

'Russian Obama' Abandons United Russia for Rival

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A native of Guinea-Bissau who has become the poster child for United Russia's Volgograd region branch said Thursday that he quit the ruling party for its rival, A Just Russia.

In his open letter to his one-time acquaintance Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, farmer and activist Joaquim Crima, nicknamed "Russian Obama," said United Russia has failed to fulfill its election promises and is "turning into a party of bureaucrats."

Political analysts said Crima's move looks like a calculated attempt to discredit the ruling party ahead of the State Duma elections in December — but they admitted that it just might work.

In his letter, [published](#) on A Just Russia's web site, Crima said United Russia violated the promise made ahead of the 2009 regional elections to raise salaries for state employees and rein in prices on basic foods and community services.

"None of this has been done," wrote Crima, who joined United Russia in 2007. "But money to raise officials' salaries is regularly found in the not-so-rich regional budget." He also criticized social spending cuts in the region.

Crima said he experienced the party's ineptitude firsthand last summer, when he collected 20 tons of watermelons to be sent as humanitarian aid to residents of the Moscow region who suffered from devastating wildfires.

"All that was left was to ship them to the Moscow region. I addressed United Russia's regional leaders several times, but in vain. The watermelons eventually spoiled," Crima said.

"My modest ambition to be useful to the party turned out to be unnecessary," said Crima, who quit the ruling party on Tuesday and joined A Just Russia the next day, on the eve of a two-day United Russia conference in the Volgograd region.

Neither United Russia nor Putin's office had commented on the story Thursday. Repeated calls to Crima's cell phone went unanswered, and none of the eight senior United Russia officials contacted by The Moscow Times were available for comment.

Sergei Klimenkov, a senior Just Russia official in the Volgograd region, said by telephone that Crima has asked to be made an unofficial aide to State Duma Deputy Oleg Mikheyev, himself a Volgograd native.

He did not say whether the wish will be granted, but admitted that the party "will use Crima's popularity to boost its rating."

Crima is, indeed, known in his region, and has made national headlines before. A Russian citizen and a graduate of Volgograd State Pedagogical University who has been living in Russia for 22 years, he shot to fame in 2009 when he ran in a rural district election using a popular, if not quite politically correct Russian saying, "I'll work like a negro," for a campaign slogan.

He lost the vote, but won himself comparison to U.S. President Barack Obama. United Russia did not pass up the chance to capitalize on his popularity, using him in 2009 to [promote](#) its web forum Berloga.ru, which is now defunct, with the site's address taken over by a Moscow-based strip club.

Putin met with Crima last summer during a trip to the Volgograd region, praising him and his fellow villagers for repairing a local road with their own hands and ordering local authorities to take a cue from the black farmer.

Crima makes his living growing watermelons. He is also known for adding to his full name the first name and patronymic from Vasily Ivanovich Chapayev, a legendary Civil War-era commander who was immortalized in an eponymous movie in 1934 and has become a folk hero in Russia.

Dmitry Noskov, a spin doctor for A Just Russia's Volgograd branch, was the first to break the story about Crima switching sides, dubbing the story on his [blog](#) with a quote from 19th-century poet Alexander Pushkin: "His example is a lesson to others."

Noskov posted a scanned copy of Crima's request to terminate his party membership, written

in sloppy handwriting and replete with spelling mistakes, including a misspelling of United Russia's title.

Alexei Mukhin, who heads the Center for Political Information, said "a scandal [was] the only thing" that A Just Russia could use to counter "the powerful administrative resource" of the ruling party.

"Even simply mentioning United Russia's name in the context of A Just Russia can boost the party's popularity, which is currently near zero," Mukhin said by telephone Thursday.

In the 2009 elections to the Volgograd region legislature, United Russia garnered more than 49 percent of the vote and won 27 seats, compared with 13 percent and three seats for A Just Russia.

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