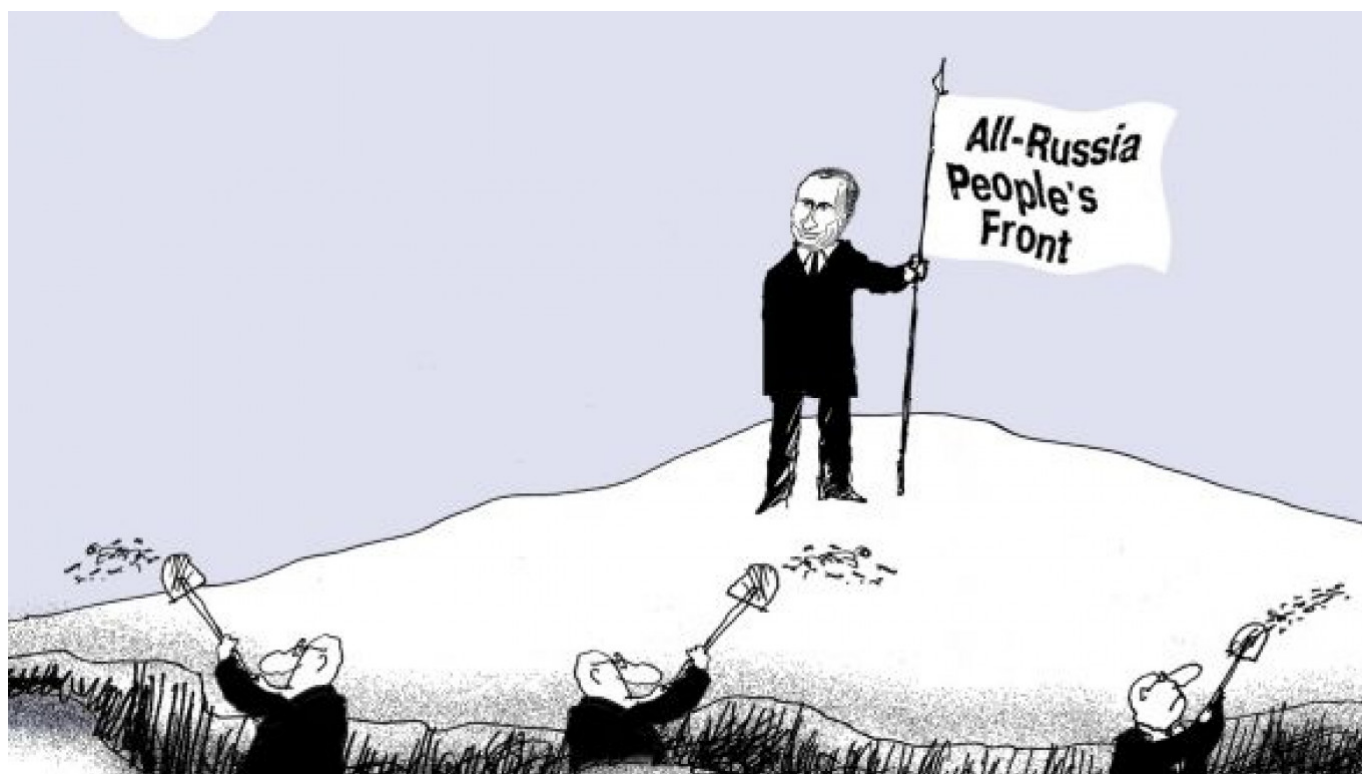


## Putin's Feckless Front

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"I will be the next president of Russia" was the clear and direct message Prime Minister Vladimir Putin sent when he announced the creation of the All-Russia People's Front.

On Saturday, a hodgepodge of the front's representatives appeared at Putin's residence in Novo-Ogaryovo. Putin held a second meeting with the group on Wednesday. It marks the final end to any hopes that the Twitter-happy President Dmitry Medvedev might have had for re-election, although this was pretty clear long ago.

But before delivering the coup de grace to Medvedev, Putin first killed off the Kremlin's virtual liberal party. Its creation was purportedly Medvedev's brainchild, with former Kremlin chief of staff Alexander Voloshin and Rusnano CEO Anatoly Chubais placed in charge with organizing the Kremlin-friendly party.

Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin was initially offered the top spot in Right Cause, but he refused it outright. By all indications, Kudrin has his sights on becoming prime minister after Putin regains the presidency and has little interest in getting bogged down in a dead-end position with a party that few people to this day know exists.

Then the job was offered to First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov. He mulled over the

proposition for a couple weeks and then went to Putin for advice. The national leader told him, “Do what you want, but if I were you I wouldn’t rush into anything.”

Then Putin and his gang went after A Just Russia, headed by the determined defender of muskrats, Sergei Mironov. His party’s only crime is that it is not United Russia. That is, it was created according to the political concept: “Everyone who doesn’t want to vote for United Russia should have an alternative.” But now that concept has been narrowed to: “Everybody should vote for Putin.”

I can picture Putin and Medvedev discussing Medvedev’s political future:

Medvedev says, “I want to be president.”

Putin replies: “I’ve got United Russia plus the entire people’s front backing me. Who have you got?”

Putin wanted his announcement of the new front to sound like a menacing roar from the national leader: “I’m in charge!”

But Putin’s roar comes off pretty meek. Although he calls his organization the people’s front, it isn’t at all clear what this front is supposed to be fighting against. In the Soviet period, similar fronts were created to fight “bloody bourgeois regimes” in the West and “capitalists who drink the blood of the people.” But who are Putin’s front members — pensioners, factory workers, veterans, women’s groups, automobile owners — supposed to be fighting in post-Soviet Russia? Former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky? Without any help from the front, he will spend many more years in prison anyway. Maybe the front was intended to fight Medvedev? But who needs the front when Medvedev was a long time ago doomed to be an eternal lame duck on the country’s political landscape.

And what is the people’s front supposed to be fighting for? For Putin’s right to build another multimillion-dollar palace for himself? For the political and business elite to get off scot-free after committing bloody road rage using their flashing blue lights? For the right of tax officials with annual household salaries of \$40,000 to buy a luxury villas in Dubai and Montenegro?

Who will be the avant-garde of this front? Who will defend the expanded version of “the party of crooks and thieves” and carry Putin on their shoulders into a new presidency? They are a bunch of nobodies — so much so that we don’t even know their names. The public is simply informed that: “On Saturday, representatives of the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, the Russian Federation of Independent Trade Unions, the Russian Pensioners Union, Young Guard, United Russia, the Union of Afghanistan Veterans, the Women’s Union of Russia and others” had a meeting with the prime minister. By strange coincidence, this is roughly the same list of organizations that signed the notorious open “letter of 55” earlier this year in opposition to Khodorkovsky.

In contrast, look at the open letter in support for Khodorkovsky that was signed by the respectable writers Boris Strugatsky and Boris Akunin, actress Lia Akhedzhakov, actor Oleg Basilashvili, film director Eldar Ryazanov, theatrical director Kama Ginkas and television journalists Vladimir Pozner and Leonid Parfyonov.

During elections, Russian voters are often bused to polling stations to vote for United Russia candidates. In a similar fashion, “representatives of the people” were bused in to Putin’s residence to create a new popular front. Are we supposed to be impressed?

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