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[The All Russia People's Front: A party with no power?](#)



More and more frequently, Vladimir Putin attends meetings with activists of the All Russia People's Front (ONF). He provides them with all necessary support and speaks of the 'special role' the party plays. The prospect of the ONF becoming an 'umbrella brand' for all pro-Putin forces at the elections of State Duma deputies planned for September is actively discussed. What is the ONF's real place in the system of informal political ties?

The ONF emerged in May, 2011 when it was not known for certain whether Dmitry Medvedev was going to run for another term in office or not. However, both Putin and Medvedev's teams were preparing their 'bosses' for the upcoming campaign. Both of them - for a victorious campaign. As Mikhail Zygar' wrote in his book 'All the Kremlin's Men' - Putin was in need of a 'new Surkov' - and Vladislav Volodin, the head of the governmental apparatus back then, became he. The ONF was established in the run-up to the 2011-2012 elections: United Russia was supposed to be handed over to Medvedev as the future prime-minister whereas Putin was supposed to join the campaign with new allies: a broader coalition of moral role models. The Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies, which was supposed to write a program for Putin, was invented together with the Front, uniting 'all of the healthy forces'. However, in the end, the Kremlin managed this all on its own. In fact, since August, Putin had been the one with one foot in the Kremlin. Thus, an additional crutch in the form of the ONF turned out to be rather unnecessary. Ultimately, the program was drafted by the presidential administration and the ONF only played the role of 'figurant' during the elections. Putin met the Front's activists after he had already been elected president in 2012.

The ONF existed only in virtual reality until 2013: the founding congress, which established the movement, was held only two years after the emergence of the Front as such. However, its growth was hampered even after that: for example, attempts to form a regional network in locations where elections had been organized were hindered by contradictions between the plans of the movement and the ruling party. ONF offices were opened on the sites of Putin's counseling offices, and the ONF had in fact served as an institution of his authorized representatives until 2013.

Perhaps the ONF would have long been a sort of political decoration which the Kremlin is in the habit of acquiring, had it not been for the 2014 crisis: sanctions, confrontation with the West, plummeting global oil prices etc. The main domestic political challenge - to survive the 2016 elections. The Kremlin started to safeguard itself: it feared enhanced political risks coming both from 'the bottom' (the fall in living standards of the population has made the issue of electoral support of the authorities unpredictable), and on behalf of the non-systemic opposition that has regularly attacked Putin and his milieu. In early 2014, the mixed electoral system was reinstated. In accordance with it, half of the deputies are elected in single-member constituencies, and this has greatly expanded the Kremlin's room for maneuver. Whereas previously, 'United Russians' were Putin's only representatives in parliament, currently, so-called 'Putiners' can easily enter parliament both as 'United Russians' and 'Front-liners'.

However, the peculiarity of the ONF's situation lies in the fact that it has to be a surrogate wherever it performs certain functions. The main paradox of the ONF lies in the fact that it is, in essence, a 'ruling party' with no power. Informal functions of this social movement supported by voluntary donations are impressive: governors are dismissed, regional officials are rendered accountable and the government is criticized based on

the content of ONF reports. The ONF does not hesitate to confront officials, threaten them with dismissal and indulge in self-importance. It is Putin's privileged force exclusively that does not owe any debt to anybody. In fact, the ONF fulfills the functions of a political party to a certain extent, although it exercises its 'rule' not via parliament but via Putin and the presidential administration. And since Putin and the presidential administration are interested only in ratings, the ONF is contributing towards Putin's rating, but has no direct opportunity to fight for seats in parliament. And hence the paradox: United Russia has seats in parliament but makes inconvenient, unpopular decisions whereas the ONF is engaged in populism but lacks seats.

All mentions of the ONF having deputies in the lower house of parliament only remain true up until the very moment that the 'in favor' button has to be pushed: at this point, every 'Front liner' turns into a disciplined 'United Russian'. Besides, it is impossible to draw a clear line between the ONF and United Russia: prominent 'United Russians' are members of the ONF; and the results of the 2011 elections show that 14 out of the 85 'Front-liners' who entered parliament turned out to be members of the party (and the majority of non-partisan members joined United Russia afterwards). And it's no wonder that some of them find this procedure more and more painful. In 2013, it was suggested that a sub-group of 'Front-liners' within the faction of United Russia be established: the former disagreed with the stance of the ruling party on issues such as the abolition of per mille, housing and public utilities reforms, the establishment of public-private companies, the taxation of individual entrepreneurs, and the introduction of time zones. However, their attempts to isolate themselves were quickly suppressed by the party's leadership.

A new election campaign is fast approaching, and competition is intensifying. A bitter fight has broken out between representatives of the ONF and the ruling party for the formation of electoral lists in the regions. And despite the fact that both United Russia and the ONF are managed by the presidential administration and both structures are supervised by Vyacheslav Volodin, they are not prevented from competing.

New sociology prompts competition, too. According to a survey by the Levada-Center, the popularity of the ONF has significantly increased over the course of the last two years. The number of those who are 'totally' or 'rather in favor of the Front had increased from 38% in 2013, to 60% by August 2015. It is a powerful resource which evokes both euphoria and excessive expectations. Against the backdrop of such a head rush, the 'Front-liners' may well harbor the illusion that it is only one thing - United Russia - which holds control over 'access to parliament' in its hands - which interferes with access to real power. And even if, in any case, the lists are to be agreed upon in the presidential administration, a campaign targeted at 'annihilation' of the adversary will inevitably be carried out by both parties at the pre-selection stage. The worse the situation of 'United Russia', and the higher the rating of the ONF, the harder it will be for the Kremlin to harmonize relations between these two structures, even though they operate under the same 'roof'.

To a certain extent, the ONF can be labeled 'the Volodin edition of the Surkov's Civic Chamber'. The Civic Chamber emerged in late 2004, which coincided with the beginning of the deepest political reforms of Putin's first tenure. It was supposed to become the mouthpiece of 'constructive' civil society. The Civic Chamber also comprised 'two of every kind': industrialists, workers, trade unionists, human rights defenders, etc. Seemingly, everything appeared to be done by the book: the Civic Chamber was supposed to legitimize the Kremlin's controversial actions while minimizing the potential for dialogue between the power elite and 'moral role models' in society. The Civic Chamber almost disappeared from the public sphere with Surkov's departure from the Kremlin. However, the Civic Chamber was a bit more fortunate in other terms: a special law was passed pertaining to it. However, unlike the Civic Chamber, the ONF is a combination of the Civic Chamber and the 'pro-Putin movement' - and laws pertaining to them will not be passed, at least not at the moment. Incidentally, it is Alexander Brechalov - a co-chairman of the Central Staff of the ONF - who is the secretary of the Civic Chamber. In this fact, one can see a cautious attempt by the ONF to seize a sort of 'patronage' over the remnants of the Civic Chamber (so that it remains in ruins perhaps).

The ONF is a dangerous phenomenon in Russian politics: it blurs traditional institutions of power. It is a political movement which has acquired channels for promoting legislative initiatives without legitimate power (without ever having been elected), or legal grounds to participate in public decision-making. It is a movement which claims powers to 'dismiss' elected governors. It is a structure which plays the role of 'His Majesty's Opposition' and not 'the Opposition to his Majesty'. It cooperates with security forces (*siloviki*), and opposes the government, in line with all the approved procedures. The ONF 'closely follows' ministers, officials and governors. It is accountable to no one but the Kremlin chiefs. While the role of traditional political institutions

of power and state government institutions is blurred, the role of the power elite itself delegitimizes since there are no other governance tools apart from the official ones at hand. It boils down to an unnatural juxtaposition of Putin's informal power and formal state structures where the latter are strengthened at the expense of the former. And maybe, in a few years from now, no one will be surprised to see an article 'on the leading and guiding role of the ONF in Russian society' drafted into the Russian Constitution.

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