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Communists Storm Out of Moscow Duma Hearing on Monument to Feared Secret Police Chief

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The Communist Party plans to contest the City Duma's decision to exclude the education and health care questions from the proposed referendum in court.

The Moscow City Duma courted controversy Wednesday with its determination that a proposed referendum question on the restoration of a monument to feared Soviet secret police chief Felix Dzerzhinsky was consistent with the law.

But Dzerzhinsky — a Bolshevik revolutionary and founder of the dreaded Cheka secret police, which later evolved into the KGB — was not at the heart of the day's scandal.

The Duma had been set to decide Wednesday whether three proposed referendum questions submitted by the Communist Party were consistent with the relevant legislation, clearing the path for the party to move forward with the initiative.

In addition to the question of whether the Dzerzhinsky statue should be resurrected on Lubyanskaya Ploshchad, the Communist Party sought to include questions on education and health care reforms.

Emotional Roller Coaster

Wednesday's plenary session lasted more than five hours. Initially, the majority of the deputies decided that none of the proposed questions were eligible for the referendum and rejected the respective bill.

At that point, in a gesture of protest, four of the five Communist faction deputies present stormed out of the session.

"It's absurd what's happening there," Nikolay Zubrilin, Communist Party member, told The Moscow Times, his tone heated. "They're ignoring Muscovites' democratic rights and the Communist Party's legal right to hold a referendum."

But shortly thereafter, the tide turned. Rodina Party Deputy Andrei Shibayev suggested an amendment to the City Duma decision determining the Dzerzhinsky question consistent with the law, and therefore eligible for the referendum. The amendment passed.

"The City Duma supported Shibayev's amendments and supported the referendum on returning the Dzerzhinsky monument to Lubyanskaya Ploshchad. So there might be a referendum in Moscow after all," Alexei Shaposhnikov, Moscow City Duma chair, explained to reporters after the session.

Uncertainty Remains

Tatyana Portnova, the head of the City Duma commission on state building and local self-government, disagreed with Shaposhnikov's formulation of the situation.

She told The Moscow Times on Wednesday that it's not the City Duma's job to throw its weight behind the referendum. "We don't support or reject the referendum itself. We only determine whether the questions are consistent with the law or not, and whether they are eligible to be posed in a referendum," Portnova pointed out.

She added that the City Duma had never before parsed proposed referendum questions the way it did on Wednesday.

Just last week, Portnova had told The Moscow Times that the city lawmakers could not give different answers to different questions. "We will either decide that all the questions are eligible, or that none of them are," she said earlier.

Apparently, they could and they did, and now the ball is in the Moscow City Election Commission's court.

The commission is set to consider the fate of the referendum Thursday, though committee representatives have already vowed to reject the referendum. "Under the law, if even one question is determined ineligible by the City Duma, the commission must reject the [referendum initiative]," Interfax news agency cited Dmitry Reut, Moscow elections

committee chief of staff, as saying on Wednesday.

If, despite Reut's doubts, the committee sides with the Communists, 146,000 signatures (2 percent of Moscow's electorate) will need to be collected in support of the referendum within one month's time.

Meanwhile, the Communist Party plans to contest the City Duma's decision to exclude the education and health care questions from the proposed referendum in court, news agency TASS reported Wednesday.

"Two-thirds of their decision was illegal, and we are going to sue," TASS cited Valery Rashkin, State Duma deputy and the Communist Party member.

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