

Putin's People's Front Will Live On

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Vladimir Putin **Sergei Porter**

Vladimir Putin's All-Russia People's Front won't go away soon and its State Duma members will not join United Russia en masse, a senior lawmaker said Wednesday, refuting reports of the political movement's untimely demise.

"Rumors about our death are greatly exaggerated," Vyacheslav Lysakov, a founding member of the Front and first deputy chairman of the Duma's constitution and state affairs committee, told The Moscow Times.

Lysakov was referring to a report in Izvestia on Wednesday that said the Front had effectively ceased its political work. The organization, set up by Prime Minister Putin last year as a mobilizing force for the Duma and presidential elections, was suspending all its work until at least this fall, the newspaper reported.

Lysakov said that while some of the Front's branches would be temporarily inactive in regions that have no elections coming up, this was not true with regard to the whole organization.

“We are alive and working,” he said.

He added that the Front would exist for the duration of the current Duma’s legislative period.

“Putin confirmed to me that the Front is a project for at least five years,” he said, adding that the organization would seek official registration as a public movement with the Justice Ministry.

Lysakov, who heads a motorists union called Free Choice, praised the Front for its effective political mobilization.

“We activated so many people who were previously not active in politics, and we do not want to lose them,” he said.

Critics say the People’s Front will just allow Putin to distance himself from the increasingly unpopular United Russia.

Putin announced Tuesday that he will resign as United Russia’s leader after he starts his third presidential term on May 7. He also said outgoing President Dmitry Medvedev should then head the party and the government.

Medvedev has not yet commented on Putin’s suggestion, but United Russia leaders were quick to predict that they would elect him unanimously. The party said Wednesday that the election was planned for May 26.

The announcement came after weeks of speculation that the Front will become a new leftist pro-Putin party while United Russia will evolve into a rightist pro-business party under Medvedev.

Currently, both organizations enjoy a close if somewhat blurred relationship. Lysakov said more than 70 of United Russia’s 238 Duma deputies are nonparty members who were elected through the People’s Front, including himself.

The deputy played down comments from Boris Gryzlov, United Russia’s second in command, who said the Duma’s front members should join the party.

“This is each deputy’s individual decision,” he said, adding that United Russia’s nonparty faction members’ work would continue without conflicts.

But Sergei Markov, a former United Russia Duma deputy and now vice-rector at the Plekhanov Institute, said the situation posed more questions than answers.

“Right now it is unclear whether Front members should join United Russia or not. They do not know whether United Russia will be a Putin party, a Medvedev party, or both,” he said.

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