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Duma Endorses Election Reform in First Reading

By Alexander Winning

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Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky, seen above, said the mixed system "puts the brakes on democracy" by restricting opposition parties' development.

The State Duma on Tuesday passed in a first reading a bill that would reintroduce a mixed voting system for parliamentary elections, despite a heated argument on the Duma floor that it favors pro-Kremlin forces.

In voting late Tuesday afternoon, 296 lawmakers voted in favor of the bill, 148 voted against and one abstained. The vote totals reflect uncommon discord within the ranks of the lower house, which is often criticized for rubber-stamping legislation backed by the Kremlin.

The bill, submitted by President Vladimir Putin last month, would modify voting rules and reintroduce a mixed system whereby 225 Duma deputies are elected by party lists and 225 in single-mandate districts. The mixed voting system was abolished in 2005 in favor of a move to proportional representation and party lists.

Among other provisions, the bill would set the vote threshold for parties to get into the Duma at 5 percent — instead of the 7 percent threshold in place for the last Duma elections in 2011— and oblige independent candidates to gather signatures from 0.5 percent of voters in their district to qualify for registration. It would also uphold a ban on forming electoral blocks in place since Putin's second presidential term.

A bill to modify voting rules passes despite criticism that it favors the ruling party.

Addressing their Duma colleagues, deputies from the Communist and Liberal Democratic parties attacked the bill for playing into the hands of the ruling United Russia party, saying it would boost candidates with administrative resources and facilitate falsifications on voting day.

"United Russia is no longer capable of winning elections according to the current system, so the switch to a mixed system has been proposed," said Vadim Solovyov, reading out a joint statement from the Communists.

His colleague, Anatoly Lokot, saw the switch as a means of ensuring victory for candidates collaborating with the All-Russia People's Front, a pro-Putin umbrella group of nongovernmental organizations, at the next Duma vote in 2016.

Nationalist firebrand Vladimir Zhirinovsky, who heads the Liberal Democratic Party's Duma faction, said in a statement e-mailed by his party that the mixed system "puts the brakes on democracy" by restricting opposition parties' development.

"Lawmakers elected in single-mandate districts never remained independent in the past. They gathered into groups and supported the ruling party. It's a hidden way for [pro-Kremlin forces] to retain their hold on power," Zhirinovsky said.

Given United Russia's stranglehold on the Duma, however, opposition parties' outrage did little to prevent passage of the bill, which requires two further readings in the Duma and one in the Federation Council before the president can sign it into law.

In voting Tuesday, the ruling party's cause was helped by social-democratic A Just Russia, whose leader Sergei Mironov announced that his party faction supported the mixed voting system "on a matter of principle."

But Mironov, whose party has faced accusations of Kremlin subserviency since its foundation in 2006, said A Just Russia would lobby for the bill to be amended ahead of its crucial second reading to cut the threshold to enter the Duma to 3 percent and reinstate the option to vote "against all" candidates on electoral bulletins.

Setting out United Russia's position, Vladimir Pligin, head of the Duma's Constitution and State Affairs Committee and a party heavyweight, said the legislation catered to "public demand for new civil society structures" and would fill the lower house with energetic lawmakers inspired by the potential for a "social boost."

Pligin, whose committee drafted the bill, also gently reminded deputies that Putin had backed returning to a mixed voting system in his December state-of-the-nation address to both houses of parliament.

Analysts and regional political experts consulted by The Moscow Times agreed with the parliamentary opposition that the elections bill would unduly favor United Russia but said a mixed system was an improvement on party lists.

"The current political system doesn't reflect the country's loyalties," Grigory Melkonyants, deputy executive director of Golos, said by phone. "Voters who aren't affiliated with a political party are currently deprived of their right to propose their own candidates, so in this sense, our organization welcomes the bill."

Melkonyants dismissed claims that United Russia was acting out of concern for voters' rights, however, saying the party's leadership aims to use a combination of administrative resources and prominent candidates to secure crushing victories in upcoming single-mandate races.

"United Russia could become even more dominant this way," he said, describing the mixed voting system outlined in the bill as "outdated" and saying it "combined the deficiencies of both systems."

Melkonyants' comments were echoed by Alexei Titkov, an analyst with the Institute of Regional Politics, who said the Kremlin had submitted the bill so that United Russia would be able to retain its Duma majority without excessive pressure from above.

"The bill also solves a key problem for regional governors," Titkov said. "The presidential administration always demanded that ruling party candidates secure at least 50 percent of votes in their regions, but now those candidates will only have to beat the competition to win mandates and satisfy Kremlin officials."

When asked what the optimal system for Russian voters would be, both Titkov and Melkonyants referred to Golos' electoral codex published in January last year.

According to the codex, all lawmakers would compete to be elected in single-mandate districts, and then their results would be used to calculate which parties had garnered the most votes.

"That would be the fairest option," Titkov said.

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