

# Russian Unions' Political Ambitions after the Elections

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The growing politicization of Russian labor unions in recent years reached a peak after the December 2011 parliamentary and March 2012 presidential elections, when both official and alternative labor unions began discussing the possibility of creating their own political parties. Despite their formal political neutrality, Russian labor unions have always exercised political influence, including through informal contacts with the country's top leaders, lobbying the legislative and executive branches, and building alliances with political parties. Under current conditions, political levers provide an even more important mechanism for unions to advance labor interests than do social partnership institutions or mobilizing labor protests.

## **Overall Situation**

Russia's labor union movement is divided into two competing camps: the official unions affiliated with the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR), the successor to the Soviet council of trade unions (VTsSPS), and alternative unions that have no relationship to the FNPR. Currently the FNPR dominates the labor sphere. As the successor of the VTsSPS, the FNPR inherited its material and financial resources. It claims to represent 95 percent of unionized workers, giving it 24.2 million members or 45 percent of all Russian employees.<sup>1</sup> SOTsPROF (the Association of Socialist [later Social] Trade Unions) was established in 1989 in Moscow as an alternative to the Soviet VTsSPS labor union and reconstituted in 1991. SOTsPROF occupies an autonomous spot

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.fnpr.ru>, as well as Irina Olimpieva, "'Free' and 'Official' Labor Unions in Russia: Different Modes of Labor Interest Representation." *Russian Analytical Digest* No. 104, October 27, 2011, <http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/rad/details.cfm?lng=en&id=133748>.

in the union movement, distancing itself from FNPR and the independent free unions, including the Confederation of Labor of Russia (KTR), the All-Russian Confederation of Labor (VKT), and a host of smaller union organizations.

Unions made their first statements about increasing political involvement in the new political climate immediately after the December 2011 State Duma elections. FNPR Chairman Mikhail Shmakov announced at a January meeting of the FNPR general council that it was imperative for his union to participate in politics and to support Vladimir Putin as a presidential candidate. In March, after a heated discussion in the pages of the FNPR newspaper

*Solidarity*<sup>2</sup> about the need to create a political party, a decision was adopted to resurrect the Union of Labor political movement, which had competed in the 1995 and 1999 Duma elections and will ultimately be converted into a political party. During a March 12 roundtable discussion that included representatives from the main free unions, there was a discussion about the need to increase the political weight of the unions in the wider democratic movement. One of the options under discussion was the establishment of a new party.

Key	
FNPR	Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia
VTsSPS	All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions
SOTsPROF	Association of Socialist [later Social] Trade Unions
KTR	Confederation of Labor of Russia
VKT	All-Russian Confederation of Labor
MPRA	Interregional Union of Automobile Workers

### **Why Are the Russian Unions Seeking Political Influence?**

The unions' intense search for political levers is a result of the inefficiency of the existing neo-corporatist model of "social partnership," which generally resembles the classic European model of social dialogue. Labor is supposed to represent and negotiate its interests through the existing social partnership institutions – tripartite and bipartite commissions at different levels of government and industry with the participation of representatives of labor, employers, and the state – rather than via direct political participation.

However, the practical implementation of this system has a number of flaws at every level that undermines the core idea of social partnership. The key problems include the state's dominant role in crafting labor and social policy, the low status of federal-level social partnership institutions, collective bargaining agreements that serve as guidelines rather than binding requirements, the absence of an effective association of employers at the branch and territorial levels, and the lack of possibilities for legal labor protests in enterprises. Given the imbalance of forces in the social dialogue, the unions and employers do not negotiate with each other directly with the state functioning as an intermediary, as in the European neo-corporatist model, but rather fight each other for direct influence over the state.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.solidarnost.org/numb/2012/02/08/numb\\_20079.html](http://www.solidarnost.org/numb/2012/02/08/numb_20079.html)

### **Political Levers of Union Influence**

In practice, Russian unions have always used a variety of political tools: establishing direct contacts with top state leaders, building ties to government agencies and bureaucrats dealing with labor and social policy issues, electing their representatives to legislative bodies through various political parties and blocs, organizing inter-fraction parliamentary groups for lobbying labor and social interests, and representing labor demands in mayors' offices. Such direct political action formally contradicts the existing model of social partnership. Thus, the unions often carry out their political work through semi-formal or informal means. As a result, Russia's current political system is a kind of hybrid between corporatism and pluralism, with a predominance of informal institutions.

Over the history of post-Soviet Russia, the political strategies of the unions have changed in response to changes in institutional conditions and the political landscape. Overall, it is possible to identify two periods of development, though there is considerable variation even within these periods. The first lasted from the beginning of the 1990s to 2000, when the unions were actively involved in building alliances with a wide variety of political parties, blocs, and associations, and gained practical experience. After their failure in the 1995 elections, for example, many FNPR representatives won seats in the 1999 Duma elections thanks to the success of the FNPR's Union of Labor political association, which worked within the framework of the Fatherland-All Russia party. During this period, the presence of union representatives and active FNPR lobbying in the Duma allowed the unions to block the government's efforts to adopt an extremely liberal version of the new Labor Code.

Beginning in 2000, political conditions changed. For the FNPR the main goal of its political strategy was to gain access to President Putin as the most powerful political player and United Russia as the most powerful political organization. The FNPR bet on Putin and supported him from the very beginning in the difficult 2000 presidential elections and maintained its "loyalty" to him until today. In 2012, FNPR officially supported Putin's candidacy and the union leaders were Putin's official representatives in various electoral districts where they organized rallies in support of him. During the December protest rallies seeking a new round of Duma voting, the FNPR even offered to bring 100,000 people onto the streets in support of the elections.

The alternative unions have also made efforts to set up political alliances, working with the Communists and Just Russia instead of United Russia. However, with the adoption of the FNPR-influenced 2001 labor code, the conditions in which the free unions operated significantly deteriorated. Therefore, for most of the 2000s, the alternative unions were focused mainly on surviving and preserving their organizations.

### **What Are the Unions Unhappy About Today?**

Even in conditions where they have informal political influence, none of the unions are satisfied with their current ability to impact labor and social policy making. They are unhappy for several reasons:

- The unions do not like their alliances with the existing parties because they must support the ideology of the party rather than represent the interests of the workers. Additionally, participating in someone else's party requires the unions to fight to get their representatives on the party list, a struggle that is not always successful. According to one discussion in the newspaper *Solidarity*, "Non-union parties will always be under outside pressure. Either ideologically-driven politicians or the financial sponsors who represent the employers will influence the party."
- Thanks to the growing protest movement in recent years, the free unions have gained strength and organizational potential. As a result, they have growing ambitions to assert their influence at the federal level. At the same time, the FNPR-influenced labor code excludes them from the system of social partnership. They are beginning to understand that without political influence, their battle for worker rights will not be effective. Even the electoral success of Interregional Union of Automobile Workers' (MPRA) leader Aleksey Etmanov, who for the first time in the history of the free trade unions won a seat in the Leningrad regional council on the Just Russia ticket in December 2011, is not enough to satisfy their broader plans.
- The unions are unhappy with the changes in the political landscape after the recent elections. FNPR invested a lot in the elections, but it did not secure desirable representation because of the relatively poor showing of United Russia in the Duma elections. There is no strong center-left or social democratic party, which would provide a natural home for the unions. At the same time, the right side of the political spectrum, represented by Mikhail Prokhorov, is growing stronger, while the Communists are moving further to the extreme by setting up an alliance with the nationalists.

### **Chances for Success**

There are a variety of factors that might work for the success of the unions in the political arena. The key advantages that the unions hold are the following:

- The main possibility for success, distinguishing the unions from other new political parties and movements, is that the unions are already mass organizations with infrastructure and experience mobilizing workers. Today the FNPR has 24 million members, many local chapters, and relatively strong discipline. The alternative unions are traditionally strong in terms of mobilization and organizing protests.

- The unions gained extensive experience since the beginning of the 1990s in creating political associations and winning political influence. The FNPR was particularly successful in creating the Union of Labor in 1999.
- There is a growing trend toward consolidation among the free unions movement in recent years. Despite the traditionally high ambitions among individual leaders, they are looking for a way to work together.

There are also obstacles, which exist primarily within the unions themselves.

- Many regional and local union organizations are against participating in the political process. The FNPR's alliance with United Russia and its decision to join Putin's All-Russia People's Front in May 2011 provoked considerable dissatisfaction among the unions. Although ultimately a majority expressed their backing, among the primary union organizations and rank-and-file union members, there is strong support for the idea that the unions should remain politically neutral.
- There is a similar problem among alternative unions. Since they are based on the ideology of fighting for worker rights, it is even more difficult for them to explain to their members the necessity of politicization. Political activity will necessarily require a reduction in the militancy of the unions, limiting protests and preserving social peace when a "friendly party" is in power, which puts free unions in a difficult situation since mobilizing protests is their main resource in relations with employers.
- Party building necessarily requires the investment of resources, which could create splits inside the FNPR. With Putin's return to the presidency, the FNPR leaders can count on the continuation of his support and the preservation of their informal political influence, which calls into question the necessity of investing the enormous amount of resources required to set up a new party.

### **Possible Consequences in Case of Success**

Neither the FNPR nor the free unions seek to dominate the political arena. However, they would like to have institutional opportunities to represent the interests of labor in the legislative and executive branches. The basic goal in creating a party is to cross the seven-percent barrier to gain entry to the Duma. Nonetheless, the appearance on the political stage of new parties in the social-democratic camp will change the overall political landscape.

The growing political competition complicates the already difficult situation in the union movement. Even though it is already clear from the unions' internal discussions that ideologically all "union parties" will have identical platforms, the further politicization will deepen the split between the official and alternative unions,

adding political competition to competition for union membership and political ambitions to the existing ambitions of the union leaders.

Strengthening the direct political influence of the unions will inevitably further undermine the significance of the institutions of social partnership and erode their already low effectiveness. As for preserving or changing the informal character of the unions' political influence, the result depends not on the unions, but on the level of change or stasis within the general Russian institutional environment. It is clear, though, that the unions are positioning themselves to take advantage of any new opportunities that arise.