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Another Soviet Practice Returns as Moscow Installs a Russian as No. 2 in Ingushetia

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

VIENNA &mdash Moscow's installation of an ethnic Russian as the second-ranking official in Ingushetia is intended to improve the central government's control over the distribution of assistance there, something that Ingushetia President Yunus-Bek Yevkurov says he very much favors because of the rampant corruption left over from his predecessor's reign.

But because of the difficulties such outsiders have faced in Chechnya, South Ossetia and Dagestan, and because this practice of having a Russian "minder" in non-Russian republics recalls the practice of the late Soviet period, the newly installed Ingush prime minister, Alexei Vorobyev, faces an uphill task.

Moreover, it is even possible that his appointment, which was confirmed by the republic's parliament today, may exacerbate the negative feelings many Ingush already have about what they see as Moscow's clumsy interference in their republic under Murat Zyazikov,

the previous president whom Prime Minister Vladimir Putin imposed on Magas.

In some respects, Vorobyev is less an outsider than many others. He served in MVD units in the Caucasus between 1988 and 1992 and later worked in the Russian interior ministry, the Federal Protection Service and the State Customs Committee, where he rose to the rank of major general. Since 2008, he has been in Ingushetia.

From 2008 to 2009, Sobkorr.ru reported Thursday, he worked as an advisor to the Ingush president on work with law enforcement agencies and led the apparatus of the Anti-Terrorist Commission of that republic. More recently, he has been secretary of the Security Council of Ingushetia, and, for the past two weeks, acting prime minister.

In supporting Vorobyev's candidacy, Yevkurov noted that "everyone knows him. He has been working here for the same time I have," adding that the new prime minister "has interacted with the population and understands its mentality, traditions and customs." Consequently, Yevkurov said, he has been able to provide "enormous help" in the force structures.

Vorobyev's past experience in Ingushetia may lead some to discount the extent to which he is likely to be perceived locally as an outsider and by Moscow as someone who can be counted on not to go local, at least in comparison with the ethnic Russian second secretaries that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union routinely installed in non-Russian republics to control them.

But assumptions in that regard may be wrong. On the one hand, many of the ethnic Russians who were named to be second secretaries had spent time earlier in their careers in the places to which they were assigned. And on the other, as Kasparov.ru observer Yury Gladysh notes, Vorobyev's appointment is the third of its kind and appears to represent a trend.

As Gladysh points out, in the autonomous republics of the Russian Federation, "the position of prime minister does not mean what it usually does in sovereign countries." Instead, "the ideal premier," at least from Moscow's perspective, is someone who knows how to control financial aid coming from the center to make sure it goes to where it is intended.

Like its Soviet predecessor, the Russian Federation government likes to have its own people in these posts. And over the last year, it has employed this tactic twice in the North Caucasus. However, the results of these efforts, as Gladysh notes, have not always been as successful as the center hoped, largely because of resistance by local people.

Neither Chechnya nor South Ossetia was willing to put up with a Moscow-selected prime minister, and there was the infamous case, albeit at a lower level, when Russian efforts to install its own candidate in a Dagestani position led to a situation in which local officials resisted his installation with arms in their hands.

Given the level of corruption in Ingushetia at present, Gladysh says, one can only hope that Vorobyev will have better luck. The support he now appears to enjoy from Yevkurov may help, but it is far from providing an absolute guarantee in what is now the most unsettled republic of the North Caucasus.

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