The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Just Russia Chairman Signals Shift Toward Kremlin

By Alexander Winning

April 10, 2013



Tens of thousands protesting after the disputed 2011 Duma elections. Levichev said opposition leaders like Alexei Navalny had no right to usurp the “natural outpouring of emotion” that followed the elections.
Vladimir Filonov

Russian society is disillusioned with the wayward anti-Kremlin protest movement, and the center-left Just Russia party will not pander to self-proclaimed opposition leaders, the party's chairman said Thursday.

"An atmosphere of disillusionment predominates in society today, not only disillusionment with the ruling regime but also with the so-called protest movement," Just Russia chairman Nikolai Levichev said at a news conference on the party's future.

Levichev, who is also vice speaker of the State Duma, said key protest organizers, including anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny, had no right to usurp the "natural outpouring of emotion" that followed disputed State Duma elections in December 2011.

A Just Russia, whose Duma faction is led by former Federation Council Speaker and presidential candidate Sergei Mironov, has the third-largest faction in the lower house, behind the ruling United Russia party and the Communists but ahead of Vladimir Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic Party.

Accusations of Kremlin subservience have consistently dogged A Just Russia since its foundation under government tutelage in 2006. Analysts say the party, which was intended as a counterweight to the Communists, has never been independent and that the party's recent move to expel two of its most outspoken members was carried out on the instructions of the presidential administration.

In comments likely to increase speculation that his party is not willing to rock the boat, Levichev stressed that A Just Russia would not participate in street demonstrations without clear goals.

Officials close to President Vladimir Putin have dismissed the protest movement as disjointed and lacking coherent objectives. Its leaders, they say, are puppets in the hands of Western governments bent on destabilizing the country.

Explaining the expulsion of outspoken politicians Dmitry and Gennady Gudkov from the party last month, Levichev said the pair had pursued their own political ends after taking up their Duma mandates. Dmitry Gudkov is currently a lawmaker, while his father Gennady served in the Duma until being ousted last year over accusations of illegal business activity.

"The main goal of certain 'freeloaders' was to jump on the train and then travel without a ticket," he said, referring to the Gudkovs, who both played an active role in organizing opposition protests on Bolotnaya Ploshchad and Prospekt Akademika Sakharova, and were expelled from the party for allegedly bringing A Just Russia into disrepute.

He did not comment on the fate of Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov, another prominent Kremlin critic, who has frozen his party membership. Ponomaryov has said the decision to oust the Gudkovs was "a mistake that could prove fatal."

As for his party's future strategy, Levichev said A Just Russia would position itself as a "responsible political force," apparently paying heed to Vyacheslav Volodin, the presidential administration's formidable point man for domestic politics, who said earlier this week that the Kremlin would only work with parties with a "constructive agenda."

The Just Russia chairman also dismissed speculation that his party was weighing whether to collaborate with the All-Russia People's Front, a pro-Putin umbrella group set to hold its founding congress in the summer.

"For us, the People's Front is nothing more than a three-letter abbreviation," he said, referring to the movement's Russian acronym, ONF. "We will wait and see what it turns into, but for the moment it is nothing more than intentions."

A political analyst said A Just Russia could have its arm twisted into joining the People's Front, however, adding that the party could be shut down altogether if it doesn't toe the Kremlin line.

"A Just Russia will never be an independent political player. It was always intended as a sparring partner for United Russia and could easily be forced to join the People's Front," said Pavel Salin, director of the Moscow Financial University's Center for Political Research.

"When A Just Russia started to criticize the current regime, the game changed. Mironov was removed from the Federation Council, and he understood that his party could be dissolved if he didn't put his house in order," Salin said.

Contact the author at a.winning@imedia.ru

Related articles:

- Ponomaryov Aide Detained in May 6 Riot Case
- Leading the Opposition With the People's Front
- Putin's Vertical Duma

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/04/10/just-russia-chairman-signals-shift-toward-kremlin-a23199