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Top Challenger Quits Ryazan Governor Race

By Jonathan Earle

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Observers have speculated that Igor Morozov's decision to withdraw from the Ryazan governor's race was the result of behind-the-scenes negotiations.

The top challenger in Ryazan's gubernatorial race has pulled out and endorsed the ruling party's candidate in an apparent backroom deal that casts further doubt on the Kremlin's willingness to hold free and fair gubernatorial elections this autumn.

The candidate, Igor Morozov, told Gazeta.ru that the decision was meant to avoid fracturing the ruling elite and stirring up protest sentiment in the Ryazan region, where analysts said popular dissatisfaction with United Russia and the acting governor, Oleg Kovalyov, could spell an upset.

On Thursday, officials hinted at a deal in which Morozov would take a seat in the Federation Council in exchange for helping Kovalyov retake the job he held from 2008 until July, when he unexpectedly stepped down and became acting governor, prompting the Oct. 14 vote.

"I think that in the event of my victory, a representative from Patriots of Russia [Morozov's party] could be appointed to the Federation Council," Kovalyov said at a news conference, adding that he would like to choose Morozov, Interfax reported.

United Russia party secretary Sergei Neverov, who also attended the event, stressed the importance of including proposals from Patriots of Russia, a largely pro-Kremlin party that is little-known at the federal level but has been successful in some regions.

Morozov's decision to withdraw was the result of negotiations between officials from the presidential administration, United Russia and Patriots of Russia aimed at shoring up a relatively unpopular governor, Kommersant reported, citing undisclosed sources.

Kovalyov received only two points out of five on a political survival scale published by the Political Expert Group consulting firm and the Political Technologies journal, which cited Kovalyov's low popularity, discord among local elites and a lack of notable achievements.

Furthermore, the ruling party won 39.8 percent of the vote in the region in December's parliamentary elections, well short of the 49.3 percent United Russia received nationwide.

The move appeared to come as a surprise to Morozov, a former senator and State Duma deputy who resigned from his post at the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States to run for governor. He told Gazeta.ru that he'd been informed of his party's decision on Monday.

Communist Vladimir Fedotkin and the Liberal Democratic Party's Alexander Sherin now appear to be Kovalyov's most serious opponents. A Just Russia's candidate failed to gather enough signatures from municipal deputies as per a much-criticized provision of the December law that reintroduced gubernatorial elections, abolished in 2004.

Gubernatorial elections are also scheduled for Oct. 14 in Bryansk, Amur, Belgorod and Novgorod.

On Friday, the Central Elections Commission confirmed a decision by regional election officials in Bryansk not to register A Just Russia's Vyacheslav Rudnikov, whom they accused of faking signatures from supporters.

United Russia candidates won gubernatorial elections in Omsk and Krasnoyarsk this summer.

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