The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Opposition Party Denied Duma Run

By Alexandra Odynova

June 22, 2011

Boris Nemtsov, Vladimir Milov, Vladimir Ryzhkov and Mikhail Kasyanov at a rally in Moscow in 2010. All four men now share leadership of the Party of People's Freedom.

The Justice Ministry on Wednesday refused to register the opposition Party of People's Freedom on the grounds that it had submitted a membership list with dead and underage members.

The decision, not unexpected, eliminates a direct rival to the newly insurgent Kremlin-linked Right Cause party and all but ensures that no anti-Kremlin forces will run in the State Duma elections in December.

The Justice Ministry's rejection also deals a blow to the leadership of the liberal opposition, many of whom previously served in the government and had hoped to regain a say in state affairs.

Leaders of the Party of People's Freedom accused Prime Minister Vladimir Putin of personally orchestrating the decision.

“It was quite a predictable decision,” Ilya Yashin, leader of the party’s Moscow branch, said by telephone.

“I’m sorry that Putin decided not to allow our party to enter the elections,” party co-leader Mikhail Kasyanov, a former prime minister, said in a statement. “It’s evident that he is afraid of risks.”

Kasyanov shares leadership duties at the party, also known by its Russian acronym Parnas, with former Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov, former Duma Deputy Vladimir Ryzhkov and former Deputy Energy Minister Vladimir Milov.

Putin did not comment on the charges. But he accused Nemtsov, Milov and Ryzhkov during a live broadcast in December of embezzling millions of dollars when they held government jobs, and he said they sought to return to power to steal more. The three unsuccessfully sued him for slander.

Yashin said Putin’s televised remarks had provided a clear hint that the party would not be registered.

The ministry said in a statement that the membership list submitted by the party had included teenagers and people who died before the party’s founding congress in December. Moreover, it said, people had written to the ministry to say they had given up their membership after the list was compiled in December. It did not identify any of the people or specify what prompted them to leave the party.

A second violation, the ministry said, was found in the party rules because they did not include a provision for the mandatory rotation of party leaders.

Yashin called the ministry’s reasoning “gibberish” based on an “illegal” political decision.

The party can appeal the decision in court or refile the registration request. It was unclear whether it would do either. Nemtsov and Ryzhkov said on Ekho Moskvy radio that they saw no point in challenging the ministry’s decision in court, where judges nearly always side with the government in cases involving political parties and elections.

But the party may sue in the European Court of Human Rights, Yashin said. He noted that the European court in April ruled as illegal a Supreme Court decision to disband Ryzhkov’s Republican Party in 2007. The European court would be obliged to review any lawsuit this year, which means that the party might have a slim chance of participating in the December vote, Yashin said.

A lawmaker with the European Parliament, Guy Verhofstadt, promised last week that lawmakers would increase pressure on the Kremlin to hold free elections if the party were not registered.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed disappointment that the party wasn’t registered Wednesday and urged a review. “It is hard to understand how this decision today by the Ministry of Justice is consistent with Russia’s international commitments and recent statements by Russia’s own leaders,” Clinton said in a statement. “We urge the authorities to investigate the reports of irregularities in the Parnas registration process to ensure that the

procedures used to deny registration of this party were consistent with Russian laws and international standards."

The party's other option — refiling the registration request — would do no good, because the ministry would reject it again, said Yury Korgunyuk, a political analyst with Indem, a think tank. He said he also believed that the ministry's decision was political. "They just needed to find a pretext" to prevent the party from running, Korgunyuk said by phone. "It's not a question of how many nonexistent members the Justice Ministry has counted but why it was checking those documents at all," he said, adding that no such check is mandatory to register a party.

Indeed, party leaders knew in advance that getting their name added to the list of seven registered parties would be hard. Since 2006, only one party, Right Cause, has managed to obtain registration.

The Party of People's Freedom with its liberal and pro-business stance would have posed a direct challenge to Right Cause, which is restructuring and expected to elect billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov as its new leader at a congress this weekend. Prokhorov has promised to give the party the second-biggest faction in the Duma, after United Russia.

Right Cause official Andrei Dunayev offered his regrets and urged the Party of People's Freedom to apply again, Interfax reported. He also said the registration rules, which his party cleared in 2009, are "very cumbersome."

At least seven opposition parties have been denied registration with the Justice Ministry since 2009. The leftist Rot Front has been turned down five times since last year over technicalities. In the latest instance, in April, the ministry said the party emblem, a fist held high, could be interpreted as promoting extremism.

Opposition leader Eduard Limonov said in February that his group, The Other Russia, had copied the registered Communist Party's charter when filing for registration, but the Justice Ministry had still said it violated federal legislation.

Justice Minister Alexander Konovalov said in an interview published this week that the registration rules should be canceled altogether. But he said he would enforce them as long as they are in place.

United Russia, headed by Putin, praised the ministry's decision Wednesday. "Political necrophilia is unacceptable in our country," senior official Alexei Chesnokov said, Interfax reported. "Including deceased people on the party's membership list when filing for registration is plain immoral."

The Communists dismissed the denial as a non-event, saying the Party of People's Freedom had no chance of winning any seats in the Duma anyway. A Just Russia's founder, Sergei Mironov, called the refusal "simply unwise."

The Party of People's Freedom, meanwhile, will stage a protest over the ministry's refusal on Pushkin Square on Saturday, Ryzhkov said on his web site.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/06/22/opposition-party-denied-duma-run-a7783