The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

How Putin Pads Numbers

By Victor Davidoff

June 19, 2011



Prime Minister Vladimir Putin first floated the idea of creating the All-Russia People's Front on May 6. A week later, the front's founding document was published. Since then — a little over a month — Putin has arguably become the most popular politician in history. Today his front has several million supporters and about 500 organizations as members. According to information from the local branch of United Russia in the Khabarovsk region, half a million people support the front out of a total population of 1.34 million. In one day, 39,000 employees of the holding company Siberian Business Union joined the front; that is, four divisions in military terms, an apt comparison when talking about the people's front. Putin, it would seem, has outdone Josef Stalin and Mao Zedong — and he has done it without resorting to terror.

Of course, the front's rapid increase in membership has been facilitated by the ease of signing up. You don't have to even get off the couch. The high-tech front has a site where anyone can fill out a form with a couple of clicks and receive confirmation that the application has been accepted, automatically making him a supporter. You don't have to fill out much information on the application, and you don't even have to be a citizen of Russia to join. Blogger Kurupt

decided to carry out an experiment and signed in as Poligraph Sharikov, a character in Mikhail Bulgakov's anti-Soviet novel "Heart of a Dog." The experiment was successful, and now Sharikov is a proud member of Putin's front.

But it doesn't seem likely that the front will need a super-powerful server to process millions of applications around the clock. The majority of supporters are automatically signed up en masse after an organization they are a member of or a business they are employed by becomes a member. Often the head of the organization or business makes the decision on behalf of his members and employees with or without their knowledge. Since many people are members of several organizations, there is an glitch in the supporter count that leads to ridiculous results. For example, in the Sverdlovsk region, the number of members of organizations that have joined the front exceeds the population of the province.

This method of gaining supporters for the front has raised a great number of legal issues. One of the leaders of the Yabloko party, former State Duma Deputy Viktor Sheinis, noted that the country's legislation permits political parties to form local branches "exclusively by territorial principle, not through businesses."

But Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov believes that no law has been broken, since the front is a nongovernmental organization, not a political party. Sheinis and other oppositional politicians are probably curious to hear from a judge how an organization that has the goal of securing victory in the Duma elections has the same legal status as the World Wildlife Fund.

A people's front is a type of organization that is familiar to everyone in the former Soviet Union who remembers the perestroika years. In those times, fronts were oppositional groups of democrats fighting to limit the power of the ruling party. Does this mean that Putin opposes President Dmitry Medvedev and his policies?

This question could be answered by the front's platform documents. Unfortunately, its one-page declaration consists of platitudes and merely notes that its goals match those included in Strategy 2020. But Strategy 2020 is not a document; it is an ad hoc think tank with several expert groups that periodically produce reports on a wide range of topics, from the "Development of the Finance and Banking Sector" to "Health and the Inhabited Environment."

This clear lack of a political program has suggested to the majority of analysts that the front is simply a mechanism with one function: Get the majority for its supporters in the next Duma elections and guarantee a victory for Putin in the presidential election.

Sergei Mironov, former leader of the Just Russia party and former speaker of the Federation Council, wrote on his LiveJournal blog, "The people's front created by the United Russia party looks suspiciously like the once-touted 'unbreakable bloc of communists and independents.'"

The difference is just that the front has no ideology at all — except perhaps for one underlying idea: the fear of change. But as Mironov rightly points out, "that fear has never saved anyone from change."

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/06/19/how-putin-pads-numbers-a7694