

Leftist Leaders Announce Effort to Join Forces

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Two high-profile opposition State Duma deputies from A Just Russia joined forces Thursday with a prominent member of the Public Chamber to announce plans to create a Social Democratic Union to bring together Russia's left-wing forces.

"A wide range" of left-wing and social-democratic forces will be represented in the union, State Duma Deputy Gennady Gudkov told journalists, adding that invitations had been sent to the Communist Party and "various" other left-wing movements.

Public Chamber Member Yelena Lukyanova said coming together to forge a unified political front was the only way to ultimately defeat President-elect Vladimir Putin's ruling United Russia party.

"Everyone who disagrees with United Russia's policies needs to unite, both on the left and the right flank — it is absolutely evident," she said at a news conference in Moscow with Gudkov

and his fellow party member, State Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov.

Political analysts were divided about the project's viability, saying the coalition could have short-term success riding on public discontent in the wake of recent protests, but predicting it would eventually break up over the members' differing agendas.

Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov is also involved in the union's formation but was absent from the event, having been called to the city prosecutor's office for questioning about his role in protests following the presidential election.

He said that so far the Left Front had not made a definitive decision about whether to join the new organization.

"We shall observe this process and take part in discussions, but I don't think that the matter has yet reached organizational steps," he told RIA-Novosti.

Several other leftist leaders echoed similar reservations about signing on to the proposed coalition.

Sergei Mironov, A Just Russia's presidential candidate, also said the party was eager to "join efforts with the Communists, the Left Front and new parties to be created," but was not ready for a "legal union," RIA-Novosti reported.

Communist Party representatives say they are hesitant about joining forces with organizations that are more right wing.

Sergei Obukhov, a State Duma deputy and member of the presidium of the Communist Party's central committee, told The Moscow Times that he saw "no point" in joining the union as his party already had more supporters than A Just Russia and Left Front combined.

"How can a sea pour into a puddle?" Obukhov said.

The Dec. 4 State Duma and March 4 presidential elections "have shown that the Communist Party is the leader on the left front," he said.

"We believe that the basis [for a union] must be our political weight," he added.

Vadim Solovyov, a senior Communist State Duma deputy said his party first needed to see the program of the union before considering joining.

"But in general it is a strange association, an attempt to remind people about themselves. If Udaltsov considers himself a social democrat, then what type of communist is he?" Solovyov told Gazeta.ru on Thursday

Gudkov said earlier in March that the liberal opposition Yabloko party could become part of a social-democratic party, but Yabloko chairman Sergei Mitrokhin on Thursday scoffed at the idea.

"It doesn't matter what they call it. As far as I know, Udaltsov is a Communist and a radical. How can Yabloko enter any kind of union with him?" Mitrokhin told The Moscow Times,

bursting into laughter.

Andrei Piontkovsky, a political analyst and senior member of the liberal Solidarity opposition movement, said the union had “no chance of success” because both A Just Russia and the Communist Party wanted to lead it.

“The Communist Party will not go for it as it would mean giving the initiative away into other hands, while A Just Russia believes that forces should be concentrated around itself,” Piontkovsky told The Moscow Times.

He said more chances to create a leftist party “may appear” later, after people become “satiated” with founding new parties after a Kremlin-sponsored law reducing barriers for party registration is soon passed, as is widely expected.

Yelena Pozdnyakova, of the Center of Political Technologies, said that now was a “good moment for a union” of leftist opposition forces “given the public protest mood” following the disputed Dec. 4 State Duma elections, which “showed the interest within society for these parties.”

Both A Just Russia and the Communist Party increased their representation in the Duma after the vote.

“As long as the protest mood is alive, it will not be hard for [the initiators of the union] to find common ground like views on economic policy, privatization and oligarchs,” Pozdnyakova told The Moscow Times.

“But if the protest mood starts dying down, which is happening already, then differences may arise because a more detailed agenda will need to be worked out,” she said.

“Whether they will be able to cope with the differences will depend on how much they will need the union,” Pozdnyakova said.

One aim of the coalition is to avoid confrontation between like-minded politicians in elections, Ponomaryov said.

The structure of the union, including its leadership, has not yet been decided upon and will be discussed at a general meeting on April 5. Gudkov said the union will not have a single leader.

But Gudkov insisted that the new organization is “not a party but a movement.”

Ponomaryov said members would be admitted individually but that “they must have influence within their organizations.”

Gudkov said the union would be funded by business and public donations and that they will show the public what they are doing through primaries.

Those present at the conference were not in agreement over the possible inclusion of ex-Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, who announced Wednesday that he planned to restart his own Social Democratic party.

“If Mikhail Sergeyevich plans to do everything on his own, he does not have any prospects. But if he wants to join a collective, for example, participate in our Social Democratic Union, we will be glad to have him,” Gudkov said.

But Lukyanova accused Gorbachev of “discrediting” the social-democratic “idea,” saying as a result of that it “did not develop for a long time.”

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