

Q&A: Yakunin Sees Bismarck Plot in Ukraine Unrest

By [Alexander Panin](#)

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Vladimir Yakunin being interviewed last week at a business forum in Sochi.

SOCHI — Vladimir Yakunin is convinced that Ukraine's forced amputation from Russia is a triumph for Otto von Bismarck, who plotted the whole thing in the 19th century.

The head of Russia's giant state rail company is fired up about politics. As well he might be — the U.S., the EU, Canada and Australia have branded him a member of President Vladimir Putin's inner circle, frozen his assets and declared him persona non grata over Russia's behavior in Ukraine.

Vladimir Yakunin

Education

1972: Graduated from the Leningrad Mechanical Institute, specialized in engineering and maintenance of long-range ballistic missiles

Work Experience

1985 — 1991: Second, then First Secretary of the Soviet Union's diplomatic mission to the United Nations

1991 — 1997: Helps establish Bank Rossiya, likely meets future President Vladimir Putin

2002 — 2003: First Deputy Transportation Minister

2003 — 2005: First vice-president of Russian Railways

2005 — Present: President of Russian Railways

Scientific and Social Activity

- Head of the State Policy Department at Moscow State University's Faculty of Political Science, Ph.D in political science
- Chairman of the Committee of Trustees of the Center for the National Glory of Russia, St. Andrew's Foundation

Medals and Awards

- Russian Order "For Merit to the Fatherland," 4th class, among other Russian awards
- Medal for Battle Merit from the U.S.S.R.
- French Legion of Honor
- Grand Decoration of Honor in Gold with Star, for services to the Republic of Austria
- Commander of the Order of the Lithuanian Grand Duke Gediminas
- Grand Officer of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic
- Order of Civil Merit of the Kingdom of Spain, among other international awards

Yakunin, whose company Russian Railways is the country's biggest employer with 1.2 million staff, looked relaxed and confident as he sat down around a table with over a dozen international journalists last week at the annual 1520 Strategic Partnership international business forum in Sochi.

As he has done at previous forums, Yakunin, 65, dispensed with the curt, to-the-point remarks he gives to Russian media, opening up to the foreign press to ad lib about Germany's first chancellor, Ukrainian fascists and Russia's appetite for new territory.

It was a question from an Estonian journalist about Russian-Estonian rail cooperation that jerked Yakunin from discussion of the Russian rail market into geopolitical fulminations.

Ukraine has been ground zero in a geopolitical tug-of-war since November, when then President Viktor Yanukovich abandoned plans to sign an association agreement with the European Union and chose instead to pursue closer ties with Moscow. Kiev's central Maidan square immediately filled with protestors outraged that Yanukovich had sold out Ukraine's European future. A three-month confrontation culminated in snipers firing on protestors. Yanukovich fled, and Russia stepped in to defend Russian-speaking eastern Ukrainians from the new government — which it branded nationalist and illegitimate — by annexing Crimea and massing troops on Ukraine's eastern border.

The Estonian journalist raised the concern that exists among the people of Baltic countries that after seizing Crimea from Ukraine in March, Russia could go on to engulf them as well. Mr. Yakunin was asked whether he could dismiss these fears.

Yakunin grew up in Estonia, then one of the Soviet socialist republics. Ironically, the country of Yakunin's childhood was one of the first to call for his name to be blacklisted.

Hackles raised, Yakunin turned to the subject of international relations with the passion and precision of a veteran scholar, and one who sees Ukraine as a very Russian cultural zone:

"Listen, it was not Russia that created all that turmoil in Ukraine. We should look back to Bismarck's time. Bismarck said it is impossible to beat Russia — something that history has proven repeatedly — but that you can instill a false idea in the minds of Russians and then they will fight among themselves.

"Bismarck then said that in order to deprive Russia of its power, you need to separate Ukraine from it. This idea has surfaced in official documents from many countries, especially those concerned with geopolitical planning. These documents have been part of U.S. policy since the 1920s.

"So when the question was raised of Ukraine joining the European Union, Russia's leaders had a strong feeling that this exactly fulfills [Bismarck's] political strategy.

"But the only pressure Russia imposed on the political elite in Ukraine was asking them to read what they are about to sign [Russia has a free-trade arrangement with Ukraine. In the run-up to the signing of an association agreement with the EU in November, Kiev buzzed with Russian officials hammering home the point that if Ukraine opened its borders to European goods, Russia would have to erect trade barriers to prevent Ukraine from becoming a transit corridor for those goods to the Russian market, and that Kiev had much more to lose than gain from the deal].

"From first hand, I know that [ousted Ukrainian President Viktor] Yanukovich was very surprised after he was enlightened on the essence of the terms of the association deal.

"It is true that the Russian political elite had been persuading Ukraine to reconsider its decision [before the signing ceremony]. At the time we were discussing their possible participation in the [Eurasian] Economic Union, which was recently signed between three countries [Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan]. We had special economic arrangements for them [Ukraine]. We had an open border. That was the position before the Maidan [street protests] happened.

"Maybe I am a bit conservative, but I do not consider a protest democratic when people are killing official representatives of power [Protestors repeatedly clashed with the Ukrainian riot police, the Berkut, during the three month period from Yanukovich's decision not to sign the association agreement and his ouster on Feb. 23. More than 100 protesters died, including 16 law enforcement officers]. Just imagine even an attempt to behave like that in the U.S.

"A kid was shot there as he tried to point a toy gun at a policeman, and the officer was not held responsible. Like it or not, this is protection of servants of the state. In Ukraine, policemen had live rounds fired at them, and that was considered a democratic process. If this sort of democracy appeals to some people, that is up to them.

"Then there is nationalism [The Ukrainian nationalist political party-cum-paramilitary group that actively supported the Maidan protests is politely called the Right Sector]. There is a right wing in France, in Germany, everywhere — it is part of the establishment. But there is a huge difference between right wing nationalists and the neo-fascists that we see in Ukraine today. Nobody has the right to say that burning people alive in Odessa was part of a democratic protest [More than 40 pro-Russian activists died when a trade union building in Odessa was set on fire during running street battles between separatists and Kiev loyalists on May 2].

"Why is this not noticed in Europe? Journalists are rushing to hot spots around the world to get their material, but for some reason they are not going to eastern Ukraine. They used to, but not anymore. Why? Are they afraid? No, it is because they are told not to go there. Because if they showed what is really going on there, it would result in a huge shift in their countries.

"In Crimea, 90 percent of the population were and are Russian [According to Ukraine's 2001 census, 58 percent of Crimeans were ethnic Russians, 24 percent were ethnic Ukrainians and 12 percent were Tatars]. We do not want our people to be burnt by nazis like they were in Odessa. It was their [the Crimean population's] desire and their decision to join Russia, which was confirmed by international journalists and observers [In a snap referendum on March 16, two weeks after Russian troops seized the peninsula, 96 percent of voters in Crimea and Sevastopol voted to join Russia with an 83 percent voter turnout, according to official results]. It is not possible to put a gun to the head of every citizen in Crimea to get him to vote the right way. That was their free will.

"My overall answer to Estonians is this: Russia does not feel hatred towards anyone, even the Germans. And we have a reason to hate them. We do not hate anyone but will not permit anyone to kill us or endanger the future of our children.

"However, if anyone would like to cooperate with us, we will be the most efficient, resolute and reliable partner."

This interview selected quotes from a roundtable discussion with members of the foreign press in Sochi. It has been edited for length and clarity.

See also:

[Q&A: The Key to Business Success in Russia? Karaoke](#)

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