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Duma Ends in Rubber-Stamp Ruling Frenzy

By The Moscow Times

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The fifth convocation of the State Duma ended its work Wednesday with a final session devoted to the giving and receiving of awards and congratulations. Even the opposition members' refusal to stand up when Prime Minister Vladimir Putin entered the room did not ruin the celebration of unity among the executive and legislative branches of government.

The prime minister thanked the Duma deputies for their accommodating work. Referring to the fact that this Duma had approved the vast majority of bills presented to it, Putin said it demonstrated "the great advantage of our country in comparison with other countries in this time of crisis." Indeed, the composition and functioning of this Duma has been unique. Elected exclusively based on party lists, the current Duma has enabled the Kremlin and the presidential administration to cull out undesirable candidates through the party bureaucracy.

As a result, the fifth Duma was even more obedient than the fourth. The 315-seat constitutional majority held by United Russia, multiplied by the party discipline factor,

deprived the Duma of the very reason for which parliaments exists in developed democracies — to thoroughly examine and make corrections to the laws by which the citizens of that country must live. Even the protracted debate over police law reforms — instigated by strong public pressure — was an exception. In general, the Russian parliament became the "Approval Ministry" and has been transformed into a legislative conveyor belt for quickly rubber-stamping legislative initiatives from the president and government.

The parliamentary busy bees apparently do not realize that constantly changing the law tends to destabilize the legal system, worsen the business environment and discourage foreign investment in Russia. It also makes public control over the lawmaking process more difficult. Most ordinary citizens and businesspeople prefer finding ways to avoid the laws altogether than trying to keep up with all of the latest changes.

However, before the Duma deputies closed out their current terms, they not only passed more initiatives handed to them by the government but also hurried to approve bills presented by lobbyists. In particular, they agreed to "fix" a law requiring companies competing in road construction tenders to submit their bids electronically. Now, the bids will only be accepted in traditional paper form, thereby making it easier for state officials to disqualify undesirable bids on subjective grounds or to claim that certain submissions were accidentally lost. And it is important that deputies do this work now. After all, not all of them will be members of the sixth State Duma.

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