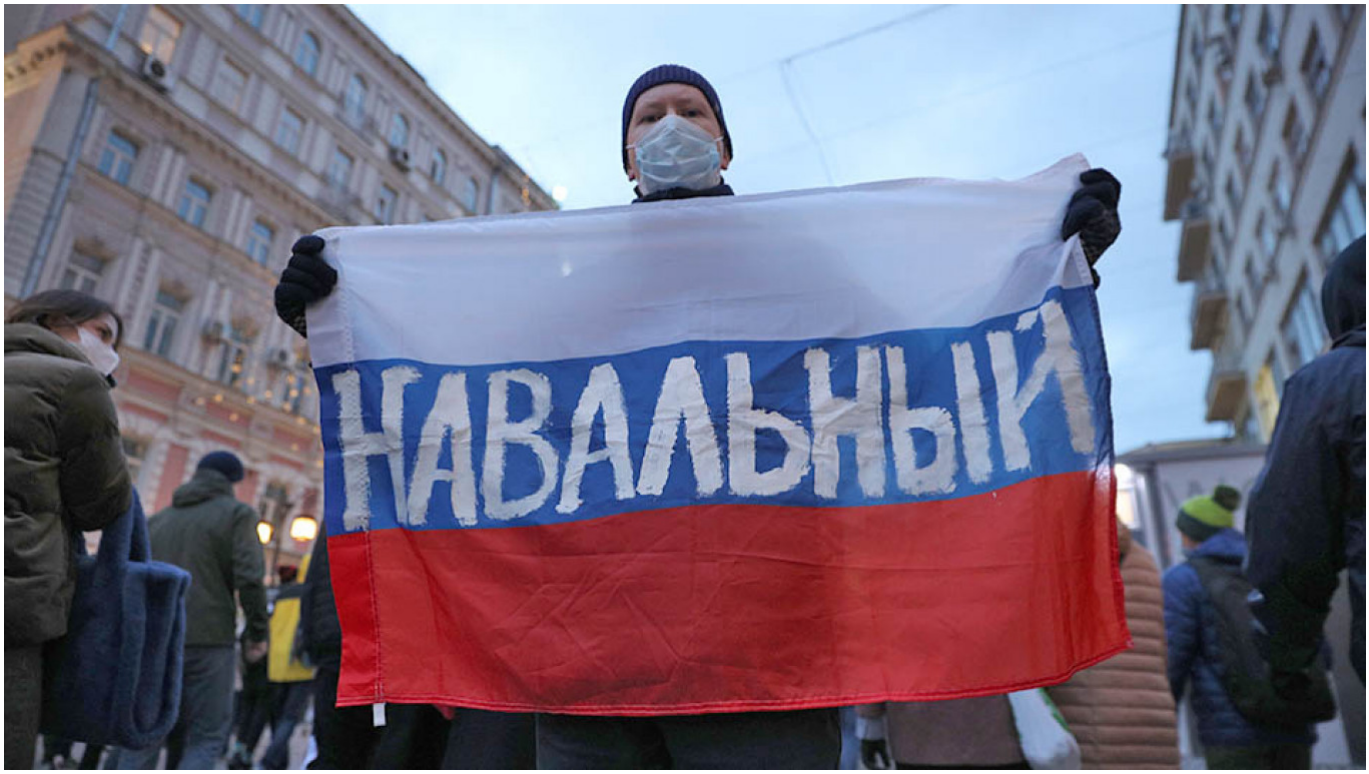
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Russia Swiftly Moves to Block Navalny Aides, Supporters From Ballot

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The changes to Russia's election law would shut out Navalny's supporters from critical parliamentary polls in September. **Vladislav Shatilo / RBC / TASS**

Russia's lower house of parliament on Tuesday approved draft legislation that would ban members of "extremist" organizations from being elected as lawmakers.

The changes to Russia's election law would shut out jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny's supporters from critical lower-house polls in September. The move also comes ahead of a court ruling to add Navalny's network of regional offices and his Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) to Russia's list of banned "terrorist and extremist" organizations.

Related article: Russia to Debate Bill Banning Navalny Supporters from Polls – Lawmaker

If passed, the bill will ban anyone who played any role in an extremist group's hierarchy from running for office.

The ban would also apply to those involved in the group anywhere from one to three years before it was formally declared “extremist.”

Heads of “extremist” organizations would not be allowed to run for the State Duma, the lower house of Russia’s parliament, for five years while employees would face three-year bans.

Deputies in the State Duma voted 293 in favor of the bill in a first reading to 45 against, with two abstaining.

To become law, the bill needs two more votes of approval in the State Duma and one in the upper-house Federation Council before receiving President Vladimir Putin’s signature.

If passed, the ban would directly affect several Navalny allies who have announced plans to run for the Duma, including his senior aide and FBK lawyer Lyubov Sobol.

"The idea is to enlarge the circle of potential candidates who could want to run and who are seen by the Kremlin as a sort of undesirable figure and to bar them from running in advance. It’s a bill that targets not just the FBK but also its supporters, and thus it targets movements on a much larger scale than just Navalny’s team," Tatiana Stanovaya, the founder of the political analysis project R.Politik and a nonresident fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Center, told The Moscow Times.

"The main challenge for the Kremlin ahead of the State Duma elections is not to elect a loyal Duma — in the current circumstances it seems achievable, as most of the opponents are to be agreed with the presidential administration — the real challenge is to avoid a summer 2019-style political crisis on a Russia-wide scale," she added, referring to the mass protests in Moscow that broke out over the barring of independent candidates from the City Council election.

The highly anticipated State Duma vote takes place this September, with the ruling pro-Kremlin United Russia vying to overcome its low ratings and keep its supermajority of nearly 75% of seats.

Moscow prosecutors suspended the self-disbanded Navalny network and Russia’s state financial watchdog froze its bank accounts in anticipation of a court ruling declaring the anti-Kremlin activist’s group “extremist.” The “extremist” designation would put its members and supporters at risk of jail time.

Navalny’s groups have spent years releasing investigations alleging corruption among senior government officials and backing anti-Kremlin election candidates.

Navalny, 44, is serving two and a half years in a prison colony for violating parole on old fraud charges during his recovery from a near-fatal poisoning that he blames on the Kremlin.

AFP contributed reporting.

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