

Navalny's Opposition Coalition Stymied in Siberia

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Alexei Navalny

Efforts to inject some of Russia's almost invariably pro-Kremlin regional and municipal legislatures with opposition-minded lawmakers ended in failure in Novosibirsk on Monday.

Opposition firebrand Alexei Navalny's Party of Progress, Parnas and several other opposition parties formed a coalition aimed at providing a platform to like-minded candidates in various Russian regions, including Novosibirsk, where it had lined up three candidates to run for the city's upcoming legislative vote in September.

Weeks of canvassing, rallying voters and otherwise endeavoring to rouse the largely dormant opposition vote in Novosibirsk appeared to prove futile on Friday when a working group of the regional election commission determined that the so-called Democratic Coalition had failed to gather the requisite 10,657 signatures, and thus refused to register any of its candidates.

“The working group that verified the signatures determined only 10,187 of them were valid,” wrote Leonid Volkov, a former Yekaterinburg municipal lawmaker and a longtime Navalny ally who runs the coalition's campaign, in his blog Monday. As this fell short of the required amount, the working group recommended that the election commission deny the candidates' request to register for the upcoming elections.

As Navalny had pointed out in a blog entry earlier, their group had in fact gathered 17,500 signatures, and then weeded out several thousand on their own, ultimately handing in 11,682 signatures, each of which the coalition was confident was above reproach.

Unwilling to give up without a fight this time, the Democratic Coalition challenged the election commission's decision.

But after hours of negotiations Monday, their efforts proved to be in vain.

“At 11:47 p.m. [Novosibirsk time], they decided to refuse to register [our candidates]. Our objections, including [documentary evidence], were not considered,” Volkov tweeted.

He announced afterward via Twitter that the coalition would appeal the decision to the Central Election Commission, and declared a hunger strike pending the willingness of election officials to reconsider the evidence.

Burdensome Requirement

Earlier this month, Navalny complained on his blog that collecting signatures is an obstacle designed by the federal authorities to undercut opposition figures' efforts to take part in elections.

“Signature collection here [in Russia] is hard work for the real opposition,” the politician wrote. “For [parties that tow the Kremlin line] it's not a problem — they can submit blank pages and will still be registered,” he added.

Analysts interviewed Monday by The Moscow Times agreed that signatures often prove to be the Achilles heels of opposition-minded political hopefuls in Russia. Candidates have to gather adequate numbers of signatures in their support prior to being allowed on ballots across Russia.

In 2014, two well-known opposition politicians — Masha Gaidar, who has since moved to Ukraine to work for Odessa Governor and ex-Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, and Olga Romanova, a well-known prisoners' rights advocate — washed out of the Moscow City Duma race after their signatures were determined to be insufficient.

In the same race, Barbara Babich, at the time a 23-year-old unemployed theater college graduate, and a relative unknown, passed the test with flying colors.

Covering Their Tracks

Navalny and Volkov both claim to have fought hard to ensure the Democratic Coalition's signatures would pass the election commission's litmus test.

“We're the only [group] that is willing to show reporters our signatures as well as the process of collecting them,” Navalny wrote in his blog earlier this month, as the process of gathering signatures in the Siberian capital was in high gear.

Wishing to exceed the requisite 10,657 signatures, the coalition set its sites on gathering upward of 15,000 signatures over the course of three weeks, Navalny wrote in his blog.

Some 300 individuals were hired to collect signatures, and the coalition demanded perfection from each of them, Navalny said.

And Volkov added in his own blog that the process went according to plan. Signature collectors were thoroughly vetted and meticulously monitored. Those determined to have forged signatures were handed over to the police, Volkov said.

The collectors exceeded their goal, managing to gather 17,500 signatures in time for an extensive internal verification process.

Once the signatures were collected, they were scrutinized by attorneys and handwriting experts. Call-center operators then personally contacted the individuals that had signed in favor of the candidates to ensure they had done so voluntarily, and that their signatures had not been forged.

“Of the 17,500 signatures, the ... most exemplary ones were submitted to the election commission today,” Navalny wrote in his blog on July 17. “There is no legal cause to deny us the opportunity to participate in the elections,” he concluded.

“Within 10 days [during which the election commission was tasked with verifying the signatures and making its decision] we will know whether the opposition will be permitted to participate in these elections,” Navalny added.

Losing the Battle

The results were released on Friday. Only 10,187 — 470 shy of the required sum — were determined to be valid, leaving the Democratic Coalition candidates ineligible to feature on the ballots.

The majority of invalid signatures were ones the election commission claimed failed to correspond with the database of the regional branch of the Federal Migration Service (FMS).

The coalition immediately began sifting back through, cross-checking each of the signatures that had been declared invalid. “In 53 percent of cases, the errors had been made by election commission employees themselves,” Volkov wrote in his blog on Sunday.

“When the election commission verifies the signatures, they type each name in by hand, and only then do they compare them with the FMS database. [Then] if they find a single comma out of place, they deem the signature invalid,” Navalny wrote in his blog on Saturday.

Both Navalny and Volkov maintained that the signatures deemed invalid were primarily marred by typographical errors attributable to the very officials charged with verifying their authenticity.

Volkov further pointed to errors within the FMS' system. He wrote in a blog entry Sunday that in many cases, the FMS had been using outdated information.

Armed with the results of their research, coalition representatives headed to the election commission to discuss the situation, Volkov wrote: "At first they seemed glad to see us and open to dialogue, but then something strange started to happen."

An FMS official who was present at the meeting rejected all of their explanations with one simple argument: "There's no reason not to believe the FMS."

"We showed her [the FMS official] everything. ... We said: 'If you have information in your database that a person still owns a passport issued by the U.S.S.R., for example, and we have a more recent passport number in our signature list, isn't it your [FMS] error and not ours?' But she answered 'No, the FMS data is up to date and correct,'" Volkov wrote in his blog.

"It's a very comfortable argument [employed] to substantiate a political decision made by the Novosibirsk election commission," he concluded.

Kremlin Pressure

Dmitry Oreshkin, an independent political analyst and head of the Mercator political research group, echoed Navalny's sentiments that impossible signature requirements can be used as a means of controlling the opposition. Russia's federal authorities prefer to avoid difficulties from the start rather than facing them during elections, Oreshkin said, explaining that in his view, this accounts for the Democratic Coalition's present struggle.

"The Kremlin fears elections at all levels," Oreshkin told The Moscow Times on Monday, explaining that varying levels of tolerance for electoral fraud can be found throughout the Russian regions. In Novosibirsk, he opined, this tolerance is minimal.

"In the 2011 [State Duma] elections, the United Russia party received a mere 29 percent of the votes in Novosibirsk," he said, concluding that the ruling party had reason to be wary of the opposition there.

Alexei Mazur, a prominent Novosibirsk journalist and political analyst, said that the coalition's signature collection was transparent. "Everyone in the city saw them doing it, and Volkov was constantly explaining how they were doing it and was answering all questions presented to him," Mazur said in a phone interview with The Moscow Times.

He sided with Oreshkin's conclusion that the Democratic Coalition's signature woes were the result of a political decision.

"Sociological research has shown that [members of the coalition] wouldn't make any drastic changes if elected to the local parliament," Mazur said.

"There would be one or two of their deputies in the parliament among several dozen from other parties," he said. "But the authorities didn't like the way the mayoral elections in Moscow [in 2013, when a second round of voting was nearly necessitated, thanks in part to Navalny's robust performance], so now they're being overly cautious," he said.

Navalny has shelved his own electoral ambitions for the time being. A pair of suspended sentences he is serving for embezzlement charges he believes were politically motivated will bar him from any elective office until 2018.

Meanwhile, he has thrown himself into the task of fighting to introduce opposition-minded lawmakers wherever possible in Russia. In recent months, the Democratic Coalition has endeavored to rally candidates in Novosibirsk, Kostroma, Kaluga and Magadan.

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