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Kremlin Eyes Liberal Venediktov as Putin's 2024 Rival – Vedomosti

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Alexei Venediktov. **Kirill Zykov / Moskva News Agency**

The Kremlin is considering running media personality Alexei Venediktov as Vladimir Putin's "liberal" rival in the 2024 presidential elections, the Vedomosti business daily reported Tuesday, citing four anonymous sources close to the presidential administration.

Venediktov is the former editor-in-chief of Ekho Moskvy, a liberal-leaning radio station that was blocked by authorities days after Russia invaded Ukraine in early 2022.

Vedomosti's sources describe "someone like Venediktov" as a potential opposition candidate who could attract liberal voters to the ballot next spring.

Other expected challengers include veteran Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, who has regularly placed second in past campaigns; nationalist Liberal Democratic Party leader Leonid Slutsky, the successor to perennial third-place finisher Vladimir Zhirinovsky who died last year; and New People party newcomer Alexei Nechaev.

“The more the elections are discussed, the higher the turnout,” argued one of Vedomosti’s anonymous sources.

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The Kremlin’s strategy seeks to showcase widespread support for Putin and his military campaign in Ukraine by giving him a high vote margin over other candidates that represent a wide spectrum of society.

Previous reporting has suggested that the Kremlin expects Putin to win 75% of the vote at a 70% voter turnout.

Pro-Putin figures have secured similar vote shares during regional elections held earlier in September, including in the Ukrainian regions partially controlled by Russian troops.

Venediktov told Vedomosti he had not been approached with the offer and would decline to run for president if he were. Vedomosti’s sources expressed confidence that a figure of similar stature would agree to stand in as a liberal opposition candidate in case of Venediktov’s refusal.

Putin said last week he would decide whether to run for a fifth presidential term when the 2024 campaign officially kicks off in December.

Authorities took Ekho Moskvy off the air for spreading “false information” about the Russian military as part of a wide-ranging wartime crackdown on dissent and independent media, forcing the station to close down.

Venediktov was branded a “foreign agent” soon after. “Foreign agents” are not barred from running for president, but one of Vedomosti’s sources said the designation could still be removed for the 2024 presidential campaign.

Ekho Moskvy had been a beacon for Russia’s democrats and liberals since its founding in 1990 during the Soviet Union’s dying days.

Venediktov’s own ties to the political elite — including his role in promoting a controversial electronic voting scheme for the 2021 parliamentary elections — saw him reviled by much of Russia’s anti-Kremlin opposition.

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