The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Why Won't This Russian Opposition Politician Watch His Language?

By Valery Panyushkin

January 16, 2026



Leonid Volkov. **A. Savin**

How many good ideas over recent years and decades have been ruined for the sole reason they were expressed rudely?

Take Leonid Volkov, one of the leading figures of the Anti-Corruption Foundation. He not even publicly, but in private correspondence, called Denis Kapustin — the founder of the Russian Volunteer Corps — a "Nazi" and referred to Kyrylo Budanov, the former head of Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate and now head of President Volodymyr Zelensky's Office, as a "vile provincial political technologist."

And so the horse bolted out of its stable.

It's not that accusing Kapustin of Nazism or Budanov of provincialism is, in itself, a brilliant idea. But if you strip Volkov's words of their rudeness, his comments would have been far less

incendiary. Though, of course, it would have been far more polite not to interfere in Ukrainian affairs at all and to leave it to Ukrainians themselves to decide who among them is a Nazi and who a country bumpkin.

But no. Volkov put his views forward (not for the first time) with cavalry-style bravado. Doing so never leads to positive results, but it stubbornly refuses to go out of fashion.

Now Lithuania's Migration Ministry is asking the Lithuanian State Security Department whether Volkov's presence on Lithuanian territory poses a danger and whether his residence permit should be revoked. Ukrainian prosecutors have also copened a case into Volkov for "justifying" the invasion of the country.

In social media posts defending himself, Volkov writes that his words were "sharp and emotional." No — they were simply impolite, to put it mildly.

Furthermore, voices are being raised suggesting that Volkov must be a Kremlin agent whose goal is to set all anti-Putin forces against one another. People have already talked themselves hoarse — spinning endless tales — instead of accepting the obvious explanation, fully consistent with Occam's razor: Volkov simply considers it acceptable for him not to watch his language. He lacks indiscipline — nothing more.

Impoliteness is not a crime (except in some countries that forbid insulting their leader), nor is indiscipline. And yet parents everywhere have always tried to teach their children to be polite because it matters a lot.

Related article: Ukraine Opens Investigation Into Navalny Ally Volkov Over Allegations of 'Justifying' Russian Invasion

It was precisely a lack of linguistic discipline that led to a change in the meaning of the war. In 2022, it was a war of freedom against dictatorship, democracy against totalitarianism and law against arbitrariness. Gradually, over these four years, the Russian-Ukrainian war has been transformed into a war between Russians and Ukrainians.

It was so easy for progressive humanity to take the right position in this war while it was a war of freedom versus dictatorship. How difficult is it to take the right position now? From the perspective of an ill-informed European or American, it looks as though Slavs are quarreling, hating and killing one another for reasons that are hard to decipher.

The same applies to the Russian opposition. They allowed themselves to descend into invective and, as a result, over four years they have failed to come up with anything serious that could shake the dictatorial regime in Russia. Nor have they produced anything that could meaningfully ease the lives of anti-war people in Russia and far beyond its endless borders.

Diplomatic politeness was invented thousands of years ago. Even in the ancient world, people realized that you can hate one another as much as you like, but you must speak politely or be trapped in eternal conflict.

They also realized that peace requires not retribution, but mercy. For a war to end, most enemies (even the defeated ones) must not be punished, but forgiven. Volkov wrote that

Budanov, his predecessor Andrii Yermak and presidential adviser Mykhailo Podoliak will inevitably "end up behind bars." That is wrong. I know nothing about the crimes Volkov attributes to these people, but I am absolutely certain that most crimes committed during the war will be forgiven. Both sides of any war commit so many crimes that punishing them all would require prosecuting millions of people, which would be impossible.

Long ago, Alexei Navalny (may he rest in peace) and I argued about this. He said that the United Russia party consisted entirely of crooks and thieves who would all face trials in the Beautiful Russia of the Future. I replied that there aren't enough judges, prosecutors or defense lawyers to prosecute all 3 million members of the party. And if you were to imprison them all at once, you would become a worse jailer than Stalin. So they would have to be forgiven. Alexei fell silent and thought about what I told him.

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

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2026/01/16/why-wont-this-russian-opposition-politician-watch-his-language-a91705