

As Mayoral Vote Approaches, Parties 'Imitate' Political Activity

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The Communist Party has filed a request to several government agencies asking them to check whether ruling party United Russia had received foreign funding, in a move observers called an "imitation of political activity" ahead of the Moscow mayoral election on Sept. 8.

State Duma Deputy Vadim Solovyov told Izvestia on Friday that, according to information obtained by his Communist Party, certain Russian companies that had given money to United Russia were owned by offshore or foreign entities and that a complaint on the matter was sent to the Prosecutor General's Office, the Justice Ministry, the Central Elections Commission and the Federal Tax Service.

"If violations are proven, the money must be given back to those companies or transferred to the state budget, while those who used this money must be punished. Otherwise, we will raise the question of banning the party's activity," Solovyov said.

United Russia official Konstantin Mazurevsky said that the party's financing fully complied with the law and that the party had never received any complaints from monitoring agencies, RIA Novosti reported Friday.

Observers said the ultimate goal of the Communists was not to prove that United Russia received money from abroad but to draw media attention to their mayoral candidate, Ivan Melnikov, and to tarnish United Russia's image, as well as to maintain their relevance as a political force.

Solovyov said their complaint was prompted by the fact that United Russia last week alleged that opposition candidate Alexei Navalny's campaign was likely financed from abroad by more than 300 foreign individuals and enterprises, an accusation supporters said was a pretext to exclude Navalny from the race due to his rising popularity.

Earlier in August, Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky said Navalny must be prosecuted for allegedly receiving money from abroad. Last week, the Prosecutor General's Office said it would look into the claims. Navalny has denied the accusations.

The Communist Party is the first party with a candidate in the mayoral race to target United Russia with a major attack, while United Russia, the Liberal Democrats and A Just Russia have mostly concentrated their efforts on fighting Navalny.

On Friday, A Just Russia requested that a criminal case be opened against Navalny on slander charges after the latter posted a link on Twitter to a Web forum that said Just Russia member Oleg Pakholkov was a member of a criminal gang in the 1990s whose members committed murders, robberies and rapes.

On Tuesday, police searched the apartment of Navalny supporters in central Moscow after Just Russia candidate Nikolai Levichev said there were illegal campaign materials there.

"The results of elections in Moscow and other regions are always predictable, but all parties have to somehow imitate party activity, so they use such tricks as complaints and accusations against other candidates," said Lilia Shvetsova, a political expert with the Carnegie Moscow Center.

She also said the Communist Party had filed multiple complaints regarding United Russia's financing in the past, with no effect, since "neither the Investigative Committee nor the courts are allowed to check the ruling party's activities."

"These actions are aimed at enhancing the party's electoral prestige, but nothing new has been invented here. It uses old schemes, which at the same time do not mar its relations with the authorities," Shvetsova said.

Alexei Mukhin, an expert at the Center for Political Information, also said the real reason for the complaint was to make people respect the Communists' mayoral candidate.

All the parties want to make their candidates look like the main participants in the electoral race by creating media attention for them, he said.

The Moscow mayoral campaign currently looks like a struggle between the Kremlin

and Navalny, and other candidates want some attention as well, agreed Pavel Salin, director of Moscow Financial University's Center for Political Research.

Acting Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, the favorite in the race, is running as an independent but is backed by the Kremlin and United Russia, of which Sobyenin has been a member since 2001.

"[But] this is not an imitation of politics," Salin said. "The Communist Party wants media attention ahead of the election — this is what real politics are."

Shvetsova dismissed the idea that the Communists' actions were genuinely directed at promoting their candidate for victory. Ever since the 1996 presidential election, in which Communist candidate Gennady Zyuganov lost a tight race to Boris Yeltsin, the Communist Party has worked carefully to make sure the authorities know it isn't actually competing for power, she said.

"They want to keep their places in the State Duma and their leader Zyuganov wants to keep his state dacha with a swimming pool. That's why they've learned how to imitate political activity in a masterly fashion," she said.

The pundits agreed that the Communists' actions were unlikely to influence the election results and would not help the parties' candidates grow into national politicians.

"This campaign will only have an effect for Navalny — he's gaining more popularity and will become a politician of federal importance," Shvetsova said.

The latest poll conducted by Synovate Comcon showed that support for Sobyenin has slid 11 percentage points, falling from 74.6 percent to 63.5 percent, while backing for Navalny rose to 19.9 percent. (See related story, Page 3).

"Candidates from other parties are just 'spoilers' in these elections," Shvetsova said. "They were appointed as candidates only to make the elections look legitimate."

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