The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin Elected Leader of the All-Russia People's Front

By Ivan Nechepurenko

June 11, 2013



Vladimir Putin speaking at the organization's congress on Wednesday. **Mikhail Klimentyev**

When it came time to elect a leader at Wednesday's conference of the All-Russia People's Front, there was no need for formalities: The ecstatic crowd was already chanting "Putin, Putin, Putin!"

"So are we going to vote? Are there any other nominees? Vladimir Vladimirovich, I congratulate and sympathize with you," said Stanislav Govorukhin, a famous film director and staunch supporter of President Vladimir Putin.

Formally, Putin has not been a member of any political organization since the collapse of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1991.

But now he is going to lead a completely different kind of organization — one that seeks to unite people across the ideological spectrum to build a better, more direct link with

the country's leader and people of diverse occupations: engineers, teachers, veterans and pensioners.

"The goal of the People's Front is to give everyone a way to create, create a great country, a great Russia. And we are ready to work with everybody who shares our goals and values and who is ready to share common responsibility for the historic success of our Motherland," Putin said.

The founding congress of the front also saw Govorukhin, co-chair of the Delovaya Rossia association Alexander Galushka and State Duma deputy Olga Timofeyeva elected as co-chairs of the "central staff" to be responsible for everyday operations of the newly formalized structure.

In addition, Andrei Bocharev, head of the organizing committee for the founding congress, was elected head of the organization's executive committee.

On Wednesday, Izvestia newspaper published a report implying that the All-Russia's People Front had already made waves internationally: According to the report, a nonprofit group created by U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama in January 2013 to foster grassroots contribution to achieving the national agenda was copied from Putin's front.

That group, Organizing for Action, describes itself as a nonprofit organization whose aim is to "mobilize citizens of all parties and diverse points to speak out for speedy passage and effective implementation of [U.S. President Barack Obama's] program."

Unlike Obama's initiative, however, Putin's front does not limit itself to the president's electoral commitments, but is concentrated more on interaction between Putin and the Russian people.

Political analysts have predicted that a political party might be established on the basis of the All-Russia People's Front in the coming years.

"It should be noted that the movement personifies Putin's electorate, which is much wider than United Russia's," Alexei Makarkin told Interfax on Wednesday.

"The main thing is that this new party will support Putin if he decides to get elected president for a fourth time in 2018," he said.

Deputy Chair of the Communist Party Valery Rashkin agreed with these predictions.

"The front was created to gradually turn into a party and support Putin in the next presidential election," he said.

The front was created in 2011 as a loose association of conservative Putin supporters with vague aims and an organizational structure that largely depended on the ruling United Russia party, now headed by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev.

At Wednesday's founding assembly, the front solidified its formal independence by registering itself as a "public movement" with a leader and an apparatus.

"We want [Russia] to become a magnet that other countries and peoples gravitate to," said the movement's newly elected leader, Putin.

"We are the People's Front, and we stand for Russia," he said in closing remarks.

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Original url:
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