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United Russia Lawmaker Backs Amnesty for Bolotnoye Suspects

By Oleg Sukhov

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A key United Russia lawmaker said Tuesday that he supported granting amnesty to suspects in the high-profile Bolotnoye case, echoing recent comments by President Vladimir Putin.

Speculation about a possible amnesty for suspects in the case has grown since Putin said at the Valdai Club meeting last week that he had not ruled it out. Some observers have argued that the measure would help to heal a growing divide between the government and civil society.

The case involves 12 defendants who are currently standing trial for participating in alleged "riots" at an anti-government rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad in May 2012. Two other suspects have already been convicted and 14 others have not been tried yet. The opposition believes the case to be retaliation by the Kremlin against the protest movement and argues that no actual riots took place, saying that clashes with police at the rally were provoked by authorities.

"Including the Bolotnoye case suspects in the amnesty list would be right and objective," said Pavel Krasheninnikov, head of the State Duma's Legislation Committee, Interfax reported. The parliament's lower house will consider the amnesty next month, he added.

Krasheninnikov was referring to the planned amnesty devoted to the 20th anniversary of the Russian Constitution, scheduled for Dec. 12.

The Bolotnoye case has become a major rallying point for the opposition since it began last year. Tens of thousands of people attended two major protests in May and June dedicated in part to opposing the case, while minor rallies in support of the suspects have been held weekly and monthly. On Sunday, a charity concert featuring prominent musical artists was held in Moscow to raise funds for the defendants.

Western governments have also taken notice of the case with the U.S. Embassy in Moscow expressing concerns over it last week with the Foreign Ministry's human rights ombudsman.

Alexander Cherkasov, one of the directors of the Memorial human rights group, said the amnesty was justified because "everything we know proves that no crime was committed."

In August, prominent lawyer Vadim Klyuvgant said he believed that the case had "collapsed" with the prosecution failing to present any evidence that riots took place.

Similar cases in Europe usually lead to administrative penalties and do not end in criminal cases, Cherkasov said.

"The freedom of assembly is more important than strict enforcement of the law," he said.

Cherkasov said current talk about a political thaw would be meaningless unless an amnesty for the Bolotnoye case suspects was granted.

"Without an amnesty, all speeches about a thaw will be idle talk," he said. "If there is political will, they will do it fast. If not, it is just window dressing."

But Cherkasov said he did not know whether the authorities were seriously considering the measure.

"I am not much of a Pythia," he said, referring to the famous oracle of ancient Greece. "I am talking about what ought to be, not about what is."

He also said that the suspects did not need to plead guilty to quality for an amnesty, and that it can be granted even before a ruling is made.

Suspects in the case opened in connection with the 1991 coup attempt were granted amnesty before a formal verdict, Cherkasov said, adding that the same had happened in the riots investigation against people who supported the parliament in its conflict with President Boris Yeltsin in 1993.

But Putin said at the Valdai forum that he hoped all formal procedures in the Bolotnaya case would be completed. The president's answer was seen by some as ambiguous because he

resorted to tough rhetoric, saying there should be retaliation against those who call for using force against police officers.

"No one should have the illusion that such behavior is acceptable," Putin said. "If people infringe on the rights and interests of others and break the law, there should be an appropriate reaction from the state ... [But] can we consider using the right to amnesty in this case? I do not rule it out."

The Bolotnoye case drew additional attention Tuesday when several defendants complained about alleged violations in their treatment by authorities.

Denis Lutskevich and Alexei Polikhovich filed complaints with the European Court of Human Rights against what they saw as a violation of their rights not to be subjected to inhuman or degrading treatment, to liberty and security, and to be released pending trial, Interfax reported.

Human rights activists have accused the authorities of subjecting the suspects to de facto torture by starving them, forcing them to stand for hours before hearings and putting them in stuffy glass cages. They have also argued that the participants of the case do not pose a threat to society and should not have been held in detention for more than a year.

Another defendant, Sergei Krivov, has begun a hunger strike to protest against the court's decision to reject motions filed by the defense, his lawyer Sergei Badamshin wrote Tuesday on Twitter.

In August, nine defendants went on strike and refused to participate in hearings after the court refused to consider a report filed by the police officer who was allegedly attacked by Krivov, the prosecution said.

Earlier this month, a scandal was also triggered by the court's refusal to allow Mikhail Kosenko, one of the suspects, to attend his mother's funeral.

The next hearing in the Bolotnoye case is scheduled for Wednesday.

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