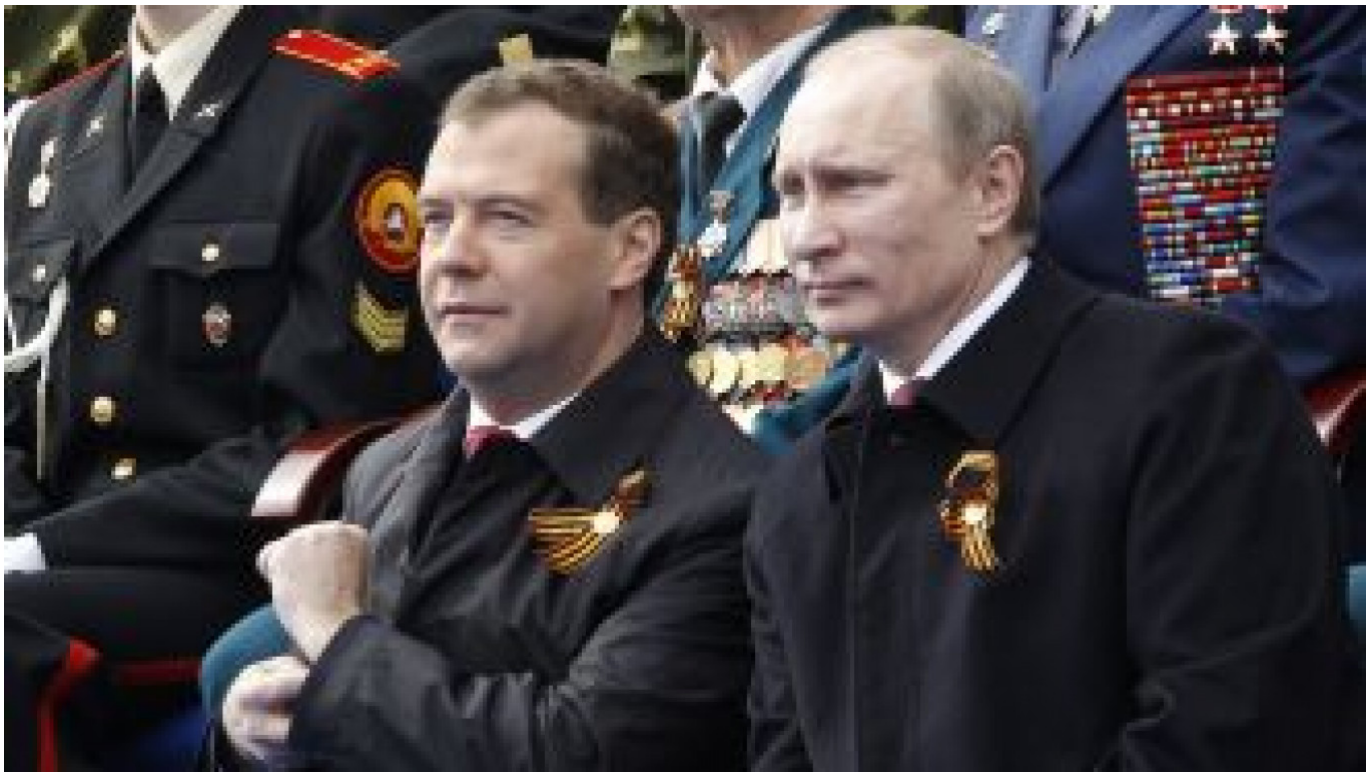
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Putin Forming Pre-Vote 'Front'

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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Putin and President Medvedev watching a Red Square parade on Monday. **Vladimir Rodionov**

Non-United Russia politicians of all stripes have united to denounce an initiative by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to form a nonpartisan group as little more than a ploy to save the ruling party from defeat in December's parliamentary elections.

Putin announced the formation of the All-Russia People's Front at a United Russia conference in Volgograd on Friday, saying the group would allow the election of non-party members on United Russia's ticket to the State Duma.

He rushed ahead with the plan Saturday by presiding over the group's first coordinating council, where he acknowledged that the All-Russia People's Front was necessary because United Russia needs "new ideas, new suggestions and new faces" before the elections.

United Russia, headed by Putin without being a member, dominates practically all of the country's legislatures, but its support slid below 50 percent in regional elections in March.

"This is an attempt to create a single-party system," said Leonid Gozman, a co-leader of the pro-business Right Cause party.

Putin said Friday that the front would unite social organizations such as trade unions, business associations and youth organizations on an "absolutely equal" basis, Interfax reported.

On Saturday, he said he hoped the front would create "a brainstorm" of ideas by bringing in new leaders, according to a transcript on his web site.

Putin also said he would meet with the front's coordinating committee as often as monthly and called for the development of regional branches.

Gozman, whose party was founded with Kremlin support after the demise of the Union of Right Forces party in 2008, said the front closely resembled the Soviet-era Bloc of Communists and Non-Party Members.

"Anyone who does not join this group could be regarded as against the people," he told The Moscow Times.

He said the sole purpose of the front would probably be to mask vote rigging in the Duma elections. "This organization won't gather a single extra vote for United Russia, but they [United Russia] will try to use it to legitimize their good results," he said.

Leaders of opposition groups also not represented in the Duma shared contempt for Putin's initiative.

"The aim is crystal clear: to keep personal power and the power of the party of crooks and thieves," said Boris Nemtsov, a founder of the unregistered Peoples' Freedom Party.

Nemtsov, writing in his blog, said Putin was acting out of sheer desperation because not only was the popularity of United Russia plummeting, but his personal rating has also dropped to a two-year low. Putin's popularity, however, remains well above 50 percent.

While Putin stressed that political parties were welcome to join his new front, each of the Duma's three nominal opposition parties declined.

"This is a sham. After all, United Russia has fought against public organizations over the past few years," Ilya Ponomaryov, a deputy with A Just Russia, said by telephone Monday.

A Just Russia has had a rocky relationship with United Russia recently, culminating in a dispute over the possible ouster of Federation Council Speaker Sergei Mironov, the former leader of the party.

Vladimir Zhirinovsky, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, said the front was nonsense. "It amounts to a public acknowledgement that they cannot change anything in the country," he told Interfax.

The Communists noted that many who participated in Saturday's meeting were already complicit with United Russia. "A broad people's front cannot exist without the people — but

around United Russia there are no people in the real sense of the word," deputy party leader Ivan Melnikov said in comments posted on the party's web site.

Indeed, the meeting at Putin's Novo-Ogoryovo residence was attended almost exclusively by organizations not known for their independent-mindedness.

Among the participants was Mikhail Shmakov, leader of the Kremlin-friendly Federation of Independent Trade Unions; Timur Prokopenko, chairman of United Russia's youth wing Young Guard; and the heads of the Pensioners' Union and the Afghan War Veterans' Union, both of whom are United Russia deputies in the Duma.

Some mild dissent was discernible in the comments of Alexander Shokhin, head of the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, who stressed that the front should be long-term and not a United Russia project before the elections, according to the transcript on Putin's site.

Other business representatives at Saturday's meeting were Chamber of Commerce and Industry president Sergei Katyrin, Sergei Borisov of the Opora association of small and medium-sized businesses and Vladimir Gutenev of the Engineering Association.

Shokhin also questioned the use of the word "front," saying other political organizations have already used the word in their names. "We don't need a first, second, third [front]," he said. Last month, the Justice Ministry rejected a fifth registration attempt by the leftist Rot Front party.

Putin said reservations had been raised when he proposed naming his group "front" but said the name "All-Russia front" was chosen to resolve them. In a seeming acknowledgement that the initiative was last minute, he conceded that he had discussed the name issue late Friday — between 11 p.m. and midnight.

Vyacheslav Lysakov, head of the Free Choice motorists association, confirmed that the initiative appeared to have been hastily thrown together. "I got a first call Friday evening, but my telephone was switched off," he told The Moscow Times about his invitation to join the coordinating council meeting. "So I was asked to join Saturday's meeting only the same morning as the meeting."

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