The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Report: United Russia Might Be Dismantled

By Jonathan Earle

February 12, 2012



United Russia, the country's dominant political party for more than a decade, might be radically reformed or even dissolved in the coming months, media reports said Friday.

The party has long been a bulwark of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's grip on power. But support for it has been sagging for more than a year, and analysts said the speculation is a sign that the Kremlin is addressing this problem.

Sergei Markov, a Kremlin-connected analyst and former United Russia Duma deputy, confirmed that such plans exist.

"Something will have to be done after the [March 4] presidential election," he told the Moscow Times.

Both Izvestia and Bloomberg reported Friday that United Russia won't survive in its present

form.

Putin might dissolve United Russia and create a new power base with a different name, logo and leadership, Bloomberg reported, attributing the information to two people involved in the plans who asked not to be identified because the information isn't public.

Izvestia cited several sources close to the party as saying its leaders are considering a range of options.

"There will undoubtedly be a rebranding," said Olga Kryshtanovskaya, a prominent sociologist and party member. "We need to ... develop a clear ideology. Also, a leader should appear," she was quoted as saying.

The newspaper cited a second source as saying a "total rebranding" was in the works.

Party leaders denied the report.

Sergei Neverov, the party's third in command, told Interfax on Friday that an upcoming party convention will have "no discussion of 'rebranding,' much less dissolving the party." Neverov said party members would merely discuss staff changes.

But Alexander Vorobyov, head of United Russia's Duma faction, told RIA-Novosti that the party was willing to consider rebranding and other measures to strengthen its position.

"There will be changes and renewals. That is obvious and necessary; life doesn't stay the same. ... Only with this we will retain our leadership," he wrote Friday on Twitter.

However, in a surprising statement Saturday, Vorobyov announced his resignation from a key party post he had held since 2005.

"Today is my last day as head of [United Russia's] central executive committee — almost 7 years! We're giving way to the young," he tweeted.

United Russia officially won just less than 50 percent of the vote in the Dec. 4 Duma elections, and the opposition says that without vote-rigging the result could have been as low as 35 percent.

Since then, tens of thousands have taken to the streets across the country to demand new elections and political competition, many holding signs condemning the "party of crooks and thieves," a nickname coined by opposition leader Alexei Navalny that has become a household phrase.

Most analysts said that given the party's poor reputation, reform is extremely likely.

"The urgency to reform it is obvious," said Masha Lipman, an analyst for the Moscow Carnegie Center. "United Russia doesn't seem to be wanted by anyone, including the tandem. Putin sees it as a burden and a liability," she said by telephone.

Putin, who heads United Russia without being a member, has been distancing himself from the party for some time. In May, he founded the All-Russia People's Front, a loose

political organization open to nonparty supporters that fielded candidates for the December Duma elections.

The party has not played a significant role in Putin's campaign for the presidency, and it had no official affiliation with the large Feb. 4 pro-Putin rally in central Moscow.

According to numerous accounts, organizers resorted to busing in paid "supporters" to the rally, while an opposition rally across town attracted tens of thousands.

Markov, the former deputy, said his party has become so discredited that it has lost the ability to function properly.

"It can no longer act as a force for political mobilization," he said.

The pro-Kremlin pundit said profiteers and "lobbyists" working for their business interests had discredited the party.

Then-President Putin co-founded United Russia in 2001, and the party gradually took control of all the country's regional and national legislatures, marginalizing opposition parties and solidifying the Kremlin's centralized authority, or "power vertical."

In the 2007 Duma elections, the party won 64 percent of the vote and a constitutional majority, aided by Putin's popularity and steady economic growth. Those elections also triggered accusations of massive vote-rigging.

During Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, economic slowdown, continued corruption and unfulfilled promises of reform have led the party to be associated with stagnation.

Medvedev, like Putin, is not a party member and has distanced himself from United Russia on numerous occasions, although he headed the party list in the December Duma elections.

Analysts speculated about how and when United Russia would be reformed. Most said nothing would change until after the presidential election.

Under one scenario, United Russia would be split into smaller parties, perhaps along the lines of existing "political clubs," which are informal ideological groups in the party.

Markov said this was unlikely because it would weaken the party as a parliamentary force.

"The president and the government need to rely on a strong political party in the Duma, especially in times of an economic crisis, and Putin has said this often enough," he said.

Under another scenario, the party would be replaced by the All-Russia People's Front.

Vladimir Pribylovsky, head of the Panorama think tank, said this would not be a substantial change because practically all the front's leaders are members of United Russia.

The seemingly playful creation and disbanding of parties from above has been a tradition in Russian politics since the 1990s, when the ruling party since 1995 was Our Home – Russia.

It was replaced by Unity (Yedinstvo) in 1999, and two years later it was amalgamated with

the Fatherland-All Russia party to create United Russia.

The Kremlin has continued to form new parties, such as A Just Russia (2006) and Right Cause (2009), both of which were created by merging three smaller parties.

Despite the rumors surrounding United Russia, not everyone believed that the party would undergo a radical reform.

"These discussions about reforming United Russia are a way to boost Putin's popularity rating ahead of the presidential election," said Alexei Mukhin, an analyst at the Center for Political Information. "In all likelihood, there will be no significant changes."

And Pribylovsky said top-down reform would not have significant ramifications outside the party because the country's leadership would remain unchanged.

"They know that they and their party are increasingly unpopular, but they do not want to give up power," he said.

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