

Mironov Regains Just Russia Chairmanship

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A Just Russia reshuffled its leadership over the weekend, a move that analysts said signaled the party's desire to assuage some members' discontent with a poor showing in regional elections last month while remaining loyal to the Kremlin.

The party's national congress voted Sunday to return Sergei Mironov to the position of chairman, which he gave over to State Duma Deputy Nikolai Levichev in April 2011 to prepare the party for parliamentary elections later that year and his own campaign in the March 2012 presidential elections.

Levichev, in turn, was elected Sunday to head the party's Council of Deputies, a position that Mironov occupied until Sunday. The party's regional delegates, however, stripped Levichev of a privilege that Mironov had enjoyed in the position: veto power over the party's chairman and its senior managing bodies.

The change followed Mironov's meeting with President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday, when the A Just Russia leader promised to change the party's charter to "make it more democratic," mobilize its supporters and claim third place in the September 2014 regional elections, particularly in the vote for the Moscow City Duma.

A Just Russia currently controls the third-largest faction in the State Duma, with 64 seats. However, modest results in regional elections last month, including Levichev's sixth-place finish in the Moscow mayoral election with 2.79 percent, demonstrate the party's disappointments and shrinking political clout.

Political analysts interpreted the switch as a sign of the desire to keep the party afloat by pleasing the Kremlin. Though Levichev has not stood in opposition to the Kremlin during his tenure as chairman, Mironov, the former speaker of the Federation Council, has closer ties to Putin.

Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information, alleged that Mironov made an agreement with the Kremlin that he would take over the party chairmanship, showing that A Just Russia is not truly in the opposition.

"Mironov's return is the only chance for the party to at least survive until the next elections," Mukhin added.

But Alexei Makarkin, deputy head of the Center for Political Technologies, reacted to the reshuffle by saying, "Changing the order of the parts does not change the sum."

"The party will remain oriented towards the authorities, as it has been," Makarkin said by phone.

A Just Russia's leadership swap echoes the anti-opposition sentiment that gave it its biggest headlines this year. In March, the party expelled Gennady Gudkov and Dmitry Gudkov, a father-and-son pair outspoken in their criticism of authorities, and in August, Levichev participated in a raid on the apartment of supporters of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, then Levichev's opponent in the Moscow mayoral race.

A Just Russia was created as a Kremlin-loyal party in 2006, but adopted critical rhetoric between 2009 and 2012, before Mironov announced in early 2013 that the party would not cooperate with the nonparliamentary opposition supported by the Gudkovs.

While the reshuffle may be a sign of the party's loyalty to the Kremlin, the impetus for a change in leadership stems in large part due to the party's discontent with Levichev's activities as chairman.

Analysts also cited Levichev's failure to reach understandings with the party's regional leaders and its sponsors as a likely reason for the reshuffle.

"The problem with Levichev's politics is that he had failed to find common ground either with regional branches or with the leadership," Mukhin said.

A number of sponsors also refused to finance the party's projects during Levichev's chairmanship, Mukhin said.

Party members had also expected Levichev to fare better in the capital's Sept. 8 mayoral election "given that Moscow is one of the most oppositional regions," Makarkin said.

Calls to A Just Russia Duma deputies Oksana Dmitriyeva, Oleg Shein and Alexander Burkov went answered Sunday.

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