

Duma Lifts Communist's Immunity Over Police Brawl

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V. Bessonov

The State Duma on Friday agreed to lift a Communist deputy's immunity from prosecution in connection with an investigation into whether he struck a police officer during an unauthorized street rally six months ago.

The deputy, Vladimir Bessonov, from the Rostov region, has denied hitting anyone, and the Duma vote followed an NTV television report that Bessonov's brother had met with a mob figure.

The Prosecutor General's Office asked the Duma to lift Bessonov's immunity after police officer Oleg Myshenin told NTV that Bessonov "hit his face with a fist" at an anti-government rally in Rostov in December.

A video of the rally shows Bessonov quarreling with police officers, but it was not clearly seen

whether he hit anyone.

If found guilty of attacking a police officer, Bessonov faces a maximum sentence of five years in prison.

The head of the Duma's Ethics Committee, Ildar Gabdarakhmanov, said Friday that Bessonov's immunity was revoked only for this specific investigation.

"This means that investigators can conduct all of the needed procedures, excluding a search or an arrest," Gabdarakhmanov said, according to Interfax.

A military colonel, Bessonov is a member of the Duma's Defense Committee and a parliamentary commission overseeing spending for defense and security issues.

Even though the incident under investigation occurred six months ago, opposition lawmakers believe that Bessonov is being used as a scapegoat to warn opposition-minded politicians not to get involved in protests.

"This looks like an order [from the authorities] to show what might happen to you if you get involved in opposition protests," Sergei Kosinov, head of A Just Russia's Rostov branch, said by telephone.

He described Bessonov as a "sane and intelligent" person and said the investigation also might be intended to weaken the position of the deputy's brother, Yevgeny Bessonov, a popular Communist lawmaker in Rostov.

Yevgeny Bessonov, who was included in the Communist Party list during December's Duma elections but not given a seat, might become a Duma deputy if his brother is forced to leave parliament in connection with the investigation.

A few days ago, Gazprom-controlled NTV aired a report that purported to show Yevgeny Bessonov meeting with Nika Kuznetsova, the widow of reputed mobster Vyacheslav Ivankov, also known as Yaponchik, who was killed in an unsolved shooting in 2009.

NTV said Kuznetsova told Bessonov that she could provide financial support if the Communists protected local businesses.

Despite repeated offerings, Bessonov supposedly played coy with her and at one point said that as a Communist, he didn't care about businesses.

Neither Bessonov brother could be immediately reached for comment. But supporters noted that the NTV report was made by the same people who have previously produced negative reports about the opposition.

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