



United Russia Accused of Spreading Fibs

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In a sign that the election season is drawing nearer, A Just Russia on Thursday accused United Russia of orchestrating rumors that one of its founders and most senior figures was resigning.

Reports that State Duma Deputy Speaker Alexander Babakov has decided to leave A Just Russia for Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's All-Russia People's Front come from United Russia, party chairman Nikolai Levichev said.

"This is the latest attempt from spin doctors close to United Russia to destabilize us," Levichev told The Moscow Times, adding that Babakov had not made any public statement so far.

A report in the Vzglyad online newspaper [said](#) Thursday that Babakov had explained in an open letter that he was disappointed that A Just Russia had recently become marginalized and taken a much more critical stance toward the country's leadership.

But the newspaper failed to publish the letter, and party officials said Thursday that they had not seen it. Babakov's own web site, Babakov.ru, carried no mention of it late Thursday.

Apart from Vzglyad, the Perm-based Sol online magazine [carried](#) similar information, without mentioning an open letter or any other source.

Reached by telephone, Babakov's aide Vladimir Dunayev said he would not comment on the reports immediately and asked to be called later in the day. He did not respond to repeated follow-up calls.

Levichev said attempts to create the impression that Just Russia members were deserting were bound to fail. "There is absolutely no panic in our ranks," he said.

But he added that there was widespread pressure on party members in the regions to join the All-Russia People's Front, an umbrella organization created in May to prop up support for United Russia, which is led by Putin.

He said that while the front is officially nonpartisan, Just Russia members were expected to quit the party if they decided to join it.

Levichev later told Russian News Service radio that he believed the quotes from the open letter were actually written by Marat Gelman, a prominent blogger and art curator from Perm who was one of the intellectual architects of the nationalist Rodina party, which in 2006 merged with two smaller parties to form the pro-Kremlin A Just Russia.

Gelman denied the accusation with a pun. "Yeah, and I'm also Johnny the Elephant," he wrote on his Twitter feed, referring to a 46-year-old elephant that died in the Perm zoo last month when rescuers failed to lift him up after a fall.

Babakov was Rodina's last chairman. He has been a Duma member since 2003 and was elected as one of the Duma's nine deputy speakers in December 2007.

Originally a businessman, Babakov last year was the most senior deputy and the only Just Russia member named among the Duma's most notorious absentees, according to media reports citing a confidential list prepared by the Public Chamber.

A Just Russia is the smallest Duma party, with only 38 of its 445 seats, and recent polls put the party on the brink of the 7 percent threshold in December's elections. It has seen a string of setbacks recently, cumulating in the demise of its long-standing leader, Sergei Mironov, who gave up the party chairmanship in April and was stripped of his post as Federation Council speaker in May.

Mironov responded somewhat ambiguously to Thursday's developments. "It looks like Babakov is joining the people's front," he wrote on his Twitter feed. "At last?"

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