

Opposition Eyes Popularity Vote as Catalyst for Unity

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Navalny, one of the opposition's best-known leaders, said the vote would breathe new life into the protest movement. **Andrei Makhonin**

Russia's fragmented opposition is to hold a nationwide Internet vote to identify its most popular leaders and elect a coordinating council ahead of planned mass anti-Kremlin protests later this year.

Although the opposition got tens of thousands of people onto the streets to protest an allegedly rigged parliamentary election in December and the return of Vladimir Putin to the presidency in a March vote, it has so far failed to capitalize on that success to build a more organized movement.

The Internet vote, set for Oct. 7, is therefore being seen as an attempt to unite a group of individuals of differing political views who have traditionally failed to put their ideological and personal differences aside to take on the Kremlin.

"We need competition," anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny said in a video on his blog,

adding that at least 100,000 people would need to vote for it to have legitimacy.

Navalny, who has become one of the opposition's best-known leaders in the last year, said the vote would breathe new life into a movement that, with new elections years away, is bereft of an immediate reference point for change.

"This opposition has been demoralized because it has not been taking part in competitive processes for a long time," Navalny said, calling on his own supporters to take part in the vote.

Although it has a handful of sympathizers, the opposition does not have any factions in the State Duma, is rarely given air time on state television, and is more popular in big urban centers such as Moscow and St. Petersburg than in the provinces.

In power either as president or as prime minister for the last 12 years, Putin has complained that the opposition lacks any leaders with whom the authorities can negotiate.

Navalny said the Internet vote was a response to that jibe and that the current leaders' lack of legitimacy has been the opposition's main problem.

Despite months of street rallies, it has failed to formulate a united political agenda beyond its general opposition to the Kremlin and has not raised sufficient funds to start putting together a movement that could one day present a serious challenge to Putin, who is due to stay in power until at least 2018.

Other anti-Kremlin politicians have also agreed to participate in the Internet vote, though some are hesitant, pointing out that with his large online following Navalny will be the main beneficiary of such a vote.

The election commission that will organize the vote will include Ilya Segalovich, co-founder and chief technology officer of the nation's most popular Internet search engine, Yandex.

Segalovich is No. 159 on Forbes magazine's list of the richest Russians after Yandex's \$1.4 billion initial public offering in New York in 2011.

The vote will elect 45 people to a coordinating council, which will then decide on tactical issues such as how and when opposition rallies are organized.

The three most prominent groups within the opposition — the liberals, the nationalists and the leftists — will be given quotas of five people each on the council to ensure that all of the movement's factions are represented.

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