

Dr. Donald N. Jensen

January 26, 2012

Voice of America

Russian Service

Crossfire

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Yavlinskiy Tossed Off the Ballot

Russia's elections commission struck blow against the legitimacy of Russia's presidential contest when it announced this week that Grigoriy Yavlinskiy, a veteran opposition leader and leader of the liberal Yabloko party, would be disqualified from the race. The commission found that more than 25 percent of the signatures submitted on Yavlinskiy's petition for candidacy were invalid. (Yabloko has not had any seats in the Duma since 2007. Politicians who want to run for president but whose parties are not in the parliament must thus submit 2 million signatures in support of their candidacy). The commission also refused to register Irkutsk governor Dmitry Mezentsev (a pro-Putin "safety candidate" who probably was there to make the race legally valid if all candidates other than Putin dropped out). It approved, however, the petition of billionaire oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov, close to the Kremlin, whose submitted signatures officials said met the legal criteria. Prokhorov will be the only independent on the ballot, along with the candidates of the four parliamentary parties.

Yavlinskiy's exclusion appears to be part of the Kremlin's plan to ensure that Vladimir Putin wins the balloting on the first round. Although Yavlinskiy is an unlikely electoral threat, by shaving off the number of candidates who oppose him Putin can make it easier to achieve the 50 percent he needs to avoid a runoff. "They aren't letting me join the race," Yavlinskiy told a news conference, "because they don't want to allow an alternative – political, economic, and moral." The Kremlin also probably hopes Prokhorov's bid will channel Yavlinskiy's constituency – intellectuals and middle class urbanites who were active in the December protests – toward a more reliable candidate. Yavlinsky's disqualification also prevents Yabloko from deploying election monitors. Yabloko observers documented widespread evidence of official fraud after the December Duma election. Thousands of additional people had signed up to perform the same duties in March.

The Kremlin has good reason to be nervous about how closely the campaign is scrutinized. Although Putin has been meeting constituents, wooing governors and emphasizing foreign threats to Russia's security – a time-tested way of attracting popular support -- the country's

more reliable polls put Putin's popularity at significantly below 50 percent – and possibly dropping. The regime can doubtless rig the vote count to pad Putin's support, but there are limits to the extent to which fraud and falsification can ensure success (It can add no more than 10-20 percent of the vote, according to some experts). There are political costs both abroad and at home, moreover, if manipulation is too blatant. Popular cynicism is widespread enough that many Russians would not accept the validity of presidential election results even if they were the result of a process that was free and fair.

Former Finance Minister Kudrin, a possible Prime Minister in any government shakeup, has been trying to broker talks between the authorities and the opposition in recent weeks in an attempt to diminish the protest mood, so far to little effect. Kudrin, perhaps speaking for Putin, rejects the opposition's demand for dissolution of the Duma and new legislative elections. Nor has Putin fired Central Election Commission head Churov, whom many blame for the December fraud. One commentator this week described Putin as in a state of uncertainty about what tactics, if any, to use. He is also wary of taking bold steps that would mobilize his base but at the same time strengthen his opponents.

Kudrin has said he assumes Putin will win either in the first or second round. Indeed, at the moment that is the most probable result. But if the opposition continues to gather momentum, the results of a runoff pitting Putin against a single candidate could be surprising. "In the event of a runoff, lots of people will vote for anyone but Putin," Boris Vishnevsky, one of Grigoriy Yavlinskiy's party colleagues, told a St. Petersburg colleague this week. One Yabloko leader said he even prefers Communist leader Zyuganov, an endorsement of a kind unheard of before this unexpected season of protest began less than two months ago.