

Putin Puts Himself Out Front

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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By announcing the formation of the All-Russia People's Front on Friday, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin reaffirmed himself as the country's ultimate power broker. He effectively squashed hopes that President Dmitry Medvedev would emerge from under his patronage as an independent political leader.

Putin clearly comes out the winner, while everyone else loses.

The immediate members of the All-Russia People's Front will include the elite and many interest groups — including business associations, trade unions, Afghan war veterans and pensioners' and women's pressure groups. They won't be able to ignore Putin's invitation to join and risk being left out in the cold. Once they become part of the front, they will no longer be able to criticize Putin's policies or present alternative visions of what they believe is good for Russia.

United Russia will end up on the losing end. Until recently, the party has positioned itself as the ultimate embodiment of Putin's will in politics. Now, United Russia's once-predominant role will be heavily diluted among other factions in the front. Boris Gryzlov, chairman of

United Russia's Supreme Council, said over the weekend that the party was ready to fill a quarter of its ticket in December's State Duma elections with nonmembers from the front.

President Dmitry Medvedev also gets the short end of the stick from Putin's initiative, as do his supporters, who believe that Medvedev offers the only hope within the ruling tandem of initiating much-needed political and economic reforms.

During his scheduled news conference on May 18, Medvedev will certainly be asked what he thinks about Putin's front, and he will surely answer that it is a great idea. By admitting this, Medvedev will deliver his own head on a plate into Putin's hands.

It would be convenient for Putin to retain Medvedev as president for a second term. This would keep continuity and "stability" in the Kremlin leadership and help justify Putin's decision to anoint Medvedev in the first place four years ago.

But even those in the Russian elite who believed that Medvedev was the best hope to modernize the country in 2008 would have to concede this time that Medvedev is nothing more than Putin's puppet.

The other big losers from Putin's front are the Russian people. A nationwide coalition uniting most of the Russian political class with the sole purpose to please the power ambitions of a single person deals a huge blow to the political development of the country.

No one should be deluded by Putin's demagoguery that the front is being created to have a better discussion of the challenges that the country faces. Seven years ago, after the Beslan tragedy, Putin created an institution with exactly the same mandate, the Public Chamber. Since then, the chamber has served little more than a decorative function.

There is no reason to hope that the front will make up for the Public Chamber's failure. After all, United Russia, which has muscled legislation into law by sidelining discussion, not encouraging it, aspires to be the foundation for the new group. And Gryzlov himself once said the Duma is not a place for discussion.

Putin has not identified any threat that would require a massive consolidation of forces under his tutelage as required by his new front. He also has remained silent about public polls in recent months that have shown the lowest ratings for him, Medvedev and United Russia in two years — support that continues to decline. This is bad news for a national leader just seven months before Duma elections and less than a year away from the presidential vote.

The All-Russia People's Front is a disturbing throwback to the Soviet era when all public and professional groups were forced to ally with the Communist Party to serve the ruling elite. In the end, 20 years of difficult institution building in post-Soviet Russia might be wasted for the sole purpose of allowing Putin to remain the country's kingmaker for as long as possible.

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