

A Just Russia Threatened as Founding Groups Split From Party

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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A Just Russia, the moderate-left State Duma party that includes several leading opposition figures, suffered the latest in a series of setbacks Monday when leaders of two of its founding groups announced they were splitting off.

Leaders from the Pensioners' Party and the Rodina party said they were ditching A Just Russia because party officials had put personal ambition ahead of party unity.

"Rodina's ideas, activists and leaders were either ignored or dismissed," Igor Zotov and Alexei Zhuravlyov said in a joint statement signed Monday, Interfax reported.

Analysts said the move did not come as a surprise and was unlikely to spark an exodus from A Just Russia, but rather signaled trouble within the party, and especially for leader Sergei

Mironov.

Zhuravlyov, a State Duma deputy and head of the nationalist Rodina party, said A Just Russia was never a truly unified force but rather a “political Frankenstein.”

In February, members of another part of the coalition that made up A Just Russia, the pro-environment Green movement, announced that they would be leaving to form their own political party.

A Just Russia was formed in 2006 with the merger of Rodina, the Pensioners’ Party and Zhizn, as a social-democratic alternative to the Communists.

The union was blessed by the Kremlin, but A Just Russia has shown itself willing to attack the ruling United Russia party, thereby attracting more vocal opposition voices.

When anti-government protests broke out in December, three Just Russia deputies — Ilya Ponomaryov, Gennady Gudkov and Dmitry Gudkov, Gennady’s son — quickly became leaders of the movement.

Last month, Gennady Gudkov was stripped of his Duma mandate for illegal business activity. He said he was being punished for supporting opposition protesters.

Before political reforms passed earlier this year made it easier to form political parties, A Just Russia was one of only seven officially registered parties and represented an alternative to the Communists and the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party.

Party chairman Nikolai Levichev said the party was strong and dismissed Monday’s news conference as a stunt to promote Rodina and a party called Russian Pensioners for Justice.

In a statement, Levichev said Zotov and Zhuravlyov had already de facto left A Just Russia.

Zhuravlyov was elected to the State Duma in December on the list of the ruling United Russia party, and Zotov was expelled for supporting Dmitry Medvedev’s candidacy for prime minister.

The defection of a small group of deputies including Zotov and Alexei Mitrofanov earlier this year gave pro-Kremlin parties a de facto constitutional majority — 300 seats — in the Duma.

A Just Russia currently has the third-largest party faction in the Duma, with 64 seats in the 450-seat body. United Russia controls 238 seats.

Alexei Makarkin, head of the Center for Political Technologies, said Monday’s split was the result of the Kremlin’s displeasure with A Just Russia’s links to the opposition movement.

But Pavel Salin, an independent political analyst, said the real problem was with the shrinking political clout of co-founder and leader Sergei Mironov.

In the presidential election in March, Mironov won just under 4 percent of the vote, a few months after his party picked up seats in Duma elections in December, when it took 13 percent of the vote.

Mironov, a former Federation Council speaker and once a close ally of President Vladimir Putin, stepped down as chairman of the party in April 2011.

Mironov protested the ouster of Gennady Gudkov from the Duma last month, calling it “unlawful revenge” and “a rude violation of the Constitution.”

But on Saturday, he called on members of his party to stop wearing the white ribbons that have become the symbol of the anti-Kremlin protest movement after a United Russia deputy disparaged Mironov and several of his party’s deputies by name in a Duma speech.

Party members should distance themselves from opposition protesters, whose large rallies have turned into a “political sect,” Mironov said.

Rodina’s departure could threaten A Just Russia’s regional offices, Salin said, adding that Monday’s split could also spur more deputies to follow Zotov and Mitrofanov by abandoning A Just Russia.

“Without the support of the Kremlin, or the neutrality of the Kremlin, A Just Russia is not viable,” Salin said by telephone on Monday.

A source within A Just Russia told The Moscow Times on Monday that the party’s survival depends on continued support from Putin.

“Mironov doesn’t have serious problems with Putin, but he is critical of the government and Medvedev,” the source said on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the subject.

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