The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

From the Archive: Yeltsin Sacks Stepashin, Anoints Putin

By Brian Whitmore

August 10, 1999



President Boris Yeltsin on Monday fired Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin and named security chief Vladimir Putin to head what would be the fifth government in 17 months — then startled the nation by saying he wants Putin to succeed him as president.

Putin, 46, appeared to have a strong chance for confirmation as prime minister — but the likelihood of his actually being elected Yeltsin's successor seems remote.

Yeltsin's actions seemed motivated by concern that Stepashin had shown insufficient zeal in protecting the Kremlin's interests in upcoming parliamentary elections — and by the president's desire to have a tougher political enforcer on the case.

Yeltsin, whose term expires in July, said he was certain Putin, who until Monday headed the Federal Security Service, or FSB, "will be very useful to the country."

"I have decided to name a man who in my opinion is capable of uniting society, based on the broadest political forces, to ensure the continuation of reforms in Russia," Yeltsin said, speaking slowly and with some effort in a televised address. "I have confidence in him."

"And I want those who go to the polls next July to be confident in him as well."

Putin declared his heretofore unexpected presidential candidacy, saying "I will undoubtedly run for president."

Putin added that he had not been planning a presidential run — but added that he was accustomed to obeying and would seek office if ordered to. "We are military men, and we will implement the decision that has been made," he said.

Yeltsin's decision to dump yet another prime minister evoked mostly weariness and head-shaking from other politicians at the revolving door in the White House government headquarters.

Stepashin served just under three months, the shortest term of any of Yeltsin's prime ministers, following Yevgeny Primakov, fired May 12 after eight months; Sergei Kiriyenko, fired Aug. 23, 1998 after five months; and Viktor Chernomyrdin, fired March 24, 1998 after more than five years in office. Yegor Gaidar served as acting prime minister from June to December 1992.

In a brief farewell to his Cabinet, a shaken Stepashin — who has been a staunch Yeltsin loyalist for a decade — indicated that he was unhappy with his firing.

"He thanked me for my good work — and dismissed me," Stepashin said, telling his government of his meeting with Yeltsin on Monday morning. "I honestly expressed my position concerning my resignation to Boris Nikolayevich [Yeltsin], but this is his right as president and commander in chief. I told the president that I have been, am, and will be with him until the end."

Stepashin described Putin as "a worthy person" and wished him luck.

Yeltsin named FSB deputy director Nikolai Patrushev as Putin's replacement at the security agency, and signed a decree setting December 19 as the date for elections to the State Duma, the lower house of parliament.

Neither Yeltsin nor Stepashin gave any reason for the shake-up. Putin said the reason for the change was the upcoming elections and escalating tensions in Dagestan, where at least five villages were seized by Islamic militants.

News media have speculated that the conflict could be used by the Kremlin as a pretext for declaring a state of emergency and canceling elections.

"Putin is tougher than Stepashin and has the support of the security organs," wrote the weekly newspaper Moskovskiye Novosti, which last week predicted Stepashin's firing and

Putin's appointment. "And a readiness for tough decisions and authority in the security apparatus is exactly what Putin will need."

On Monday, Putin said there was "no basis" for a state of emergency. Yeltsin also promised that presidential elections will be held on time next year.

"In exactly one year's time, for the first time in the country's history, the first president of Russia will transfer power to a fresh, newly elected president," Yeltsin said.

Putin asked members of Stepashin's government to remain in their posts, saying there would be no significant changes in the Cabinet.

As prime minister, Putin would automatically become acting president until new elections can be held, if the often-ill Yeltsin dies or resigns before his term is up.

The Duma, which is required by law to consider Putin's candidacy within a week, set debate on the nomination for Monday at 2:00 p.m. If the Duma fails three times to confirm a prime minister, Yeltsin is constitutionally required to dissolve the lower chamber of parliament. Duma Speaker Gennady Seleznyov said that he "didn't exclude" the possibility that Putin would be confirmed on the first attempt.

The Duma should "not waste weeks on discussing Putin, who could be fired in three months," Seleznyov said.

Yeltsin's dumping of Stepashin coincides with the formation of a new, anti-Kremlin political block, Fatherland-All Russia, which unites ambitious Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov with powerful regional governors. Analysts say that Stepashin was fired, at least in part, for failing to prevent that alliance.

Luzhkov is widely believed to be preparing a presidential run to succeed Yeltsin, who cannot run again. The president's inner circle, dubbed the "family" by the Russian media, distrusts Luzhkov and hopes to install a successor who would preserve their privileged position — and prevent them from possible prosecution on corruption charges.

The Kremlin, specifically Yeltsin's chief of staff Alexander Voloshin, tried in vain to block the alliance — which gives Luzhkov a formidable political machine in Russia's far-flung provinces. When they failed, it appeared that power was slipping away from the Kremlin.

As soon as Fatherland-All Russia was formed, observers were saying it could dominate elections to the Duma — and give Luzhkov a boost in his presidential race.

"The process of forming a new ruling party was happening quickly and without the Kremlin's participation," Andrei Ryabov, a political analyst at Carnegie Moscow Center, said. "Stepashin was being too passive for Yeltsin's liking during this process. He was standing on the sidelines and playing a neutral role instead of protecting the Kremlin's interests."

Putin is a tougher figure, known for leaning on regional leaders. As deputy head of Kremlin

administration, and more recently as FSB director and head of the advisory Security Council, Putin was not shy about opening criminal cases against uncooperative elites in Russia's provinces.

"Stepashin was loyal, but Yeltsin demands more than loyalty," Yury Korgunyuk of the INDEM think-tank said. "Putin's appointment can be seen as a message to the governors."

Ryabov said that with Putin as prime minister, elections to the Duma will take on "a different character" — with increased use of kompromat, or compromising documentary evidence, and "administrative methods" to combat parties distasteful to the Kremlin.

"I am afraid that the elections will take on a tragi-comic character," Ryabov said.

Other observers pointed to the fact that Stepashin was becoming an unacceptably independent figure for Yeltsin — who is notorious for jealously guarding the prerogatives of his office. Stepashin's recent trip to the United States, for example, received wide and favorable television coverage here; and he had spoken out over the fighting in Dagestan.

"Stepashin was operating very independently regarding the situation in Dagestan," Ryabov said. "He was giving orders to the military and the Interior Ministry, which is the president's sphere."

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/1999/08/10/from-the-archive-yeltsin-sacks-stepashin-anoints-putin-a66769