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Why I Lost My Right To Speak in the Duma

By Ilya Ponomaryov

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Ever since Gennady Gudkov was illegally stripped of his mandate as a State Duma deputy, an interesting period began in the parliament. Gudkov's ouster on Sept. 14 marked the serious escalation of a parliamentary crisis that began in December when Duma election results were falsified in favor of United Russia.

Duma Deputy Dmitry Gudkov and I came under heavy pressure immediately following the publication this month of our "golden pretzel" articles, which detail what we believe to be illegal businesses run by various deputies. But United Russia's resentment of me dates back to this summer, when I stood at the Duma podium and said: "Crooks and thieves, don't pass the new libel law!"

Although the heat died down after that, the golden pretzel articles rekindled United Russia's animosity. The Duma ethics commission issued a recommendation against me that was signed by 40 members of United Russia and the Liberal Democratic Party, a number of whom

were named in the articles. They include Alexei Knyshov, whose company is building the M4 highway and who has been actively lobbying the Duma to introduce toll roads, and Yelena Nikolayeva, who I believe has produced forged documents to advance her personal interests. Deputy Alexei Mitrofanov, who once belonged to my Just Russia party but now sides with United Russia, has been named the head of a new Duma committee to oversee mass media, despite being under suspicion of taking bribes.

And what could be expected when the initiative against me was reviewed by ethics committee head Vladimir Pekhtin, who purchased land that he failed to declare as income and that stands in the path of a proposed highway, enabling him to sell it to the government for no less than 100 million rubles ($3.2 million)?

This is why I lost the right to speak on the floor of the Duma from Oct. 16 to Nov. 16. The most revealing part of these events is that the people who apparently thought I was referring to them when I spoke of "crooks and thieves" are the very ones who signed the motion against me.

I think President Vladimir Putin is rubbing his hands together and preparing to escalate this conflict. The old adage of "divide and conquer" has become the catchphrase of his third term. According to his thinking, "cleansing" the parliament of unwanted elements will only strengthen his hold on power.

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