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Protest Leaders Skip Duma Round Table

By Alexander Bratersky

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Organizers of the recent election protests skipped a meeting Thursday put together by senior United Russia party leaders to open a dialogue over the turbulence unsettling the country's political establishment.

But as the seats reserved for leading protest figures at the round-table discussion remained empty, United Russia's State Duma leaders carried on with the event and expressed their worry over the possible outcome of recent events.

"There are people who don't want bloodshed in Moscow, and we are expecting them to take a seat at this table," said Duma Deputy Speaker Oleg Morozov, a senior United Russia official, while talking with reporters after the meeting.

Morozov said invitations had been sent to some popular leaders of public protests, like journalist Leonid Parfyonov and author Boris Akunin — representatives of a newly created league of voters.

Vladimir Ryzhkov, co-founder of the liberal Parnas party, told Lenta.ru that he turned down his invitation because those who organized the debates from United Russia "cannot solve anything."

Political expert Nikolai Zlobin told reporters Thursday that he felt the opposition had missed an opportunity by not attending the forum.

"Politics is like football," he said. "You not only have to defend your own goal, but attack the goal of your rivals."

But even without the presence of their most outspoken opponents, United Russia's leaders were harshly grilled by establishment opposition leaders who did attend, like Communist Party boss Gennady Zyuganov, Liberal Democratic Party chief Vladimir Zhirinovsky and A Just Russia head Sergei Mironov.

All three are presidential candidates running against Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in March's election as he seeks to return for a third term.

"Putin, Putin, Putin! He is your tsar and God. Even Brezhnev was shown less on TV!" Zhirinovsky said, comparing fawning television coverage of Putin to that of Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev.

Zhirinovsky, whose speech was the most fiery at the event, demanded that final voting results from each region be posted online immediately after the election to lessen the chance of tampering.

He said he was unimpressed by the installation of web cameras at polling stations, as ordered by Putin to guarantee a "clean" election.

"All the falsifications are done in quiet offices," he said.

The head of United Russia's Duma faction, Andrei Vorobyov, indicated that he supported the proposal.

"Protocols should be available to those who ask for them," he said.

The meeting was particularly notable in that it marked a departure from United Russia's prior approach of largely avoiding discussions with opponents and suggests that the party itself may be experiencing a period of internal turbulence.

Putin has distanced himself from United Russia as its popularity around the country wanes. His campaign has been run by the All-Russia People's Front, an umbrella organization for a wide range of public groups.

For the first time, Putin faces considerable headwinds.

The independent polling agency, Levada, said Thursday that only 37 percent of Russians currently say they will vote for Putin in March, making a second round a distinct possibility.

The Levada poll results correspond with the findings of an internal poll conducted by the

Federal Agency of Government Communications and Information, known by the acronym FAPSI in Russian, which showed that only 38 percent say they will vote for Putin. That figure was revealed earlier this week by Communist Party Duma Deputy Oleg Smolin, Novaya Gazeta reported.

State-run pollster VTsIOM, however, said Thursday that Putin will receive 52 percent of the vote.

The prime minister has said he would not participate in debates with the opposition, but might send his representatives instead — a notion met with derision from others at the round table.

"Putin doesn't want to go to debates because he has nothing to say. He has not seen real people for a long while," said filmmaker Yury Grymov, a member of A Just Russia.

Grymov said, overall, he was not impressed by the discussion.

"They can talk about honest elections, but in reality it is a talk about how honestly they can elect Putin," he said.

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