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Military Caps Replaced by Plain Old Hats

By Nikolai Petrov

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A Kremlin decision to appoint Novosibirsk Governor Viktor Tolokonsky as its envoy to the Siberian Federal District on Thursday raises two key questions: Why now, and why so sudden?

Rumors surfaced weeks ago that the envoys to the Siberian, Volga and Northwestern districts might lose their jobs, and it was clear last month that Tolokonsky was on his way out when United Russia put his deputy, Vasily Yurchenko, at the top of its list of candidates for October regional elections. It makes sense to replace Tolokonsky before the vote because his reputation has been tainted by a scandal involving two officials with alleged gang ties. Even so, Tolokonsky, who takes over as presidential envoy from an ex-head of the General Staff, is a successful leader.

The reshuffle appears to be timed to coincide with the Kremlin-hosted Yaroslavl modernization conference, which opened Thursday. President Dmitry Medvedev, who will address the conference Friday, wants to show that his personnel policies are being modernized.

It’s tempting to call this Medvedev’s appointment. Indeed, Tolokonsky is the third economy-savvy governor to be named as presidential envoy in recent months, after Khabarovsk Governor Viktor Ishayev and Krasnoyarsk Governor Alexander Khloponin. All three have political ambitions, an increasing rarity among governors. But Tolokonsky is not just the successful governor of a modernized region. He is a professional economist with vast managerial and political experience who has won numerous elections, including for mayor and governor, and knows how to end conflicts and handle factions within the ruling elite.

This makes Tolokonsky’s new job look like a move by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin — a post-recession evolution of his personnel policies. It is no coincidence that all three regions to supply economy-savvy governors hosted United Russia congresses attended by Putin. One more, in the Volga Federal District, is coming up, possibly spelling the ouster of its envoy, Grigory Rapota.

What is happening here is presidential envoys in military caps are being replaced by envoys in hats simply because the situation has changed. Moscow needs to develop regional economies, and this job is better handled by civilians with economic backgrounds than former military officers.

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