

Duma Fast-Tracks Bill on Party Registration

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Ryzhkov at a June 25 protest rally. **Igor Tabakov**

Opposition leaders are bracing themselves for a new law that many expect will lead to a mushrooming of political parties in the country.

On Friday, the State Duma's public organizations committee decided to send the bill to the floor for a second reading Tuesday without changing its key ingredient: lowering the membership threshold for a party from 40,000 to 500.

Committee chairman Alexei Ostrovsky told Interfax that the draft, announced by President Dmitry Medvedev in December, might well become law before Vladimir Putin's inauguration as president, which is planned for May 7.

A third reading could be completed Friday. Based on that time frame, the Federation Council could approve the bill as soon as March 28.

"If senators approve it, the president will sign swiftly and the bill becomes law [immediately]," Ostrovsky told Kommersant.

The hurdles to register political parties have long been identified as a key ingredient in the Kremlin's policy to stifle competition for Putin's United Russia party.

And while the sudden turnaround has been seen as one of the concessions made following protests that broke out after December's Duma elections, experts warn that the goal might actually be in line with the strategy of keeping the opposition weak.

"Clearly, the Kremlin has decided to make registering new parties as easy as possible so as to strongly fracture the party landscape into a multitude of minor players," Tatyana Stanovaya, an analyst at the Center for Political Technologies, [wrote](#) on the Politcom.ru website.

Stanovaya's view was echoed by Gennady Gudkov, a senior Duma deputy for A Just Russia.

Gudkov, who has participated in the recent anti-government protests, told RIA-Novosti last week that the new law will lead to "spoiler parties" and "mini parties" that will garner less than 0.5 percent in elections.

Currently, just seven parties are [registered](#) by the Justice Ministry, four of which have Duma seats.

The ministry has already received 68 applications to form new parties, United Russia Duma deputy Vladimir Pligin said last week.

The new rules could pose a test for the People's Freedom Party, or Parnas, which was formed two years ago as a coalition of disparate opposition leaders whose main unifying motive was to confront the Kremlin.

The opposition coalition [announced](#) last week that it was leaving a working group on political reform with the Kremlin because the Duma committee would not consider its suggestions for making party registration easier.

Two of Parnas' co-leaders, Mikhail Kasyanov and Vladimir Ryzhkov, head their own unregistered parties. The third, Boris Nemtsov, is co-leader of another opposition coalition, the Solidarity movement.

Ryzhkov announced Friday that he would revive his Republican Party after the Justice Ministry signaled that it would no longer hinder its registration.

The move follows a decision by the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, which ruled last year that a 2007 Supreme Court decision to abolish the party was illegal.

The Supreme Court consequently annulled its decision, but this was challenged by a formal complaint from the Justice Ministry.

Ryzhkov said Friday that the Republican Party would take part in regional elections this fall and that he won't leave Parnas. Instead, he will aim to merge his party into the opposition

coalition.

"Success will only come to those who gather most political forces around themselves," he told Kommersant.

But while Parnas might hold, numerous other opposition forces are already promising competition. Vladimir Milov, a former deputy energy minister, said he would register his Democratic Choice Party once the rules were eased.

Speaking with The Moscow Times, he dismissed fears of marginalization by arguing that free-market theory should also hold for parties.

"The more competition, the better for consumers [of politics]," he said.

Milov was a founding member of Solidarity and Parnas, but he quit both after sparring with the other leaders.

Another potential entrant on the liberal right is the Union of Right Forces, the country's long-standing pro-business party, which foundered in 2008 when some of its leaders joined the Kremlin-supported Right Cause party.

Leonid Gozman and Boris Nadezhdin, who left Right Cause after what they said was a Kremlin-inspired coup, have recently started to revive the Union of Right Forces. Gozman told The Moscow Times that a decision whether to reregister the party would be made in the coming weeks.

In addition, billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin and industry lobbyist Boris Titov have announced their own parties, all of which would be right of center on the political spectrum.

Prokhorov, who finished third in this month's presidential election, is seen as the most promising contender.

Kudrin has [said](#) he will discuss joining forces with Prokhorov, whose campaign team says the yet-unnamed party has received more than 80,000 membership applications.

But the political left could splinter as well as a result of the new law.

Sergei Udaltsov, one of the most prominent leaders of the recent anti-government protests, has suggested forming a new social-democratic party that would combine his unregistered Left Front with the liberal Yabloko party and the formerly Kremlin-friendly A Just Russia party.

While that prospect might threaten the Communists, who finished second with 20.5 percent in the Duma elections, it has only increased speculation of an imminent breakup of A Just Russia, which finished third with 14 percent.

Gudkov and Ilya Ponomaryov, two Just Russia Duma deputies at the opposition forefront, vehemently denied that they are at odds with party leader Sergei Mironov, whom many still see as a Putin loyalist.

"Our main task is not to allow a breakup of the leftist forces into a big number of small organizations," Ponomaryov told The Moscow Times.

Gudkov denied speculation that he would leave A Just Russia amid a public spat with Mironov, saying that he is part of the party's backbone.

"I believe that only united we will win, divided we fall," he was quoted as saying by RIA Novosti last week.

However, Udaltsov has already declined an invitation from Mironov to join A Just Russia.

"I'm happy that Sergei Mironov thinks positively about me, but I am currently not ready to join any party," he [told](#) Interfax.

Opposition representatives interviewed for this article agreed that the most important thing will be whether parties will be allowed to form blocs before elections so that they can appear as one on ballots.

Sergei Markov, a former Duma deputy, said A Just Russia had failed to live up to its promise.

"It is not possible to be popular and loyal [to the Kremlin] at the same time," he said.

But he added that it was hard to predict what would happen to the party because the Kremlin has probably not found a final strategy.

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