

Moscow Officials Give Go-Ahead for First Post-Soviet Referendum

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The Moscow city legislature on Wednesday allowed the Communist Party to start collecting the nearly 150,000 signatures needed to hold a September referendum on restoring the statue to its original location.

Moscow election officials cleared the way Thursday for a popular vote on whether to restore a statue of the Soviet secret police's founder to a square in central Moscow.

The referendum's approval appears to reflect increased readiness by the Kremlin to resurrect Soviet-era symbols amid a showdown with the West over Ukraine.

The statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the Bolshevik revolutionary nicknamed "Iron Felix," stood outside KGB headquarters in Moscow until it was toppled by protesters in 1991 when the Soviet Union was falling.

The KGB's main successor, the FSB, now occupies the landmark building on Moscow's Lubyanka Square.

Images of demonstrators dismantling the towering monument with the help of a construction crane were among the most powerful symbols of collapse of the Communist rule.

Dzerzhinsky's statue has remained at a Moscow park since then along with other sculptures of Soviet leaders removed from their original locations after the Soviet collapse.

Communists and other hard-liners have long pushed for restoring the statue to its original place, but authorities had ignored their demands until now.

The proposed referendum caused dismay among liberal politicians and rights defenders.

Lyudmila Alexeyeva, an 87-year-old Soviet-era dissident who heads the respected Moscow Helsinki Group, denounced the planned vote as a "farce."

"I can only walk with assistance, but if they restore the Dzerzhinsky monument, I will come there to splash it with red paint, the color of blood that bloodsucker spilled," she said, according to Interfax.

The Moscow city legislature on Wednesday allowed the Communist Party to start collecting the nearly 150,000 signatures needed to hold a September referendum on restoring the statue to its original location.

The Moscow Election Commission, which initially vowed to block the vote, abruptly reversed its position Thursday and registered a group that would collect signatures for holding the vote.

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