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St. Petersburg Election Ballot Features 3 Near-Identical Boris Vishnevskys

September 06, 2021



Boris Vishnevsky **Zamir Usmanov / TASS**

Voters in Russia's second city St. Petersburg will face a confusing choice at the polls between opposition politician Boris Vishnevsky and two other candidates named Boris Vishnevsky who look very similar to him.

Vishnevsky, a longtime Kremlin critic running for the local legislative assembly in the Sept. 19 vote, accuses authorities of running the two other men as "spoiler" candidates to trick voters into splitting the protest vote.

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On Sunday, Vishnevsky posted a photo of an information poster for the St. Petersburg Legislative Assembly race showing the three Boris Vishnevskys with similar haircuts and white-flecked beards.

“My ‘doubles,’ who became ‘Boris Vishnevsky’ in time for the elections by changing their first and last name, have now changed their appearance. They’ve grown beards and mustaches, and I think they've gotten some retouching as well,” the original Vishnevsky tweeted.

According to the independent Novaya Gazeta newspaper, the two alleged “spoiler” candidates, Boris Ivanovich and Boris Gennadievich, changed their names shortly before the election from Victor Bykov and Alexei Shmelev.

The only way to tell the three men apart is by their ages and patronymics, derived from a Russian’s father’s first name and usually listed on the ballot.

The original Vishnevsky previously linked the arrival of the two candidates to his electoral popularity and expressed confidence in voters’ ability to tell him apart from the spoilers.

This month’s elections are a test for the pro-Kremlin United Russia party, which is seeking to overcome historic unpopularity to hang onto its majorities in parliament and local legislatures.

Observers say a recent wave of police raids and detentions of opposition figures, as well as tightened election laws that shut out allies of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, are an attempt to clear the field of United Russia’s opponents.

Vishnevsky, a member of the liberal Yabloko party, previously faced what appeared to be a coordinated smear campaign by a notorious pro-Kremlin “troll factory” accusing him of sexually harassing his university students.

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