

A Just Russia Opts for an Alternative

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

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Gudkov, addressing the Bolotnaya Ploshchad rally Saturday, said he is ready to quit over alleged election fraud. **Igor Tabakov**

As protests against the ruling United Russia party swept the nation, opposition party A Just Russia overwhelmingly chose its leader Sergei Mironov, a longtime ally of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, to run against him in the March presidential election.

Some party faithful had hoped that A Just Russia would pick a fresh contender, fielding popular figure Oksana Dmitriyeva against Putin, but no alternative to Mironov was presented during the voting at the party's congress Saturday.

Mironov, a former Federation Council speaker who ran for president in 2004, received the vast majority of the votes and promised to be a viable alternative to Putin in the upcoming election.

"I will enter the race not to participate, but to win," Mironov told journalists after the meeting, which was held at Moscow's Sokolniki park.

Mironov has indicated that his campaign will be more serious than in 2004 when he called himself a “backup” for Putin and took less than 1 percent of the vote. “During 2004, I didn’t have the team I have now,” he told The Moscow Times, referring to A Just Russia, which was formed in 2006 as a pro-Kremlin leftist party.

Mironov said the party’s performance in last week’s Duma elections — capturing 13 percent of the vote and nearly doubling its seats — shows that it is a force to be reckoned with. “We can see now that despite all the predictions, the party finished in third place,” Mironov said.

He also promised to nominate charismatic economist Dmitriyeva as prime minister if he is elected.

Dmitriyeva had a brief experience in government, serving in Prime Minister Sergei Kiriyenko’s government in 1998. She has strong backing in St. Petersburg, where she was known as an opponent of Governor Valentina Matviyenko.

Dmitriyeva looked visibly disappointed during the party congress, but acknowledged to Izvestia that Mironov is more “known than she is.” Veteran politician Alexei Mitrofanov, a former member of the ultranationalist Liberal Democrats who was elected to the Duma to represent A Just Russia, agreed.

“Her popularity across the country is a part of mythology,” he told The Moscow Times. “She is known in Moscow and in St. Petersburg.”

In a gesture seen to counterbalance the appointment of prominent 75-year-old filmmaker Stanislav Govorukhin as chairman of Putin’s campaign, Mironov chose 86-year-old actress Rima Markova to run his campaign. “This is our answer to Govorukhin,” Mironov said.

Party insiders said the energetic, graceful-looking Markova would function more as a nominal head of the party campaign, which would be, in fact, run by the senior political strategist.

Mironov said he is ready to debate Putin, but declined to say what kind of questions he would ask. Putin has never taken part in a public debate with challengers, and Mironov was criticized for not publicly challenging him while aggressively attacking United Russia in speeches.

Mironov said his party will not create coalitions with United Russia and party leaders said they will remain a parliamentary opposition party, although they will not get involved in the protests demanding new elections, the freeing of opposition leaders and the firing of elections commission chief Vladimir Churov.

Senior party members did, however, attend Saturday’s rally against United Russia on Bolotnaya Ploshchad in Moscow. Among them were Dmitriyeva and party heavyweight Gennady Gudkov, who said he was ready to give up the party’s mandates as a protest against the allegedly rigged elections.

But he was challenged by Mironov, who called Gudkov’s position a “private opinion.” “We have fought with sweat and blood for those mandates, not to give them up. People have believed us and we are not going to give up the Duma to United Russia,” Mironov told Interfax.

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