

New 'Party of Action' Looks to 2011

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Babkin speaking to party delegates.

A wealthy businessman unveiled plans Thursday to create a new party, sparking debate about whether it was another Kremlin-backed project for the 2011 parliamentary elections or the independent initiative of an ambitious entrepreneur.

Partia Dela — or Party of Action — offered a populist platform that was light on specific policies, with one notable exception. The party will seek to reinstate direct elections for regional leaders, a policy that recently ousted Mayor Yury Luzhkov has said he plans to campaign for.

"We think that a political discussion is needed to create a better environment in the country, and the wrong economic course should be corrected. Those are the things we need to fight for," Konstantin Babkin, 39, told The Moscow Times after holding his party's founding congress.

Babkin is chairman of the Novoye Sodruzhestvo holding, a major producer of agricultural

machinery that controls several plants in Russia and Canada. The company, which includes Rostov-based combine producer Rostselmash, was listed 47th on Forbes Russia's 2010 list of largest privately held companies, with annual turnover of 43 billion rubles (\$1.4 billion).

More than 160 delegates from 51 Russian regions voted unanimously to make Babkin chairman of the new political party. The congress was held on the outskirts of Moscow in the Soviet-era Izmailovo hotel, which has agreed to host opposition parties in the past.

The program distributed at the congress focused on populist demands, such as universal higher education, measures to raise birth rates, support for the poor and the introduction of a luxury tax.

Delegates selected an image of a bee as their emblem, in what Babkin said should demonstrate the industriousness of the party's members.

A source close to the party denied that the bee was a reference to Luzhkov, a noted beekeeper. The party held "consultations" with Luzhkov, the source said, but the informal talks have ended and are not expected to continue.

Luzhkov has said he plans to stay in politics and fight for the return of gubernatorial elections, although he will not contest the 2012 presidential elections. He said he would revive the long-dormant Russian Movement of Democratic Reform, once chaired by his predecessor and friend, Gavriil Popov.

Babkin said he planned to get the party registered with the Justice Ministry before the year's end so that it could run in next year's elections to the State Duma. Party leaders privately expressed confidence that they would be allowed to register, a process that has been used in the past to exclude opposition groups.

Only seven parties are now registered, and just four have been able to pass the 7 percent threshold to win seats in the Duma.

Babkin denied any Kremlin involvement behind his party. But several political analysts said Party of Action looked like an effort to engage supporters of the now-defunct Agrarian Party, which was swallowed up into Putin's United Russia last year.

"No signals have come yet from the Kremlin — neither positive, nor negative," said the soft-spoken Babkin, who added that he and his supporters "do not always agree" with United Russia.

Babkin said his party would not just be a pro-business party and would seek support from students and pensioners.

The demand to return popular elections of governors, eliminated under then-President Vladimir Putin in 2004, could put the party on course for a rocky relationship with the Kremlin.

President Dmitry Medvedev has repeatedly said he is against returning to direct elections, and analysts have said Luzhkov's outspoken support for the issue may have contributed to his dismissal.

But analysts noted that businessmen have been careful not to cross the Kremlin with their political ambitions, particularly since 2003 when Yukos owner Mikhail Khodorkovsky, then Russia's richest man, was jailed in a politically tinged tax case.

Nikolai Petrov, a political analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center, said it was "absolutely impossible" for a major businessman such as Babkin to go into politics now without first getting a blessing from the Kremlin.

"Or at least from a certain faction in the Kremlin that believes that a certain part of the political spectrum is not well-covered by a loyal party," he said.

Babkin may be trying to realize his political ambitions and might feel encouraged by not being cut short by the Kremlin at the very beginning, said Georgy Bovt, a political analyst and a co-chairman of the liberal Right Cause party, which was registered last year.

"The Kremlin can block them at any step, but they prefer to watch to see whether this effort might yield a new political resource," he said.

Some delegates at the party's forum Thursday were also ambivalent of the perspectives of its leadership.

"Maybe they don't have the charisma needed for political leaders and have not mastered their speeches, but they have a desire to change something," Viktor Moskalyov, a delegate from the city of Smolensk, told The Moscow Times.

Babkin has not criticized Putin or Medvedev in the past.

He has been a vocal advocate for years for import duties on agricultural machinery and called on Putin in July 2009 to make permanent a 15 percent duty introduced during the economic crisis.

Ivan Starikov, a former deputy economy minister who worked on agricultural issues who knows Babkin well, said Thursday that the party was not connected to the Kremlin and would be an "opposition force."

"This party will be democratic-oriented and will act as a lobbyist for business interests," he said.

Starikov said Babkin had decided to go into politics and "is very determined" because he has lost faith in the state's support of the agricultural industry.

He also noted that Babkin is not a political novice. The businessman was a senior member and sponsor of the liberal but Kremlin-loyal Civic Force party, which ceased to exist in 2008.

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