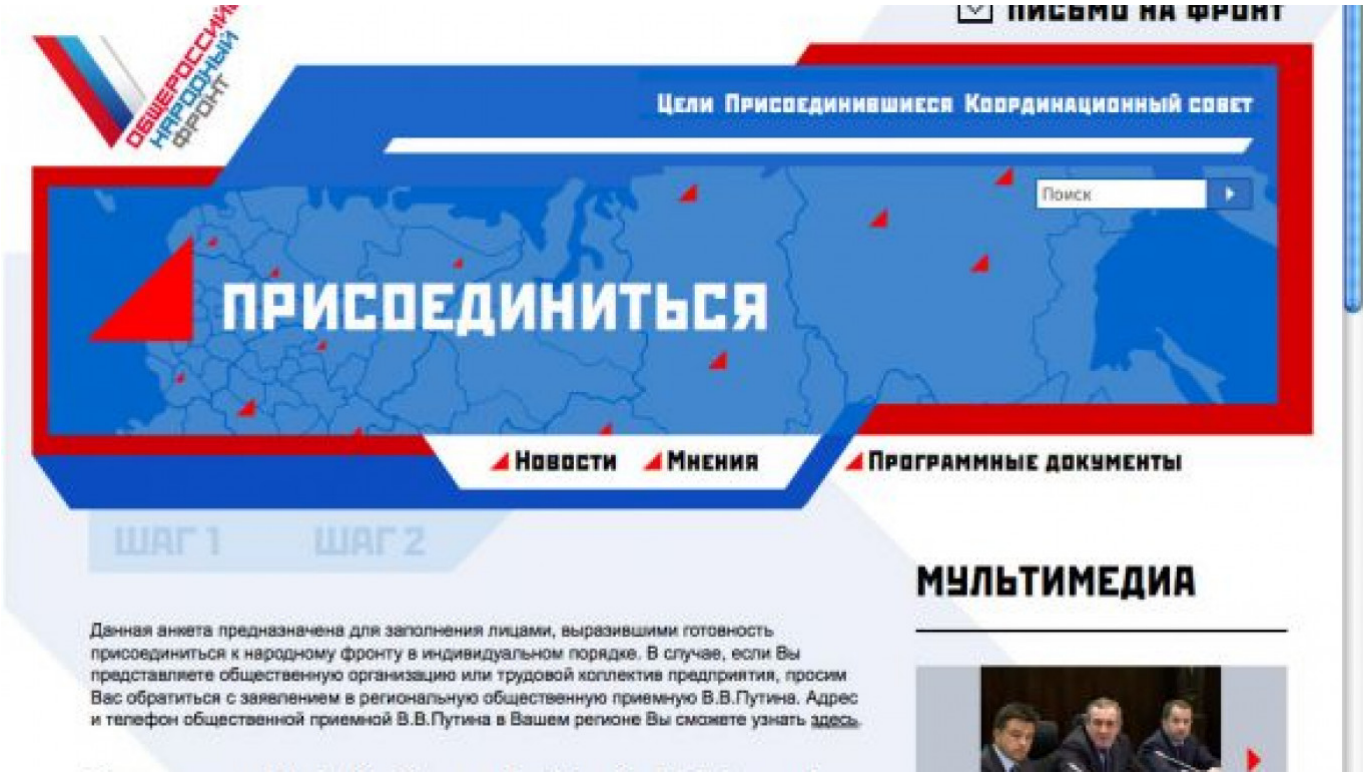
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Doubts Grow About Putin's Front

By Alex Chachkevitch

July 05, 2011



A note on the front's web site confirming new member Michelle Obama.

Doubts are growing whether the All-Russia People's Front, created two months ago by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, will help United Russia win extra votes in the State Duma elections after a series of scandals shook the group.

In the latest embarrassment, an unfettered registration process has allowed the likes of Moammar Gadhafi to join the group, as documented by several bloggers Tuesday.

The fact that anyone can register under any name and any number of times casts doubt on reports by the All-Russia People's Front that its supporters include more than 460 organizations and millions of individuals.

Putin has put his hopes on boosting vote results for his United Russia party on the All-Russia People's Front, saying the party will reserve 150 of 600 places on its party list in the Duma elections for members of the front.

Sergei Markov, a Duma deputy with United Russia, said registration is actually just the first step.

"If [people] want to, they can sign up," he said by telephone Tuesday. "The front is not going to stop them."

But the group only counts as supporters the people and organizations who join its regional and federal councils and plan to participate in the Duma elections on its ticket, he said.

Stanislav Belkovsky, a former Kremlin insider, said the absence of organization illustrated by the fact that anyone can join the group and then leave without notification was proof of its short lifespan.

"After elections are over, the front will be forgotten," said Belkovsky, an independent political analyst.

That is if the group survives that long.

Rivals and political analysts have ridiculed the group since its inception in early May, and the latest entrant to the Duma race, billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, joined the chorus in an interview published Tuesday.

"You know, in my opinion, it is really laughable when 38 million agricultural workers join the front in a single day," Prokhorov, elected head of the pro-Kremlin Right Cause party 10 days ago, told Kommersant. He was referring to the decision by the Russian Agrarian Movement to join the group.

Right Cause has no seats in the Duma, but Prokhorov has promised to give his party the second-biggest faction in the December elections. United Russia, meanwhile, has pledged to make the party a key target in its own election campaign.

Putin did not comment on Prokhorov's statement, but he complained last week that the front's chaotic membership drive threatened to discredit the very idea of the group.

Still, Putin said he would encourage people to join — which they are doing, but not always sincerely.

Blogger and journalist Andrei Malgin on Tuesday posted screenshots showing the confirmed registrations of Gadhafi, Libya's embattled leader, and several fake names not all fit for publication.

A Moscow Times reporter attempted to confirm the claims by making registration requests on the front's web site for U.S. first lady Michelle Obama and Winnie-the-Pooh. The web site unquestionably approved the requests.

Malgin also said the Russian Cheerleaders Union had joined the group even though none of its members are old enough to vote.

Several organizations listed as members, including the Russian Union of Architects, later balked after their members protested about not being asked first. Vladimir Volodin, a senior

official at the All-Russia People's Front, said last week that organizations should hold votes on whether to join.

Complicating matters, the front does not even exist from a legal standpoint because it has never been formally registered.

Of course, not everyone is skeptical.

"The front is great idea for us," said Nikolai Dronov, head of the Anti-Cancer Movement. "It's a platform for an exchange of ideas and another way through which our cause can be heard."

Dronov said that since the organization joined the front in June, he has attended various conferences and round tables, voiced his ideas about projects, and learned about the problems of other groups that have joined the front.

"There is nothing wrong in allowing anyone to join the front and to voice their concerns and problems," he said. "It may be hard to pick out good ideas, but it's great that everyone gets a chance to be heard by the government."

The All-Russia People's Front mandate is to give a broad range of public groups a better say in politics — and thus boost support for United Russia. But the plan does not seem to be working. United Russia's popularity has continued a slow downward slide, reaching 53 percent last month compared with 57 percent in May and 60 percent in February, the independent pollster Levada Center said last week.

Dronov conceded that the All-Russia People's Front might be nothing more than an election vehicle, but he said he did not care. "They're letting us speak and are listening, and that's important," he said.

"But," he added, "I hope the government does not forget about us after the elections."

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