

Liberals Hope OSCE Can Help Duma Bid

By [Natalya Krainova](#)

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From left, Kasyanov, Nemtsov, Ryzhkov and Milov arriving for a news conference to discuss Duma plans Monday. **Alexander Zemlianichenko**

Four liberal opposition politicians asked the Justice Ministry on Monday to register a new political party that would seek to revert the presidential term to four years, free jailed former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky and, perhaps unsurprisingly, ease the rules for registering parties.

Keeping in mind that the ministry has only registered two parties in eight years, the leaders of the Party of People's Freedom even notified the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe about their application, hoping that the added attention would increase their chances of being allowed to run in upcoming State Duma elections, said one of the leaders, former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov.

"A failure to register our party would mean illegitimate elections because elections without the opposition are ... a special operation to seize and keep power," another co-leader, former Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov, told reporters.

The other two co-leaders are former Duma Deputy Vladimir Ryzhkov and former Deputy Energy Minister Vladimir Milov.

Ryzhkov said the party counted a potential constituency of 10 million to 15 million voters, mostly educated residents in midsized and large cities.

The Party of People's Freedom has branches in 53 of Russia's 83 regions and more than 46,000 members, which means it fulfills the minimal legal requirements to qualify for a party, it said in a [statement](#) on its web site.

The Justice Ministry had no immediate comment on the application, which it has 30 days to consider. An analyst said the party had little hope of winning any Duma seats in December even if it were registered.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has called for a two-party system, similar to the one in the United States. Russia seemed to take a step in that direction last week with a shakeup at A Just Russia, which could leave the Duma, where four parties are now represented, with only three after the elections.

A Just Russia, a pro-Kremlin party that once tried to merge with the Communists, is one of the two parties that the Justice Ministry has registered since 2003.

The other is the pro-business Right Cause party, which was registered in 2009 and won a new lease on life last week with billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov's announcement that he would assume its helm.

Kasyanov acknowledged that Right Cause posed a potential threat to his party but dismissed it as an "imitational project" organized by the Kremlin. Right Cause is the only party so far that has called for President Dmitry Medvedev to run for a second term next year.

In a sign of the Kremlin's support, Medvedev predicted last week that Right Cause would do well in the vote by "consolidating the right."

Prokhorov, meanwhile, unveiled a tax- and bureaucracy-cutting platform for Right Cause over the weekend that he promised would help it place second in the Duma elections, behind Putin's United Russia.

The Party of People's Freedom wants to roll back some of the reforms supported by Putin and Medvedev, and it has prepared 12 bills that it plans to introduce in the Duma. These include softening legislation on political parties, slashing the presidential term to four years from the current six, releasing "political prisoners" Khodorkovsky and his partner Platon Lebedev, reforming the pension system and creating a professional, not conscript-based, army, Interfax reported.

The party will also field a candidate in the presidential election in March. The nominee will be elected through secret ballot at a party congress, Ryzhkov said. He said the date for the congress would be chosen after the Justice Ministry registers the party.

Kasyanov said he hoped that the OSCE would closely monitor the party's efforts to gain registration. The OSCE, of which Russia is a member, has previously accused the Justice

Ministry of over-bureaucratizing the process of party registration and said the red tape was a means to suppress political competition.

OSCE officials had no immediate statements about the party's appeal.

Yury Korgunyuk, a political analyst with the Indem think tank, said the Party of People's Freedom was unlikely to secure registration and, if it did, could only count on about 2 percent of the vote, far below the 7 percent threshold to win seats.

"There are no signs that the authorities have changed their attitude toward the opposition," Korgunyuk said by telephone.

He said liberal voters are "disappointed in politics and don't participate in elections."

Meanwhile, three opposition groups — Eduard Limonov's The Other Russia, Sergei Udaltsov's Rot Front, and the obscure Rodina: Common Sense group — announced Monday that they would join forces as the Committee for National Salvation to protest the Duma elections, which they expect will be rigged.

The new group, which will stage nationwide protests on election day, is intended to serve as a rival to the All-Russia People's Front, a new public group headed by Putin that aims to unite interest groups around United Russia for the elections, Limonov [wrote](#) on his blog.

"We have raised a banner of resistance," Limonov said, calling all independent-minded groups to "throw aside ... preferences and dislikes, personal whims and ideological discord" and join the new group.

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