

Opposition Deputy Faces Growing Pressure Over Alleged Misconduct

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Pressure mounted Tuesday on opposition State Duma deputy Ilya Ponomaryov ahead of the scheduled airing of a program on state TV implying that he met earlier this month with Georgian powerbroker Givi Targamadze, who has been charged with sponsoring unrest in Russia.

A preview of the program "Special Correspondent" slated to air late Tuesday on Rossia television showed Ponomaryov with a group of anti-Kremlin Russian politicians in Vilnius, Lithuania, where a crew from the state TV channel had traveled to interview Targamadze.

Speaking to The Moscow Times by telephone from Riga, Ponomaryov denied wrongdoing, calling the Rossia program "absolutely outrageous" and "a new dawn for state propaganda."

"To turn out to be in the same city with someone bad is enough for state-controlled media to start making conclusions," he said.

Ponomaryov, one of just a handful of outspoken Kremlin critics in the Duma and one of the leaders of the opposition protest movement, has faced growing criticism from his opponents in the Duma for alleged misconduct, including the receiving of \$750,000 from the Skolkovo innovation center that investigators say was an illegal payment. Ponomaryov says it was a legitimate fee for giving lectures at the center and writing an academic paper.

National media reported Tuesday that Ponomaryov's party, the social-democratic A Just Russia, was planning to propose that he leave the Duma because his opposition activity and the Skolkovo case have supposedly tainted the party's image.

Ponomaryov said that he found out about the party's alleged plans only from media reports and that before he left for Riga a week ago, his relations with party leader Sergei Mironov had been very warm and that Mironov had supported him in the Skolkovo case.

Leonid Gozman, another opposition politician who was in Vilnius with Ponomaryov, wrote a letter to Rossia television head Oleg Dobrodeyev in which he said the film contained false information. He said the group had visited Vilnius to speak at an international conference dedicated to Russian-European relations on the eve of the Lithuanian presidency of the European Union.

According to Lithuanian and Russian media reports, the conference attracted a range of other Russian opposition figures, including Parnas co-leader Boris Nemtsov, opposition Coordination Council member Olga Romanova, Republican Party of Russia leader Vladimir Ryzhkov, as well as several Belorussian opposition activists and Latvian politicians, among them Latvian Foreign Minister Audronius A?ubalis.

In the Rossia program, a journalist is shown speaking with Ponomaryov and Gozman, who the journalist says he accidentally came across after interviewing Targamadze at a house in Vilnius. When the journalist asks what they were doing near Targamadze's house, Ponomaryov said they were walking around the city and didn't know Targamadze was there as well.

Ponomaryov told The Moscow Times that he was invited to the conference by a Lithuanian political club organized by a former foreign minister and Vilnius University and said the Russian delegation brought up topics that the Russian government often mentions at international events attended by representatives of EU states, such as the visa regime and international trade and human rights issues.

"We asked Lithuania, as part of the EU, to reject its double-standard policies in relation to Russia," Ponomaryov said.

Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy excoriated Ponomaryov in a speech at the Duma on Tuesday, calling his participation in the conference "political fraud." He said the Duma should evaluate Ponomaryov's actions, which he said were "openly antigovernment," adding that "deputies have no right to participate in any antigovernment meetings abroad."

Targamadze was put on a wanted list by Russian investigators after another state-controlled channel, NTV, aired an expose allegedly showing opposition leader Sergei Udaltsov and his

allies Leonid Razvozzhayev and Konstantin Lebedev discussing how to provoke unrest in Russia. The three Russian activists were subsequently charged with planning "riots."

On Tuesday, investigators searched the apartments of at least six activists from the opposition Left Front movement, Parnas party and Solidarity movement in Belgorod, Yaroslavl and Nizhny Novgorod. The Investigative Committee said it found documents and correspondence proving that Udaltsov and his allies were meeting the activists to involve them in the planned "riots."

Udaltsov and Razvozzhayev have denied the charges, while Lebedev, a former aide to Ponomaryov, pled guilty and was sentenced last month to 2 1/2 years in prison.

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