

Naryshkin Denies Duma Will Be Dissolved

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Amid widespread speculation that the State Duma will be dissolved for new elections, Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin assured deputies that the lower house would fulfill its duties until the end of its current term in 2016.

"I would like to repeat that the genuine authority of the State Duma is based on the professionalism of each one of us, meaning the quality of the laws we pass, whether they comply with the constitution ... and whether they respond to the interests of the majority of citizens," Naryshkin said in a speech to the Duma on Friday.

"All other criteria and judgments are only ploys aimed at destabilizing the situation in our society and hindering the highest legislative body of our country from professionally fulfilling its duties," he said.

Political commentators have written extensively in recent weeks about the possibility of the

Duma being replaced because of high-profile resignations and low approval ratings for the assembly, which is controlled by United Russia.

But, as Naryshkin pointed out in his speech, early Duma elections have never been called in the 20 years since the Soviet collapse, and deputies interviewed by The Moscow Times predicted that the current Duma would remain in place at least until the Sochi Olympics next February.

Ilya Ponomarev, a deputy from the Just Russia party and one of the Duma's most prominent Kremlin opponents, said he thought Naryshkin's speech reflected how much pressure the Duma leadership was under, calling it "a sign of weakness rather than strength."

"The present Duma will certainly linger until the Sochi Games, but you can feel the tension already," he said, adding that it was becoming difficult for lawmakers to strike deals and do business because the long-term outlook is unclear.

In recent months, the Duma has become the subject of intense media scrutiny, and both opposition and pro-government deputies have been forced to leave its ranks after investigations into their activities.

In September, Kremlin critic Gennady Gudkov was stripped of his seat in the Duma on charges of unlawful entrepreneurship, marking the first time a deputy has been kicked out of parliament without being convicted of a crime. Last month, Vladimir Pekhtin of United Russia resigned after opposition leader Alexei Navalny published documents showing that Pekhtin co-owned an undeclared \$2 million condominium in Miami, Florida.

Two more United Russia deputies, Anatoly Lomakin and Vasily Tolstopyatov, resigned from the Duma weeks after Pekhtin, while the Duma's anti-graft chief, Irina Yarovaya, has faced embarrassing allegations of ethics violations with the publication of a report accusing her of owning a multimillion-dollar apartment in central Moscow.

The Duma has also been criticized by the public for polarizing laws it has passed in recent months. More than 130,000 people signed a petition posted late last year on the website of opposition newspaper Novaya Gazeta calling for the Duma to be disbanded, while more than 100,000 signed a separate petition on the same website opposing a ban on U.S. adoptions of Russian children.

According to an initiative put forward by President Vladimir Putin, all petitions signed by more than 100,000 people have to be reviewed by the Duma. United Russia Deputy Vladimir Pligin, who heads the Duma's Constitution and State Affairs Committee, said earlier this month that such petitions only had to be "considered" and that the Duma could not be dissolved by signatures.

Alexei Ponomarev, a Communist lawmaker who is deputy head of the Duma's Rules Committee, said speculation that the Duma would be dissolved were widespread both among lawmakers and staff. "On Thursday I was walking to my office on the eighth floor and a woman stopped me to ask whether the Duma would be dissolved soon. I replied, 'Not until the Sochi Games at least,'" he said.

He added that he opposed new Duma elections, noting that what deputies need now is "confidence," which has been damaged by sharp media scrutiny on their activities.

Earlier last week, United Russia issued a statement warning the media over "abusing the right to free speech," apparently in response to an article in Moskovsky Komsomolets describing three female United Russia deputies as "political prostitutes."

Naryshkin referred to the statement Friday, saying that while freedom of speech was a vital democratic virtue, it was a double-edged sword that could cause "irreversible consequences" if used improperly.

"All of us, both lawmakers and people at large, have to do everything to preserve true freedom of speech, rather than the vulgar variety," Naryshkin said.

United Russia deputies escalated their fight against Moskovsky Komsomolets on Friday, demanding that Moscow City Hall look into whether the newspaper was legally allowed to be in the building it occupies. The newspaper's editors responded by denying wrongdoing and declaring that Moskovsky Komsomolets is "the most popular newspaper in Moscow."

But in the latest sign that United Russia's influence is waning, Izvestia reported Friday that all the top officials in the Kremlin administration were withdrawing from the party.

President Vladimir Putin is not a member of United Russia, which is headed by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, but he has consistently relied on it for support in passing laws and rallying voters behind him during his 13 years in power.

Ponomarev said that Putin would be satisfying a major demand of the weakened anti-Kremlin protest movement by dissolving the Duma — the protests began in December 2011 in response to disputed parliamentary elections — but that it may actually strengthen the president's position.

"One scenario is that they will make the Duma the scapegoat, while Putin will make himself out to be a true democrat," he said.

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