

After 11 Years, the Clout of Kremlin Envoys Wanes

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When Vladimir Putin carved the country into seven districts just after becoming president in May 2000, most commentators saw this as a necessary move to tighten the Kremlin's control over the regions.

Eleven years later, the federal districts and the presidential envoys who head them are widely seen as powerless rubber-stamp institutions.

Putin himself, who as prime minister is still seen as the country's paramount decision maker, highlighted this earlier this week.

At a convention of his United Russia party he asked Georgy Poltavchenko, the longtime envoy to the Central Federal District, whether he saw his recent appointment as governor of St. Petersburg as a promotion or demotion.

"Vladimir Vladimirovich, for me this is delightful," Poltavchenko thoughtfully [replied](#), prompting a laughing Putin to say, "Well put!"

Poltavchenko is a case in point. Although the former KGB officer and longtime Putin loyalist has been an avid [Twitter](#) user for some time, he has kept a low profile during his 11 years as presidential envoy.

This is true of most other presidential envoys, who rarely make headlines in the national media. Significantly, the Central Federal District, which covers 18 regions including Moscow, does not even have a web site to this day.

Analysts have argued that the most significant impact of the introduction of this new administrative layer has been to swell the bureaucrats' ranks. The country's total number of civil servants grew by more than 500,000 to 1.67 million between 2000 and 2009, according to official statistics.

Questions on the envoys' role mounted after President Dmitry Medvedev on Tuesday [replaced](#) the Northwestern Federal District's envoy, Ilya Klebanov, with Urals District envoy Nikolai Vinnichenko and appointed the Kremlin's domestic policy chief, Oleg Govorun, as Poltavchenko's successor.

The fact that Vinnichenko is a university classmate of Medvedev and that Govorun comes from the heart of the presidential administration has led analysts to speculate that the reshuffle is an attempt by the president to promote people close to him in the run-up to the State Duma elections in December.

Both Putin and Medvedev have said they might run in the presidential vote in March 2012, fueling speculation about a power struggle between the two.

But analysts contacted Wednesday said that while there were no imminent signs that the federal districts would be scrapped, they had too little resources to carry political weight in the future.

Alexander Kynev, who follows regional politics at the Foundation for Information Policy Development, said their purpose had long ceased to exist. "It is impossible to explain why they are necessary today," he said by telephone.

Kynev said the federal districts made sense as a means of controlling regional leaders before Putin abolished direct gubernatorial elections in 2004.

Initially, he explained, there were two main goals: to control the governors and bring regional laws in line with federal law. With both fulfilled, the envoys are left with little more than minor paperwork. "They are generals without an army," he said.

But Vyacheslav Glyazychev, a Public Chamber member and regional policy expert, said significant tasks remain even though some of the federal districts' initial functions have become redundant.

He said that besides collecting information and analysis for the Kremlin, the envoys continue to exert federal control over the regions by overseeing personnel decisions in law

enforcement agencies.

"All major appointments of Interior Ministry and prosecutors' staff go through their filter," he said.

Medvedev himself has signaled that he sees a role for the envoys. In 2010, he introduced an eighth federal district in the North Caucasus and earlier this year he suggested the introduction of a ninth, the Capital Federal District that would comprise Moscow with yet unspecified surrounding regions.

But Glyazychev cautioned that both cases did not necessarily relate to a strengthening of the envoy's position. Alexander Khloponin's authority, he said, rests more on the fact that he was made a deputy prime minister in addition to envoy for the North Caucasus Federal District.

He said the introduction of a new federal district surrounding the capital should not be expected anytime soon because the change would probably require a constitutional amendment. "This will be a very long process," he said.

The future impact of federal districts is expected to depend even more on the envoy's personality than anything else. "The right person will exert moral and political authority over governors," Glyazychev said.

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