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All-Russia People's Front Seen as Vehicle to Polish Kremlin's Image

By Ivan Nechepurenko

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Three men relaxing near a banner for the founding congress of the All-Russia People's Front on Manezh Square. **Igor Tabakov**

President Vladimir Putin is expected to take the reins of the All-Russia People's Front on Tuesday at the organization's founding congress in a move some experts say is aimed at distancing himself from United Russia.

As the ruling United Russia party found its reputation plagued by public criticism and the increasingly popular label "the party of crooks and thieves," two years ago, the All-Russia People's Front was apparently created to give Putin an alternative power base ahead of Duma and presidential elections.

Since then, the front has acted as a loose association of conservative Putin supporters with unclear aims and an organizational structure that still largely depends on United Russia.

But in a sign of Russia's changing political landscape, the founding congress is set to change that by providing the front with its own bureaucracy and, in turn, solidifying its political influence.

The inaugural meeting will be held at the Moscow Manezh, just opposite the Kremlin walls, the site of many government-linked events.

The move to hold the congress may stem from the organization's expanding popularity among the Russian people — a popularity that has so far been lacking any lucid understanding of what the organization aims to do. According to a recent poll conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center, 56 percent of Russians have heard of the organization but only 7 percent actually understand what it stands for.

In addition, half of the survey's respondents were indifferent to the organization's activities, with only 29 percent saying they felt positively about it.

"For Putin, this is an attempt to build a direct link with the Russian people and separate himself from any associations with corruption-beset elites," said Nikolai Petrov, professor of political science at the Higher School of Economics.

"This is a way to get rid of even the minuscule vestiges of party institutions that we had with United Russia," he said.

Since its inception, the All-Russia People's Front has been seen as a replacement to United Russia as Putin's chief political vehicle. Experts and pundits alike predicted that the organization would increasingly disassociate itself from the ruling party now headed by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev.

The contrast is evident even on the level of rhetoric, with the All-Russia People's Front using a more militaristic, conservative lexicon. The collegial ruling body due to get elected at the conference, for instance, will be called the "central staff."

"The All-Russia People's Front is in no way an alternative to United Russia," State Duma deputy speaker Lyudmila Shvetsova told Interfax last Wednesday. "The front's rhetoric is much wider and inclusive than that which a party would have."

"Political parties no longer work well as institutions. That's why a new format was created, based on dialogue rather than confrontation," Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information, said by telephone.

"In addition, Putin is tired of having a party that is based solely on him as an idol figure. He wants to have a structure based on ideas," he said.

Konstantin Simonov, head of the National Energy Security Fund, said at a Monday press conference on the All-Russia People Front's popular image that he sees the organization as an umbrella under which all people can consolidate around the figure of Putin.

"What will happen at the congress is we will see Putin making serious statements to underline that the All-Russia People's Front, out of a formal structure, is turning into something tangible. United Russia then, along with Medvedev, will carry all the accumulated negative

burden," Petrov said.

The conference will run through Wednesday.

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