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Russian Political Opposition Uniting for 2016 Parliamentary Elections

By Peter Spinella

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Russia's currently fragmented political opposition — which covers a broad spectrum of ideologies, from the far left to the far right — has agreed to form single alliance for next year's parliamentary elections, newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported Thursday.

Nine of Russia's most prominent opposition politicians, including Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Alexei Navalny, have agreed to form an alliance with a unified list of candidates for the elections in December 2016, the newspaper reported, citing opposition leader Mikhail Kasyanov, a former prime minister and close friend of recently murdered opposition firebrand Boris Nemtsov.

Kasyanov told the newspaper that Nemtsov's brazen murder, just steps away from Red Square in February, has galvanized the opposition leaders to form the political alliance as well as pursue justice for the killing.

"We have agreed that our group will take political control over the murder investigation so

that the investigators do not limit themselves to finding only the killers, but also the organizers," Kasyanov, who served as prime minister during Vladimir Putin's first term as president in 2000-04, was quoted as telling the newspaper.

Gennady Gudkov, a socialist opposition leader, was kicked out of the lower house of parliament, the State Duma, after the Investigative Committee accused him of involvement in entrepreneurial activity, which is illegal for Duma deputies. In December 2012, the Constitutional Court sanctioned the Duma's decision to kick him out.

Gudkov, along with his son Dmitry, Navalny and others had helped stage a series of anti-government street protests after the scandal-mired parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011-12.

Gudkov and his son, who is also a seasoned parliamentarian, have agreed to join the new coalition, which also includes career politicians Ilya Yashin, Andrei Nechayev, Vladimir Ryzhkov and Vladimir Milov, the Nezavisimaya Gazeta report said.

The younger Gudkov said in the report that the time has come to end infighting among the opposition and unite for a common cause. "There is nothing that we should compete among ourselves for — if it's only for a bullet in the head or a spot in a cemetery. We have agreed that we will meet on a regular basis, act as a united front and produce a collaborative reaction to certain events," Gudkov was quoted as saying.

It remains unclear whether either Navalny or Khodorkovsky, two of the group's most prominent members, would be able to run for office if they wanted to, as both have criminal records.

In addition, Khodorkovsky is currently living in Europe and recently vowed he would not return to Russia until he can be sure he will not be thrown back into jail. Khodorkovsky, once Russia's richest man, served a decade in prison on charges including embezzlement and tax evasion that his supporters denounced as revenge for his political ambitions.

Navalny, a vocal critic of President Vladimir Putin, was the runner-up in Moscow's 2013 mayoral election, collecting 27 percent of the vote. He too was convicted of embezzlement, but avoided going to prison.

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