

Medvedev Keeps Distance From Putin's Group

By [Nikolaus von Twickel](#)

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Dmitry Medvedev seen in the studio of Mayak radio station on Thursday. **Mikhail Klimentyev**

President Dmitry Medvedev said Thursday that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's decision to form a broad public group around his United Russia party is a legitimate political tactic, but stopped short of endorsing it.

Medvedev's comments were his first on plans for the All-Russia People's Front to rally interest groups around the ruling party since Putin announced it at a party conference last Friday in Volgograd.

The new group has been lambasted by all other political parties as a ploy to save United Russia from humiliation after its ratings dropped below 50 percent in March regional elections.

Medvedev seemed to echo that sentiment by suggesting the group was simply a campaign tool for United Russia and that his job was to ensure political competition, not join the project.

"I understand the motives of a party that wants to keep its influence over the country. Such an alliance is in accordance with the law and justified from an electioneering point of view," Medvedev said in televised comments during a meeting with staff of the VGTRK state media holding.

"But dare I say that other ... parties will also try to fully partake in the election campaign," he said. "My task is to see that the law is applied correctly and to create necessary political competition inside the country — only then will our political system be stable."

"All political battles are still ahead of us, and no single party can see itself as dominant," said Medvedev, who himself is not affiliated with any political party.

Putin — who heads United Russia without being a member — said earlier Thursday that he had consulted with Medvedev on setting up the front. "He supports what we are doing," he told a meeting with party officials and some of the front's founding members in Sochi, according to a transcript on his web site.

But Medvedev's own reserved reaction is bound to fire fresh speculation about a widening political rift between him and Putin, who has been seen as Medvedev's mentor ever since endorsing the incumbent to succeed him as president in 2008.

Recent conflicting statements from both leaders on issues like Libya and on the trial of jailed businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky have fired speculation that the hitherto ruling "tandem" has given way to more or less open competition for political survival.

The question of who will stand in the presidential vote next March has been vexing the political scene for months — as both Putin and Medvedev have indicated that they might run.

Some commentators have interpreted the setting up of the people's front as a clear indication that Putin is planning to return to the Kremlin when Medvedev's term expires in 2012.

Party chairman and State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov said Thursday that the front could serve as a vehicle to nominate a presidential candidate, if it proves successful in the parliamentary elections, but did not say who it could be.

"If it manifests itself in December as a consolidating force ... then it can naturally be a platform for the upcoming presidential election," he said, RIA-Novosti reported.

Gryzlov also denied that the front had anything to do with waning popular support for the party.

He argued that United Russia's ratings have been rising since April 20, well before Putin announced the creation of the All-Russian People's Front on May 6, Interfax reported.

But Lev Gudkov, head of the independent Levada polling agency, maintained that the front serves mainly as a tool to prop up support for Putin's party while United Russia has become tainted over the years as a club for bureaucrats.

"There is a clear trend that support for the party is falling, and this frightens the Kremlin spin

doctors," Gudkov told The Moscow Times on Thursday.

Gudkov warned that the organization might also serve to enforce the "power vertical" by bringing interest groups under tighter state control.

He argued that Putin started his first term as president in 2000 with a crackdown on television, which was followed by the abolition of gubernatorial elections in 2004 and the gradual elimination of direct mayoral elections.

"The third step in this logic is to bring nongovernmental organizations under central control — a practice that was well-established in the Soviet Union," Gudkov said by telephone.

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