

Putin on the Front Burner

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Two full years after it was first created, the All-Russia People's Front gained official status only last week under the new name of the People's Front for Russia. President Vladimir Putin, who was unanimously elected as the movement's leader, addressed the 1,500 party delegates.

The People's Front was probably born out of in-fighting between Kremlin propagandists and as a back-up for the 2011 State Duma elections. It became more ideology-oriented in reaction to the massive street protests and Putin's desire to consolidate his conservative majority as a counterweight to the highly active minority.

The congress elected a central staff consisting of 55 people headed by three co-chairpeople: film director Stanislav Govorukhin, who headed Putin's campaign last year, Delovaya Rossiya co-chairman Alexander Galushka and Stavropol television journalist Olga Timofeyeva. A similar three-headed structure also exists in the regions, indicating that they serve more of a representative than a working function.

The People's Front central staff has fewer members of the administrative elite and more from the business community and blue collar workers. This is apparently a deliberate attempt to distance itself from the "party of crooks and thieves" label that United Russia has been unable to shake off. Besides Delovaya Rossiya, it is dominated by business and trade unions such as Opora, the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs. The higher party functionaries are found in United Russia, Rodina and Patriots of Russia. The central staff also includes quite a number of military and Chernobyl veterans. Many civic organizations are also represented, from the Russian Sambo Federation and the Women's Union to the Potato Growers Union. It also includes a smattering of celebrities.

There is also a notable participation of 30-somethings whom Putin took notice of during his meetings and travels around Russia. They include the head of the council of student groups, the head of the Union of Rural Youth, the leader of the Rotten Roads inter-regional movement in Pskov and the head of the foundation for support of entrepreneurial Internet initiatives. This may be Putin's ploy to involve the younger generation in his broad national party.

Regional representation was not a priority. The vast majority of the members are Muscovites, with a couple of people from St. Petersburg thrown in. Of the remaining regions, the most represented are Tatarstan with three people, the North Caucasus and the Urals. In addition, gender equality was clearly not a consideration, with only 13 of the 55 members being women, although one spot in the "ruling troika" was allotted to a woman.

Although the People's Front congress is superficially reminiscent in style to Soviet congresses for its largely decorative leadership composed of prominent people coupled with representatives of the common people, it turned out to be more lively and diverse in practice. In its current form, the front is an important step for Putin toward a more personal and corporate state, one in which the national leader stands over the heads of the political elite to address the people more or less directly through a variety of corporate and social groups.

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