

Medvedev Appointed Chairman of United Russia

By [Alexey Bratersky](#)

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Medvedev addresses delegates and guests at United Russia's 13th party congress, where he was formally elected the party's chairman.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev called for United Russia to be “rebuilt from scratch” at a convention that elected him party leader over the weekend.

But many old party hands also landed leadership posts at the convention, casting doubt on whether significant changes were in the offing.

Former State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov was appointed head of the party's supreme council, while Sergei Neverov, a conservative known for his tough stance against opposition protests, was named head of the party's general council.

"We now must engage in rebuilding the party from scratch," Medvedev said in an address to the congress. "This will be complicated."

He also promised to reform the party by introducing primaries for mayors and governors and raising the share of lower-ranked members in the party's ruling bodies by up to 20 percent.

But despite the bravura tone of the convention, held in the Manezh Exhibition Hall across from the Kremlin and fenced off from the public, senior party leaders were more open-minded during recent round-table discussions about United Russia's future.

The desire for change, expressed by many regional party members, has revealed problems in the mammoth party, known for lacking an ideological agenda and often used as a toothless force for senior leadership to push laws through the parliament.

"In private conversations, all of you have said it's impossible to work like this and we don't mean anything for the party," Deputy State Duma Speaker Oleg Morozov said during a heated debate at a round table on the eve of the convention.

Morozov, a United Russia heavyweight, made that comment shortly before being named head of the presidential administration's department for domestic politics.

He was echoed by another liberal-leaning United Russia member, Vladimir Pligin, who said the party's survival would be at stake if it did not transform itself from an artificial political force into a truly democratic party.

"Otherwise, we will be 'substituted' — that is the softest word for it," Pligin said at the round table.

United Russia, which has held a parliamentary majority for a decade, has been accused of manipulating elections and harboring corrupt officials among its ranks. Critics have dubbed United Russia "the party of crooks and thieves."

"Everything connected with United Russia I have spurned from my life forever," former senior United Russia official Lyubov Sliska said by telephone when asked to comment on the party's future.

But Sholban Kara-ool, a United Russia member who heads the Tyva republic, said he was excited that the party had a say in the formation of Medvedev's Cabinet. "The party is really becoming the force that is forming the government," he said.

But Medvedev's promises for party reform were met with caution by Duma Deputy Vladimir Dolgikh.

"We need to develop mechanisms and people for it," said Dolgikh, a United Russia member who held senior positions in the Soviet Communist Party.

The lack of new members able to assume leadership positions is visible in the composition of the party's general council.

Among the few new people elected to the council was Valery Trapeznikov, a former Uralvagonzavod worker-turned-Duma deputy. He will oversee relations with trade unions.

Trapeznikov said party members should "unite to physically beat the party's enemies,"

referring to opposition leaders Alexei Navalny and Ilya Yashin, Kommersant reported Saturday.

Ural Mountain-based Uralvagonzavod, a top domestic tank producer, became a support base for Putin during his re-election bid in March.

The re-election of Neverov and Gryzlov to senior posts shows that no serious changes can be expected within the party because both men are close to presidential administration deputy head Vyacheslav Volodin, himself a Putin protege, said Pavel Salin, an analyst at the Center for Current Politics.

Former United Russia Deputy Sergei Markov said the party could have demonstrated a desire for change during the convention by proposing other candidates for the chairmanship alongside Medvedev.

Markov, vice president of the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, also said the party would need "political will" to cleanse itself of undesired elements and foster an open dialogue about the country's needs.

He noted that Medvedev would not have full control over the party. "The party remains the party of Putin," he said.

President Vladimir Putin, who led United Russia without being a member before Medvedev's election Saturday, told the convention that United Russia should become the "party of the people's majority."

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