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Why Putin Created All-Russia People's Front

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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At the latest United Russia conference, held in Volgograd on May 6 and ostensibly dedicated to the development of southern Russia, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin formally launched his party's State Duma election campaign and, to large degree, his own 2012 presidential bid. Putin's political strategy is becoming increasingly clear now.

He proposed creating the All-Russia People's Front to give United Russia the "new ideas, new suggestions and new faces" it needs before the elections. In the new arrangement, the party itself will continue to play only a supporting role to Putin's thinly veiled power grab. As he envisions it, this "front" will be a coalition between the ruling party and numerous non-United Russia nongovernmental organizations, initiatives and even individuals who are willing to rally around the person of Vladimir Putin. According to Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, "It is a supra-party that is not based on the party. Rather, it is focused on Putin, the creator of this idea."

Even as they greeted almost every sentence of Putin's speech with a rousing standing ovation, United Russia members could not fail to understand that they were being relegated from a leading to a subservient role in his people's front. Putin is not looking out for the party's interests but for his own, and United Russia will be forced to carry out whatever function he assigns for it — and the function will clearly be far from the most prestigious.

Why would Putin six months before Duma elections suddenly need to take the unusual step of creating the people's front?

First, he is attempting to halt rapidly eroding support for the ruling tandem and the "party of power." Public opinion polls and the actual, unaltered results of regional elections indicate that the ruling regime has experienced a catastrophic loss of support from society. The situation is particularly bleak in major cities, where United Russia now has practically no chance of victory.

Putin is trying to breathe new life into his political career by corralling huge numbers of people into his camp who are as yet untainted by any association with the unpopular party of corrupt bureaucracy. United Russia's election list will soon swell with the names of an unprecedented number of prominent hockey and football players, figure skaters, kitschy folk singers, pop stars, movie actors and various public figures whose careers depend on the good favor of the authorities. Putin is aiming to convert their popularity into election points for himself and the faltering ruling party.

But why is Putin so concerned about how United Russia will fare in the Duma elections? It probably has less to do with concern for the party — one that he never joined, despite being its leader — and more with the fact that the party's standing will determine his status as a presidential candidate. United Russia campaign chief Sergei Neverov has already expressed not just hope but confidence that Putin will head the party (and now people's front) list. If that is the case, it is vital for Putin that United Russia/the people's front wins at least 60 percent to 65 percent of the vote so that he can claim a mandate from the people and become the only candidate from the ruling elite with a chance of serving as president for the next six to 12 years.

This also explains the attacks on the pro-Kremlin Just Russia. Instead of attracting votes away from the Communist Party and the Liberal Democratic Party as planned, the party has lately been snatching votes away from Putin's United Russia — on the very eve of an election cycle that is crucial to Putin's chances for remaining in power. First, Sergei Mironov lost his post as party leader, and now he risks losing his post as Federation Council speaker. Moreover, if Putin decides that A Just Russia is capable of taking 7 percent to 8 percent of the vote away from United Russia even in its half-dead state, A Just Russia might disappear from the political arena just as rapidly as did Dmitry Rogozin's Rodina party.

It is doubtful, however, that these political maneuverings will really help Putin and the authoritarian regime he created to hold onto their monopoly on power, corruption and legal excesses. Most self-respecting prominent citizens will simply refuse to lend their names to the people's front for fear of ruining their own reputations. And those who do join probably lack any reputation in the first place. As a result, rather than adding luster to the "party of crooks and thieves," they will only reinforce the odious reputation held by the party of power.

To retain their hold on power, Putin and his close associates will have to engineer the greatest election fraud in modern Russian history. Mathematician Sergei Shpilkin estimates that 14 million votes were stuffed in ballot boxes or fabricated by other means during the 2007 State Duma elections, and even more will be needed to clinch victory this time. Regardless of the propaganda campaign that will inevitably accompany those efforts, the public will know perfectly well that the results were manipulated and will not consider the elections or the elected bodies to be legitimate. The crisis of authority — already a reality — will continue to grow.

The tactic of calling for a people's front and the allusion to past European movements of the same name will not succeed because of the cynical and patently false motives behind it. Broad people's fronts arose in post-World War II Europe and in post-communist Eastern European countries primarily to strengthen democracies and overcome the legacy of Nazism, fascism, communism and dictatorial rule. But Putin co-opted the "people's front" moniker for a political machine designed to maintain a hold on power for himself and for officials and monopolies that shamelessly plunder their own people and suppress individual rights, freedoms and civil society. That is the All-Russia People's Front that Putin has created. The whole initiate would be funny if it weren't so utterly horrifying.

Vladimir Ryzhkov, a State Duma deputy from 1993 to 2007, hosts a political talk show on Ekho Moskvy radio and is a co-founder of the opposition Party of People's Freedom.

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