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Duma Kicks Out Kremlin Critic

By Alexander Bratersky

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Ousted Deputy Gudkov waving goodbye as he leaves the Duma on Friday. **Mikhail Metzel**

The State Duma voted Friday to strip prominent opposition figure Gennady Gudkov of his seat for engaging in unlawful entrepreneurship, marking the first time that a deputy has been kicked out of the lower house of parliament without first being convicted of a crime.

The United Russia-backed vote also removed one of parliament's most vocal and charismatic critics of the Kremlin by ousting Gudkov, who had denied wrongdoing and maintained that he is under attack for backing the opposition protest movement.

In his last statement before Friday's vote, A Just Russia member Gudkov warned ominously that his ouster, which he said was unconstitutional, would precipitate a crisis in the government.

"The case is not about me. You have triggered a mechanism that will destroy the state, and we will all be responsible for it," Gudkov said.

A Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov called the actions against Gudkov "unlawful revenge." "It is a rude violation of the Constitution," Mironov said.

The Duma voted 291 to 150 in favor of stripping Gudkov of his seat, with nearly all members of the United Russia and nationalist Liberal Democratic Party factions supporting the motion and most A Just Russia and Communist Party members voting against it. Three deputies abstained from the vote.

United Russia Deputy Andrei Isayev argued that the Duma was carrying out the will of the people in divesting Gudkov of his seat.

"Our voters are asking, 'Will it really be demonstrated that there are some people of one type and some people of another?'" Isayev said during the Duma session. "People expect fairness: Everyone is equal in the eyes of the law. We cannot undermine that hope of our people."

He also tried to humiliate Gudkov by reminding deputies that Gudkov had been a member of United Russia during his early tenure in parliament: "He worked with us under the same laws that he is now actively fighting against," Isayev said.

Representatives of the Prosecutor General's Office and the Investigative Committee also spoke at Friday's Duma session, saying there was evidence that Gudkov had broken anti-corruption legislation as well as been involved in business activity.

Deputy Prosecutor General Vladimir Malinovsky argued that there was an inherent conflict of interests in Gudkov's being involved in entrepreneurship and acting as deputy chairman of the Duma's security and anti-corruption committee.

Gudkov, a former KGB colonel who was first voted into the Duma in 2001, had been under pressure by the authorities for months. He recently sold his private security firm, Oskord, after police threatened to withdraw the business' license because weapons were "improperly stored."

Duma members had accused him of taking part 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.

One United Russia deputy on Friday voted against removing Gudkov from the Duma: Stanislav Govorukhin, a film director and Vladimir Putin's campaign chief for the presidential election earlier this year.

Ruling party member Boris Reznik abstained from the vote, while member Alexander Khinshtein did not take part.

There could have been more United Russia deputies supporting Gudkov if the vote had been secret, A Just Russia Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov told The Moscow Times, citing private conversations with some United Russia members.

A Just Russia said Gudkov's Duma seat would be given to Nikita Krichevsky, a prominent left-leaning economist known for his columns in Moskovsky Komsomolets. Krichevsky was next in line for a deputy seat on the Just Russia party list submitted for December's parliamentary vote.

But Gudkov and fellow party member Ponomaryov speculated that the current Duma would not last much longer due to infighting among deputies.

"Today a major parliamentary crisis has begun," Ponomaryov wrote on his LiveJournal blog. "Now the reciprocal reproofs, showdowns and insinuations will be endless. There will be purges, reciprocal surveillance, and suspicions."

"The only way out of this situation is to dissolve the State Duma," he wrote, predicting that precisely that would happen in December.

Earlier this week, A Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov said he had asked Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin to check several United Russia deputies who he said were also involved in running businesses. There have also been reports that the Kremlin has pushed for investigations of United Russia deputies accused of similar violations.

United Russia Deputy Sergei Zhelyznyak said other deputies might lose their Duma seats if they are found to have committed violations similar to those Gudkov was accused of.

Gudkov, who had seemed prepared for the decision to lose his seat, told reporters that his leaving parliament would push him further into street politics. Gudkov has been involved in organizing a number of major opposition rallies in Moscow since December.

"You are witnessing the birth of a new public politician," he said, while waving goodbye to reporters in the Duma building. Some demonstrators staged a protest outside the Duma to show support for the lawmaker.

Ponomaryov said that by pushing Gudkov out of the Duma, the authorities had lost a moderate who favored negotiating with the ruling establishment.

"He was a person who tried to build bridges, and that could have been in the interests of the authorities," Ponomaryov said.

Some experts said the mustached, salt-of-the-earth Gudkov might have a chance to emerge as a popular politician, following in the footsteps of former President Boris Yeltsin, who became a people's hero after being expelled from the Soviet Politburo by his conservative rivals.

But it would be difficult for Gudkov to win people's hearts, since many Russians view lawmakers who have business interests with suspicion, said Alexei Makarkin, head of the Center for Political Information think tank.

In a poll conducted this week by state-run pollster VTsIOM, 61 percent of respondents said they supported stripping Gudkov of his Duma seat for mixing business activity with parliamentary work.

Sixty-six percent of those polled said they believed that other deputies would be punished for similar violations.

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