

Putin's Movement Not Taking On Bigger Role Until 2016, Say Experts

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The All-Russian People's Front (ONF), the organization created in 2011 on the eve of the State Duma elections and headed by President Vladimir Putin, made the headlines this week as federal and some regional authorities announced plans to give it more power in various decision-making processes.

The Economic Development Ministry introduced a bill Monday obliging executive authorities, including regional and municipal ones, to discuss “strategic planning documents” with the ONF.

The next day, Vyacheslav Nagovitsyn, governor of Russia's republic of Buryatia, tasked his local government with getting the organization's approval before going forward with

procurements worth more than 500,000 rubles (\$7,700).

But the actual intention is not to give the ONF more decision-making powers: It is waiting for 2016 to take on a bigger role in the State Duma elections, pundits told *The Moscow Times*.

“It is the left leg of authority, as [Vladislav] Surkov [the former deputy head of the presidential administration said to be behind the most notorious political projects of the noughties] used to say 10 years ago, that is needed in case the right leg — the United Russia party — goes numb,” Dmitry Oreshkin, an independent political analyst, told *The Moscow Times* in a phone interview.

United Russia Alternative

The ONF was created in the spring of 2011, seven months prior to the State Duma elections, and was quickly identified by media and analysts as an alternative to the United Russia party, which was losing popularity. In the December elections marred by allegations of mass rigging, the party barely scraped together a majority of votes, and its popularity has continued to decline, especially in urban areas.

The ONF describes itself as a “public movement,” but is an officially registered organization with a charter and fixed structure that includes central headquarters, regional headquarters and an executive committee. The official website of the ONF states that its creation was Putin's initiative, and the president has met with its members regularly since 2012.

The idea of a public movement as opposed to political parties that have discredited themselves in the eyes of society belonged to Vyasheslav Volodin, Surkov's successor, Oreshkin said.

“The United Russia party is losing its popularity, and the Kremlin has acknowledged that for some time now. Volodin had been contemplating this project for about five years,” the analyst added.

During the very first meeting right after the presidential elections in 2012 Putin set the goals for the ONF: monitoring of the implementation of his decrees and the fight against corruption.

“The All-Russian People's Front should indeed become a broad public movement in order for all citizens to have the opportunity to set tasks, make sure they're completed ... [and] directly introduce suggestions that would later become laws and government decisions,” Putin was cited on the website as saying a year later.

ONF members range from the prominent film director Stanislav Govorukhin, one of Putin's most passionate supporters, and Yaroslav Kuzminov, rector of the Higher School of Economics and the husband of Central Bank head Elvira Nabiullina, to numerous State Duma and regional legislature deputies.

“It could work out [as an alternative to United Russia]: It's a non-political organization that proclaims it doesn't participate in elections, and they use openly leftist rhetoric, like fairness, fighting against oligarchs, public interests etc.,” Oreshkin told *The Moscow Times*.

New Tasks

Currently the People's Front is known for holding numerous congresses and conferences devoted to society's most pressing problems, like health care and education, as well as for monitoring state procurements and exposing corruption in them.

In light of the latter activity, the Buryatia governor Nagovitsyn ordered his government to get the ONF's approval for any procurements worth more than 500,000 rubles.

“I'm telling everybody, including district heads, to sign agreements with the People's Front and, whatever tender is launched, let the activists participate in decision making. The Russian president commissioned them to monitor [it] — let them monitor it,” the governor was cited by the state-run RIA Novosti news agency as saying.

The initiative was not greeted with immediate enthusiasm in the ONF.

Anton Getta, head of the ONF's “For Fair Procurements” project, said ONF activists shouldn't do the job of government officials.

“Specialists who deal with procurements ... get paid for their job, and their main task is to carry out open, competitive procedures, [and be] effective in terms of spending budget funds,” Getta was cited as saying Tuesday on the ONF website.

A day earlier the Economic Development Ministry introduced a draft decree suggesting discussing all important state documents and plans with the ONF, including the president's address to the Federal Assembly (both chambers of parliament), budget prognosis and national security strategy.

The proposal is based on the federal law that allows the involvement of public organizations or unions in drafting such documents, but to involve just one — the People's Front — would be odd, said Yekaterina Schulmann, a political scientist and associate professor at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration.

“It can't be outlined in an actual law — that one particular public movement will have power in discussing government plans,” she told The Moscow Times in a phone interview.

“The People's Front is a public movement. It doesn't have any legal powers, the only influence it has is its meetings with the president and other top-ranking officials,” she added.

The ministry's initiative, according to Schulmann, might turn into meetings and discussions, but these discussions would not obligate anyone to make particular decisions. “Decisions are made by other people: government officials, presidential administration staff and State Duma deputies,” she said.

At the same time it could simply be a way of keeping the movement afloat in people's mind, said Mikhail Vinogradov, head of the Petersburg Politics think tank. “They are trying to make people remember that in addition to United Russia, there's the People's Front,” he said.

“I don't see any real activity of the People's Front at the moment,” he told The Moscow Times.

Waiting in the Wings

Both Schulmann and Oreshkin agreed that while at the moment the ONF might not take on any serious role, it certainly will in 2016.

“The whole idea seems to be to have a back-up plan lined up before 2016, in case United Russia continues to have relatively low popularity,” said Schulmann. If that happens, the ONF will support candidates in the single-member districts — as opposed to party list candidates — and pro-Kremlin forces will eventually get a majority in the State Duma, she said.

Oreshkin echoed her statement. “United Russia is wearing itself out, that's why the single-member constituencies system was returned,” he said.

At the same time the movement can hardly be considered a replacement for United Russia, said Schulmann: It is more of an addition to it. “It is sometimes presented as United Russia's competition, but it's more for show,” she said.

If Putin decides to run for the presidency in 2018, the ONF could also help. “They can imitate a broad public movement, rather than a party, that could help the candidate to not be associated directly with the United Russia party, which by that time might be even less popular than in 2016,” Schulmann said.

The ONF did not respond to a request for comments sent by The Moscow Times.

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