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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Duma Lifts Yegiazaryan's Immunity

By Alexandra Odynova

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The State Duma on Friday allowed the Investigative Committee to proceed with a $65 million fraud case against Liberal Democrat Deputy Ashot Yegiazaryan by lifting his immunity from prosecution.

In the 382-40 vote, deputies from United Russia, A Just Russia and the Communist Party supported a one-off request by investigators to consider the criminal charges, while opposing votes and two abstentions came from the Liberal Democratic Party, Interfax reported.

Liberal Democrat leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky argued against the request before the vote and suggested that Yegiazaryan might successfully sue the Russian government in the European Court of Human Rights.

"And then we will be shamed in front of the whole world," he said, according to a transcript of his remarks posted on his party's web site.

Yegiazaryan is suspected of defrauding two acquaintances of about 2 billion rubles ($66

million), Investigative Committee deputy chief Vasily Piskaryov told the Duma.

The two acquaintances are Mikhail Ananyev, who served as a deputy chairman of the government's Federal Property Fund from 2002 to 2005, and businessman Vitaly Smagin. Both have filed complaints with the Investigative Committee that Yegiazaryan took their money in two separate schemes several years ago, said Alexander Gurov, head of the State Duma's Credentials and Ethics Commission, Interfax reported.

The Investigative Committee said Yegiazaryan invited Ananyev to co-invest in the construction of the Yevropark mall on Rublyovskoye Shosse in 2002 and the reconstruction of the Hotel Moskva, located across the street from the Duma, in 2003 but is suspected of failing to fulfill their agreement and of spending 50 million rubles on his own needs, Interfax reported.

While looking into Ananyev's complaint, investigators found that Yegiazaryan might have swindled shares worth 1.5 billion rubles from Smagin, it said.

If charged and convicted, Yegiazaryan faces up to 10 year in prison.

Yegiazaryan, who has not been seen in the Duma since the fall session opened last month, said in a statement Thursday that he had fled abroad because his life was in danger, Interfax reported. He has accused rivals of being behind the allegations.

Yegiazaryan asked to participate in Friday's Duma session by telephone or video link, but this was not done.

Zhirinovsky said Yegiazaryan will not return to Russia. "He will never come here," he said, Interfax reported.

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