

Mironov Lays Out Election Strategy

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

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KALININGRAD — “You are the left leg of the Kremlin!” an elderly Communist barked at Just Russia party leader and Federation Council Speaker Sergei Mironov at a voter meeting in Kaliningrad.

Mironov tried to reason with the Communist, who accused him of not doing enough to support the poor. “We are trying to do it, but our party is not shown on television,” Mironov said.

“How come? You are the No. 3 man in the country!” the man shouted back.

The exchange succinctly sums up the problems of Mironov's party, which was established in 2006 to become the main leftist group in the country — and a pro-Kremlin one at that — but has played second fiddle to both the Communists and the ruling United Russia.

A Just Russia is entering an election year with a dismal popularity rating of 4 percent, according to a Levada [poll](#) last week. Even the party acknowledges that support does not top

14 percent — and it remains unclear whether the support will translate into votes in regional elections in March and the State Duma vote in December.

What is dragging the party down is an identity crisis, unresolved after all these years and now more acute than ever — with members in the regions calling for an independent policy and Mironov stubbornly insisting on maintaining loyalty to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who heads United Russia.

But even Mironov, 58, a soft-spoken former geologist from St. Petersburg, is finding it increasingly hard to get by in politics without confronting his opponents — at least some of them.

“I'm still a member of Putin's team,” he said in an interview with *The Moscow Times* during a trip to Kaliningrad last week.

But he promised to fight against United Russia — which Putin heads without being a member — and not support its candidate in the 2012 presidential race, whoever he might be.

The pledge amounts to potential rebellion, because United Russia will likely throw its weight behind the Kremlin's candidate, expected to be either Putin or his protege President Dmitry Medvedev.

“I think Putin is a pragmatic person and uses United Russia for his own needs. I don't really like it, but I do understand it,” Mironov said. “The fact that Putin leads United Russia without being a member is crucial for me. If he joins it some day, it would be regrettable for me, to be honest.”

Mironov declared an end to an uneasy truce with United Russia, reached in February 2010, during his trip to Kaliningrad, one of the 12 regions to elect legislatures on March 13.

A Just Russia will also name its own candidate for the presidential race in the fall, he said.

Mironov — who infamously ran against Putin in the 2004 presidential election to show his support for Putin — acknowledged in February 2010 that his backing of Putin was not absolute. His vague and wary criticism of Putin's anti-recession measures and links to United Russia sparked a flurry of outrage among his opponents. United Russia Deputy Andrei Isayev — incidentally, a former anarchist-turned-pro-Kremlin politician — denounced it as Mironov's “personal moral failure.”

But the fight fizzled out, and A Just Russia has done little since to oppose the Kremlin and United Russia on topics that have stirred public controversy, from deforestation in Khimki and a rise in violent nationalism to the abuse of flashing blue lights on cars used by officials.

This does not mean Mironov's party faces no obstacles. Just as Mironov was speaking at a meeting in Kaliningrad, the head of his party's apparatus, Oleg Mikheyev, was urging curiously disinterested Kaliningrad police officers to investigate the beatings of a Just Russia campaigner who was distributing party literature.

Thugs hired by United Russia were likely behind the beating, Mikheyev said. But he took care to distinguish between the party and its leader, saying he had nothing against Putin.

“Unlike United Russia, which slings dirt at our leaders, we are not getting personal,” he said.

Kaliningrad police eventually promised to open an investigation into the beatings — a decision that Mikheyev credited to his senior position in A Just Russia.

Mironov himself also admitted that his position as Federation Council speaker was not without benefit, making governors, most of them United Russia members, listen to him.

“Governors pay more attention to what I am saying because they view me as a ruling official,” Mironov said.

But some of his own subordinates are not so happy about his dual status, fearing that he is often negotiating with the Kremlin behind their backs, said a senior member of A Just Russia's Kaliningrad branch.

“We are expecting him to become more independent,” he said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he did not want to face consequences for criticizing the leader.

Whether the Kremlin has any use for Mironov is an open question. A bill lobbied by United Russia and signed into law by Medvedev last month chipped away at his power as Federation Council speaker by robbing him of the authority to block newly appointed senators from taking office.

Mironov personally voted against the bill in November but asked fellow senators to support it, saying the legislation “wouldn't change anything.”

“Some have really thought that I am trying to create a loyal council, but that not the case. I am an equal among equals,” Mironov said in the interview.

He acknowledged blocking some senator appointees from taking office, but said his decision was based on concerns about their possible criminal, not political, links.

“I was able to use data by the Federal Security Service and Interior Ministry,” Mironov said, refusing to elaborate because the reports were classified.

He also said he never explicitly removed a senator. “I have not forced anyone to quit, but some have submitted resignations after I spoke to them.”

Mironov did not identify any senators. Among those who have resigned under his tenure are Chechnya's Umar Dzhabrailov and the Penza region's Andrei Vavilov.

A Just Russia's ambiguous stance is well illustrated by its policy in Kaliningrad, located on the westernmost edge of Russia and one of the few regions to witness significant political unrest in recent years. Unpopular Governor Georgy Boos was removed by the Kremlin last year after thousands of people held rallies against him.

A Just Russia, which has no seats in the Kaliningrad regional legislature, held talks with a protest leader, businessman Konstantin Doroshok, ahead of March elections, but failed to convince him to run on the party's list.

In what party officials described as a show of sympathy for Doroshok, A Just Russia decided not to field a candidate in the district where Doroshok is running as an independent.

The party shied away from the Kaliningrad protests, spearheaded by independent activists and leftist opposition groups, including the Communist Party. But Mironov acknowledged at the time that the rallies signaled serious problems in the region.

He stood by his words when speaking to The Moscow Times, saying similar protests could flare up in any of the 84 regions of the country. He cautioned, however, against unsanctioned rallies.

“I don't think street democracy should prevail, but I also don't exclude that something like that can happen,” he said. “It should provide a lesson to governors not to drive people to despair.”

“We see that civil society is growing, and while it mostly remains within the Internet community, it spilled into real life in Kaliningrad,” he said.

Mironov himself is an avid blogger, whose [page](#) on LiveJournal.com, launched in 2008, boasts a following of about 2,800 subscribers.

Some of them might be less interested in politics than Mironov's personal stories about his time in the elite paratrooper forces in the 1970s or his work in geological expeditions in Mongolia.

His down-to-earth and often captivating yarns tell about ancient Tibetan manuscripts, serial killer manhunts and performances by vintage Soviet pop stars. His political posts are stiff and formal by comparison.

“My blogger friend Nana Kulikova said there are political bloggers, bloggers who want to promote themselves, and dreamers,” Mironov said. “I think I am a combination of the first and third type: a politically minded dreamer.”

He did not say what he dreams about.

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