

Communists Refuse to Go Ahead With First Post-Soviet Referendum

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After collecting nearly 160,000 signatures in support of the restoration of a monument to feared Soviet secret police chief Felix Dzerzhinsky in the center of Moscow, the Communist Party has abandoned a bid to hold a referendum on the issue, lawmaker Vladimir Rodin told The Moscow Times on Thursday.

The Communist Party had been required to gather 146,000 signatures in order to gain authorization to stage the popular vote. That figure represents 2 percent of the city's eligible voters.

But after far exceeding their goal, party officials decided to hold off on staging the referendum pending the outcome of a lawsuit that would allow them to pose a number of other issues more relevant to the everyday lives of Muscovites than the monument, Rodin, a State Duma

deputy and member of the Communist Party, told The Moscow Times.

"It's true, we collected 152,000 signatures within [the first month of canvassing], and they're still coming in. As of Thursday we've received an additional 5,000 signatures," Rodin said.

The party took issue with the fact that the Moscow City Duma excluded from the possible referendum questions about education and health care system reforms that the Communist Party had initially proposed, according to Rodin.

"Most of the people that signed [in support of the referendum] complained about the fact that we hadn't been able to push the questions about education and health care through the City Duma," Rodin said. "Of course, these questions concern Muscovites a lot more than Dzerzhinsky."

Accordingly, the party has decided to hold off on staging the referendum pending the outcome of a lawsuit they have filed challenging the Moscow City Duma's decision to exclude the education and health care questions.

Rodin couldn't say how long that would take. He noted regretfully that if the ruling comes down in the party's favor, they will need to begin collecting signatures all over again, as the first attempt pertained only to the Dzerzhinsky question.

Analysts said in comments to The Moscow Times last month that the fate of the referendum depends on the Kremlin's will.

"If the Kremlin needs it to go ahead, it will go ahead. If they don't, it's very easy to undermine it," Dmitry Oreshkin, an independent political analyst and head of the Mercator political research group, said at the time.

"The presidential administration holds the key to the whole situation," Oreshkin said. "So basically the outcome of the initiative depends on how the administration decides to use this key."

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