

Lebedev Casts Lot With Putin's Front

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Billionaire Alexander Lebedev says his Our Capital movement will join the All-Russia People's Front to strengthen its anti-corruption dimension. **Igor Tabakov**

Billionaire Alexander Lebedev [announced](#) Friday that he would give up his banking business because of harassment from the Federal Security Service and team up with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's All-Russia People's Front.

The outspoken Lebedev would be the first Kremlin critic to join the front, which has been widely derided as a stunt to revitalize Putin-led United Russia before December's State Duma elections.

He is also the second billionaire businessman to announce plans to enter politics after Mikhail Prokhorov said earlier in the week that he would lead the pro-business Right Cause party into the elections.

Lebedev's decision met immediate suspicion from skeptics that he was trying to protect his business interests, although Putin's spokesman quickly welcomed it.

Lebedev said on his blog that Our Capital, a little-known movement that he founded to oppose former Mayor Yury Luzhkov, would join Putin's front to strengthen its anti-corruption dimension. "Our Capital has ample experience in uncovering graft, including at the federal level," he wrote.

He also said harassment from the Federal Security Service, or FSB, had made it impossible to continue his banking business. "Why engage in business when it exists only under the condition of fighting the FSB?" he asked in an [interview](#) with Gazeta.ru.

Lebedev on Thursday uploaded a video to his site in which he accused FSB officers of money laundering. He removed the video shortly afterward, saying it was a preliminary version published by mistake. The 15-minute [film](#) has since surfaced on YouTube.

Lebedev, himself a former KGB official, has accused corrupt FSB and Interior Ministry officers of orchestrating a police raid on his National Reserve Bank last fall. In February, he published an open letter to Putin, saying he believed that a mafia group was raiding his business "under the guise of 'carrying out orders from above.'"

Putin, who rose from the position of KGB agent in the 1980s to head of the FSB in 1998, is seen as the leader of the country's security agencies.

Lebedev has styled himself as a liberal Kremlin critic, although he has never seriously challenged Putin or President Dmitry Medvedev. In 2006 he teamed up with former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to buy a 49 percent stake in the country's leading opposition newspaper Novaya Gazeta. (The remaining controlling stake is held by the newspaper's journalists.) In 2008, the two [founded](#) the Independent Democratic Party of Russia.

While the party has remained defunct, Lebedev, who is worth \$2.1 billion according to Forbes magazine, has expanded his foreign media interests by buying London's ailing Independent and Evening Standard newspapers.

Ilya Yashin, co-leader of the Solidarity opposition group, was stunned by Lebedev's plans to join Putin's front. "I know Lebedev is a decent man, and I do not understand why he would tarnish his reputation by joining a front of crooks and thieves," he told The Moscow Times.

"The party of crooks and thieves" has recently become a catchphrase used by Kremlin critics to describe United Russia. The people's front was assembled two weeks ago by clustering interest groups around it. Its 16 founding organizations include trade unions, business associations and veterans' groups that are all largely pro-Putin. Putin has said the front will allow candidates to enter the Duma in the December elections without joining United Russia.

Ilya Ponomarev, a Duma deputy with the Kremlin-friendly Just Russia party, suggested that Lebedev was probably just trying to protect his business. "An extravagant businessman like him will switch sides whenever it suits him," he said by telephone.

Lebedev referred callers Friday to his spokespeople, who declined to comment. But the businessman has made several seemingly opportunistic political decisions in the past. After unsuccessfully running against Luzhkov in mayoral elections in 2003, he won a State Duma seat the same year with Rodina, a Kremlin-backed party formed just two months before

the elections to take votes from the Communists. Once in the Duma, he joined United Russia but later left it for A Just Russia, which was created by a merger of Rodina and two other parties for the 2007 Duma elections.

He did not return to the Duma after the 2007 vote and announced the creation of the new party with Gorbachev the following year.

Also in 2008, Lebedev closed another newspaper he owned, Moskovsky Korrespondent, after it published an article alleging that Putin had an affair with an Olympic gymnast half his age.

He regained political office in March, when he was elected as an independent deputy to a district legislature in the Kirov region.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov reacted positively to the 51-year-old businessman's plans to join the people's front. "We can only welcome any new members to the front," he told Interfax, adding that there were similar applications from "practically every region" in the country.

Peskov said any organization could join if it shared the basic goals "to push forward the country's development as formulated by Vladimir Putin and United Russia."

But not everyone was so welcoming. Boris Titov, a founding member of the people's front who heads the Delovaya Rossia business association and co-leads Right Cause, cautioned that Lebedev's application would have to be "studied very carefully." Titov characterized Lebedev's decision to join the front as suspicious and suggested that it meant he was facing financial troubles linked to the National Reserve Bank.

"I do not know the financial conditions of the bank, but I know how it was created and what were its main assets," he said on Kommersant FM radio.

"It's not so smooth and maybe that is why he decided to try out being a politician," he said.

Whatever Lebedev's political motives might be, they won't affect Novaya Gazeta, the paper's deputy editor-in-chief Andrei Lipsky said by telephone.

"There has never been a case where he meddled with our editorial policies, and there never will be," he said.

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