

Kremlin Candidate Alleged To Press Firms to Help Bid

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Presidential candidate Dmitry Mezentsev faced new allegations of foul play this week, when bloggers reported about managers of numerous regional companies pressing employees into helping collect signatures for his bid.

A telegram from state-run Sverdlovsk Railways, published by opposition activist Igor Drandin on his [blog](#) Wednesday, also implicitly admitted that Irkutsk Governor Mezentsev was a "technical candidate," only fielded to ensure the legitimacy of the election.

A presidential election is ruled void if it lacks at least two competitors. After Mezentsev, a loyalist of Prime Minister and fellow presidential candidate Vladimir Putin, announced his bid, most observers speculated that the Kremlin fielded him as a countermeasure in case all Putin's rivals decide to boycott the election.

The telegram — which is dated Dec. 26 and, [according](#) to Kommersant, was sent to some 100 industrial companies in the Urals and western Siberia — also urges the recipients to help collect signatures for Mezentsev's bid.

As an independent, the governor is required to collect 2 million signatures supporting his candidacy by Jan. 18 to be included on the ballot in March.

The telegram asks managers to appoint signature collectors, tasking each with collecting 80 to 100 signatures for Mezentsev, who did not comment on the story Thursday.

This is the second scandal involving the Irkutsk governor's bid this month. On Jan. 8, Drandin ran a video allegedly showing a group of 20 Moscow college students faking signatures for Mezentsev, who later insisted that they were only "training" to fill out the forms.

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