

Party Registration Reform Bill Passes Duma

March 25, 2012

The  **Moscow Times**

The State Duma on Friday unanimously approved in the third and final reading a Kremlin-sponsored bill reducing the minimum required national party membership from 40,000 to 500, Interfax reported.

Political observers have said the bill may be a Kremlin attempt to fracture political opposition, which would use the opportunity to found a multitude of minor parties.

Criticism of the bill by non-systemic opposition leaders who were invited to the Duma's Friday session didn't alter the vote.

Opposition leaders had hoped for an amendment allowing blocks of parties and other groups to participate in elections but Deputy Speaker and United Russia faction head Andrei Vorobyov said Friday that he saw "no necessity" in changing the bill.

Vorobyov argued instead that such blocks would lead to "a threat of feud and tension," Interfax reported. He said that if parties had no disagreements, they should be merged.

Sergei Mitrokhin, leader of the liberal opposition Yabloko party, who was invited to the session to speak about the bill, questioned whether the law "can be called a victory for common sense."

"No, it cannot," he said, Interfax reported.

Andrei Dunayev, chairman of the Right Cause liberal party told the Duma Friday that the bill would not be "effective."

"Dozens of parties will emerge, and these are dozens of ambitions and manipulations — this is a very serious threat," he said, according to Interfax.

Even Anatoly Lokot of the Communist Party, which voted for the bill, said it could lead to emergence of "parties for solving commercial issues" and "phantom parties."

Of the representatives of non-parliamentary parties, only Sergei Glotov, head of the Moscow branch of the Patriots of Russia, praised the bill before the Duma.

The Federation Council is expected to approve the bill Wednesday.

It will then be signed by Medvedev and take effect by April, after its official publication in the government newspaper Rossiiskaya Gazeta.

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