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New Duma Draws From Politburo and Playboy

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Maria Kozhevnikova

A former Playboy playmate, a former Politburo member, a champion boxer, actors and scores of businessmen are among the motley crew of deputies-elect to the new State Duma, which will convene for the first time next week.

Despite last weekend's demands by tens of thousands of protesters to annul the Dec. 4 vote, President Dmitry Medvedev decreed Tuesday that the lower house of parliament will convene for its first session next Wednesday, Dec 21.

United Russia's presence will be significantly smaller compared with the outgoing Duma, but the party will still hold a simple majority of the seats that will allow the parliament to continue to effectively rubber-stamp Kremlin-backed legislation, a role that it has assumed during Vladimir Putin's decade in power.

The list of new United Russia lawmakers includes Maria Kozhevnikova, who stars in the "Univer" television series and was Russian Playboy's front-page girl in 2009. Before being elected into parliament, she was voted the country's sexiest woman by Maxim magazine this fall.

Kozhevnikova, 27, will sit in the same faction with Vladimir Dolgikh, 87, who is expected to open the new season as parliament's oldest member. Dolgikh, who oversaw the metallurgy sector in the Soviet Politburo of the 1980s, snatched the honor of opening the session from Physics Nobel laureate Zhores Alferov, who is six years younger than him and opened the new Duma in December 2007 at a comparably youthful 77.

Alferov was re-elected as a Communist deputy, according to the final list approved by the Central Elections Commission and published by Rossiiskaya Gazeta this week.

Other parliamentary newcomers are former heavyweight boxer Nikolai Valuyev, who famously claimed to have uncovered evidence of a Siberian Yeti during his campaign in the Kemerovo region, tennis star Marat Safin, actors Lyudmila Maksakova and Vladimir Mashkov and Mikhail Piotrovsky, director of St. Petersburg's Hermitage Museum.

Also new to parliament will be Dmitry Khorolya, a native of the Arctic Yamal region who heads the country's reindeer association.

In a sign that online campaigning is gaining significance, Vladimir Burmatov, who could be called United Russia's first Twitter activist, will enter the Duma. Burmatov, who has almost 50,000 Twitter followers, rose to fame in September when he initiated a campaign with the "SPASIBOPUTINAZAETO," or "Thank Putin for That," hashtag, which became the first Russian-language topic to enter Twitter's global trending top 10.

United Russia has previously sent celebrities to the Duma, including former Olympic gymnast Alina Kabayeva and wrestling champion Alexander Karelin, who were both re-elected.

But this time many of the unconventional additions will join the party's faction without being members thanks to party leader Prime Minister Putin's decision to form the All-Russia People's Front, enabling outsiders to stand on the party list.

Putin has said the front should renew the party with fresh faces, and party officials claim that it should provide a quarter of United Russia's Duma members. Yet that did not save the ruling party from sliding 14 percentage points to 49 percent in the official election results, which in turn has been questioned by opposition parties amid accusations of widespread vote-rigging.

This and the fact that the party will be reduced from originally 315 to 238 of the 450 Duma seats means that quite a few United Russia faces are bound to vanish from parliament.

Among the most prominent outgoing deputies is Sergei Markov, the talkative Kremlin-connected veteran pundit who failed to gain a place on the party list in primaries in the Stavropol region.

His place is likely to be filled by the newly elected Vyacheslav Nikonov, who has been running the Kremlin-connected Politika Foundation.

Also left out were Irina Yarovaya, who heads United Russia's influential "patriotic club" platform, and Viktor Abramov, who oversees the party finances.

But United Russia's electoral list is awash with senior officials whose presence was aimed to boost the party's popularity but are not expected to take their seats, meaning that chances are high for second-tier candidates to make it into parliament after all.

The list of so-called locomotives, or *paravozy*, is headed by President Medvedev, who is the party's sole federal candidate, and includes many regional governors.

One of the first to profit from this was Soviet crooner Iosif Kobzon, whose Duma seat was confirmed Tuesday after a party official in the Siberian Zabaikalsky region made way for him, RBC Daily reported.

Critics say that sending celebrities to the Duma is part of a strategy to emasculate lawmakers to mere pawns who vote for whatever their faction bosses tell them, but United Russia's Markov denied this, saying it helps stem falling popular support for parliament in general.

"People want to vote for celebrities and not for politicians — this is a global phenomenon," he told The Moscow Times.

Not equipped with a powerful leader like Putin, who seemingly forms mass movements like the All-Russia People's Front at the drop of a hat, the three opposition parties are nevertheless also fielding candidates with lean political backgrounds.

Veteran nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democrat Party is again sending Andrei Lugovoi, the former bodyguard accused by British police in the poisoning death of Kremlin critic Alexander Litvinenko in 2006.

Also on Zhirinovsky's team is Leonid Slutsky, who this summer landed by helicopter in the famous Lavra Monastery of Sergiyev Posad outside Moscow, explaining that this was the only way to beat traffic jams and be on time for a meeting with Patriarch Kirill.

However, the LDPR, which has long denied accusations of selling parliamentary seats to wealthy bidders, will be without some of its more prominent millionaire members, first and foremost businessman Ashot Yegiazaryan, who fled to the United States last year amid a fraud investigation.

Also gone from the party's ranks will be Rifat Shaikhutdinov, a political strategist who paradoxically served as billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov's campaign manager for the Right Cause party this summer while being a sitting LDPR Duma member.

The party also won't forward Valery Budanov, whose father, Yury, was shot dead this summer in Moscow after serving a prison sentence for raping and killing a Chechen girl while serving as an officer during the second Chechen war.

The first choice for rich businessmen seeking parliamentary posts is usually United Russia because of its intimate government ties, but this time it looks like some of its wealthiest deputies won't get in.

Leonid Simanovsky, a former Yukos vice president who last year ranked as the richest Duma member with a declared $40 million income for 2009, did not make it onto the list. Also gone is supermarket tycoon Vladimir Gruzdev, who has become governor of the Tula region.

But also the Communists and the leftist A Just Russia party boast "moneybags," as wealthy deputies are known in Russian. The Communists have Sergei Muravlenko and Viktor Vidmanov on their list of so-called "red millionaires." Muravlenko is a former Yukos executive, and Vidmanov, president of the Rosagropromstroi agro-industrial group, is a long-running party sponsor.

The party is also sending new deputies to the Duma whose Communist convictions were previously not well known. Among them is Vasily Likhachyov, a former ambassador to the EU and deputy justice minister who headed the party list in Tatarstan.

A powerful Communist newcomer is Viktor Cherkesov, a St. Petersburg KGB veteran and purported member of Putin's inner circle who played a key role in clashes between powerful security services members in 2007 when he headed the Federal Drug Control Service.

A Just Russia, which appears to be undergoing a partial transformation from a Kremlin-created party into an opposition force, will again boast Sergei Petrov, founder of the Rolf car dealership, and influential Chechen businessman Adnan Musykayev.

But despite the reduction of United Russia seats and the presence of outspoken lawmakers like A Just Russia's Gennady Gudkov and Ilya Ponomaryov, observers doubt that the new Duma will gain much political influence compared with its predecessor.

"It's legitimacy will be extremely low, especially after the serious falsification allegations," said Andrei Ryabov, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center.

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