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Supermarket Tycoon Takes Charge in Tula

By Alexey Eremenko

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Tula Governor Vyacheslav Dudka, a former army officer who got mired in a corruption scandal this year, was tentatively replaced Friday by the multimillionaire co-founder of the Sedmoi Kontinent supermarket chain who himself has a background in intelligence services.

Speculation about Dudka's imminent removal had been circulating since February, when a regional official charged with accepting a bribe of 40 million rubles ($1.4 million) said the money was for the governor. Five corruption inquiries into Dudka's staff are ongoing.

Dudka "voluntarily" filed a resignation letter, the Kremlin said on its web site. "Voluntary resignation" is a standard face-saving phrase afforded to outgoing officials who have displeased the government.

The new acting governor, Vladimir Gruzdev, a State Duma deputy with United Russia, refused to comment on his appointment or accept congratulations, Kommersant reported Saturday.

But in an indication that he is serious about the job, Gruzdev toured Tula on Sunday, examining utilities services and voicing city development plans, regional news site Newstula.ru reported.

United Russia has 10 days to put forth gubernatorial candidates. The Kremlin can then pick a name from the list or select its own nominee, who then will need to be confirmed by the United Russia-controlled regional legislature.

Dudka did not comment publicly on his reasons for stepping down or his future plans. But Kommersant reported, citing a source close to the former governor, that he had decided to quit because of a crackdown on his administration that, the daily said, was apparently Kremlin-sanctioned.

"I'm a team man," Dudka was quoted as saying.

He said he planned to work with "science, new technologies and, possibly, with space."

Dudka, 51, a Tula native, worked in the rocketry and artillery forces from 1982 until 1998, mostly as a military representative in the region's military industry enterprises. In 1986, he was involved in the cleanup of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

He served as deputy head of a Tula-based weapons maker, KBP Instrument Design Bureau, from 1998 until then-President Vladimir Putin appointed him governor in 2005.

Sergei Kondratenko, a local legislator with United Russia, said Dudka helped boost the region's economy and attract investment, RIA-Novosti reported.

But Just Russia lawmaker Vladislav Sukhoruchenkov accused him of corruption, an allegation echoed by Dudka's predecessor Vasily Starodubtsev and by the government's newspaper Rossiiskaya Gazeta, which added that the region's main industry, high-tech and heavy machinery, actually lacked investment.

Earlier this year, Dudka was investigated on suspicion of extorting the bribe of 40 million rubles for a land plot from supermarket chain Green, with his employee Viktor Volkov allegedly acting as a proxy in the case. Dudka was questioned by the Investigative Committee twice but never charged.

Gruzdev, 44, born in the Moscow region, worked as military interpreter in Angola and Mozambique in the 1980s and served in the Foreign Intelligence Service from 1991 to 1993. After that, he proceeded to become one of the founders of Sedmoi Kontinent, now a thriving high-end supermarket chain.

Forbes Russia magazine put Gruzdev's wealth at $950 million in April. He has also served as a Duma deputy since 2007, sitting on the Legislation Committee, where he helped forge several bills liberalizing legislation for economic crimes.

Gruzdev is willing to trade his Duma seat for the Tula governor's office because he has no chances for career advancement in the legislature, Kommersant reported, citing unidentified analysts. The Tula region itself is a convoluted tangle of power groups, which was what prompted the Kremlin to select an outsider to govern it, regional analyst Alexander Kynev told

the newspaper.

The reshuffle coincides with the Duma campaign, which starts in September. No recent data on support for political parties in the Tula region is available, but last year, United Russia won 45 percent at the vote for the Tula city legislature, followed by A Just Russia and the Communist Party with 16 percent each.

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