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Zyuganov Endorses Demands of Protesters

By Jonathan Earle

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Left Front head Sergei Udaltsov pledging support to Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov on Tuesday. **Mikhail Metzel**

Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov agreed Tuesday to implement a series of demands put forth by opposition protesters, if he is elected president in the March 4 election.

Zyuganov signed an agreement by Vadim Kuzmin, the chairman of a pro-Zyuganov public council, and Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov, who drafted the platform — marking the first concrete merger between street protesters and leaders of the so-called "established opposition," who have neither appeared at the protests nor previously embraced their demands.

The 11-point agreement includes many demands that seem to enjoy widespread support among protesters — mostly educated, middle-class urbanites, who staged two large rallies following Duma elections that were marred by allegations of fraud. The points include freeing

political prisoners, firing elections commission chief Vladimir Churov, carrying out new Duma elections and restoring direct elections for governors.

More radically, under the agreement Zyuganov pledged to change the Constitution to transfer power from the executive to the legislative branch, reduce the presidential term from the current six years and call an early presidential election next year. But Udaltsov later told Gazeta.ru that Zyuganov refused to promise to call an early election in 2013 if he won the Kremlin.

Reached earlier by telephone, Udaltsov said he was tentatively throwing his support behind Zyuganov as the most likely candidate to force Putin into a runoff. He said he welcomed other candidates — except Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky, whom he refused to endorse — to join Zyuganov in agreeing to carry out the reform platform if elected president.

Zyuganov is polling at 9 percent, according to the latest survey of likely voters published by the Levada Center. This ties him at second with Zhirinovsky and 33 percentage points behind Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

The agreement, which is not legally binding, also stipulates an end to unofficial censorship of the media, free and fair Duma elections by 2013, direct Federation Council elections by 2014 and a reestablishment of Russians' right to hold national referendums.

Other Russia leader Eduard Limonov, who considered linking up with the Communist Party in the 1990s, dismissed the agreement as pointless. "Zyuganov won't win ... and he doesn't really want to," he said by telephone.

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