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# Mironov's Ouster Puts Party in Peril

By Alexander Bratersky

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Sergei Mironov attending a session of St. Petersburg's legislature Wednesday. The lawmakers dismissed him. **Dmitry Lovetsky**

Raising the specter of a major shift in the political landscape, the long-serving Federation Council speaker and founder of the Just Russia party was ousted from his post in the upper chamber Wednesday.

Sergei Mironov's dismissal, which President Dmitry Medvedev sanctioned live on air just minutes before the actual ouster, threatens to spell the end of A Just Russia, a pro-Kremlin party created for the 2007 State Duma elections that the Kremlin has found little use for since.

If A Just Russia collapses, parliamentary seats may be split between the three remaining parties represented in the Duma at the December elections or be snatched up by the pro-business Right Cause party, which got a powerful new supporter earlier this week in billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov. But some analysts speculated that the Kremlin might be playing a more complex game, trying to paint the still-loyal Just Russia as an independent force.

Mironov, 58, was nominated as senator in 2001 by the St. Petersburg legislature, which is controlled by the ruling United Russia party. On Wednesday, the legislature voted 43-5 to recall him from the Federation Council.

The vote was shrouded in uncertainty until the last minute, with reports saying early Wednesday that it would be postponed for a week.

But local deputies hurried to remove Mironov after Medvedev said during the live broadcast of a major news conference that the speaker's removal would be "nothing supernatural."

"If a decision [on Mironov] were made today, I believe he should accept it calmly," Medvedev said.

Mironov, whom St. Petersburg legislators have accused of neglecting the city, said at the session that he was being targeted for his "political views" and accused United Russia of suppressing political dissent.

His removal was also supported by the Communists, the Liberal Democratic Party and two Just Russia members, who were promptly purged from the party for "treason," said Oxana Dmitriyeva, who heads the St. Petersburg branch of A Just Russia, Interfax reported.

The recall vote prompted senior Just Russia member Oleg Mikheyev to declare that his party was "the only opposition force left."

"How come opposition parties could vote against the leader of an opposition party? This is a puppet opposition," he said by telephone.

Mironov's deputy in the Federation Council, Alexander Torshin, became acting speaker after Mironov's dismissal.

Torshin, a United Russia member perhaps best known for heading a toothless parliamentary inquiry into the 2004 terrorist attack on the Beslan school, may be appointed to the job full-time, political analyst Yevgeny Minchenko told Interfax.

United Russia, which controls the Federation Council, said Wednesday that it would select several candidates for speaker.

Mironov will not leave politics. He will become a Duma deputy, taking over a seat to be vacated by a Just Russia deputy, party head Nikolai Levichev said.

Mironov gave up formal party leadership to Levichev earlier this year but remained its de-facto leader. He is entitled to a Duma seat because he headed A Just Russia's party list at the latest elections in 2007, Levichev said.

United Russia said it would not oppose Mironov's move to the Duma, where he will be free to indulge in his criticism of the ruling party.

"Mironov will be able to concentrate on opposition activity, just as he wanted," said Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov, who heads United Russia's Duma faction, Interfax reported.

Other Duma factions also had no warm words for Mironov, with Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky even calling for a ban of A Just Russia.

The Communists welcomed Mironov's removal but not the "dirty atmosphere of an internal showdown in the government" that accompanied it, deputy party head Ivan Melnikov told Interfax.

Mironov's party was established in 2006 as a pro-government, leftist project intended to steal votes from the Communists. Among the three parties that merged to form A Just Russia was Rodina, the Kremlin's previous leftwing project created just two months before the 2003 Duma elections to also take votes from the Communists. Rodina was shut down despite its popularity as its leadership sought to make it an independent political force with a heavy nationalist slant.

A Just Russia never became independent, but it also never gained much popularity. It holds 38 of the 450 seats in the Duma, and its current approval ratings are below the 7 percent it needs to cross the election threshold.

Moreover, the party has grown increasingly hostile toward United Russia, with Mironov regularly criticizing it for incompetence even as he professed loyalty to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who heads United Russia without being a member.

While loyal to the authorities on a federal level, A Just Russia has drifted toward opposition on the ground, clashing with United Russia at regional elections.

Melnikov, of the Communist Party, said he believed that the Kremlin had decided to rid of A Just Russia before the next Duma elections. "It's clear that the 'esers' have not fulfilled their task. They have started to steal voters from the United Russia party, not the Communists," he said, Rosbalt reported.

"Esers" is the unofficial title that A Just Russia shares with the pre-revolutionary Socialist Revolutionary Party, a group fond of terrorist tactics and known for its staunch opposition to both the tsarist government and the Bolsheviks, who overthrew it and eliminated the original "esers."

But Melnikov also said Mironov's move to the Duma might be a "sly twist" aimed at party rebranding. "This will provide a certain opportunity for a mock radicalization of the 'esers,'" he said, without elaborating.

A drift toward real opposition is an expected course of action for A Just Russia, although it may mark the end of the party in its present form, a party official told The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity.

"The party stopped being an amorphous formation and gradually became a political force to be reckoned with, which is why it may face the same fate as Rodina," the official said by telephone.

Opposing the Kremlin would be the only way for Mironov to salvage his political career, said independent political analyst Stanislav Belkovsky.

Mironov needs to "become a tough opposition figure, otherwise he will just be given some ceremonial post" and fade into obscurity, Belkovsky said.

Russia may move from a four-party system to a three-party one because A Just Russia will not be able to make it into the Duma without the administrative resources provided by Mironov's position as a Federation Council speaker, said Alexei Mukhin of the Center for Political Information.

"There were people with directly opposing political views in the party, and administrative resources were the only thing holding them together," Mukhin said.

Putin has called for Russia to move to a two-party system.

Another option is the ascension of Right Cause, which may replace A Just Russia as a fourth parliamentary faction although with a different political alignment, said political analyst Dmitry Badovsky.

Right Cause could sweep the votes of entrepreneurs who have previously supported United Russia in the absence of a more pro-business party.

Mikheyev, of A Just Russia, tried to keep a stiff upper lip over Mironov's ouster, saying "every cloud has a silver lining."

"He will now have more time to concentrate on the party's work," he said. "United Russia will see how the situation turns out for it."

*Correction: An earlier version of this article incorrectly identified the name of the think tank where Alexei Mukhin works. The correct name is the 'Center for Political Information.'*

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