The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

After Year of Protests, Activists Founding Political Parties

By Alexander Bratersky

December 04, 2012



An activist touting a poster saying “I didn’t vote for United Russia” at a Dec. 5, 2011, rally. **Sergei Karpukhin**

Activists who took part in large-scale protests against the Kremlin over the last year are putting their hopes in new political parties that could be used as a platform for opposition leaders like Alexei Navalny.

With public enthusiasm for protests seeming to have waned after a year of mass demonstrations, members of the opposition are building political parties to give people a new vehicle to put forth their demands.

"When you realize that you can't count on fast solutions and as protest activity is declining, you have to act more constructively," said Natalya Pelevina, a civil activist and one of the leaders of the December 5th Party, set to hold its founding congress on Saturday.

The party takes its name from the date of the first mass anti-Kremlin demonstration last year, when thousands of people filled Chistoprudny Bulvar to protest alleged vote rigging in State Duma elections held the day before.

More than 100 people gathered Wednesday evening to remember that day's events at a small unsanctioned demonstration on the tree-lined boulevard. Andrei Semyonov, a 33-year-old lawyer, held up the only poster in the crowd, which said that Vladimir Churov, the Central Elections Commission chief — a reviled figure among protesters — made up the Duma vote results.

Veteran opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was also in attendance and said that his state of mind had changed since last year's protest.

"A year ago I was angry. Now I'm in a working mood," he said.

The December 5th Party will include several members of the Solidarity movement, which played an active role in protests held over the last year and whose leaders include Nemtsov and opposition politicians Ilya Yashin and Garry Kasparov.

Nemtsov is also a co-leader of the Republican Party — People's Freedom Party, along with Mikhail Kasyanov and Vladimir Ryzhkov.

Ryzhkov, a former State Duma deputy who in October led efforts to get his party elected to the city legislature of Barnaul in the Altai region, has been a vocal proponent of working for change through elections, with less emphasis on protests.

The new December 5th Party has ties to another emerging political force called the People's Alliance, created by close associates of Navalny, the anti-corruption blogger and opposition leader, Pelevina said.

Among those behind the People's Alliance, which also plans to hold its founding congress later this month, is Vladimir Ashurkov, a former top manager at Alfa Bank and current director of Navalny's Foundation for Fighting Corruption.

"We are almost like family friends, who are united by a common view on events," Pelevina said about the People's Alliance.

Pelevina, who also helps Navalny in his anti-corruption efforts, is best known for her campaign against First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov, who made millions of dollars in 2004 through investments in companies controlled by powerful tycoons Alisher Usmanov and Suleiman Kerimov.

Pelevina tried to get a criminal case opened against Shuvalov, but prosecutors have refused. Shuvalov has repeatedly denied that he did anything improper or illegal.

Navalny has not expressed a desire to join either party, as he is apparently trying to appeal to a broader electorate, particularly to moderate nationalists.

"He wants to be an icon of a different scale," said Alexei Makarkin, deputy head of the Center for Political Technologies think tank.

Asked to judge the chances of new opposition parties to achieve their goals — which include more liberal political reforms and a crackdown on endemic government corruption — analysts said a rift within the Kremlin system is likely their only hope for change.

Makarkin also expressed doubts that the December 5th Party or the People's Alliance will be able to attract many rank-and-file participants in the opposition protests, saying the movement encompasses a highly diverse range of people, from social democrats to far-leftists to nationalists.

"It is very difficult to consolidate them," Makarkin said.

Pelevina said the December 5th Party will stand for liberal-democratic values, while Ashurkov of the People's Alliance told Vedomosti last week that the party will be centrist and oriented toward the middle class.

Political analyst Yevgeny Minchenko, head of the influential Minchenko Consulting Group, said the protest leaders have lost support because they largely skipped out on regional elections in October, when United Russia swept the five gubernatorial races.

He said that with authorities tightening the screws on protesters — such as with a law passed earlier this year toughening rules on public rallies — and amid calls for political liberalization, the only hope for the protest movement will be a "rift within the elites."

Minchenko, who recently co-authored a report on power struggles within Putin's inner circle, estimated that around 60 percent of protest leaders are "fueled by Kremlin clans." He declined to name any of the leaders he suspected of having ties to the authorities, citing fear of a potential libel suit.

There have not been visible contacts between Navalny and members of the ruling elite. Navalny declined a proposal to work in the so-called Open Government task force started by Medvedev during his term as president.

Pelevina said she is against meeting with members of the Kremlin elite. "I know how much you can trust people in power. Some of them might look nice, unlike the political line they are pursuing," she said.

Yekaterina Kravtsova and staff writer Jonathan Earle contributed to this report.

Related articles:

- City Hall Suggests Alternative Route for Dec. 15 Protest
- One Year of Protest Turbulence
- Year After First Protest, Future of Movement Uncertain

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/12/04/after-year-of-protests-activists-founding-political-parties-a19951