

Mironov Steps Down in Surprise Just Russia Shakeup

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New party leader Nikolai Levichev, right, and Sergei Mironov in 2007. **Igor Tabakov**

Federation Council Speaker Sergei Mironov abruptly stepped down as leader of the Just Russia party over the weekend, sparking speculation that he was vacating the spot for another heavyweight like Russia's NATO envoy, Dmitry Rogozin, or even President Dmitry Medvedev.

But Mironov said he was only passing the seat to his childhood buddy, Nikolai Levichev, who heads the party's State Duma faction, and promised to lead A Just Russia through the Duma elections in December.

A Just Russia signaled with the surprise shakeup at a congress Saturday that it understands the need for drastic change if it is to remain relevant, and Mironov declared that the party would not back United Russia's candidate in the 2012 presidential election, even if it was Medvedev or Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

A Just Russia, created from the merger of three minor parties in 2006, is pro-Kremlin like United Russia, but the authorities have little use for it since United Russia holds a majority in most legislatures nationwide, including the Duma, where it has 315 seats compared with A Just Russia's 38.

Initially intended as a leftist group to steal votes from the Communists, A Just Russia has suffered an identity crisis from the beginning, playing with nationalist, socialist and loyalist platforms but not pursuing any wholeheartedly.

The ambiguity is reflected in its popularity ratings. The party claims its support stands at 14 percent, but official polls indicate only half of that amount — just enough to cross the Duma threshold but not to make a difference.

Mironov announced at Saturday's congress in Moscow that he was quitting and nominated Levichev as his replacement.

"We have decided on this step in order to distribute our forces," Mironov told reporters.

The congress delegates, who took the shock announcement without batting an eyelid, promptly voted in Levichev.

"Not having the faction's leader as the head of the party has weakened our position," Mironov said. "This is critical in an election year."

Mironov said he has known Levichev, 57, since childhood and vouched for both his professionalism and loyalty.

"We grew up in the the same courtyard," he said about Levichev, who has a background in physics. "When things are getting hot, it's good to know you've got your back covered."

Mironov, who was elected head of the party's Council of Deputies, a party apparatus group for its legislators, said he would focus on preparations for the Duma elections, leaving organizational work to Levichev.

Levichev, in turn, said Mironov remained the party's leader.

"Many parties abroad have tandemocracy. For us, it's a sign of democratization," Levichev said, Interfax reported.

Nevertheless, Levichev may be only a temporary figure, warming the seat for a political heavyweight — most likely Rogozin, a party source told The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter.

Rogozin has close ties to A Just Russia because his own nationalist Rodina party was absorbed into it back in 2006.

Mironov, while speaking to journalists Saturday, dismissed the notion that Rogozin may become the party's head.

Rogozin's return would damage the party's socialist credentials, said Alexei Mukhin,

a political analyst with the Center for Political Information, noting that A Just Russia is an associate member of the global group Socialist International, which is wary of nationalism.

"But they need to win the December elections," Mukhin said by telephone.

The party source also said A Just Russia might be gearing up to become a political vehicle for Medvedev, who may run for re-election in 2012. Unlike his political patron Putin, who heads United Russia without being a member, Medvedev does not have his own party.

Party endorsement is one way to formally register for the presidential election, although nomination by any group of voters numbering at least 500 members is also allowed.

Senior Just Russia official Gennady Gudkov welcomed Medvedev's potential bid.

"I would endorse him if he implemented serious reforms. Medvedev is not connected with the system created by Putin," he said.

But Gudkov added that he spoke only as the leader of the Go Russia movement, which was created explicitly to back Medvedev's reforms. The group remains unofficial after the Justice Ministry threw out its registration request on a technicality in February.

Putin and Medvedev have repeatedly said one of them may run for the presidency in 2012 but kept silent on who it might be, much to the chagrin of the ruling elite nervously waiting to swear allegiance to the right leader.

Mikhail Vinogradov, an analyst with the Petersburg Politics think tank who is close to United Russia, said the chance of Medvedev being named leader of A Just Russia was slim. "I don't see a possibility of more than a 15 percent chance," he [said](#) on Vesti FM radio.

Some analysts said Mironov might have left the spotlight because A Just Russia was preparing to take a stronger opposition stance that would reflect unfavorably on his position as Federation Council speaker.

"His term as the speaker comes to an end soon, and he understands that he can't be the head of an 'opposition' party and of the Federation Council at the same time," political scientist Mark Feigin said by phone.

Mironov's resignation may be a gambit arranged with United Russia's Kremlin backers to keep his seat in the Federation Council, a position that makes him nominally the third most powerful politician in the country, said Mukhin, of the Center for Political Information. "He has suffered several attacks from United Russia, which has threatened to remove him from the post," Mukhin said.

Most senators are United Russia members, which means that the party could easily replace Mironov during speaker elections, also upcoming in December.

But the move may be an attempt to save Mironov from the embarrassment of a sound defeat from United Russia in December's Duma elections. At least, that can be inferred from the cryptic statement of Gudkov, who said, without elaborating: "In chess, the king has the right to move to escape a blow. It is called castling."

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