**YEVTUSHENKOV’S CASE: UNDER THE SURFACE**

*The Russian oligarch is charged with financial fraud, but aren’t there involved any political reasons connected with the crisis in Ukraine? Some analysts call it a punishment for meddling in the state's foreign policy.*

All the past week business and political communities in Russia and abroad closely followed the development of the sensational case of Vladimir Yevtushenkov, one of the richest and most influential Russian businessmen. It would be enough to mention that according to Forbes the Yevtushenkov's personal fortune reaches $ 9 billion, and the assets of the financial and industrial group JSFC "Systema", of which Vladimir Yevtushenkov is Chairman of the Board of Directors and the owner of more than 60% stock, is estimated at $ 44 billion (308-th line in the Fortune Global 500 in 2013). The business interests of "Systema" comprise nearly all the possible activities: telecommunications, high technology, oil and energy, banking, retail, mass media, tourism and healthcare services.

On September 16 in became known that Mr. Yevtushenkov had been charged with "laundering" the shares of enterprises of the fuel and energy complex of the Republic of Bashkortostan, and arrested. In a single day after that the shares of "Systema" at the Moscow Exchange collapsed by more than 30%, and of its subsidiary and the immediate scandal's cause "Bashneft" by 14%. Due to the record fall, the trade was twice interrupted. The same day just at trades opening, the global depositary receipts (GDR) of "Systema" fell in price by 38.91% at the London Stock Exchange.

The article the Criminal Code corresponding to supposed Mr. Yevtushenkov's offence threatens a maximum penalty of imprisonment for seven years. For the present Vladimir Yevtushenkov hasn't been imprisoned, but put under house arrest.

So, what is there behind the "case of Yevtushenkov"? Hardly anyone believes in the outright triumph of Justice — except, maybe, the law enforcement authorities and the management of the "Systema" itself, which voiced the official (and understandable) position of the company. The recent events reminded to many the 11 year old case of "Yukos Oil Company" and its owner Russian oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky (16th richest man in the world at the time). Actually, Mikhail Khodorkovsky himself believes that the charges against Vladimir Yevtushenkov are nothing else than the attempt to take over his "Bashneft" company.

On the other hand, than as now, most analysts explain the "Yukos" process and subsequent long jail term of Mikhail Khodorkovsky not by the real law infringements (just this July an international arbitration court ruled that Russia must pay $50 billion for seizing the assets of "Yukos"), but by the political ambitions of Mr. Khodorkovsky.

Isn't there any ground to presume the same reasons here? Is it possible that the Vladimir Yevtushenkov's case has the potential to affect the balance of power in the Russian political and business elite more serious than even the Russia's involvement in the Ukrainian crisis? It is not accidental, after all, that the leading oligarchs, not related to President Putin's inner circle, have not been put under sanctions so far and have a chance to get away with whatever may happen to the current Russian government.

Vladimir Yevtushenkov has never conflicted with the government, at least openly. He also was never too close to Mr. Putin. And he seemed to clearly understand his place in the Kremlin hierarchy, as well as the rules he must keep to. In his recent interview with Forbes magazine, he expressed it this way: *"Any State always finds a way to put you in your place, no matter how strong you may be."*

If not very close to Mr. Putin, Vladimir Yevtushenkov was close to another president, the ousted now president of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovych, and that is very possible the key to the whole story. Mr. Yevtushenkov can be called a personal Viktor Yanukovych friend for more than 15 years, not to mention a number of dubious enough business affaires in Ukraine. For example, a Yevtushenkov's company sold the Ukrainian government web cameras to observe the polling stations during the elections to the parliament in 2012 for approximately 1 billion hryvnias ($ 125 million). The cameras happened to be quite useless and, more than that, they seemed to disappear after elections. Another company owned by Yevtushenkov got involved in the construction fraud in the Kiev city center.

Those trusting relations were used by the Russian leadership in 2013, when Yevtushenkov played the role of unofficial emissary persuaded Victor Yanukovych to make a U-turn away from European integration to the Russian-dominated Customs Union — the decision that cost, in the end, Mr. Yanukovych his presidency, and Ukraine its territorial integrity. After establishing the so-called "people's republics" at the East of Ukraine, Yanukovych and probably Yevtushenkov continued to finance the separatist movement. And now, after concluding the Minsk agreement on ceasefire, this means the disputed territories are slipping out of unacknowledged, but tight Russian governmental control. What reasons does Yevtushenkov have to participate in it, business, ideological, personal, or all together? It remains to be guessed, but he seems to have got his warning.