

Russian parliament expels Putin adversary

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24 September 2012

Last Friday, the Russian State Duma annulled the parliamentary mandate of Gennady Gudkov, a deputy from the A Just Russia party.

Gudkov is one of the most influential politicians in Russia. He supported the “modernization” campaign of former President Dmitry Medvedev.

Responding to the declaration of Vladimir Putin’s presidential candidacy last autumn, he participated in the protest movement that emerged following the disputed Duma elections in the winter. His banishment is an expression of the increasingly violent disputes between rival cliques within the ruling elite.

Gudkov was dismissed under the pretext of having pursued secondary employment in addition to his mandated duties as a member of the Duma. Since the early 1990s, Gudkov has operated a private security company that he still owns.

This was clearly a pretext, however, since many Russian officials maintain business activities alongside their political posts.

Some 291 deputies voted for the expulsion, while 150 from A Just Russia and the Stalinist Communist Party (CPRF) voted against it. Three deputies abstained. The media reported that many members of the ruling United Russia party were against Gudkov’s ousting but found themselves compelled to vote for it.

The real reason for the cancellation of Gudkov’s Duma mandate was his criticisms of President Putin and his involvement in the Moscow protests. Gudkov has for years called for “reform from above” and consequently supported ex-President Medvedev.

Although Medvedev was close to Putin, he advocated a more liberal economic policy and a US-orientated foreign policy. At a demonstration in Moscow on Saturday, Gudkov again warned that the government would eventually “be wading through blood or be overthrown” unless reforms were undertaken.

Gudkov’s advocacy of reforms has nothing to do

with a struggle for democracy or greater social equality. He is a typical representative of the former Soviet bureaucracy that enriched itself through the restoration of capitalism in a criminal manner and at the expense of the population.

Like Putin, Gudkov made his career in the Soviet secret service agency, the KGB (now the FSB), where he worked from 1982 to 1991. Like many of his KGB cronies, he founded a private security firm, Oskord, in the early 1990s. By the late 1990s, Oskord was among the market leaders. According to Russian media reports, at least half of its approximately 3,000 employees at the time came from Soviet intelligence and security bodies.

Most of these security firms were mafia-like outfits, used by various oligarchs in the battle for the control of businesses and spheres of influence. As private companies, they were in competition with the Interior Ministry, which carried out its own security operations and enjoyed certain advantages due to its position in the state apparatus.

Gudkov began his political career in the early 2000s. As *Der Spiegel* magazine reported, he was aided by his KGB friends. His job was to lobby parliament for the private security firms. From 2001, Gudkov was member of the Duma and sat on the committee for public security.

During his tenure as a deputy Gudkov often changed parties, a common practice among Russian politicians. Initially he was a member of the patriotic nationalist People’s Party of the Russian Federation. Together with some friends, he crossed into the party camp of Putin’s United Russia in 2007. He then became a member of the Kremlin’s newly founded party, A Just Russia.

Subsequently, Gudkov became a prominent supporter of the “modernization” course, endorsed by then-President Medvedev. He was one of the leaders of

Forward Russia, a party established in 2010 as the Medvedev faction's answer to United Russia. But the project was soon stifled by the Kremlin.

Gudkov advocates limiting government involvement in the economy and thus represents a free market "liberal" faction of the ruling elite. He maintains close ties with, among others, Vladimir Ryzhkov, co-chairman of the Solidarnost liberal movement, which is sponsored in part by the US government.

Gudkov's expulsion from the Duma reflects Putin's concern over mounting popular opposition and growing divisions within the ruling elite. Gudkov is one of a number of former Putin supporters who have turned against him and are now cooperating with the protest movement, largely composed of middle class elements.

It is significant that Gudkov, a prominent supporter of Prime Minister Medvedev, is so openly attacked by the Putin fraction in parliament. Medvedev himself was reportedly surprised by last autumn's announcement that Putin would again run for president. He now rarely makes public appearances and has been repeatedly criticized by President Putin. Many observers expect that he will not serve a full term. Nevertheless, Medvedev—who avoided any public confrontation with then-Prime Minister Putin during his presidency—has supporters in both liberal circles and the state apparatus itself.

Gudkov's expulsion amounts to a clear signal from Putin to his critics within the political establishment. They are all to understand that virtually any parliamentary deputy who openly challenges the president can now be removed. The liberal newspaper, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, speculated that Putin could well dissolve the entire Duma in the not too distant future.

The background to the sharp differences within the Russian elite is shaped by Russia's growing political tensions with the US and other NATO powers, as well as the global economic crisis.

More and more sections of the ruling elite oppose Putin's course in relation to the US. Russia, together with China, constitutes the main obstacle to direct military intervention by the US and its allies against Iran and Syria. Many regard a military confrontation with the US—to which Putin's stance could ultimately lead—as an unacceptable risk for both military-political and economic reasons. Russia is also increasingly politically isolated in Europe, mainly because of its

opposition to the war in Syria. Due to Russia's close economic ties with EU countries, this isolation is a major problem for the Moscow government.

At the same time, the global economic crisis is raising social and political tensions. Greatly dependent on the export of raw materials, Russia was particularly hard hit by the 2008 financial crisis.

Commodity exports, based on high world market prices, formed the foundation for the country's economic growth in the 2000s, which was ultimately crucial for Putin's consolidation of power. Since then, the "Putin model," whose economic success was primarily attributable to high oil and gas prices on global markets, has come under increasing criticism from both the Western and Russian elites.

Meanwhile, Russia is sliding into a new recession, which the Kremlin will find virtually impossible to cushion in the way it did in 2009. Under these conditions, fears of a social explosion are growing within the ruling elite.

Faced with these social and political tensions, Putin is trying to stanch criticism from within the ruling circles and prepare the state apparatus for a confrontation with the working class by mounting renewed attacks on democratic rights.



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