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Zhirinovsky Seeks 25% of Duma Vote

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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Zhirinovsky, pictured in 2009, blasted the “billionaire-granny” team of Prokhorov and Pugachyova on Tuesday. **Igor Tabakov**

Never mind that the State Duma elections remain three months away. Veteran nationalist firebrand Vladimir Zhirinovsky already knows the result for his Liberal Democratic Party.

"Given that Russia is a semi-monarchical, one-party regime, we expect to come in second. We hope that we will be given 25 percent," Zhirinovsky told reporters after a party convention Tuesday, according to excerpts published on the party's web site.

The convention's 284 delegates earlier confirmed their flamboyant leader, who also has served as deputy Duma speaker since 2007, as the leader of the party's federal list. The party received 8.14 percent of the vote in the 2007 Duma elections.

In a trademark colorful convention speech, Zhirinovsky, himself often labeled a political clown, lambasted the Kremlin for installing "clowns" like Ivan Okhlobystin and a "billionaire-granny" team like Mikhail Prokhorov and Alla Pugachyova, Interfax reported.

Okhlobystin, an Orthodox priest-turned-TV star, last week announced a bid for next year's presidential election, while aging pop diva Pugachyova has said she would back Prokhorov's pro-business Right Cause party.

Zhirinovsky, who has headed the misnamed Liberal Democrats since their inception 20 years ago, reiterated the party's nationalist demands like replacing the country's federal makeup with a unitary state without ethnic territories and introducing direct presidential rule in the North Caucasus.

He made his promises under the party's election campaign slogan, "For the Russians, the heroic people, the party will stand for rebuilding an ethnic Russian state."

"The Soviet [state] failed. The Yeltsin [state] failed. And the present one isn't working," he said, according to the party's web site.

The convention also adopted a resolution calling for the incorporation of Belarus, Ukraine and the Central Asian countries into a new state and criticizing the Commonwealth of Independent States, or CIS, as a "hermaphrodite," Interfax reported.

At a subsequent news conference, Zhirinovsky, who has regularly denied allegations of being a Kremlin stooge, demanded the ouster of the current leadership.

"The St. Petersburg team is not capable of improving the lives of the majority of citizens. ... This team must go," he said, Interfax reported. Both President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin hail from St. Petersburg.

Second to Zhirinovsky on the federal party list is Alexei Ostrovsky, chairman of the Duma's CIS Affairs Committee, while Zhirinovsky's son Igor Lebedev is in third place.

Safe regional spots were given to businessman Andrei Lugovoi, wanted in Britain for the 2006 poisoning death of Kremlin critic Alexei Litvinenko, and to Valery Budanov, son of former army Colonel Yury Bundanov, who was shot dead in June after serving a prison term for murdering a Chechen teenager.

Lugovoi will head the party's Irkutsk list, while Budanov is on the list of a Moscow city district, Interfax reported.

Zhirinovsky, however, stressed that nobody with criminal links would be on the party lists. "There isn't a single candidate who has seen a criminal case opened against him," he said.

Analysts agreed Tuesday that the party has a good chance of entering the Duma again, not the least because nationalism has been on the rise since last December's ethnic rioting on Moscow's Manezh Square. Lev Gudkov, head of the independent pollster Levada Center, said the party can expect some 13 percent of the vote.

Gudkov said by telephone that Zhirinovsky's strongest electorate was in the periphery, where chronic poverty and a lack of hope is easily channeled into xenophobia.

He also said the party could count on tacit Kremlin support because "the Kremlin understands very well that Zhirinovsky is excellent at collecting the protest vote."

Meanwhile, another Levada poll indicated that a majority of voters does not believe that the Dec. 4 elections will be fair.

A total of 53 percent of respondents said they believed that the vote would be "an imitation of elections," and 49 percent said they expected manipulations.

The survey was conducted in July and August among 1,600 voters across the country. The margin of error was 3.4 percentage points.

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