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'None of the Above' on Its Way Back to the Ballot

By Oleg Sukhov

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The State Duma's Legislation Committee on Monday approved a bill reintroducing the "none of the above" option in all elections except for those choosing a president.

The ballot option was introduced in Russia in 1991 but was removed in 2006. Its planned reintroduction has been widely interpreted as an attempt by United Russia to take votes away from opposition candidates.

Legislation Committee chairman Vladimir Pligin, of United Russia, said that the option would be reasonable for municipal elections but that its relevance for State Duma and regional elections was open to discussion.

The bill was submitted last October by Valentina Matviyenko, speaker of the Federation Council, and other members of the parliament's upper house. They argued that the option would help determine whether a particular vote was a protest vote against the ruling party or

a genuine preference for a specific candidate.

Opposition leader Alexei Navalny wrote on his blog Monday that United Russia hoped to benefit as a result of people voting against everyone instead of choosing opposition candidates in relatively competitive elections. But they will not introduce the option in presidential elections because President Vladimir Putin cannot afford to make them competitive and will not have any strong rivals whose votes should be taken away, Navalny said.

He argued that the bill was a response to his strong showing in the 2013 Moscow mayoral election, in which he was the runner-up with 27.2 percent of the vote, and jokingly described what he perceived as the Kremlin's rationale.

"A true explanation sounds like this: Everyone hates us. Candidates like upstart Navalny and others emerge who exploit the people's hatred for us, United Russia thieves, and get a lot of votes," the politician wrote.

But the opposition leader said he supported the bill because it would hit United Russia harder than opposition parties. Currently, some people vote for the ruling party not because they think it is "good" but because they believe "everyone else is even worse," and soon they will be able to express their distaste for all candidates, he wrote.

A first reading of the bill is scheduled for Friday.

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