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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Presidential Race Lacks Independents

By Alexander Bratersky

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A Yabloko supporter at the party's rally in central Moscow on Saturday. **Sergei Karpukhin**

The Communist and Yabloko parties held anti-Kremlin rallies over the weekend and, disappointing some supporters, nominated their old-guard leaders to run in a presidential election where they are unlikely to pose a threat to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

The Central Elections Commission, meanwhile, registered billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov and two other people with purported Kremlin ties as candidates and refused to register three independents.

Yabloko insiders had stirred hopes for change by saying last week that the party might back anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny as its candidate against Putin.

But party co-founder Grigory Yavlinsky won the vote at a party congress on Sunday, RIA-Novosti reported. Navalny was not on the ballot.

Navalny was expelled from Yabloko in 2007 for his nationalist views. Party leader Sergei

Mitrokhin said Friday that Navalny, the darling of the nonparliamentary opposition, was denied support because he "has not given up his views," Gazeta.ru reported.

Yabloko brought out some 1,000 people to Moscow's Bolotnaya Ploshchad on Saturday to protest alleged fraud during the State Duma elections on Dec. 4. Official results gave the party 3.4 percent of the vote, not enough to win Duma seats. Yavlinsky, however, re-entered politics by winning a seat in the St. Petersburg city legislature.

Another 4,000 people attended an anti-election fraud rally Sunday on Manezh Square staged by the Communist Party, which nominated longtime party head Gennady Zyuganov as its presidential candidate.

The size of both rallies, while large by opposition standards, paled in comparison with a grassroots elections protest held on Bolotnaya Ploshchad on Dec. 10 and attended by 30,000 to 60,000. Another major protest is planned next Saturday.

Zyuganov has run for president three times, including against Putin in 2000, and ended up the runner-up every time. Yavlinsky has run twice, in 1996 and 2000.

"Yavlinsky is intelligent, but he is an outdated candidate. We need someone fresher," Yulia Gorelova, 47, a member of Green Russia, a Yabloko faction, told The Moscow Times at the Saturday rally.

Also Saturday, the elections commission rejected presidential bids by three independent candidates: radical opposition activist Eduard Limonov, former Interior Ministry official Leonid Ivashov and Yeltsin-era government official and well-known anti-Semite Boris Mironov.

The commission cited paperwork technicalities for Limonov and Ivashov. Mironov's denial was due to his prior criminal conviction for extremism.

Limonov and Ivashov promised to appeal, while Mironov did not comment immediately.

The commission approved the candidacies of Prokhorov, Irkutsk Governor Dmitry Mezentsev and former Vladivostok Mayor Viktor Cherepkov, who are believed to be close to the Kremlin. Each now must collect 2 million signatures of support.

The commission also approved businessman Rinat Khamiyev and Samara-based political activist Svetlana Peunova.

Putin has already been registered, as have Vladimir Zhirinovsky, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, and Just Russia co-founder Sergei Mironov, both of whom have run for president before.

"Putin understands that it would be impossible for him to win free elections today, so he wants to fight against known players," said Mark Feigin, an analyst and member of Solidarity opposition group.

Staff writer Khristina Narizhnaya contributed to this story.

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