

Deputies 'Cheated' On Police Reform

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The State Duma decided on Thursday to drop a controversial provision to declare any police actions legal unless proved otherwise from a bill on police reform due for a second reading next week.

But lawmakers will also cull numerous crucial amendments proposed by minority parties, effectively crippling the bill that the Kremlin introduced last year with much fanfare after a public discussion.

The Duma's Security Committee on Thursday recommended dropping dozens of the 560 amendments submitted to the bill on police reform ahead of a general vote on Monday.

The Just Russia and Liberal Democratic parties, which supported the bill in a first reading last month in exchange for a promise that their proposals would be taken into account later, said Thursday that they had been cheated by United Russia, which controls both the Security Committee and the Duma.

Lawmakers still can revise the bill before Monday, but the Duma usually follows committee recommendations.

Among the amendments discarded Thursday were measures to increase public and parliamentary control over the police and ban the force from the private security market, where it is currently a key player, said Gennady Gudkov, a Security Committee member with A Just Russia.

"The Police Joint-Stock Company will be alive and well," Gudkov said bitterly by telephone. "In the end we will just change a couple of words and the people will not get any reform at all."

Even the Security Committee's decision to remove the provision where a police officer's actions are legal by default — which critics said would open the door to rampant abuse — was made in response to public outrage, not criticism by minority lawmakers, said committee chief Vladimir Vasilyev, who represents United Russia, Interfax reported.

Another key provision allowing the police to break into people's homes was clarified, with officers only authorized to kick down doors if they are chasing a criminal or hear cries for help from within the locked premises, Vasilyev said, RIA-Novosti reported.

Another United Russia member on the committee, Alexei Volkov, told The Moscow Times that this provision is similar to measures already used by utilities services, which sometimes require breaking into apartments without owners' authorization.

But Gudkov said the bill still contains "very dangerous wording" on the matter and might be revised ahead of Monday's vote.

Another issue are public councils that oversee police work, whose membership Interior Ministry officials will be able to influence. "There is the possibility that a police boss will be able to bring in people who will support him in all his misdeeds," Volkov admitted.

But Volkov said the guidelines for the creation and activities of public councils will be defined by a separate presidential decree, which is not yet drafted.

He described Thursday's debate as "emotionally heated."

The draft of the police reform bill was first presented online for public viewing in August and gathered more than 20,000 comments. But many suggestions were ignored, and legal experts and rights activists have cautioned that the version before the Duma gives the police too much power and won't bring about real reform.

President Dmitry Medvedev has much at stake, so his career might be damaged if the reform backfires, some lawmakers said.

"With all respect to President Medvedev's ratings, it will be a big blow to the general public if this law doesn't work," Nikolai Levichev, head of A Just Russia's Duma faction, said by telephone.

Andrei Lugovoi, a Liberal Democrat Party deputy who is on the Security Committee, accused

the Interior Ministry of attempting to stall the legislation.

“The president has been misled by Interior Ministry bureaucrats who are afraid to lose their jobs,” Lugovoi told City-FM radio.

The Kremlin kept silent on the matter Thursday.

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