

Medvedev Signs Party Reform Bill Into Law

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President Medvedev speaking Tuesday at a meeting with leaders of unregistered political parties.

President Dmitry Medvedev on Tuesday signed into law a bill drastically reducing the minimum membership requirement for a political party to take part in elections, the Kremlin website reported.

The new law takes effect Wednesday.

The bill signing took place during a [meeting](#) between Medvedev and leaders of unregistered parties.

They were not given the floor, but they listened as Medvedev spoke about the benefits of political pluralism.

After learning that party leaders would not have a chance to speak at the event, Sergei Udaltsov, leader of the Left Front and the unregistered ROT Front party, canceled plans to take

part.

“I have always spoken in favor of a constructive dialogue between the authorities and the opposition, but I see no point in taking part in a formal event in the capacity of a silent Kremlin decoration,” Udaltsov said in a statement [published](#) on his group's website Sunday.

Udaltsov had planned to condemn the ongoing political reforms as sham liberalization directed at preserving United Russia's monopoly on political power.

Late last week, leaders of the unregistered liberal opposition Party of People's Freedom also said they would refuse to take part in the signing of the bill.

They said that despite the bill's benefits, “authorities keep all the instruments to limit citizens' rights to form a political party,” senior member Konstantin Merzlikin said, the Parnas website [reported](#).

The 45 Kremlin guests Tuesday were a [mixed](#) crowd.

Communists Viktor Anpilov and Gennady Selesnyov embodied formerly high-profile politicians during the 1990s.

Some little-known figures, like nationalist leader Sergei Baburin and Right Cause leader Andrei Dunayev, were also present.

Joining them were the head of the Panorama think tank, Vladimir Pribylovsky, and outspoken former Moscow prefect Oleg Mitvol, who is seeking to lead a green party.

“This is the start of a new political way for our country,” Mitvol said.

Mitvol had prepared a speech but learned at the last minute that Medvedev would be the only speaker.

Mitvol told The Moscow Times on Tuesday that he would have attended the signing ceremony, even if he had known ahead of time that he would not be allowed to address the audience.

Some proposed parties represented by the guests seemed almost farcical, adopting such outlandish names as Kind People of Russia, the Ten Commandments, By Course of Truth and Unity, the Party of Social-Networking Sites and Subtropical Russia.

But Mitvol cautioned against reading too much into the parties' initial choice of names.

“It is understandable that [the process] brings with it a lot of fluff, part of which we have seen today,” he said. “But I believe that routine work will put everything in its proper place.”

Analysts have predicted that the law, which reduces the minimum required membership from 40,000 to 500, will fragment the opposition to the point of ineffectiveness in elections.

Officially, the country has seven recognized political parties.

Ahead of the introduction of the bill that Medvedev signed into law, the Central Elections

Commission received dozens of requests for registration of new parties.

The bill reducing parties' minimum membership requirement was complemented by one restoring direct gubernatorial elections.

That bill is expected to allow parties to field candidates for governor after consultations with the president.

Tuesday was the second time in the past two months that Medvedev met with leaders of unregistered political parties.

On Feb. 20, he [invited](#) 10 leaders, including Udaltsov and liberal opposition leaders Vladimir Ryzhkov and Boris Nemtsov, to discuss political reforms.

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