The Moscow Times
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Gudkov Faces Duma Dismissal Friday

By Alexander Bratersky

September 12, 2012



Gudkov, center, at an opposition protest in June. **Igor Tabakov**

Kremlin critic Gennady Gudkov is widely expected to lose his State Duma seat in a vote on Friday due to evidence that he engaged in unlawful entrepreneurship. Now other deputies are worried that the ruling party may have opened a Pandora's box.

Gudkov, a Just Russia member and deputy chairman of Duma's Security Committee, has denied wrongdoing and maintained that he is under fire for supporting the anti-Kremlin protest movement.

The United Russia-backed motion to expel Gudkov was approved on Monday by a Duma commission that monitors deputies' incomes and now needs only a majority vote by the Kremlin-controlled lower house.

Gudkov, 56, has been accused of participating in the management of the Kolomensky Stroitel building materials retailer. While it is legal for parliament members to own a business, they cannot profit from it or be directly involved in its activities.

The evidence presented to the Duma included a copy of the minutes of a board of directors meeting in July. The document bore Gudkov's signature.

Nationalist Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky has said his party would vote to oust Gudkov. The only other deputy to be ejected from the Duma by a majority vote was Sergei Mavrodi in 1995. His MMM pyramid scheme cost millions of Russians their life savings.

Gudkov, a former KGB colonel who was first elected to parliament in 2001, recently sold his private security firm Oskord after police threatened to revoke the business's license because weapons were "improperly stored."

Oskord employees provided security at some large opposition rallies, which might have played a role in the pressure on the business, observers said at the time.

On Monday, following the income committee's 8 to 5 vote in favor of dismissal, Gudkov told The Moscow Times that "I will fight to the end." He added that he has the "complete support" of his party's leader, Sergei Mironov, who has accused United Russia deputies of the same crime alleged against Gudkov.

But he expressed a fear that if the expulsion is ratified, his son's seat would also be in jeopardy. Dmitry Gudkov, who also represents A Just Russia in the Duma, has been an active participant in the protest movement that erupted after disputed parliamentary elections in December.

A Just Russia called the motion to oust Gennady Gudkov "unconstitutional lawlessness" in a statement e-mailed to The Moscow Times on Tuesday. The party, with the support of the Communists, on Wednesday appealed to the Constitutional Court to review the case.

Duma insiders believe that Gudkov's chances of keeping his Duma seat are very slim. But a deputy with the ruling United Russia party told The Moscow Times that the potential ouster of Gudkov based on business activity had already provoked debates among fellow party members.

"People are nervous because it might be used to threaten others because many are involved in business," said the deputy, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject.

Dmitry Gudkov, citing talks with several United Russia deputies, said on LiveJournal that the Kremlin is serious about dismissing United Russia deputies who take part in unlawful entrepreneurship.

Just Russia leader Mironov said on Twitter that he had sent a letter to Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin to check several United Russia deputies who he said also engaged in business activity.

Among the people mentioned in the letter was senior Duma heavyweight Vladimir Pekhtin, accused of managing assets in St. Petersburg.

Mironov's words were echoed by a presidential administration source quoted in Vedomosti as

saying the Kremlin had sent a "clear message" to conduct investigations of United Russia deputies who could follow in Gudkov's footsteps.

Alexei Mukhin, a Kremlin-connected pundit and head of the Center for Political Information, attested that the Friday vote has not been pre-decided.

He added that United Russia is facing regional elections and it would not be beneficial to potentially polarize voters.

"Gudkov might further radicalize on the streets, a destabilizing factor ahead of regional elections," Mukhin said.

But Alexei Makarkin, head of the Center for Political Technologies, said that although many other deputies have business ties, they would toe the Kremlin line and stay out of trouble.

"Nobody cares about other deputies, even if they walk in same shoes. Kremlin has the goal of ejecting Gudkov before the opposition rally," Makarkin said, referring to the "March of Millions" protest on Saturday in Moscow.

Gudkov has been singled out by the Kremlin not only for being an opposition activist, but also for being a former KGB officer, an organization to which President Vladimir Putin had also belonged, Makarkin said.

"Gudkov hasn't done anything that criminal, but he is a former security officer, and he was one of them. And they treat those people more severely," Makarkin said.

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