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Duma Stalls on Petition Opposing Anti-Magnitsky Law

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Ilya Ponomaryov, seen above speaking at a rally in March, was one of the Duma deputies who voted against the controversial adoptions law, and he has been outspoken in criticizing it.

A State Duma committee on Monday discussed an online petition opposing the "Anti-Magnitsky Law" passed late last year, but it appeared to delay until at least April any action that could result from the petition.

The petition, published on the website of opposition newspaper Novaya Gazeta last month, was signed by more than 100,000 people and demanded the repeal of the law, which went into effect Jan. 1 and includes a ban on adoptions of Russian orphans by U.S. families.

President Vladimir Putin has ordered that officials review any petitions that garner more than 100,000 signatures.

But Constitution and State Affairs Committee head Vladimir Pligin said Monday that no

mechanism for considering such petitions was yet in place and that one would only be installed in April, Interfax reported. He said he would inform the Duma about the petition at a session Tuesday.

The petition was submitted to the Duma on Dec. 21, when a final vote on the bill was held, but Duma Deputy Speaker Sergei Zheleznyak said it could not be considered until after the New Year holiday due to parliamentary procedure.

Just Russia Deputies Ilya Ponomaryov and Dmitry Gudkov, who have opposed parts of the law, said they would use the petition as the basis for a parliamentary initiative.

"The committee said that signatures cannot be considered as an official appeal to the Duma, but the president said that all people's initiatives must be considered, and they can't be official documents by definition," Ponomaryov told The Moscow Times by phone.

He said an initiative would be introduced in the next two days but was not hopeful that it would be supported by the ruling party.

"Basically, the United Russia deputies will decide, but if we do something, sooner or later there will be a result," he said.

Novaya Gazeta editor-in-chief Dmitry Muratov and other representatives of the paper attended the Duma committee meeting Monday, which was open to visitors.

Nadezhda Prusenkova, the paper's spokeswoman, said they were not surprised by the lack of immediate action by the committee.

"We didn't expect a miracle," she said.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said Monday that adoption procedures should be eased for Russian parents and acknowledged that the U.S. adoption ban has triggered a major public response. "And it is not declining," he said at a meeting with his deputies, according to Interfax.

On Sunday, thousands of people marched through central Moscow to express their disagreement with the ban. Protesters carried portraits of Duma deputies and senators who approved the bill with the word "shame" written over them, and they called for the Duma to be dissolved, a central demand of many nonparliamentary opposition groups.

Novaya Gazeta has another petition on its website calling for the dissolution of the Duma that has garnered more than 120,000 signatures.

Pligin said that petition was pointless and ignored the views of most Russians.

"The opinion of the majority of people in the country, which was demonstrated in the last elections, must be respected," he told journalists, Interfax reported.

Opposition groups and independent vote monitor Golos contend that the last parliamentary elections, held in December 2011, were illegitimate due to alleged voting fraud and violations. The Central Elections Committee said the violations did not affect the results.

Prusenkova said signatures will continue to be collected until Feb. 1, when the petition will be given to the Central Elections Commitee, the Constitutional Court and the Duma.

"At first, we thought the Duma would implement presidential orders," she said. "But the passing of the anti-Magnitsky bill in December showed that it can only be responsible for passing such cannibalistic bills and nothing else."

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