

Moscow Edges Closer to First Referendum Since Soviet Collapse

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Moscow looks set to get its first referendum in post-Soviet times — and one of the burning issues on the ballot will be the restoration of a monument to the founder of the secret police to central Moscow.

On June 11, the Moscow election committee approved the Communist Party's request to start the procedure to hold a referendum in September.

Three questions are planned to be on the ballot. The first two deal with whether Muscovites approve of reforms to the city education system and the health care system. The third asks whether the monument to Felix Dzerzhinsky — a Bolshevik revolutionary and founder of the dreaded Cheka secret police that later evolved into the KGB — should be restored to its original spot. The statue of "Iron Felix" was removed from its pedestal in the center of Lubyanskaya Ploshchad, in front of the KGB headquarters, in 1991 in a symbolic gesture of closing the chapter of Russia's Soviet era.

The next step is for the Communists to convince the Moscow City Duma, or parliament, that these questions are eligible for a plebiscite. If the City Duma decides that they are, the signatures of 146,000 people — 2 percent of all city residents eligible to vote — will have to be gathered within a month in support of the referendum.

If that is achieved, Muscovites will head to the polls in September to express their views on all three issues.

"We've been trying to initiate a referendum since 2011, but the Moscow election committee always found an excuse not to allow us to do it," Andrei Klychkov, head of the City Duma's Communist faction, told *The Moscow Times* last week.

"This time we went to court to challenge the committee's decision. We went through all the stages, from the Moscow City Court right up to the Supreme Court, and won every time. With all those court decisions, the committee simply had to rule in our favor."

All or Nothing

It's not a victory yet, Klychkov acknowledged. The Moscow City Duma has yet to determine the eligibility of the questions prepared for the referendum and their compliance with municipal and federal laws, and signatures have yet to be gathered.

The City Duma will consider the questions on Wednesday. The eligibility criteria are: the question should be answerable with a simple "yes" or "no" answer, and that answer, regardless of what it is, should be the basis for concrete legal action, Tatyana Portnova, head of the City Duma commission for state building and local self-government, told *The Moscow Times*.

"Any referendum should compel the authorities to adopt new legal acts, and questions should be formulated accordingly," she said. It's doubtful whether the Communists' questions about the education and health care systems would compel anyone to do anything, she said: They simply ask whether Moscow residents support the reforms.

"Even if people unanimously answer 'no' to 'Do you support the city education system reform?' from the point of view of the law we can only say — so what? It's unclear what kind of legal changes that answer would lead to," said Portnova.

Those two questions were formulated more than six months ago, before the reforms were actually carried out, and can't be changed now. So it's difficult to say exactly how the referendum could impact the education and health care systems, Klychkov agreed.

But if the plebiscite goes ahead and shows that people don't support the reforms, they will have to be reversed one way or another, he said.

The Dzerzhinsky question is far less ambiguous, said Portnova. "It's clear: The city will either have to return it to Lubyanka or not," she said.

But the City Duma can't approve one question for referendum and reject the other two: It has to make a decision on all three questions, she said. "We will either decide that all

the questions are eligible, or that all of them aren't," the Duma representative said.

Divisive Issue

It is the question about Dzerzhinsky that is making headlines. The monument to Iron Felix symbolized the power the KGB, designed to fight "enemies of the nation," had over people's lives in Soviet times. In the early '90s, when life started to change for Russians, Muscovites didn't want the figure of Dzerzhinsky looming over them, representing as it did the tens of thousands of victims of political repression shot without trial by KGB officers.

"Journalists only know that there will be a referendum about Dzerzhinsky," Klychkov complained on Twitter on June 11.

It's hardly surprising that the focus is on Dzerzhinsky, and not on the reforms, Dmitry Oreshkin, an independent political analyst and the head of the Mercator political research group, told The Moscow Times.

"Putin has to use leftist rhetoric now that nationalist ideas have been exhausted. The political situation and economy aren't getting any better, so there has to be something to distract our attention," he said.

The analyst said he doubted that Iron Felix would make it back to Lubyanka, even if the referendum goes ahead. "People don't like Cheka officials as much as Communists would like to think they do," he said.

Dmitry Orlov, a political analyst with close ties to the Kremlin and a member of the supreme council of the ruling United Russia party, disagreed.

"I'm not prepared to predict the actual outcome right now, but the situation is highly competitive," he said.

The whole movement to hold a referendum is an attempt to galvanize the electorate, Portnova from the Moscow City Duma suggested.

"These referendum initiatives come up every time a year before the elections. It's possible that the initiative's only objective is to galvanize the electorate into action," she said.

Paper War

The trickiest part could turn out not to be getting the electorate on side, but collecting the signatures for the referendum's go-ahead. The Communists' initiative is not the first to make it through the Moscow election committee stage of the procedure. Last year, the A Just Russia party passed this stage with flying colors with their proposal to conduct a referendum on paid parking zones in Moscow. The questions on the list were approved by the City Duma, but activists failed to collect enough signatures.

"We were given a month to collect 146,000 signatures, but that month included the New Year's public holidays, and it was very hard to find people in Moscow motivated enough to take part in it," Ilya Sviridov, the municipal A Just Russia party member and municipal

deputy who started the initiative, told The Moscow Times.

After 10 days of collecting signatures the party found out that the rules had changed. "We had gathered a significant number of signatures when the election committee informed us that we had to use another kind of signature lists, and the signatures we had already gathered would have to be excluded," said Sviridov.

Adding insult to injury, pro-Kremlin youth activists infiltrated the campaign and deliberately forged some of the signatures, said Sviridov. The falsifications didn't go unnoticed by the media, sparking a scandal and making the initiative look bad, so the party decided to abandon it, he said.

"The Communists will face the same problems this year," he said. "First of all, they will have to collect signatures in July and August when the city is empty because most people are on vacation. And for those who aren't, the political agenda will be the last thing on their minds," Sviridov said.

The Communist party is worried by the prospect of interference in the referendum process. On Thursday, party activists protested in front of City Hall against corruption and potential governmental manipulation of the plebiscite. They have pledged to hold another protest in front of the City Duma on Wednesday, when the decision about the initiative will be made.

Direct Democracy

The Communist party's Klychkov said he was well aware of the problems the initiative might face. "I'm not delusional, I know that the authorities don't want the referendum to succeed," he said.

"The referendum itself, though, could set a good precedent — a good tradition of giving Muscovites the opportunity to decide on important matters," he added.

"We said exactly the same thing last year about our initiative," said Sviridov of A Just Russia. "Of course it could be a good precedent. Even our experience, though unsuccessful, helped change many aspects of paid parking."

Grigory Melkonyants of the independent election watchdog Golos agreed that the initiative to hold a plebiscite is a good thing.

"It could be a good experience for our political culture, no matter what questions are put on the ballot," he said. "Any referendum is an inconvenience for the authorities because it helps the voters believe they can actually influence things."

Oreshkin disagreed, arguing that the Communists' initiative was on the contrary very convenient for the authorities.

"If the Kremlin needs it to go ahead, it will go ahead. If they don't, it's very easy to undermine it," the political analyst said, stressing that Moscow's election system works in accordance with the Kremlin's decisions.

"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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