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Gryzlov Quits Parliament After 8 Years

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin addressing the State Duma on April 6, 2009, as Speaker Boris Gryzlov listens. **Igor Tabakov**

State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov said Wednesday that he would not take up his seat, ending eight years at the helm of the lower house of parliament.

"I won't enter the Duma this time because I think it is not right to serve more than two consecutive terms as speaker of the house," Gryzlov said in a statement posted on his United Russia's web site.

He added that he would not resign from his post as head of United Russia's supreme council.

Although not entirely unexpected, the resignation sent speculation swirling that the Kremlin was responding to protests that shook the country after accusations of large-scale fraud in the Dec. 4 Duma elections.

United Russia made its worst-ever showing in the vote, winning 238 of the 450 seats

in parliament, where it previously had a comfortable two-thirds majority.

Although soft-spoken and gentlemanly, Gryzlov was widely seen by the non-parliamentary opposition as a stooge who ran parliament according to the Kremlin's commands.

It was unclear Wednesday who would replace him. Kremlin chief of staff Sergei Naryshkin and Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Zhukov, who both ran on United Russia's ticket, are considered front-runners for the job.

President Dmitry Medvedev is also eligible for the post after running as the sole candidate on United Russia's federal list.

First Deputy Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov, who was earlier tipped as a candidate, said he would continue his work in the government and would not take his Duma seat, Interfax reported.

Senior party official Andrei Vorobyov told Interfax that a decision on a successor would be made at a United Russia presidium session on Saturday.

Political observers said the Kremlin would have to pick someone more capable to find a common language with a more powerful Duma opposition.

"He is inappropriate in this situation after the elections," independent political analyst Alexander Kynev said about Gryzlov.

He added that Gryzlov was widely unpopular both inside and outside parliament. "They need someone who can make compromises," he said.

The Duma speaker wields considerable political power because he can freely decide how much time is allocated for debates and how it is divided between parliamentary factions.

"Parliamentarism is weaker, therefore the head of parliament has a greater role," Kynev said.

Gryzlov, a native of St. Petersburg like Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev, moved to Moscow in 1999 to head the pro-Putin Unity party's Duma faction. He later served two years and nine months as interior minister before returning to parliament, heading the faction of the newly created United Russia party. He was elected speaker after the 2003 Duma elections and re-elected in 2007.

A fervent supporter of Putin, Gryzlov was widely ridiculed for having said that parliament was not a place for discussion, although he never confirmed this quote and national media suggested that this was a misinterpretation comments made in December 2003, when he rejected calls for interparty talks by saying the Duma was "no place for political battles."

In 2009, he became the hero of a comic strip, published online at Gryzlovman.ru, depicting him as a superhero fighting monsters and saving lives.

Stanislav Belkovsky, an independent analyst and former Kremlin insider, said that under Gryzlov the Duma had deteriorated into an appendix of the presidential administration. "They have even started accepting that laws are not written by them anymore but rather by Kremlin

officials," he said of the lawmakers.

But Andrei Klimov, a United Russia deputy who was re-elected to the Duma, said much of the criticism directed against Gryzlov was unfair. "He is a pedantic man who always saw that regulations were observed 100 percent," he said by telephone.

Klimov also praised Gryzlov for giving the opposition a fair amount of talk time and always reading long draft bills "right through to the end."

But opposition leaders were unimpressed by his removal, arguing that Gryzlov never was an independent political figure. "They will just replace one person who executes Putin's will with another," Yabloko chairman Sergei Mitrokhin told Interfax.

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