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Nonparliament Parties Debate Election Rules

By Alexander Winning

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Almost 30 nonparliamentary parties discussed electoral changes with lawmakers and elections commission members Tuesday, but few appeared convinced that their newly formed discussion group would effect any tangible results.

The parties, whose ranks have swelled since former President Dmitry Medvedev slashed the membership requirement for party registration to 500 people in April, proposed the changes at a meeting of the Council of Non-Parliamentary Parties, a body formed by State Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin on Nov. 29.

Naryshkin has said that the council would foster dialogue between the State Duma, non-parliamentary groups and the executive branch, but participants in Tuesday's event described the resulting body as toothless.

Among suggestions voiced at the event, participants backed reducing the vote threshold

to enter the State Duma to between 3 and 5 percent and allowing parties to form electoral blocks after the vote count. They criticized the idea of an additional municipal filter that would harm the chances of candidates from smaller parties running for senior posts.

But there was marked disagreement over a potential switch to a mixed voting system in which 225 of 450 deputies would be elected in single-mandate constituencies.

According to the current system, the threshold to enter the Duma stands at 7 percent, it is forbidden to form electoral blocks, and deputies are elected based on proportional representation and party lists.

Responding to the suggestions, the Communist Party and the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia — both of which are represented in the Duma — said Tuesday that they were opposed to changing the status quo.

Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the flamboyant LDPR leader, told the council that smaller parties would not develop in single-mandate constituencies because candidates in those constituencies would rush to join the ruling United Russia party once they were elected, RIA-Novosti reported.

And Ivan Melnikov, first deputy chairman of the Communist Party's Central Committee, said "voting blocks shouldn't be a front for parties hoping to get elected," according to a statement on his party's website.

Despite Naryshkin's declaration that the council would stimulate discussion, Galina Mikhalyova, who attended the event as secretary of the liberal non-parliamentary party Yabloko, described Tuesday's proceedings as a "ritual."

"It was patently clear which parties are aligned with the authorities as they were allowed to speak first and gave the official position of the government — arguing against single-mandate districts and electoral blocks," she said by phone.

Mikhalyova criticized Medvedev's decision to simplify party registration rules, saying it had provoked a surge in spoiler parties and vehicles for politicians' personal ambitions. There are currently 56 political parties registered with the Justice Ministry, although just four are represented in the country's lower house of parliament.

"The purpose of today was for Naryshkin to be able to stand up and say: 'I have spoken to the smaller parties, and they are all in agreement with what we are doing,' Mikhalyova said.

There were several notable absentees at Tuesday's meeting, including the "Republican Party — Party of People's Freedom" co-led by veteran politicians Vladimir Ryzhkov, Mikhail Kasyanov and Boris Nemtsov.

Ryzhkov confirmed that his party was invited but explained why its members had refused to attend. "If the State Duma is itself an extension of the presidential administration, then why should we?" he said.

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