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Kremlin Kicks Off Search for New Lawmakers in Reality Show-Style Contest

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Past editions of the "Leaders of Russia" contest sent potential regional leaders jumping off cliffs and diving under tanks. **Yevgeny Razumny / TASS**

The Kremlin is hosting a nationwide search for candidates to the Russian parliament ahead of next year's elections, the Vedomosti business daily reported Tuesday.

Similar to past contests that sent potential regional leaders jumping off cliffs and diving under tanks, the latest competition is open to Russians aged 21 to 55 and carries an air of a reality show. The contest comes amid the near-weekly emergence of new political parties headed by pop culture figures that critics and unnamed Kremlin sources say play into the current leadership's efforts to stay in power.

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President Vladimir Putin's First Deputy Chief of Staff, Sergei Kiriyenko, officially kick-started the competition for State Duma candidates on Tuesday, according to Vedomosti.

"We're investing in [the contestants'] professionalism and skills, and they will decide for themselves whether to participate in the elections," Kiriyenko was quoted as saying.

Elections for Russia's lower house of parliament, the State Duma, are scheduled for September 2021, although Putin's recent constitutional shakeup has fueled speculation that the vote could be held as soon as this December.

The contest will narrow its field of potential State Duma candidates to 70 to 80 contestants by May, Vedomosti reported.

They will undergo leadership courses at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA). According to Vedomosti, 10 State Duma deputies and two senators, including the authors of controversial laws enacted in recent years, will mentor the contest winners.

While the competition won't be televised, members of the public will be able to vote for their favorite contestants.

The contestants' political views will not be considered, said Pavel Bezruchko, who heads the "Leaders of Russia" competition's expert council.

Liberal opposition member Ilya Yashin said he's "too old for this sh*t" when asked if he'd take part in the Kremlin's contest.

Maxim Katz, who was recently kicked out of the liberal opposition party Yabloko, also dismissed plans to participate in the "absolutely inadequate" leadership contest.

"I think honest people who respect themselves and the country shouldn't take part in this," Katz told the Open Media news website.

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