

Amid Crackdown, Opposition Debates to Determine Leadership

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Behind the podiums, from left, activist Arkady Babchenko, Navalny and Yashin taking part in a debate on Oct. 13.

At midnight, the halls of the independent Dozhd television station at the former Red October chocolate factory were dark and empty, with only the "on air" sign lit up in red indicating that the channel still had something left to broadcast.

But the studio was not set up for your typical late-night show. The genre for the night's program was one that had lost much of its meaning in modern Russia: political debate.

While ruling party candidates in Russian elections generally avoid the confrontational format, anti-Kremlin activists have revived it with a series of contests pitting hardcore nationalists against social democrats, political celebrities against local organizers.

The ultimate goal? To help determine the makeup of a much-touted leadership council for the

non-parliamentary opposition.

"The opposition's organizing committee was expected to produce a clear political position, but it was only in charge of organizing protest rallies," said Yury Saprykin, one of the debate presenters as well as chief editor of media holding Afisha Rambler and a former member of the organizing committee for protest rallies.

"Now a political organization can be born," he said.

Saprykin tried to cheer up the candidates, who five minutes prior were blithely smoking together in a nearby hallway but had gotten nervous in the studio.

The majority of the candidates in this debate, one of the final rounds, held liberal views: veteran opposition member Boris Nemtsov, environmental activist Yevgenia Chirikova, it-girl-turned-protest figure Ksenia Sobchak and journalist Filipp Dzyadko.

As a result, their discussion didn't have as much of the contrast, let alone the acrimony and intensity, of previous rounds, when nationalist Nikolai Bondarik lashed out at a liberal policy promoted by Nemtsov, and another nationalist, Kirill Barabash, insulted the liberal Dozhd station itself, calling it a national disgrace.

But the more centrist candidates were chosen by viewers to advance, perhaps signaling that the final council — elections for which are set to be held this weekend — will not be dominated by figures with militant views.

An expansion of efforts by the authorities to prosecute opposition leaders — including the opening of a criminal case against Left Front chief Sergei Udaltsov on Wednesday — could encourage more hard-line stances among the candidates, however.

Getting Organized

The anti-Kremlin protest movement that emerged in December has been frequently criticized by both pundits and the ruling authorities for a lack of coordination and defined leadership. When President Vladimir Putin — whom the protest movement bitterly opposes — has been asked whether he would consider consulting with the opposition, he has said he doesn't know who exactly he would be negotiating with.

The Coordination Council is meant to address some of these perceived deficiencies, as well as to take a first step toward consolidating the motley collection of opposition activists that has taken part in street protests.

"All opposition activity has been reactive so far. The coordinating council will try to set its own political agenda and be an actor on the political scene," Leonid Volkov, head of the council's elections committee and an independent Yekaterinburg municipal lawmaker, said at a press conference earlier this week.

The 45-member body is set to function for a year, after which new elections will be held. The idea for the council was announced at a March of Millions opposition rally on June 12.

To ensure the representation of a range of opposition views, elections will distribute places on

the council both to 30 candidates from a general list and to 15 contenders holding specific ideologies — five each for nationalists, "liberals" and "left-wing" activists.

More than 200 people have registered as candidates. Some of them are running as members of one of 20 blocs, which include groups such as the so-called Progressive Bloc and the Green Bloc, while there are also independent candidates.

The specific functions of the council are yet to be defined, and it isn't clear how the body will be financed.

"All questions regarding the council's work will be decided by the newly elected deputies," Volkov said.

The committee's website describes the elections to the Coordination Council as a way to enfranchise citizens who feel that their views are not represented in the government. It indirectly refers to the disputed parliamentary vote in December that sparked major protests, which have since given birth to a wider movement.

"Currently, the overwhelming majority of Russian citizens have been deprived of political representation," the website says. "[But] political struggle should be the work of politicians."

"In the modern world a person has, as a rule, his own doctor, lawyer, travel agent, etc. In roughly the same way, the not-indifferent person who is interested in politics needs his own politician who will represent his interests not from protest to protest but all the time," it says.

Volkov said the first meeting of the council is planned for next week.

Some indications of the body's composition have been given in the debates, where candidates have had an opportunity to demonstrate their suitability for work on the council.

The contests have been held every weeknight since Oct. 1 starting at midnight. The final round, in which 20 candidates were chosen to participate by online voting following a qualifying round and semifinals, ended Thursday. A show summing up the debates' results and announcing the winners will be aired Friday night.

The winners of the drawn-out series of debates will not automatically be given spots on the council.

But Alexei Makarkin, vice president of the Center for Political Technologies think tank, argued that the process was valuable because it helped expose the public to a new generation of politicians and weed out candidates with outlying views.

Some observers doubted that any of the little-known hopefuls from the regions would progress far in the debates while facing big-name members of the Moscow opposition scene, such as anti-corruption lawyer Alexei Navalny and Solidarity activist Ilya Yashin. Some dark-horse candidates, such as biology professor Mikhail Gelfand, managed to make it to the finals, however.

Saprykin said that because the debates were open to every registered candidate, many who live outside Moscow and who had never been on TV before participated, some of them via

Skype.

"Suddenly, new people have been discovered," Saprykin said.

Holding the Vote

Nearly 160,000 voters had registered to take part in the elections by Thursday evening. Registration closed Thursday at midnight.

The elections, to be held Saturday and Sunday, will use only electronic ballots, although there will be physical polling places in more than 20 regions across Russia, including in Vladivostok, Barnaul in the Altai region, as well as at five sites in Moscow and three in St. Petersburg. There will also be voting stations in New York, Washington, Paris, Munich, Dresden, London and, bizarrely enough, the Prachuap Khiri Khan province in Thailand.

Voters will also be able to cast ballots online.

According to Volkov, 35 percent of the electorate is in the Moscow area, 10 percent in St. Petersburg, 40 percent in other regions of Russia and 15 percent in regions that cannot be identified by phone code and in foreign countries.

Volkov noted that the majority of voters are political activists themselves, while Pavel Salin, an independent political expert, pointed out that they are likely all active Internet users, something he said made the elections illegitimate.

"One hundred thousand to 150,000 active Internet users cannot choose candidates for the whole country," he said.

One of the main outlets for political activism following the growth in opposition sentiment over the past 10 months has been monitoring governmental elections, and the Coordination Council voting committee has invited observers to take part in these elections as well.

But some of the monitors will not be so sympathetic to the cause: Pro-Putin youth movement Nashi has announced that it will send observers to the elections.

Nashi commissioner Konstantin Goloskokov told The Moscow Times that a source close to the elections committee told him of possible "carousels," a fraud method by which groups of voters cast ballots at multiple polling stations. The opposition said the practice was used by the campaigns of some United Russia candidates in December's parliamentary elections.

Goloskokov said he had sent a request to Volkov to send observers but hadn't received an answer.

Accompanying the elections this weekend will be two City Hall-sanctioned rallies in Moscow on Saturday and Sunday for up to 1,500 participants. Each rally will take place on Trubnaya Ploshchad, where there will also be voting stations.

Following the opening of a criminal case Wednesday against opposition leader Sergei Udaltsov, who is also a candidate in the elections, the rallies have the potential to draw an aggressive crowd.

The election budget of 3.3 million rubles (\$107,000) is being funded by candidates' 10,000 ruble registration fees, private donations and 10 ruble registration payments by voters, Volkov said.

The elections' finances have become the subject of controversy after the Prosecutor General's Office initiated a criminal case Wednesday in connection with complaints by 64 people that 10,000 rubles had been stolen from each of them when they registered on the election committee's website.

Volkov told Dozhd that he believed the complaints were made by people who wanted to become candidates but whose applications were rejected. He said the committee did not have the people's bank account information and therefore could not yet return their registration fees.

Volkov alleged that the complaints were an attempt to deliberately spoil the elections.

Some believe that the council will face challenges bigger than legal problems, including that of building on the momentum of the protest movement, which some think is sputtering after the last rally in September drew a smaller crowd than past demonstrations.

Makarin said the council's efficiency would depend on how ambitious the protest movement would be.

"If it fades away, there will be more arguments within the council and its work will be ineffective," he said.

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