

Putin Touts His New People's Front to AvtoVAZ Workers

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin pressed ahead Wednesday with his creation of a popular front to prop up his United Russia party's chances in December's parliamentary elections.

"I very much hope that such a structure will help to promote new popular ideas and new people into various organs, including the State Duma," Putin told a meeting with the country's Engineering Association during a visit to AvtoVAZ's Tolyatti car factory, Interfax reported.

The association is one of 16 interest groups that said it would join the organization at a hastily arranged meeting Saturday at Putin's Novo-Ogaryovo residence.

The weekend meeting followed a Friday speech at a United Russia party conference in Volgograd where Putin introduced the All-Russia People's Front as a means to elect nonmembers to the Duma on the party ticket.

Putin has said the people's front would be open for groups of all stripes and provide a vehicle to promote the country's development over the coming years.

But critics maintain that those who have joined so far are all more or less connected to United Russia and Putin, who serves as the party's leader without being a member. Practically all of the country's other political parties have assailed the people's front as an act of desperation amid United Russia's sagging support.

Front members include the Women's Union, the Federation of Independent Trade Unions, the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs and United Russia's youth wing, Young Guard.

Their leaders are due to take part in formal talks with Putin and senior United Russia officials on Thursday in Sochi, Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday.

Peskov said the initiative should be deemed a success because more and more groups were lining up to join. "We hear the critics, we hear the pessimists, but we see a large number of organizations signaling that they are interested in taking part," he told Interfax.

Peskov has said the front would be nonpartisan although he has conceded that members should have some minimum identification with United Russia.

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