

Medvedev Offers Forum on Reform

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The  Moscow Times

President Dmitry Medvedev will meet with leaders of unregistered political parties later this month to discuss his plans for political reform, but not mass protests, news reports said Wednesday.

Medvedev plans to hold meetings with up to seven leaders of unregistered opposition parties and movements before stepping down after the March 4 presidential election, the Vedomosti daily reported in its Wednesday issue.

Unidentified Kremlin sources confirmed that Medvedev intends to meet with the group, but the list of invitees is unknown.

"The main topic the president would like to discuss is political reform in the framework of the initiatives he proposed during his State of the Nation Address" at the end of last year, the source told RIA-Novosti.

Among other proposals, Medvedev sought to bring back the direct election of governors and facilitate the official registration of parties. Both bills are pending in the State Duma.

In 2005, party registration was legally restricted, allowing the Justice Ministry to repeatedly reject registrations for some 15 parties.

Medvedev's bid to reform the legislation is seen as a concession amid growing public discontent that has drawn tens of thousands of people to the streets recently.

But citing a source, RIA-Novosti reported that Medvedev would not discuss December's disputed parliamentary elections or "rally activity."

It's unclear whether rally leaders Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Ryzhkov, who want registration for their Party of People's Freedom, will be invited to the event.

As of Wednesday, neither of them had been invited. Other prominent leaders, including Sergei Udaltsov and Eduard Limonov, also said they hadn't received an invitation.

"I think the negotiations would be useful. The question is how the meeting will be organized," said Udaltsov, of the Left Front movement. But he expressed doubt that he would be invited, Interfax reported.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is expected to succeed his more liberal protege Medvedev after the election. Putin indicated that he has no plans to start a dialogue with protest leaders.

The Yabloko opposition party already proved that even if a party is registered, its representatives will not necessarily be allowed to take part in elections.

On Wednesday, the Supreme Court ruled that Yabloko's presidential candidate, Grigory Yavlinsky, was lawfully refused registration for the March election because the Central Elections Commission disqualified some of the signatures in his support as forgeries.

Co-organizers of Saturday's opposition rally For Fair Elections, activist Olga Romanova and State Duma deputy Gennady Gudkov, on Wednesday submitted to the Office of Presidential Affairs a list of 39 people they say are political prisoners in Russian jails.

Earlier this week, Putin said at a meeting with political analysts that "there are no political prisoners in Russia," sparking objections from human rights groups.

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