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Senator Malkin Quits Federation Council

By Alexander Winning

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Vladimir Malkin

Senator Vitaly Malkin, one of Russia's richest lawmakers, resigned Tuesday over claims that he owns undeclared foreign real estate and holds dual citizenship, the latest example of a lawmaker quitting his post over allegations of unlawful activity.

Close to a dozen lawmakers have either resigned or come under suspicion of regulatory violations in the past seven months, besmirching the reputation of the parliament and sparking rumors that authorities could call early State Duma elections.

Malkin, whose resignation was announced at a meeting of the Federation Council's rules committee, was facing an inquiry into documents posted on anti-corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny's blog that purportedly show he owns multiple undeclared properties in Canada and the U.S. and has dual Israeli-Russian citizenship.

Lawmakers are forbidden from holding another country's citizenship under a law passed during President Vladimir Putin's first term and must declare all their property, but Malkin,

who has represented the Buryatia republic in the Federation Council since 2004, said he only resigned to protect the reputation of colleagues.

The investigation into Malkin's assets was suspended, since he resigned voluntarily.

Malkin, a former financial investor worth $600 million last year, according to Forbes, described the accusations against him as a smear campaign launched by foreign provocateurs, while Nikolai Kondratenko, a colleague in the Federation Council, said by phone that Malkin had acted "honestly" but that "it was important to establish order in the parliament."

Kondratenko said he expected further resignations from the upper house, noting that another senator, Boris Shpigel, had resigned on Monday, officially to concentrate on his work with the World Without Nazism foundation.

Prior to publishing documents discrediting Malkin, opposition activists in February forced the resignation of United Russia co-founder Vladimir Pekhtin, who headed the State Duma's Credentials and Ethics Commission, after uncovering evidence that he co-owned undeclared property worth more than $2 million in Florida.

Pekhtin has denied all guilt and said he merely tendered his resignation to deflect blame from United Russia, but the opposition saw his departure as a major coup, coining the term "Pekhting" for the practice of online sleuthing against officials.

Analysts consulted for this article said Malkin's decision to leave the Federation Council would not impact the work of the upper house since he was a fringe figure, but they described wider purges in the parliament as proof that authorities were trying to restore public faith in a parliament beset by scandal.

"These resignations are clearly organized from above. Authorities are afraid that people will side with the opposition in their criticism of the ruling regime, so they're trying to convince people that they're spontaneously cleansing their ranks," said Alexei Makarkin, an analyst with the Center for Political Technologies.

Makarkin said most lawmakers who had resigned were guilty of mixing politics and business. "Relatively few had any political influence," he said.

Aside from Malkin, Shpigel and Pekhtin, United Russia Deputies Alexei Knyshov, Anatoly Lomakin and Vasily Tolstopyatov have all resigned since October, and the fate of Just Russia Deputy Sergei Petrov hangs in the balance after Duma colleagues said Monday that they would check whether he had illegally engaged in business during his stint in the lower house.

The only lawmaker to be formally expelled was Gennady Gudkov, a Duma deputy with the social-democratic Just Russia party who was ousted in September, also over suspected business activity. Supporters have painted his expulsion as a move to silence a prominent Kremlin critic.

In the Federation Council, observers have for months predicted the resignations of Senators Andrei Guryev, Dmitry Ananyev and Suleiman Kerimov, all of whom are billionaires with fortunes ranging from $1.7 billion to $7.1 billion, according to Forbes' website. Duma deputies and senators are not prohibited from owning businesses but are not allowed to take part

in their firms' daily operations.

Opinion polls show that Russians broadly approve of efforts to cleanse the State Duma and Federation Council of wealthy businesspeople.

In a Levada Center poll released the same day as Malkin's resignation, 55 percent of respondents said they saw parliamentarians as the wealthiest bracket of officialdom, with 44 percent calling their riches "criminal."

Roughly two-thirds supported stricter controls on officials' assets, saying lawmakers should understand "how ordinary people live." In a move catering to popular distaste for officials investing their money overseas, the State Duma is set to hear in April, in a second reading, a presidential bill that would oblige government officials to close foreign bank accounts and sell any overseas assets, or risk being fired.

Sergei Markov, a Kremlin-connected analyst and vice rector at the Plekhanov Economic University, described the wave of lawmakers' resignations as "reactionary," refuting claims it was thought-up in advance by Putin and Vyacheslav Volodin, the Kremlin's point man for domestic politics.

The resignations were rather a damage-limitation measure aimed at countering civil activists' findings, he said.

Both Markov and Makarkin rejected the idea that the resignations could lead to the dissolution of the lower house, saying fresh elections would jeopardize Putin's stated aim of maintaining stability.

"Such theories are dreamed-up by pseudo-experts such as Navalny, [veteran opposition leader Boris] Nemtsov and [political activist and former world chess champion Garry] Kasparov," Markov said, adding that they reflected Russia's "distorted media landscape."

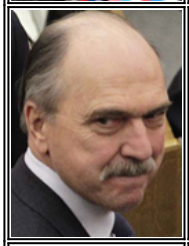
Makarkin, from the Center for Political Technologies, said attempts to purge lawmakers accused of unethical behavior from the parliament would only go so far.

"As regards revelations concerning Irina Yarovaya, authorities won't act," he said, referring to the head of the State Duma's Anti-Corruption and Security Committee whom the opposition-minded New Times magazine accused of owning a multimillion-dollar apartment in central Moscow that is officially registered to her daughter.

"Authorities don't want to get rid of pliant lawmakers like her," he added. "They are important figures in the current parliament."

Lawmakers' Resignations And Surrounding Circumstances since October 2012

	Name	Position	Party	Time of resignation	Circumstances surrounding resignation

	Alexei Knyshov	State Duma deputy	United Russia	October 2012	A probe into his alleged business activities
	Vladimir Pekhtin	State Duma deputy	United Russia	February 2013	An investigation into alleged undeclared property in Miami
	Anatoly Lomakin	State Duma deputy	United Russia	February 2013	Alleged undeclared U.S. property worth $2 million
	Vasily Tolstopyatov	State Duma deputy	United Russia	February 2013	Alleged involvement in several agribusinesses in the Krasnodar region
	Viktor Taranin	State Duma deputy	Communist Party	March 2013	His desire to leave politics and to become the CEO of an agribusiness based in the Moscow region, according to deputy party chairman Vladimir Kashin
	Nikolai Olshansky	Federation Council member		March 2013	Alleged business activities, with net worth estimated at $750 million, according to Forbes
	Boris Shpigel	Federation Council member		Pending	His election as president of human rights group World Without Nazism
	Vitaly Malkin	Federation Council member		Pending	Alleged Israeli citizenship and real estate business in Canada

Source: MT

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