

First the Reshuffle, Then the Kremlin Vote

By [Nikolai Petrov](#)

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In a normal democracy, a reshuffling of personnel occurs only after a new administration is voted into office. But in Russia's "managed democracy," elections serve more as the final chord in the highly orchestrated show rather than the prelude. For that reason, an increasing number of personnel changes are taking place in the run-up to the presidential election in March. Part of the reshuffle can be explained by the fact that rivalries are heating up between clans within the ruling elite. But at the same time, the power structure is going through a reconfiguration in anticipation of the next presidential term.

Georgy Poltavchenko — the longest-serving presidential envoy of former President Vladimir Putin's appointments — was confirmed as governor of St. Petersburg on Aug. 31, replacing Valentina Matviyenko, who was moved to the Federation Council. Shortly afterward, two more presidential envoys were replaced. The presidential envoy to the Northwestern Federal District, Ilya Klebanov, was relieved of his duties amid charges of ineffectiveness, corruption and causing conflicts, and was replaced by Nikolai Vinnichenko, a former university classmate

and trusted associate of President Dmitry Medvedev. Vinnichenko, who most recently served as the presidential envoy to the Urals Federal District, had been nominated for a series of senior government posts in the past, from prosecutor general to head of the presidential administration.

The newly vacated envoy post in the Urals was filled by Yevgeny Kuyvashev, a protege, close colleague and, according to some sources, relative of Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin. Kuyvashev also served as mayor of Tyumen for a short time and as deputy presidential envoy to the Urals Federal District for the past several months.

This promotion is something of a novelty because, previously, presidential envoys were not rotated before elections, and their replacements typically came from outside the region, not from their own staffs. This might be an indication that presidential envoys are becoming a more normal and functional part of the administrative bureaucracy.

There was some edge to Klebanov's dismissal because it coincided almost exactly with Prime Minister Putin's arrival in St. Petersburg for a United Russia conference. Conversely, when he was first named to the post in 2003, it appeared to be an honorable discharge from his previous position and a temporary step toward retirement — but he ended up staying in the job.

In short, the staffing changes reveal a relatively new tradition of making horizontal appointments when rotating presidential envoys into their new posts, while upholding the older tradition of giving the envoy post to officials who have been dismissed from their jobs.

Incidentally, the reshuffling has even affected the presidential administration: Oleg Govorun — a key member of presidential deputy chief of staff Vladislav Surkov's team — has resigned on the eve of the election. The real significance of his resignation will become clearer once Govorun's replacement in the Kremlin is announced. For now, it seems certain that the replacement of Matviyenko with Poltavchenko was only the start, and that many more high-level changes lie ahead.

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