ties to the West could be the best safeguard against war in the first place.

For Kremlin officials and politicians who are aware of the discrepancy between their patriotic rhetoric and their personal lifestyles, the solution is to stay under the radar, says analyst Belkovsky. "No one wants to bring back their kids to Russia, but no one wants to harm the Kremlin's image either," he says.

Sometimes, that task is made all the more difficult by the children themselves. Observing the debate over "patriotism" from the French capital, spokesman Peskov's daughter Yelizaveta took to the barricades.

"Those who think that patriots should be educated in their own country are either unfamiliar with history or do not accept the authority of Peter the Great," she wrote on Instagram. "We should aim to make people want to live in their own country, not to keep them there by force."

She might, however, have misjudged the mood of her compatriots back home. Her post sparked a barrage of derogatory comments from other users.

One asked: "Yelizaveta, whatever made you think anyone in Russia needs you here?"

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