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How I Plan to Bust Putin's Monopoly on Power

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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For the past year, Russia's leading opposition democratic movements have been debating what role they can and should play in the State Duma and presidential elections in 2011 and 2012, respectively. This issue was resolved on Thursday when I and three other leading liberal politicians — Boris Nemtsov, Mikhail Kasyanov and Vladimir Milov — announced the formation of a new democratic coalition, which we will attempt to register as a political party to run in the next election cycle of 2011-12.

We must start the registration process now so we can participate in the 2011-12 election cycle. We can't afford to miss this opportunity because the next Duma elections will be held only five years later, and the next presidential election will be held six years later.

Today, Yabloko and the Right Cause are the only two liberal-oriented parties officially recognized by the Kremlin, and thus they are the only nominally democratic opposition parties to have been registered by the Central Elections Commission. All other liberal,

democratic parties have been denied the opportunity to register by the commission, thereby depriving them of the legal right to participate in elections. This is precisely what happened to the Republican Party of Russia, which I headed. In 2007, it was refused registration based on trumped-up technical grounds.

In theory, candidates from parties that have been denied registration for Duma elections can run for president, but the authorities have created bureaucratic barriers that make it nearly impossible for these outsiders to register as presidential candidates. Candidates have only a brief period during which they must collect 2 million signatures from a majority of the regions. The Central Elections Commission then conducts a closed-door review of the signature lists. If the commission wants to disqualify a candidate on arbitrary grounds, all it has to do is to declare that at least 5 percent of the signatures were invalid. There is little if any oversight of the commission's findings, and trying to overturn the findings through the courts are useless. There has never been a case where the courts ruled against the interests of the ruling regime, particularly when the plaintiff is a member of the real opposition.

Recall what happened to Kasyanov when he attempted to run against then-President Vladimir Putin's favored candidate, Dmitry Medvedev, in the 2008 presidential election. Although Kasyanov was able to collect the 2 million signatures in time, the Central Elections Commission rejected his candidacy on the dubious grounds that 13.36 percent of the signatures were invalid.

If you are a true opposition candidate — as opposed to the decorative ones who are approved by the Kremlin to create a cheap semblance of democracy — participating in Russian elections automatically means encountering blatant legislative and administrative abuses and manipulations by the Kremlin-friendly election commission and courts.

Clearly, the odds are heavily against our coalition, but we are still determined to fight to defend the constitutional rights of millions of our constituents who demand representation in the parliament and the Kremlin. Our constituents want a liberal-democratic alternative to Putin's autocratic vertical power structure under which corruption, arbitrary rule and lawlessness have increased exponentially since he came to power in 2000. Thus, we have formed a coalition to oppose the ruling regime, and we will attempt to do this through the ballot box.

The name of our coalition is For a Russia Without Arbitrariness and Corruption. It highlights the social, economic and political shortcomings that have come to dominate Russia under Putin. It also defines the new coalition's two main political lines of attack as it strives to unite its supporters and reform the political and economic institutions that are essential to the country's democratization, development and modernization.

It is well-known that under Putin's rule, Russia has been crippled by rampant abuses by authorities, arbitrary enforcement of laws, a breakdown of the most basic public services, and criminal enrichment of the bloated bureaucratic class and ubiquitous corruption that devours nearly one-third of the country's gross domestic product annually.

The political and economic platform of the new coalition will be focused on overcoming the six major systemic defects that define Russia's bureaucratic autocracy:

1. state capitalism under which the government plays a dominant role in controlling and managing the country's largest industries;
2. the lack of free and fair elections, including the right of the people to elect governors;
3. the ubiquitous conflict of interest between public officials and business interests. The scandal with Mayor Yury Luzhkov is the most blatant example, but it is only the tip of the iceberg. The blending of business and politics is rampant all across the country with Duma deputies, Federation Council senators, governors, mayors and other public officials making huge profits from their own businesses — or those of close relatives — which they run from their public offices with little or no control or oversight;
4. the systemic criminal abuses within law enforcement agencies and security services;
5. a de facto one-party state with United Russia, headed by Putin, effectively playing the same monopolistic role among governors and in the Duma and regional legislatures that the Communist Party played during the Soviet period;
6. systemic extortion by regulatory agencies and other bureaucrats who suffocate entrepreneurial initiative, particularly among small and midsized businesses.

The immediate task before the coalition is to submit the necessary documents to the Justice Ministry and attempt to register the party to participate in regional, local and federal elections starting in 2011. In addition, a single candidate from the coalition to run in the 2012 presidential election will be elected by democratic procedure at a convention, which will be held in the first half of 2011.

We understand that the authorities, who are afraid that any real political competition could weaken their political and economic monopolies, will likely refuse registration for our new coalition party based on bogus grounds. If this happens, it will only further undermine the legitimacy of whatever Duma deputies and president are elected in 2011 and 2012. They will once again show the gaping hole between their meaningless democratic-sounding slogans and their authoritarian practices.

Only the Russian people can change this country for the better, but this can happen only if the Kremlin allows the people to freely and fairly elect their representatives on both the federal and regional levels.

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