

Justice Ministry Is Worst Enemy of Pluralism

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I was inundated with congratulations from friends, colleagues and journalists following the Supreme Court ruling a week ago in favor of the Republican Party of Russia, which I headed until it was liquidated five years ago.

The court's decision revoked its 2007 ruling that liquidated the Republican Party. This followed an April decision by the European Court of Human Rights that also ruled that the dissolution of the Republican Party was unfounded and violated the European Convention on Human Rights, which Russia ratified in 1998.

Most people interpreted last week's Supreme Court ruling as restoring the right of opposition parties, such as the Republican Party, Parnas and other parties on the right and left of the political spectrum, to register and participate in elections. But this is not the case. The Justice Ministry, which brought the original case to the Supreme Court in 2007 to liquidate the Republican Party, remains the largest obstacle to registering opposition parties.

The current justice minister, Alexander Konovalov, has repeatedly stated the ruling by the European Court of Human Rights "did not contain any specific instructions to Russian authorities to register the party." When asked by journalists whether the Justice Ministry would once again request the Supreme Court to approve a request to liquidate the Republican Party, Konovalov answered, "I think so."

Even if the Justice Ministry upholds the spirit of the new Supreme Court decision, it still has plenty of mechanisms to undercut the ruling. For example, the ministry could say the Republic Party has the right to register but demand that it must — once again — collect tens of thousands of signatures. The catch is that the Republican Party has been liquidated for five years, and it would take another five years just to make up for the lost time.

Second, even if the number of required signatures is decreased from 40,000 to 500, as President Dmitry Medvedev has proposed, the Justice Ministry still has the right to exclude registration based on "invalid signatures," which, as the past years have shown, can be interpreted virtually at will by the Central Elections Commission and the Justice Ministry.

This kind of obstruction from the Justice Ministry would contradict both the European Court of Human Rights and Supreme Court. It will be an attempt to punish Russian citizens who subscribe to the political views of the Republican Party and other liberal opposition parties, depriving them of their constitutional right to be represented in the legislative and executive branches of government. It will also lead to another conflict with the Council of Europe over Russia's violations of international charters on democracy and human rights that the country signed.

That is why I wrote a letter to Konovalov asking the Justice Ministry to withdraw its lawsuit from five years ago that calls for the dissolution of the Republican Party.

After that, he should register the party unconditionally in accordance with the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights and the recent Supreme Court ruling. The Republican Party should have the opportunity to restore its organizational structure and return to full participation in the country's political life in the nearest future.

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