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Party Conflict Highlights Divisions in Opposition

By Yekaterina Kravtsova

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Father and son Gennady Gudkov, right, and Dmitry Gudkov standing on stage at an opposition rally last year. **Igor Tabakov**

The social-democratic Just Russia party issued an ultimatum Thursday to four members who are leaders in the anti-Kremlin protest movement, warning them to quit leadership roles in other organizations or face dismissal from the party.

The demand threatens to further weaken and divide the already splintered opposition, which is struggling to find a purpose for its Coordination Council and to harness public discontent with President Vladimir Putin and the ruling United Russia party.

A leadership council for Just Russia told party members Gennady Gudkov, Dmitry Gudkov and Oleg Shein that they must quit the Coordination Council or leave the party, and it told Ilya Ponomaryov that he must quit the leadership of opposition group Left Front.

Ponomaryov and Dmitry Gudkov are members of the party's State Duma faction, while Gennady Gudkov, Dmitry Gudkov's father, and Shein are former Duma deputies.

Shein announced Thursday that he would leave the Coordination Council to work with the party, while Gennady and Dmitry Gudkov said they would try to persuade Just Russia leaders to drop their ultimatum. Ponomaryov said he would step down from his post at Left Front.

The party demand was prompted by dissatisfaction with a Jan. 13 protest march in Moscow, where tens of thousands of people thronged part of the Boulevard Ring to voice opposition to a ban on U.S. adoptions of Russian orphans.

Protesters called for the dissolution of the Duma and held signs showing the faces of lawmakers, including some from A Just Russia, with the word "Shame" written over them. The march concluded with participants symbolically throwing the signs into a large garbage container.

Ponomaryov and both Gudkovs have maintained a precarious balance since the protest movement started 13 months ago, pairing their official and party roles with leadership positions in the rallies that erupted following disputed Duma elections in December 2011.

The Jan. 13 march has turned out to be a particularly divisive event, causing renewed tensions not only within A Just Russia but also in the Coordination Council, the unofficial opposition body charged with organizing protests and taking positions on key issues.

The council did not organize the march, and some representatives of nationalist and leftist factions in the group were against its theme, even suggesting that council members Boris Nemtsov and Ilya Yashin be expelled for participating. Other members, including Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov and anti-corruption lawyer Alexei Navalny, also attended the march.

Yet the protest was a resounding success in terms of turnout, especially compared with the last major opposition rally, held in December. That event, an unsanctioned demonstration on Lubyanskaya Ploshchad, drew only a few thousand people, one of the lowest turnouts for a protest over the preceding 12 months.

“The organization of the council’s first rally was not just bad but a complete failure,” council member and Moscow municipal deputy Maxim Kats said Sunday at a meeting of the council.

The contrast between the two events has prompted some opposition leaders to call for having protests only when a specific event has galvanized people into taking to the streets, as the U.S. adoption ban did.

“The march was destined to be successful because of its theme,” Nemtsov said at Sunday’s meeting. “People decided that children had been victimized by Putin. We need to learn a lesson and organize rallies only when its theme touches people’s hearts.”

Masha Lipman, an analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Center, said the success of the Jan. 13 march partly reflected the popularity of civil initiatives, which she said don’t always coincide with the opposition’s political agenda.

“Lots of people at the march may not support the ‘Russia without Putin’ slogan,” Lipman said.

Within the 45-seat Coordination Council, members of which were chosen by opposition sympathizers in online elections in October, the conflict over the protest has fed frustration with the inefficiency of the body’s work.

About a third of the council’s members did not attend Sunday’s six-hour meeting, held at a conference room in the Izmailovskaya Beta Hotel in eastern Moscow. Much of the discussion centered on procedural questions and complaints about the slow progress of work.

The council’s manifesto, stating its goals and objectives, still has not been approved by members, and although dozens of amendments were considered Sunday, most of them were pushed back to the next meeting. Larger questions of opposition strategy have not been resolved either.

“Everyone is concerned with the council’s low effectiveness, and everyone knows we do very poor work here,” Nemtsov said.

Navalny disagreed, however, saying after Sunday’s meeting that he thinks the council is doing its job by distributing statements on blogs and social networks on issues important to the opposition.

“We make statements to tell people what we think about an issue, to inform them about our position,” Navalny said.

But when asked about the opposition’s strategy for the coming year, Navalny avoided the question.

Many analysts and critics regard the council as a group of celebrities that has limited understanding of the demands of society, a perception council member Sergei Davidis, a co-leader of opposition movement Solidarity, said the council will try to erase.

“A pretty long time has passed since its election, and the council hasn’t been able to confirm its authority and gather the support and faith of those who voted for it,” Lipman said.

Lipman said she believes the body will not stay together long, an assessment even some on the council agree with.

Shein, who gained national prominence after holding a hunger strike last year to protest voting violations in a mayoral election in Astrakhan that he lost, is the second member to depart from the council. Leftist Yekaterina Aitova quit in December, saying she didn’t have time for the extra work.

“From 2008 onward, groups that say they have political goals have been created, and then they disappear,” Lipman said. “Such a future is likely for the council as well.”

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