

Crisis in Russian Opposition as Two Withdraw From Election Primaries

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Russian opposition leader Mikhail Kasyanov

Two of Russia's leading opposition politicians announced Wednesday 13 April their withdrawal from election primaries being organised by the PARNAS democratic coalition.

Ivan Zhdanov, Head of Law at Alexey Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) and Ilya Yashin, PARNAS political party deputy chairman, announced they would not be standing within the space of 24 hours.

Their reaction comes after PARNAS leader, Mikhail Kasyanov, announced his refusal to withdraw from the list of proposed candidates, despite recent involvement in a well-publicised scandal.

Kasyanov was the only politician to be included on the list of potential candidates since last December when the coalition was formed.

"I think that Kasyanov's position destroys voters' trust and scraps us from the ability to be an effective opposition coalition," Yashin said.

Zhdanov's cited similar reasons to Yashin, but added that he was too busy with other political projects.

"The list would have been much more respectable if its leader was elected at primaries. Openness is the core value of the opposition," Zhdanov told The Moscow Times. He stressed that the withdrawal was his personal decision and that he hadn't heard of anybody else planning to quit their candidacy.

The decision to give Kasyanov the privilege of heading the list of candidates had been controversial. The coalition was criticised for being non-democratic and for giving the Kremlin a chance to concentrate anti-opposition smears on a single figure.

That chance was used when state-controlled television channel NTV aired grainy video footage of Mikhail Kasyanov and a colleague, Natalia Pelevina, in bed together. They are heard criticizing their opposition colleagues.

"Given such circumstances, we would be answering idiotic questions about who slept with whom and who called someone names in bed throughout the course of the whole [State Duma election] campaign," Yashin explained.

Kasyanov [told](#) KommersantFM radio that he saw no problems with Yashin's choice. "It's his decision and he has the right for any decision and it's his opinion," he said.

Unlike Yashin, Zhdanov has said that his decision had nothing to do with the publication of the film. The lawyer believe that PARNAS still have good chances at the parliamentary elections, "because there's no alternative".

"Democratic coalition members now have to choose between bad and worse," the political expert Alexey Makarkin told The Moscow Times.

Makarkin believes the film scandal will push opposition members away from Kasyanov. He also said that voter activity at the primaries appeared to be low, and that cancelling them could be an option.

At the same time, Makarkin also believes that the scandal will not result in any dramatic changes: PARNAS will survive, and Yashin will probably enter the electoral campaign in a single-member district.

"The situation in general is a plus to everyone, not a minus," Grigory Melkonyants, co-chair of Golos, an independent elections monitor, told The Moscow Times. "It is good when such things pass before the election campaign. When it starts, nothing will distract them. It seems like they [the opposition] are at a stage when they need to clarify the relationship".

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