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Zyuganov Announces 2012 Kremlin Bid

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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Gennady Zyuganov speaking at a rally in 2009. Zyuganov has become the first politician to announce that he will stand in next year's election. **Vladimir Filonov**

While President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin keep the nation guessing whether either will run for the presidency, Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov became the first politician to announce that he will stand in next year's election.

"If the [party] congress nominates me, I will run," Zyuganov told Channel One host Vladimir Pozner during his talk show late Sunday.

Zyuganov said he would even participate in the race if Putin and Medvedev decided to run against each other. "I do not exclude that both will stand, but there will definitely be a third [candidate] from our bloc," he said.

Asked against whom he would prefer to run, Zyuganov said he did not see much difference between the president and prime minister, describing both as "members of one team with one course."

Zyuganov, who has led the Communists since 1993, has run for the presidency three times since 1996, with increasingly lackluster results.

In 1996, he was a close challenger, winning 40.3 percent in a runoff with incumbent President Boris Yeltsin. In 2000, he was easily defeated in a first round by Vladimir Putin, who got 52.94 percent versus Zyuganov's 29.21 percent.

In 2004, he decided not to run at all against Putin, and in 2008 he only got 17.72 percent, finishing a distant second to Medvedev, who won with 70.23 percent.

Analysts said Zyuganov's announcement had less to do with his chances of winning than with his own position within the Communist Party.

"Zyuganov needs to secure his position well before the State Duma elections," said Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information, a think tank. Duma elections are in December.

Olga Mefodyeva of the Center for Political Technologies said Zyuganov needed to show that he still has political ambitions. "Public attention is very important for him to avert possible inner-party intrigues," she said.

A poll by the state-run VTsIOM agency last December gave Zyuganov just 4 percent of the vote if he ran against Medvedev, who would win with 50 percent.

In last month's regional elections, the Communists placed a distant second with 13 percent, while United Russia won 70 percent of all seats in regional legislatures.

However, Zyuganov was adamant that the Communists' prospects were good. "Today more people are voting for us than during the best years, while honestly United Russia won't get more than a third," he said.

Meanwhile, United Russia said it would accept Putin's choice on who the party should support for the presidential election next March.

"Putin is our unconditional leader, and his position will have unconditional priority for us," Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov, the party's No. 2 behind Putin, said in comments published on United Russia's web site.

Last week, Putin defended his decision to leave the public in the dark about who would run, explaining that any announcement would disrupt government work.

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