The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

People's Front to Stay Independent, But Some Members Want Out

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May 30, 2012



Anatoly Karpov

The All-Russia People's Front will remain independent from United Russia, even though some members intend to change alliances, party officials said Wednesday.

Created by Vladimir Putin in May 2011, the People's Front was a vehicle to garner votes for the increasingly unpopular United Russia in December's Duma elections. Putin promised that United Russia would hand over a quarter of the seats that it won to the People's Front.

Putin's judo partner, Vasily Shestakov, and chess champion Anatoly Karpov are among several People's Front deputies in the State Duma who have asked to join United Russia, Kommersant reported.

The People's Front's 80 Duma deputies include television actress Marina Kozhevnikova, Soviet-era Politburo member Vladimir Dolgikh and Metropol investment bank owner Mikhail

Slepenchuk.

Kommersant also named Alexei Pushkov, chairman of the Duma's International Affairs Committee and a former television host, among those willing to switch over to United Russia. Reached by phone, Pushkov's spokeswoman could not clarify his position. Shestakov's spokesman was unavailable for comment.

But United Russia heavyweight Vyacheslav Nikonov said the People's Front would remain independent from United Russia. "Joining the party is an individual choice," he said.

Indeed, Deputy Vladimir Gutenyov, a former heavy-industry lobbyist, said during last weekend's United Russia convention that the independence of the People's Front gave him more freedom. But he also predicted earlier that People's Front members would move to United Russia after Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev assumed the party chairmanship. Gutenyov's spokeswomen said Wednesday that he would remain in the People's Front.

Medvedev promised deep reforms in United Russia after being elected chairman, leaving the fate of the party and the People's Front uncertain, said Olga Mefodyeva, an analyst with the Center for Political Technologies. "They both don't know their future, because the authorities don't have a unified strategy," she said.

Alexander Shokhin, a People's Front member who heads the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, told Kommersant that it was "too early" to register the Front as an official public group. Its current status as an informal political movement gives Putin more flexibility as a leader, Shokhin added.

Mefodyeva speculated that some People's Front loyalists had been asked to join United Russia to "demonstrate unity."

United Russia is under the patronage of Kremlin deputy chief of staff Vyacheslav Volodin, while the People's Front is under Deputy Prime Minister Vladislav Surkov. Mefodyeva added that the men are at odds with each other.

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