

Putin's Popular Front Should Be Eliminated

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Two years ago, President Vladimir Putin asked his senior aide Vladislav Surkov what he thought about the new pro-Kremlin project, the Popular Front. Putin had just initiated it behind Surkov's back before announcing his return to the Kremlin. "It is an idea that has practically nothing wrong with it," replied Surkov, struggling to conceal his dismay.

On the eve of the front's inaugural congress on June 12, it is clear that the idea is wrong and even harmful to the Russian state. It undermines the country's constitutional system, which delegates the authority for making public policy to democratically elected institutions.

Members of the front are not elected; they are carefully selected by the authorities. It is not clear on what legal grounds the front speaks on behalf of the entire Russian people or why their opinion is more important than views of other social and political groups.

To claim that the front would serve as a platform for people to communicate directly with

the president is laughable. This is the job for public institutions like political parties, the parliament and a free, independent media. The president should communicate with all voters, not just those who profess blind loyalty to him. Wouldn't monopolizing access to the president infringe on other people's rights to influence public policy?

What's more, the front could shatter Russia's fledgling party system. Strong, ideology-driven parties become redundant, political competition is weakened, and any party could be co-opted into the front as long as it recognizes Putin's greatness.

The front is an indiscriminate weapon for stoking cultural and social wars — a wedge driven through society to misidentify friend or foe. If it were to change its name to the "Popular Front for Russia," would it really imply that those who did not join the front are Russia's enemies?

It could be abused to fan inter-elite wars, particularly in the regions. It turns personal loyalty to Putin into a tool for settling political and business scores.

History argues against the front. In the late 1980s, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, battling anti-perestroika hardliners in the politburo, created "popular fronts" to support perestroika and glasnost across the Soviet Union. The fronts were quickly hijacked by nationalist and anti-Communist forces, and by 1990 they were tearing the country apart.

It's a bad idea that should be scrapped.

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