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Russian Parliament to Rule on Opposition Lawmaker Ponomaryov

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Duma deputy Ilya Ponomaryov, who won a Duma seat from Russia's third-largest city of Novosibirsk, said Wednesday that Russian authorities have prevented him from returning home since August when he first went to the United States on a business trip.

The Russian parliament is to consider a prosecutors' request to proceed with legal action against the lone lawmaker who voted against the annexation of Crimea and is suspected of embezzlement.

State Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin said Thursday the parliament received a request from Russian prosecutors to strip Ilya Ponomaryov of immunity from prosecution, paving the way for legal proceedings. Naryshkin said Ponomaryov is suspected of embezzlement related to his work for a state-funded technological foundation, which was also the subject of a civil lawsuit in 2013.

The motion to strip him of immunity is to be considered on April 6.

Ponomaryov is one of the few remaining opposition deputies at the State Duma. He is

currently in the United States.

The State Duma has a history of expelling opposition lawmakers. The Russian parliament in 2012 kicked out Gennady Gudkov, who helped stage a series of anti-government street protests in 2011, and removed his immunity from prosecution on accusations that did not lead to any charges.

Ponomaryov, 39, was the target of a civil lawsuit in 2013 for 2.7 million rubles ($47,000) for failing to deliver the agreed number of lectures at Skolkovo, a high-tech foundation promoted by former President Dmitry Medvedev. Following futile attempts to appeal the ruling, Ponomaryov began to pay down the debt.

Naryshkin told reporters on Thursday the prosecutors suspect the lawmaker of embezzlement at Skolkovo but did not provide details.

Ponomaryov told The Associated Press that the actions of Russian prosecutions "are beyond the legal framework."

Ponomaryov dismissed the accusations against him as politically motivated and said the motion at the Duma is a reaction to his announcement that he is going to return to Russia in May.

Together with senior opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, who was murdered in central Moscow last month, the leftist Ponomaryov was among the leaders of mass street protests against President Vladimir Putin that swept through Moscow in 2011-12. The killing of Nemtsov has shaken the Russian opposition, deepening a sense of despair and fear among them.

Ponomaryov, who won a Duma seat from Russia's third-largest city of Novosibirsk, said Wednesday that Russian authorities have prevented him from returning home since August when he first went to the United States on a business trip.

After he declared his intent to return in May, "they reacted by telling me not to, they are trying to keep me away from Russia," he said over the phone, adding he expected the Duma to vote in favor of revoking his immunity from prosecution, a privilege enjoyed by Russian lawmakers in general.

"And then things will be kicked into the long grass, they don't want to create any more martyrs, their task is to prevent me from coming to Russia."

Ponomaryov, a physicist and businessman, said he would decide on his next moves once he gets to know the prosecutors' case. He said his wife was also abroad but his children were staying with their grandparents in Russia.

"I never wanted to emigrate, become a political refugee. I was here on a trip in August over Novosibirsk matters. I had a bag with two sweaters and that's all," said Ponomaryov, adding that he is in the United States on a tourist visa.

During his time in the United States, Ponomaryov has campaigned for extending Washington's sanctions imposed over Moscow's role in the turmoil in Ukraine to include more Russian state officials.

"I'm skeptical on economic sanctions. They only put the Russian nation against the United States, Europe. They should target precisely the regime and its corrupt officials. Such sanctions should be as wide as possible," he said.

The conflict in Ukraine has brought ties between Russia and the West to their lowest level since the Cold War and has cost Moscow dearly in economic sanctions, aggravating the country's economic woes.

But Putin has also used it to whip up nationalist sentiment at home where opinion polls show his ratings are near record highs.

Before his killing, Nemtsov was working on a report his aides said would aim to prove Russia's direct military involvement in east Ukraine, something Moscow has repeatedly denied despite what the West and Kiev say is irrefutable proof.

Since the street protests in late 2011 and early 2012, Putin has tightened his grip on power, leaving little room for a fractious opposition that has all but failed to challenge him during his third term.

Several prominent opposition leaders, including former oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, have fled the country, while many others, like anti-graft blogger Alexei Navalny, have faced court cases or jail.

(Reuters, AP)

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