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A Front of Blondes, Farmers

By Victor Davidoff

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.What do Russia's Union of Pensioners, the Association of Music Producers, the Union of Georgians in Russia and the Cheerleaders' Union all have in common?

Three months ago, it would have been hard to answer that question. But today it's easy: All of these very different organizations are members of the All-Russia People's Front, founded by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Cheerleaders are nothing compared with the 400,000 employees of the postal service or the 1 million railway workers who are also discussing joining the front. At the moment, the largest organizational member is the Russian Agrarian Movement with 38 million members — essentially the country's entire rural population.

The nascent front has had its share of scandals. When members of the Union of Architects and the Composers' Union found out that they were signed up to the front without their knowledge, the memberships were speedily annulled.

In St. Petersburg, blogger Vice-chancellor complained that even though he is an active member of the opposition party Yabloko, he discovered that he was counted as a front supporter three times because he is a member of multiple organizations. Is it any wonder that all the blond contestants in the Sochi Blondie Party were also asked whether they wanted to join the front?

Lawyers have cited the front's violation of a number of laws regulating nongovernmental organizations. Lawyer and whistleblower Alexei Navalny has petitioned the Prosecutor General's Office to determine the legality of the front's very existence. Navalny says the front has no charter or elected leaders — that is, it doesn't legally exist — but it has already accepted millions of members. He also questions the legality of Putin conducting meetings concerning the front in state offices and during work hours.

There are other questions for anyone who wants to know what Russia will be like in five or 10 years. What are the goals and platform of the front? The front looks like a simple vote machine designed to deliver a majority in the State Duma and put Putin back in the Kremlin, and the front's leader doesn't hide this. In Paris, Putin said: "The goal and objective of the All-Russia People's Front is to attract people with fresh outlooks, interesting views, interesting ideas and people who can bring those ideas to life ... to bring these people into power at various levels — municipal, regional, into the State Duma, the Russian parliament."

On the surface, Putin's reasons for creating the front have some validity. He says the ruling party has lost touch with the voters and "there is a kind of anemia with regard to the real problems ... of citizens." But allowing competing political parties — real, independent ones — to participate in the election would be a much more effective way of solving this problem of anemia. But as radical Kremlin critic Eduard Limonov wrote on his LiveJournal blog: "Actually, instead of all these manipulations it would be easier to just conduct free elections. But then the people doing this manipulating would be voted out of office."

Meanwhile, the front is drafting its five-year plan. Although the details of the plan have not been released, the intention to draft it resurrects the memory of the notorious Soviet practice of five-year plans. One of the reasons the Soviet Union collapsed is because none of them was ever fulfilled.

Some front supporters suggest that they have long-ranging goals. Andrei Isayev, a United Russia deputy, wrote on his web site: "The front has enemies. They are people who don't want to see a strong and sovereign Russia ... those who want to return us to the 1990s. ... They don't even hide that they want to see a return of the 1990s, which they call 'the flowering of democracy.'"

In certain respects, Isayev is correct. In today's Russia, there are still some nasty rudiments of democracy — for example, some freedom of expression and open borders. To get rid of them completely and return the country to the Soviet Union, there needs to be an all-out effort to build the largest possible front — the one that unites cheerleaders, blondes and pensioners. And most of all, there has to be a leader who will be, along with his organization, above the law of the land.

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