

Opposition Leader Predicts Mass Emigration After Presidential Vote

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Former State Duma deputy and opposition leader Vladimir Ryzhkov said he predicts a "mass exodus of people" out of Russia after the March 4 presidential election in which Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is widely expected to be elected.

"Sakharov and Bolotnaya will leave," Ryzhkov said, referring to attendees of major opposition rallies held in recent months to protest the ruling authorities and falsifications in December's Duma elections.

Speaking in an interview with Moskovsky Komsomolets published Thursday, the opposition politician pointed to the growing middle class as one of the reasons for growing discontent and noted that most of the 4 million people who have left the country in the last 20 years have had higher education.

In the interview, Ryzhkov said he thinks most people in the country would prefer leaving to revolution. Those who remain will go to the squares and we "will be witness to permanent conflict," he said.

Ryzhkov also compared Putin to authoritarian Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko, who, Ryzhkov said, in the month leading up to the presidential election in his country "released opposition activists from jail, liberalized laws, allowed access to campaigning for all," and when the opposition didn't recognize the election results, jailed many who protested.

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