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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Party Reform Bill Passes Council and Heads to Medvedev's Desk

By Alexander Bratersky

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The Federation Council on Wednesday overwhelmingly passed long-awaited legislation to liberalize party politics in Russia, despite concerns raised by one influential senator that the law contains loopholes that could allow extremist parties to emerge.

The bill — introduced by President Dmitry Medvedev amid large-scale political protests in December — decreases the number of members required for a party to officially register, from 40,000 to just 500 nationwide.

The legislation is expected to be signed by Medvedev before his term in office expires in early May when President-elect Vladimir Putin assumes power.

The amended bill was passed by a vote of 124-6. The bill's passing came following criticism from influential legal committee head Nikolai Fyodorov who said the legislation contains "risky" provisions.

He said anti-extremist legislation should be amended to create barriers for the extremist parties that could emerge after the law will come into effect.

“There are risks of an increase of those parties that are connected to separatist or nationalist movements,” Fyodorov said in an interview published Wednesday in the pro-Kremlin paper Moskovskiye Novosti.

He also made veiled criticism of those behind the bill — alluding to Medvedev but without mentioning his name.

“There is an ancient expression: A wise ruler must be measured by his worthy deeds,” said Fyodorov, a former justice minister under President Boris Yeltsin.

Fyodorov also heads a government-funded think tank, which took part in drafting Putin’s presidential platform.

Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information, said Fyodorov’s criticism about the legislation was an effort to reinforce Putin’s campaign message on his concerns about radical religious and extremist forces entering politics.

“But the message was blurry, since Putin himself didn’t provide a clear definition,” Mukhin said.

Putin only briefly touched upon the party reform legislation in one of his program articles in January, saying it shouldn’t allow for the creation of regional parties.

The amendments to ease party legislation have been met with mixed responses from both existing parties and parliamentary groups. Some party leaders said 500 members is too low a number for the creation of a serious political force.

“The number is pretty symbolic to show that authorities don’t care about that factor,” Mukhin said.

Some have also raised concerns that such a low bar for entry will allow for a watering-down of the political playing field, as the existing law does not allow for several small parties to form political blocs.

Kommersant reported Wednesday that 82 political parties, some bearing unusual names like the Love Party or the Good People of Russia party, have already filed requests with the Justice Ministry for registration.

One of the requests was sent from representatives of the Union of Right Forces, a liberal political force, although the actual leaders of the party called the application “bogus” and an attempt to steal the party brand.

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