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Putin Steps Up Support for People's Front

By Alexander Winning

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President Vladimir Putin at a recent awards ceremony for young cultural workers.

President Vladimir Putin is set to attend a forum organized by the All-Russia People's Front on Friday in a show of support for the movement he created almost two years ago to garner votes for the increasingly unpopular United Russia party.

Putin will take part in the second day of the two-day conference in the southern city of Rostov-on-Don, said Andrei Bocharov, head of the organizing committee for the Front's founding congress, which is expected to be held in June.

The conference, which is seen as a trial run for the June congress, will assess whether the president's campaign promises in the social sphere have been fulfilled and discuss new initiatives proposed by Front activists, Bocharov said Wednesday.

Putin is expected to be formally declared the Front's leader at the congress.

Putin's attendance at this week's forum reflects the heightened prestige top officials are attaching to the Front, which has been touted as a vehicle for pro-Putin forces to reinforce their grip on the political system in the face of sliding support for United Russia, which has been branded "the party of crook and thieves" by the opposition.

It also adds to speculation that the head of state has switched allegiances from United Russia to the Front. The same day that Putin's attendance at the forum was confirmed, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who took over as United Russia leader from Putin in May, was addressing young activists at the party's new school.

In response to criticism of the party, Medvedev said: "Dogs may bark, but the caravan moves on," according to a copy of his speech on the United Russia website.

The Front, which unites more than 1,000 federal and regional organizations, has toned down its political ambitions, however. Dmitry Badovsky, director of the Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Research, a think tank advising the Front, on Wednesday described it as a "supra-political structure."

To call the Front a political party is to "restrict its potential and diminish its task," Badovsky told journalists, calling it instead a "platform for dialogue between society and the president."

Badovsky said the Front could fulfill an important role by allowing disenfranchised voters "who don't trust political parties but trust Putin personally" to make their voices heard. He suggested that the Front could influence policy by appealing to Putin directly or making use of the 80 lawmakers affiliated with the movement.

Campaign representatives who took part in Putin's re-election for a third term — there were close to 500 such representatives — will serve as another link between Front activists and the president, said Olga Savostyanova, a Front coordinator.

Addressing concerns that the pro-Kremlin movement would limit its cooperation with opposition parties, Badovsky said the Front was willing to cooperate with all comers, though it only works with the United Russia and Patriots of Russia parties at present.

"All parties can contribute, so long as they consider their country's interests a priority," he said in a veiled dig at the liberal opposition, which pro-Kremlin lawmakers and state media accuse of pandering to Western governments.

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