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Investigators to Open Case Against Ponomaryov

By Yekaterina Kravtsova

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Investigators intend to open a criminal case against State Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov as part of an investigation into embezzlement at Skolkovo, an Investigative Committee spokesman said.

Spokesman Vladimir Markin told Izvestia in an interview published Monday that investigators would also seek to strip Ponomaryov — a prominent Kremlin critic — of his lawmaker's immunity in order to conduct their inquiry.

According to investigators, Ponomaryov illegally received $750,000 from the Skolkovo innovation center.

Ponomaryov hasn't denied that he received money but said the payment was for a series of lectures and academic work.

Skolkovo's deputy president, Alexei Beltyukov, who gave Ponomaryov the money, investigators said, has been charged with embezzlement. Billionaire Skolkovo president Viktor Vekselberg, who was questioned as a witness over the weekend, has said he will seek the return of the $750,000 if Ponomaryov is found guilty.

Ponomaryov, who has so far been questioned as a witness, not a suspect, was informed about the Investigative Committee's intentions during an interrogation session Thursday, Markin said, adding that all the necessary documents to strip Ponomaryov of his immunity would be sent to the Prosecutor General's Office this week.

Reacting to Markin's comments, Ponomaryov told Izvestia that he is prepared to defend himself in court and that he would prove investigators wrong, if his trial is fair.

Ponomaryov said Monday that he believes his fellow party members in A Just Russia would oppose any attempt to lift his immunity.

“I am sure that [they] will not support the request to deprive [me] of immunity. Just how strongly will depend on the materials that the Investigative Committee sends to the State Duma,” Ponomaryov told RIA Novosti.

But deputies with A Just Russia and the Liberal Democratic Party said they were ready to approve a request from investigators.

Accusations of Kremlin subservience have consistently dogged A Just Russia since its foundation under government tutelage in 2006.

"Stripping [Ponomaryov's] immunity doesn't mean that we acknowledge that a person is guilty. It's just a necessary step to find out all the details of the case," Olga Batalina of the ruling United Russia party told Izvestia.

Ponomaryov has come under fire for his active participation in the anti-Kremlin protest movement, and some observers see the threat of criminal prosecution as a means of stepping up pressure on the opposition deputy.

Last week, state-controlled TV station Rossia 1 aired an exposé alleging that Ponomaryov had met Georgian powerbroker Givi Targamadze earlier this month in Lithuania. Targamadze has been charged by Russian investigators with orchestrating mass riots last May as part of the so-called "Bolotnoye case."

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