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United Russia Deputy Suspected of Unlawful Business Activity

By Alexander Bratersky

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Knyshov was among lawmakers recently investigated for alleged business ties by left-wing Just Russia Duma Deputy Dmitry Gudkov.

The Investigative Committee said Monday that it suspects a United Russia deputy of involvement in unlawful business activity, a month after an opposition lawmaker was stripped of his seat in parliament while facing similar allegations.

Investigators said in a statement Tuesday that a probe concerning the entrepreneurial activities of Alexei Knyshov revealed that he has been involved in managing multiple construction businesses while in office.

It is legal for Duma members to own companies, but they cannot profit from them or take part in their activities directly.

In September, senior Just Russia party official and fervent Kremlin critic Gennady Gudkov was

stripped of his deputy seat by the Duma after the Investigative Committee said it had evidence that he had taken part in a board meeting at the Kolomensky Stroitel construction company. Critics said the decision was punishment for Gudkov's outspoken opposition views.

Investigators allege that Knyshov is the registered owner of 12 businesses, including two construction companies based in his native Rostov region in southern Russia. They said Knyshov also managed two of them until late December.

Knyshov was elected to the Duma in parliamentary elections held on Dec. 4.

The Investigative Committee also said Knyshov was an owner of the Slovakia-based company Inbister until August.

A website for the company says it produces metal pipe and other metal products.

"A procedural decision will be made regarding the pre-investigation inquiry," the statement said, adding that the Prosecutor General's Office and Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin would be sent the findings and decide how to proceed.

Knyshov, a rank-and-file member of the Duma Construction and Land Use Committee, said the allegations against him are groundless. "The information is 100 percent wrong," Knyshov said, contending that one of the Rostov companies cited by investigators was shut down in 2004.

Knyshov was one of several deputies being investigated for alleged business ties by Just Russia Duma Deputy Dmitry Gudkov, the son of ousted former Deputy Gennady Gudkov.

Along with low-profile lawmakers, Dmitry Gudkov's list contained a number of United Russia party heavyweights, including Vladimir Pekhtin and billionaire Andrei Skoch.

Dmitry Gudkov began his investigation into the possible ownership of assets by United Russia deputies soon after the ruling party threatened to strip his father of his deputy seat on similar allegations.

But Dmitry Gudkov said Tuesday that he is against removing Knyshov from the Duma without a court order.

"If they want to sacrifice Knyshov in response to the nonjudicial revenge on Gennady Gudkov, they will not achieve their task," Gudkov told Russian News Service radio Tuesday.

Gudkov was the first lawmaker ever to be ousted from the Duma without having been convicted of a crime.

Senior Communist Party Deputy Sergei Obukhov said he doubts that the ruling party, which has a majority in the Duma, will act against Knyshov.

"They might make noise, but I don't think actions will be taken," he said.

Meanwhile on Tuesday, two former members of the Just Russia Duma faction, Vladimir Mashkarin and Vadim Kharlov, became independents, bringing the number of deputies not

with a party faction to seven, Interfax reported.

The change means that United Russia and their frequent ally the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party can form a two-thirds majority, or a so-called constitutional majority, together with the seven pro-Kremlin independent deputies.

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