

Ryzhkov Quits RPR-Parnas Opposition Party

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A leader of Russia's main liberal opposition party, RPR-Parnas, quit over the weekend with a group of senior supporters in a move that some say could be beneficial to the Kremlin and lead to the party's dismissal.

Vladimir Ryzhkov handed his membership cancellation letter to the other two party co-chairmen, Boris Nemtsov and Mikhail Kasyanov, at a meeting of the party's federal council on Saturday, and about 15 members of the political council followed him, media reports said.

Ryzhkov's move came after a standoff with Nemtsov and Kasyanov that lasted several months over their reluctance to negotiate with the Kremlin and their support of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who is known for his links to nationalists.

Ryzhkov resigned after Nemtsov and Kasyanov decided to dismiss him as the party's official representative with authorities and apply sanctions to nine party members for criticism

of Nemtsov's and Kasyanov's vehement opposition to cooperating with authorities.

"This was a declaration of war, a crackdown on me and my supporters, there was no point in tolerating it anymore," Ryzhkov told Vedomosti in a story published Saturday.

Nemtsov told journalists Saturday that the Kremlin was "definitely a beneficiary in the whole story" but said Ryzhkov was "not an instrument in the hands of the authorities for destroying RPR-Parnas," Kommersant reported.

Nemtsov and Kasyanov fear that a number of the party's regional branches may withdraw their membership following Ryzhkov's departure.

"An apocalyptic scenario does exist: if too many regional branches leave the party, we may just as well liquidate it," Nemtsov said.

Kasyanov [told](#) journalists on Saturday that the party cannot hold its members by force.

"If someone wants to go after Ryzhkov, they can do it," he said, Interfax reported.

Calls to the cell phones of Ryzhkov, Nemtsov and Kasyanov on Sunday went unanswered.

Political analysts on Sunday seemed to shrug off the significance of Ryzhkov's departure, dismissing Nemtsov's statement that the Kremlin might benefit from the rift in RPR-Parnas and noting that the party's role in politics was a minor one.

"In real life, these are insignificant transpositions because the right-wing field [in politics] remains free, strictly speaking," former Kremlin spin doctor Gleb Pavlovsky said by phone. Kremlin First Deputy Chief of Staff Vyacheslav Volodin "is following it carefully," he added.

Lilia Shevtsova, a senior expert with the Carnegie Moscow Center, said by phone that liberal opposition "cannot play an important role due to its inactivity and because authorities have restricted its participation in elections."

The party's fate now depends on the ability of Nemtsov and Kasyanov to persuade Navalny to become the party's single leader, which was "the real reason" behind Ryzhkov's walkout, independent political analyst Stanislav Belkovsky said by phone.

The rift in the party began last summer, when Nemtsov and Kasyanov supported Navalny's bid for the Sept. 8 mayoral elections in Moscow, Ryzhkov told Gazeta.ru in an interview posted on his personal website Sunday.

Tensions in the party grew after Ryzhkov took part in President Vladimir Putin's meeting with political opposition leaders in November despite the objections of Nemtsov, Kasyanov and Ilya Yashin, a member of the party's political council and a high-profile opposition leader, Ryzhkov told Gazeta.ru in a story published Saturday.

Yashin, in contrast to Nemtsov and Kasyanov, welcomed Ryzhkov's departure over the weekend, saying on Twitter that the party would "remain independent," apparently referring to the Kremlin's influence.

Kasyanov said he and Nemtsov were forced to strip Ryzhkov of his post of the party's official representative with authorities because that position gave him the power to formally liquidate the party, which they feared he could do after 10 of his supporters registered another party — Republicans of Russia — with the Justice Ministry in January, Kasyanov said in comments carried by Interfax.

According to Ryzhkov, however, his supporters cancelled the registration of Republicans of Russia after Ryzhkov persuaded them to make concessions to Nemtsov and Kasyanov, and Ryzhkov was still fired as the party's representative, he told Gazeta.ru on Saturday.

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