“Efficient state and united society”, “social control and civic initiative”, “We are for Russia. The truth is with us. The victory lies ahead”: these are some the constituent values proclaimed in the charter of the newly-founded (June 12) by the Kremlin movement called “All-Russia Social People’s Front – For Russia” (in Russian: Общероссийское общественное движение Народный фронт – за Россию). Interestingly enough, its abbreviation in Russian – ONF – is the same as the old and so far unsuccessful “Russian People’s Front” launched by Vladimir Putin in 2011 before the highly contested parliamentary and presidential elections. Its first congress elected unanimously President Putin as its leader who will enjoy unrestricted powers in proposing and deciding on a variety of topics. Three chairs will form a kind of committee placed under Putin to ensure technically that power will not be concentrated in the hands of a single person. Executive mandates will last five years which implies that the persons appointed today will be still in office during the next State Duma elections. Membership in the movement is individual and not collective. Although the organization is meant to be a movement and not a party, its charter does not rule out the possibility that it takes part in future elections. The novelty is that the ONF will comprise eleven centers monitoring public preferences on a number of issues vital for the country’s progress (human rights, education, healthcare, family, immigration, economic growth and support of entrepreneurship, transport infrastructure, integration processes in the post-Soviet space and so on). Other centers are expected to be created in the future. Renowned experts in the related fields rather than politicians will head those centers and evaluate the social situation in Russia. What is the reason for creating such a new structure? Why was it necessary to form it now? During previous Putin’s presidential mandates similar institutes were launched (Institute for social projection; Institute for contemporary development; Strategy-2020) but none of them actually contributed to change the political landscape and practices in Russia.

Three main points should be taken into account in order to respond to these questions. Firstly, the formation of the new ONF is an endeavor to establish a reliable for the Kremlin mechanism of connection with people’s sentiments and concerns about social, economic and political life in Russia – a sort of (the currently missing) feedback on the government’s activities. Potentially it establishes a control over social

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THE NEW ALL-RUSSIA PEOPLE’S FRONT: AN OLD WINE IN A NEW BOTTLE?

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orientations and ideas as well as over the process of response carried out by the executive power (some Russian mass media referred to the ONF as a parallel structure to Medvedev’s government). To some extent it continues the logic of the verticalization of power since the information is channeled directly to the President. The expected timely, precise and comprehensive overview of the dynamics within the Russian society should help the Kremlin to predict and avoid social turbulences in the future such as those that occurred in 2011-12 challenging Russia’s political elite credibility.

Secondly, the new ONF combines political goals and logic with social ones presenting the former as explicitly justified, requested by the latter. Apparently the name of the movement suggests that its core is represented by people’s interests and that it promotes a bottom-up approach to politics. However, one can spot an attempt to find an institutional solution of uniting people around a national leader who will not only lead them but shall also listen to and resolve their concerns. In a nutshell, this mindset serves the Kremlin’s top-down approach which is currently weakened by a shaky popular support for its political decisions. Indeed the information collected through the ONF channel will be ultimately processed and filtered by the Kremlin and its consequent policies will be justified as based on people’s and experts’ assessment. In addition, one should not overlook the relationship between Putin’s “United Russia” party (UR) and the ONF. The UR is unable to build a wider consensus on the Kremlin’s policies as well as to provide an accurate representation of Russians’ views. Therefore after the 2011-12 protests a new structure not directly associated with political parties was desirable. The UR will continue to operate in the State Duma as an official political body, whereas the ONF will supplement its shortcomings in the social domain outside of the parliament. Considering the possibility for the ONF to participate in elections, it is difficult to say whether at some point in the future the ONF will prevail over UR as a main political leverage.

Thirdly, there is a general need to re-conceptualize the political and social values of the relationship population-political elite. In other words, a new model of bilateral dialogue and interaction capable to identify gaps and to advance viable solutions reflecting the interests of all social parties is highly required. Politicians have to fine-tune their approaches to people’s will and the latter to find their proper active role in political life. Both sides should advance initiatives in that direction and commence a mutually agreed institutional reform reflecting a new political consensus. The question remains whether the new ONF will be able to serve that purpose. So far its political and structural rationale recalls the meaning of the say “old wine in a new bottle”. Only a greater awareness of the weight of the social component in Russian politics may change that condition.