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Top Leftist Says A Just Russia Should Embrace Protests

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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A Just Russia should adjust its party platform by including anti-government protesters' demands for more democracy and human rights, a senior European lawmaker said Tuesday.

"In order to become a real social-democratic party, they need to take up the protesters' demands," Hannes Swoboda told reporters in Moscow.

The Austrian Social Democrat, who heads the European Parliament's socialist group, was speaking after talks with Nikolai Levichev, the head of A Just Russia's faction in the State Duma.

He added that although the party contains many good elements, its profile is "not clearly visible."

"They need to find a line where they can combine the protesters' civil rights demands with

the party's social policies," he said.

Swoboda, who is also the European Parliament's rapporteur for Russia, said the main point of his three-day visit to Moscow was to support the democratization efforts initiated by President Dmitry Medvedev in December.

His comments, unusual for a foreign lawmaker, come at a time of mounting speculation about A Just Russia's future.

The party, which originated as a Kremlin-backed leftist movement in 2006, won more than 13 percent of the vote in December's Duma elections and boosted its faction from 38 to 64.

The improvement came after some party leaders sided with the pro-Western opposition movement.

But the presidential campaign of party leader Sergei Mironov did not share in the benefits. Mironov finished last with just 3.8 percent of the vote.

The party has since witnessed sparring between Mironov loyalists irritated by the presence of protest organizers in the party and those who want to oust Mironov, widely seen as a staunch loyalist of President-elect Vladimir Putin.

On Tuesday, Kommersant reported that A Just Russia's Saratov branch demanded a special party convention to demote Mironov for his failure to attract votes.

Mironov did not deny the report, but he said Saratov was the party's only branch to make that request.

"Not one other regional branch supported this initiative," he told RIA-Novosti. He added that talk of an imminent breakup of A Just Russia was "utter rubbish."

On Tuesday, Just Russia Duma deputies Ilya Ponomaryov and Gennady Gudkov announced a news conference for Thursday at which they will unveil plans for a social-democratic union with Sergei Udaltsov, leader of the Left Front movement, and Public Chamber member Yelena Lukyanova.

Ponomaryov and Gudkov, who were at the forefront of the anti-government protests, have denied that they plan to abandon or weaken their party.

Political observers expect that numerous parties will be formed if the Duma approves a bill now under consideration that reduces the membership threshold for party registration from 40,000 to 500.

The Duma on Thursday passed the draft bill in its second reading with only minor changes, Interfax reported.

A third and final reading is planned for Friday, meaning the bill, which is part of President Dmitry Medvedev's reform package, could become law by April.

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