

Dmitry Gudkov, L'Enfant Terrible of the State Duma

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October 06, 2014



Dmitry Gudkov said Russia's political situation has led him to the streets, making him an 'accidental protester.'

In a Russian parliament filled with yes-men, Dmitry Gudkov is Mr. Nyet.

Since his election to the State Duma in 2011, the 34-year-old deputy has opposed many legislative initiatives of symbolic importance to the Kremlin. Gudkov — who has served as an independent since being ousted from the A Just Russia opposition party last year — was one of two deputies who voted against last month's bill limiting foreign ownership of Russian media, a move that pundits say will decimate the media industry and further restrict freedom of the press in the country.

"That bill was not conceived in the Duma," Gudkov told The Moscow Times last week over lunch at a British pub near the legislature's building. "It was conceived in the Kremlin. We used to see madness [like this] in the Duma once a month. Now we see it twice a week."

Young, tall and athletic, Gudkov is the antithesis of the garden-variety Duma deputy. The dapper lawmaker has charmed Russian opposition sympathizers and American senators alike with his poise and striking appearance.

With one foot in the Duma and the other in an anti-government street protest, Gudkov is at once an insider and a crusading outsider, seemingly toiling to dismantle the system while working within its confines.

Friends on the Outside

Gudkov cultivates close ties with Russia's non-systemic opposition, the political forces that are not represented in the Duma. He is a familiar face at Moscow street gatherings. Together with opposition blogger Alexei Navalny, liberal politician Boris Nemtsov and social activist Sergei Udaltsov, Gudkov and his father Gennady — who was also a Duma deputy — led the protest movement that swept the country following the contested Duma elections of 2011 and Putin's re-election in 2012.

Dmitry Gudkov, who also participated in last month's peace march for Ukraine in Moscow, was on the front lines of the Bolotnaya Square protest of May 6, 2012, which ended in violent clashes between protesters and police, and resulted in hundreds of arrests.

Gudkov said circumstances led him to the streets, turning him into an accidental protester.

"I'm not some kind of radical who runs out into the streets and takes part in protests," Gudkov said. "I'm not that type of person. I am much more interested in actual law-making. But the authorities' behavior is making that impossible."

Since Putin's re-election in 2012, the spirit of the protests seems to have fizzled out. In May, a survey conducted by the Levada Center, an independent pollster, revealed that the public's inclination to participate in demonstrations was at a historic low.

Gudkov said the opposition's resolve remains intact, despite the increasing hostility of the political environment.

"The opposition hasn't changed its stance. It hasn't evolved," he said. "The state has changed by moving toward an extreme [in its decision-making]. It has created an increasingly toxic environment for the opposition. If you put a swimmer in a pool of acid, he won't be able to swim."

Branded a Traitor

Gudkov was expelled from the A Just Russia party after a self-sponsored trip to participate in a Freedom House forum in Washington D.C. in March 2013. Before an audience of American senators and with his polished English, he lambasted Putin and thanked the American families that had adopted Russian children. Gudkov was one of seven deputies who voted against the so-called Dima Yakovlev bill, which was signed into law, forbidding U.S. citizens from adopting Russian children. He also authored a bill to repeal the legislation, which the Duma rejected.

State-run media outlets launched a defamation campaign against Gudkov after he declared

his intention to visit the U.S. on his social media pages. An NTV reporter and camera crew pounced on Gudkov as he exited the Spaso House — the U.S. ambassador's residence in Moscow — where he had met with then-Ambassador Michael McFaul ahead of his trip. Russian camera crews followed him in New York and Washington, and their broadcasts depicted him as a U.S. State Department stooge.

The deputy said his North American tour was meant to expose government officials' illegal ownership of property in the U.S. and consult with families that had adopted Russian children. A month prior to Gudkov's departure, Vladimir Pekhtin, a senior lawmaker from the ruling United Russia party, resigned over revelations that he owned more than \$1.3 million in real estate in Florida and had not disclosed the information to the Duma.

Upon his return to Russia, fellow deputies accused Gudkov of being a traitor. The flamboyant leader of the LDPR party, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, said he should be tried for treason. A Duma darling in the eyes of his American interlocutors, the deputy was seen as a renegade at home.

But Gudkov was allowed to stay.

KGB Past

The 6-foot 4-inch deputy began playing basketball when he was 8 years old in his hometown of Kolomna, in the Moscow region. He was named to Russia's junior national basketball team in the late 1990s along with current NBA star Andrei Kirilenko, who plays for the Brooklyn Nets. Gudkov's eyes lit up when the discussion turned to his athletic past.

"Kirilenko wasn't that tall back then," Gudkov said, displaying a picture of his basketball years on his iPhone. "He had a growth spurt when he was 18 and grew taller than me."

The lawmaker said he was raised in a family that was "far from politics." But the Gudkovs were close to the Soviet regime in their own way.

His father was a KGB officer, rising to the rank of lieutenant colonel. After resigning in 1992, the senior Gudkov founded a private security company. He later served as a consultant to the FSB, a successor agency of the Soviet KGB, for four years until he was elected to the Duma in 2001.

The elder Gudkov — who has accused Putin of having more power than Catherine the Great — has been one of the most vocal critics of the president. In June 2012, the father and son and their fellow deputy Ilya Ponomarev staged the first parliamentary filibuster of the Putin era. When the Duma debated increasing fines for participants of unsanctioned rallies, the troika took turns speaking for 11 hours straight. But the gambit did not stop the parliament from adopting the bill.

Although they share a KGB past, his father and Putin are not of the same ilk, Dmitry Gudkov said.

"It's a liberal myth to think that all people in security agencies are the same," the lawmaker said. "That would be like thinking that all journalists are alike. My father has always been true to himself."

Gennady Gudkov was stripped of his legislative mandate in 2012 after investigative authorities accused him of engaging in commercial activity, which is forbidden for Russian lawmakers. Independent observers viewed the measure as a Kremlin-led attack on the opposition.

The elder Gudkov's KGB past still casts a long shadow. The family's detractors have questioned the authenticity of the Gudkovs' vociferous opposition to the regime. And Dmitry Gudkov has only fueled their suspicions by straddling the political system.



Vladimir Filonov / MT

Gudkov keeps one foot in the Duma and the other immersed in protest.

Token Opposition?

Gudkov sits in the legislative body as an independent, along with Ponomaryov, who resigned from the A Just Russia party in solidarity when the Gudkov was kicked out. Some political analysts have speculated that their presence in the Duma is tolerated because it serves to legitimize the otherwise rubber-stamp legislature.

Gudkov vehemently dismissed any doubt about the authenticity of his cause, citing the three sitting "opposition" parties — LDPR, A Just Russia and the Communist Party — as being the Duma's facade of dissent. These parties, he said, vote the "right way" — according to the Kremlin's wishes — when it is required of them.

"I am not part of the system," Gudkov said. "I am in the Duma, but I am the odd one out. I have been offered different options to be part of the system, but I view them like the Titanic. Everything looks wonderful, attractive and expensive, but in reality they are already heading

toward the iceberg."

Gudkov balanced his opinion and the political forces in his environment by abstaining from voting on Russia's annexation of Crimea in March, which was passed by a 445-1 vote in the legislative body. The only deputy who voted against the addition of Crimea to Russia's federal fold was Gudkov's friend and colleague Ponomaryov.

Gudkov explained his position in his blog, saying the circumstances surrounding the political initiative — including what in his view was the illegitimacy of the Crimean referendum and the prospect of Russia becoming an "aggressor in the eyes of the world" — had led him to abstain.

Gudkov said he refrained from voting against the bill because of his constituents' concerns and "out of respect for the Crimeans who genuinely love Russia and want to live in our country."

Gudkov might seem like trouble for the Kremlin, but it would be more trouble to swat the Duma's gadfly, according to Russian pundits.

"The Kremlin realizes that it is just simpler to leave Gudkov in the State Duma," said Dmitry Oreshkin, head of the Moscow-based Mercator political research group. "The authorities have already stripped his father of his mandate, and stripping him of his would just create an unnecessary scandal. Gudkov's initiatives can easily be neutralized. He's no bother."

Yet Gudkov has used his position to stir debate in Russia's smothered civil society and question authorities' seemingly irrefutable assertions.

Most recently, Gudkov pressed the defense minister to admit to the presence of Russian soldiers in eastern Ukraine. He wrote to Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in late August, inquiring about the reported deaths of military servicemen said to have been killed while fighting in eastern Ukraine. Gudkov asked whether the families of the deceased had "received financial support from the state in exchange for silence."

Gudkov received a reply last week and published it on his Facebook, Twitter and LiveJournal pages. The letter, signed by Deputy Defense Minister Nikolai Pankov, said the presence of Russian soldiers in eastern Ukraine was a mere rumor, despite the "routine accusations of some Ukrainian and Western politicians."

Big Plans

At 34, Gudkov says he has no intention of leaving politics, but conceded that the nature of his political struggles could evolve with changing circumstances.

"People now recognize Gudkov. He's young, but he has already built his image," political analyst Oreshkin said. "That will open up political opportunities for him later on — that is, if he doesn't end up abroad."

Gudkov said one of his immediate aims was the restoration of direct mayoral elections in Russian cities.

"But that's just on a local level," he said. "I'm planning something bigger."

The deputy outlined the broad strokes of a plan to create what he called an "apolitical" reform package for the country's election legislation.

Gudkov said he would gather experts and politicians to debate changes to the laws governing parliamentary elections, before embarking on a campaign to mobilize public opinion. He is adamant that authorities "will have to listen" to the project and that it will finally unite the different factions of the non-systemic opposition, which have failed to coalesce despite their common goals.

Last month, Gudkov spoke at a conference in Nizhny Novgorod hosted by Open Russia, a movement founded by former oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who left the country after spending 10 years in prison on what critics said were politically motivated charges. Members of a pro-Kremlin group headed by Gudkov's colleague, United Russia deputy Yevgeny Fyodorov, stormed the hall where the event was being held.

Gudkov, who predicted that Russia's current economic woes would become a "catastrophe" in 18 months, said the country would inevitably be prompted to seek reforms and would need key figures to lead them. He provided no timeline nor hints as to what role he hopes to play in this process, but he observed that Khodorkovsky, who announced last month that he would be ready to assume the Russian presidency, could well play a role in the country's political future.

"When people didn't have anything to eat in the 1990s, the population demanded that politicians carry out reforms," Gudkov said. "We will need someone to elaborate a plan to get out of this crisis at some point. There could come a time when Putin understands that he has lost, that he can't trust anybody. In this situation, one person could emerge. Why could this person not be Mikhail Khodorkovsky? This seems unrealistic right now. But there will need to be someone there to negotiate a transition to democracy."

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Original url:

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