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Prokhorov Winning in Coffee Chain Latte Election

By Chloe Cranston

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The coffee chain's website showing the results of votes for cinammon-faced presidential hopefuls dusted on a milk-based drink of your choice.

Voting has already begun in the presidential election in Moscow, in one coffee chain at least, which allows drinkers to publicly declare their presidential preference before the March 4 election. Instead of a white slip, the ballot paper is in the form of cinnamon powder sieved onto your drink.

The initiative, called "Vote and you won't lose!" is simple — order your drink while naming one of the five official candidates and their face will be expertly crafted on your milky froth.

The coffee chain Koffein says it is trying to encourage the public to get involved in the election, and not merely get some free publicity. Still, as with many Russian elections, the organizers are not unwilling to use bribery to entice voters to the polls, with everybody who participates promised a free coffee on the day of the election. The chain also is not

restricting votes to those with the legal right, so foreigners can vote in this election.

Pictures of all five candidates, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, Vladimir Zhirinovsky of the Liberal Democratic Party, A Just Russia's Sergei Mironov and independent billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, are displayed in the restaurant for those who can't remember who is taking part in the election race.

Real-time results of the visitors' votes are displayed on screens in every cafe.

"It is very interesting, you can see the customers feel compelled to make a decision when the choice is right there in front of them," said waitress Polina Notik, "Every customer has voted with every order so far."

Some politicians take to cinnamon better than others though. There is a smiley Prokhorov, looking like a man confident of winning far more votes than his current statistical error percentage would suggest, and an extremely disgruntled looking Zyuganov. Zhirinovsky looks a bit confused and poor old Mironov looks like a squashed Adolf Hitler.

The most instantly recognizable is Putin who is depicted with a deadpan expression, as if only he realizes that winning the election is not just a matter of milky caricatures.

"Of course, we are unlikely to seriously affect the balance of political forces in the country," said marketing director Nikita Zhitlov, who himself seemed to be taking his election too seriously. "Russians have become estranged from the need to choose, and Koffein offers a refreshing reflection, practice and reminder on generally how to make a choice. And, of course, coffee — it stimulates mental activity, which is really important in the current difficult situation."

Not surprisingly, the latte drinkers of central Moscow lean more to billionaire Prokhorov than to rabble-rousing clown Zhirinovsky, and with just over a month to go before the real thing the New Jersey Nets owner had more than 40 percent of the vote.

Waitress and astute political analyst Notik was not overly impressed with the results so far, nor Prokhorov's candidacy.

"I think they are just joking. I think a lot of them are not taking their vote here seriously," she said. "In an effort to make a decision quickly, they just choose what they see as a nonserious option."

"Vote and you won't lose!" is at every Koffein branch until Mar. 2. www.koffein.ru. To view results: http://195.208.37.134:88

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