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Opposition Council Seeks Purpose

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From left, Dmitry and Gennady Gudkov and Navalny at a rally on Sept. 15. **Igor Tabakov**

"Who is in favor of fair courts? Seems like no one wants fair courts. How about early elections? Don't you want early elections?" former chess champion Garry Kasparov asked the opposition Coordination Council regarding the main slogan to be used for a Dec. 15 protest march.

"For now, we should use the slogan calling for the release of political prisoners, because we didn't elaborate a joint position on the other issues," Solidarity co-leader Sergei Davidis said, and a majority of members supported him.

The particulars of the Dec. 15 event, which will mark the one-year anniversary of the invigorated anti-Kremlin protest movement (see story, Page 1), turned out to be the least controversial issue among those voted on by the council at its second meeting, held Nov. 24 at an art gallery in the former Red October chocolate factory.

"It's a big achievement that the rally question was decided without any disputes," Kasparov

said after the meeting.

More than a month has passed since the nonparliamentary opposition elected members of a "shadow government" with a vague mandate to make key decisions for the opposition and represent the interests of Russians who feel disenfranchised by government elections, which are widely viewed as unfair.

More than 80,000 people cast ballots online to choose the 45-member Coordination Council, which includes opposition activists, journalists and cultural figures who espouse ideologies ranging from communist and socialist to liberal-democratic to nationalist. The body is set to function for a year, after which new elections will be held.

The council's second meeting lasted about six hours and addressed such issues as procedural rules for the body, financing and its website.

But the main question remained unresolved: What exactly is the council's purpose?

"The December protest will be held soon, but there is still no answer to the question of why the Coordination Council exists," said Ilya Konstantinov, who stood in for jailed council member Daniil Konstantinov, a nationalist, at the meeting.

A manifesto drafted by political expert Andrei Piontkovsky that states the council's goals sparked a flurry of disputes at the meeting and did not satisfy the vast majority of delegates. But when members decided that a working group should be formed to compose a new mission statement, few people volunteered for the job, particularly among the de facto leaders of the opposition.

"Drawing up the goals of the council is a very important task, and we shouldn't rush it," TV personality Ksenia Sobchak said.

"I'll pass and would like to suggest Dmitry Bykov [for the job]," anti-corruption lawyer Alexei Navalny said after it was proposed that he head the working group.

"I can only do it in verse," joked Bykov, the popular Novaya Gazeta columnist and author of the Citizen Poet series.

The manifesto is supposed to combine the resolutions read out at protest rallies held over the last year. Over that period, the opposition's main demands have been political reforms, the release of political prisoners, invalidation of the results of the presidential and parliamentary elections and new elections.

At a protest in September, social and economic demands were advanced for the first time, including an increase in spending for science, a freeze on utility rates and relaxation of legislation regulating worker strikes.

Bykov was eventually chosen to be part of the seven-member group tasked with creating the policy document. Also chosen were former State Duma deputy Gennady Gudkov, Foundation for Fighting Corruption director Vladimir Ashurkov, journalist Sergei Parkhomenko, Republican Party-People's Freedom Party co-leader Boris Nemtsov and nationalist politician Konstantin Krylov.

The last member of the working group will be Piontkovsky, whose manifesto was not even chosen as a basis for the future document.

"The chosen working group turned out to be rather well-balanced," Kasparov said. "There are representatives of all ideological groups."

In the minutes of the meeting, the objective of the council was defined as the creation of a plan for a transition period "from kleptocracy dictatorship to democratic republic, from the resignation of the president to the election of new, legitimate governmental bodies."

Kasparov said he expected a draft of the manifesto to be ready by the next council meeting, scheduled for Dec. 16, a day after the protest, and he said it would be approved "without any strains or conflicts."

Seats on the council were allocated according to quotas designed to reflect the diversity of the major opposition factions. Thirty seats were set aside for general candidates, five for nationalists, five for communists and socialists, and five for liberals.

There were concerns that the presence of delegates with sharply contrasting views could divide the council, especially its liberals and nationalists. But the most radical candidates did not gain seats, and most of the arguments at the second meeting appeared to be grandstanding.

While the meeting did not devolve into bickering among blocs, neither was it dominated by the best-known opposition leaders, such as Navalny, Nemtsov or Left Front head Sergei Udaltsov, many of whose proposals failed to gain majority support.

Potential divisions in the council have contributed to public skepticism regarding its effectiveness.

According to a Public Opinion Fund poll in early November, 24 percent of those surveyed said they were aware of the council's existence, but only 8 percent said they thought it could become a serious political force.

Of those who said they thought the council would not become a serious force, 14 percent of those who provided a reason cited "no unity or common goals."

"Judging by the meetings alone, of course the council's work will seem poor," Kasparov said. "But first of all, we're going to organize effective work online, and secondly, the council's purpose is not only to create a news hook once a month but also to build a regional network of such councils."

"The success of the council depends on the effective work of groups within it and their ability to make the council a national phenomenon and not something limited to Moscow or the Internet," he said.

Nearly 40 percent of the council's electorate lives outside Moscow and St. Petersburg, according to the council's election committee, and council members want to create a network of similar regional bodies in the near future.

The council is set to meet only once a month, but members discuss and vote on measures in an online group on the website democratia2.ru, where regular Internet users can observe the discussions. Council members also use the system to define future agendas for meetings.

Delegates also debate weekly on the Dozhd opposition TV channel, a carry-over from debates among council candidates aired almost daily on the channel for weeks ahead of the Oct. 20-21 election.

One result of the second meeting was a campaign to get opposition representatives onto commissions that oversee various elections, including those for president, the State Duma, Moscow mayor and the Moscow City Duma.

Elections commissions are seen as having power over voting procedures and the vote count, and one of the opposition movement's loudest demands over the past year has been fair elections.

The council also elected a working group to deal with budget issues and decided to institute a voluntary 5,000 ruble monthly membership fee to be used for various causes.

The council voted to use part of the November funds to help support jailed council member and Left Front activist Leonid Razvozzhayev, who is accused of plotting riots.

As the council begins its work, 26 former candidates who didn't receive enough votes to become members have organized a so-called "expert council" and are hoping to actively cooperate with the Coordination Council.

"We decided to invite to our council people who share the ideas of the protest movement and are experts in certain areas so they can work on concrete programs," said Mikhail Anshakov, a member of the expert council and the head of the Society for Consumer Rights Protection.

Journalist Maxim Brusilovsky claimed that the "celebrity members" of the Coordination Council were not willing to work and said the expert council would put forward programs on specific issues like the environment and housing. The Coordination Council has agreed to cooperate with the former candidates.

At the Nov. 24 meeting, most of the "celebrity" members sat through all six hours of voting and discussion. Following a practice used during the Dozhd TV debates, delegates' speaking time was supposed to be strictly limited to one minute for each person, but most members ignored the rule.

Some council members had less patience than others as the hours wore on. During a discussion of procedural rules, fewer than 30 of the 39 delegates present at the beginning were left in the room, some having gone outside to smoke, others taking a break by looking at the Steve Shapiro photo exhibition on display at the gallery.

"Can I have a beer? I have a headache already," said Nikolai Bondarik, leader of the nationalist Russian Party, and he placed an order at a nearby cafe.

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