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Minister: Ease Rules For Parties

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Justice Minister Alexander Konovalov said political parties and other nonprofit organizations should not be required to register with his ministry, only notify it of their existence.

Konovalov's comments, published in Profil on Monday, came in stark contrast to his ministry's refusal in recent years to register all opposition parties for purported technical mistakes in their applications.

An unregistered political party cannot take part in elections, and the ministry is under close watch as a deadline to respond to a registration request from the opposition approaches this week.

Konovalov said notification rather than registration would be better for parties and other organizations.

"We must respond to actual legal violations in their activities, but not to the hypothetical possibility" that they might break the law, Konovalov added.

The European Court for Human Rights recently ruled against the Justice Ministry over its refusal to register the opposition Republican Party several years ago.

Meanwhile, Federation Council Deputy Speaker Alexander Torshin and Constitutional Court Chief Justice Valery Zorkin have submitted a bill to the State Duma allowing the government to ignore rulings by the European Court for Human Rights in order to "protect national sovereignty," Kommersant reported Monday.

Political scientist Stanislav Belkovsky said Medvedev "wants to weaken the clout of United Russia" by allowing opposition parties in the political arena and "to boost the independence of the Russian courts" by "showing that European court rulings are not binding."

The Justice Ministry has until Thursday to reply to a registration request from the Party of People's Freedom, founded in December by liberal opposition leaders.

European lawmakers will increase pressure on Russian authorities to hold free elections should they fail to register the party, a faction leader with the European Parliament, Guy Verhofstadt, said at a liberal opposition conference in Moscow last week, Kommersant reported Friday.

"The upcoming elections will define the way your country will go over the next 10 years," Verhofstadt said.

"Unfortunately, Russia may roll backward," he added.

The Council of Europe will open a Moscow office to bolster programs of cooperation with Russia, Interfax reported Monday, without elaborating on the opening date or its functions.

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