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3 Parties Speak in Duma for 10 Minutes Each

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Talk about 15 minutes of fame. Or, in this case, 10 minutes.

Three political parties without representation in the State Duma were invited to participate in a parliamentary discussion Friday — but for only 10 minutes each. And the topic was restricted to labor conditions in Russia.

Yabloko, the liberal party shut out of the Duma in 2003 elections, joined the Kremlin-linked Right Cause and the leftist Patriots of Russia for the discussion thanks to a presidential bill giving registered parties not represented in the Duma or regional legislatures the right to speak at parliamentary sessions once a year.

But though the three parties tried their best to publicize their political views during Friday's event, the first since President Dmitry Medvedev in June signed the bill allowing them to speak in the Duma, neither the lawmakers nor the public were likely to pay much attention to

the speeches, analysts said.

A representative from each party was given 10 minutes at the microphone. No decisions were made by the Duma after the event.

Right Cause was the only party to at least partially support unpopular initiatives currently being considered by the Kremlin, while Patriots of Russia lambasted low salaries and poor working conditions in the country and Yabloko blamed labor problems on the country's lack of democracy and dependence on natural resources.

Yabloko leader Sergei Mitrokhin lashed out at the authorities for "eliminating political competition ... and creating a monopoly of one party" in the country and criticized the oil-dependent economy for causing a "high concentration of property" in the hands of the elite and for an "extremely high level of corruption," Interfax reported.

Mitrokhin linked labor issues, such as poor salaries and lack of rights for professional unions, to the dominance of an "authoritarian, corrupt, oligarchic bureaucracy" and said no progress in this area is possible until the political system is democratized.

Right Cause voiced cautious support for proposals to raise the retirement age and extend the working week. Senior party member Boris Nadezhdin told the Duma that "raising the retirement age in the next five to 10 years is absolutely inevitable because of demographic and economic trends," Interfax reported.

Raising the retirement age, currently at 55 years for women and 60 years for men, will enable authorities to raise pensions to more than 10,000 ($320) rubles a month after 2012, Right Cause said in a statement on its web site Thursday.

Nadezhdin also spoke in favor of an initiative by the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, which proposed last month to extend the working week, currently capped at 40 hours, to up to 60 hours for employees who agree to work overtime.

"Why prevent people from earning money if they are willing to work more?" Nadezhdin said.

But Andrei Isayev, head of the Duma's Labor and Social Policy Committee and a deputy with the ruling United Russia, called raising retirement age and extending working hours "unacceptable," RIA-Novosti reported. Both proposals were rejected earlier by all four parties represented in the Duma.

Sergei Glotov, a senior member of Patriots of Russia, chose to focus on state-owned enterprises, accusing them of meager wages and poor working conditions.

"No modernization is possible if labor is unappreciated," Glotov said.

Alexei Makarkin, an analyst with the Center for Political Technologies, said the event confirmed that the June law only aimed at creating an appearance of political pluralism without actually giving the non-parliamentary parties a voice in politics.

The three parties had no say in choosing the topic to discuss Friday and were asked to leave the hall after having their say despite wanting to discuss a possible bill on labor issues, he

said.

The political pariahs were "listened to because such is the law, and then they were dismissed," he told The Moscow Times.

Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information, agreed that the occasion was aimed at boosting Medvedev's image, not changing the political system. "Medvedev wanted to position himself as a liberal," he said, adding that Friday's speeches of the non-parliamentary parties were "politically insignificant."

Makarkin said Yabloko's proposals for democratic reforms were actually "in demand" in society but "few will hear them" because many people see the Duma as a "voting machine" for the Kremlin.

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