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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Ally of Slain Putin Critic Nemtsov Takes on Kremlin in Regional Vote

By The Moscow Times

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Opposition activist Ilya Yashin speaks to the media during a presentation of the report about Russian military presence in Ukraine that murdered opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was working on shortly before his death, in Moscow, May 12, 2015.

Six months after opposition politician Boris Nemtsov was shot dead outside the Kremlin in an unsolved contract killing, one of his closest allies is trying to take on Vladimir Putin's United Russia party in regional elections this Sunday.

A veteran activist at just 32, Ilya Yashin, a prominent figure in the People's Freedom Party or RPR-Parnas, was one of Nemtsov's closest friends and served as his campaign manager.

Now, in an unlikely political contest, he is seeking to continue his slain friend's work, drawing on Nemtsov's tactics to try to gain a small foothold in the parliament of Kostroma region, some 300 kilometers northeast of Moscow.

"Nemtsov set an important example not only for me but for everyone," Yashin said in an interview.

"Nemtsov was carrying the opposition banner. They killed him, but we've picked up the banner and we'll carry it further."

Sunday's elections, which will see the governors of 21 regions and over 1,300 junior officials elected along with lawmakers in 11 regional parliaments, are seen as a dry-run for nationwide parliamentary elections next year.

The ballot is also a test for the opposition, which remains marginal, at a time when the Kremlin is trying to contain the fallout from a deepening economic crisis triggered by falling oil prices and compounded by Western sanctions over Ukraine.

Despite mounting anxiety among ordinary Russians about the falling ruble and galloping prices, prospects for the opposition look bleak. Conversely, Putin's ratings, though down a little, remain near record highs of over 70 percent.

Though some of its leaders enjoy a high profile in the West, many Russian voters neither know nor care about the opposition, with some associating it with the 1990s, one of the most chaotic and unpredictable periods in modern Russian history.

The opposition says that is because the Kremlin has built a fake democracy in which it is not allowed to figure. Kremlin politicians say it is because the opposition is incompetent.

Shut Out

Parnas applied to contest Sunday's elections in four regions. The authorities, citing technicalities, allowed it to participate in only one: Kostroma, a sprawling region of 670,000 people centered on a town of the same name peppered with onion-domed churches on the banks of the River Volga.

Police later arrested Yashin's campaign manager, Andrei Pivovarov, accusing him of attempting to steal personal data. Yashin says those charges are absurd.

Parnas says it has been denied media access in Kostroma, a region with pockets of poverty, and that paid thugs disrupt its meetings, allegations backed by video footage.

The authorities say they have followed the letter of electoral law when it comes to registering parties and that the elections are being held in accordance with the constitution.

Ahead of Sunday's vote, Kostroma's center was dotted with billboards for Putin's United Russia party, which controls the local parliament. The posters showed a skyline filled with construction cranes. Nearby, campaigners dressed up in giant white bear suits roamed the streets handing out fliers giving voters five reasons to vote for the governing party.

The first reason cited was starkly simple: "The United Russia party is the only real political force."

"I'll be voting for United Russia," said one woman who only gave her name as Olga, punching

the air with enthusiasm.

Others were less upbeat.

"I don't think the vote will change anything because I think that everything has already been decided for us," said a young woman called Natalia, who declined to give her surname.

Mixed Results

Yashin and Parnas are trying to compensate for their lack of media access by holdings meetings with voters. But the results have been mixed.

At one such meeting this week Yashin addressed four pensioners on deck chairs near a children's playground amid a light drizzle. Elderly women pushing prams looked on with curiosity. A second meeting drew a similar crowd.

Yashin, who says he has held over 120 such meetings, regaled his audience with stories of official corruption, lamenting what he said were the region's crumbling apartment blocks, potholed roads, and tiny pensions.

Several elderly voters challenged his ideas, asking him why he was so negative. Other voters have called him an American or Ukrainian spy.

When asked why so few voters attend his meetings, Yashin said people were afraid to be seen with an opposition politician, citing a story about how police had called in the parents of one teenager who had attended a meeting for questioning.

Yashin believes he and his party have been allowed to contest Kostroma because more than 60 percent of voters live in rural areas in an area which covers more than 37,000 square kilometers, making campaigning logistically difficult.

Blocked from standing elsewhere, the opposition plans to organize a large rally in Moscow later this month.

The murder of Boris Nemtsov, Yashin's friend, remains unsolved. Five suspects have been detained, but it is unclear who ordered his killing and why.

Yashin, who travels with a bodyguard, said he was aware of the risks of carrying on Nemtsov's work.

"Only a madman wouldn't be afraid," he said. "This year alone one of my friends has been killed and another jailed."

Yashin said he had no grounds for optimism and it seems unlikely his party will win any seats on Sunday. But he said he thought the opposition's time would come even if he could not say when.

"Putin is not God, he can't be eternal."

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