

Belykh Fights Back After Putin Scolding

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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Kirov Governor and former liberal heavyweight Nikita Belykh fought back Wednesday against insinuations of negligence from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, saying the Cabinet head was misinformed in his criticism and refusing to apologize for taking a long-overdue vacation.

During a Tuesday videoconference with regional leaders, Putin scolded the Kirov regional government for allegedly hiking up fees for hot water.

"Why on earth did hot water prices jump 40 percent? Aren't regional leaders following this?" he told Belykh's cringing deputy via video link.

Upon hearing that Governor Belykh was on vacation, Putin said it was time to get back to work and instructed Deputy Governor Alexei Kuznetsov to "send him a little signal."

But in a [post](#) on his LiveJournal blog on Wednesday, Belykh wrote that Putin's criticism was misplaced on both counts. He wrote that the price spike was the result of a since-corrected accounting error, and, portraying himself as one of the country's hardest-working governors,

said he was fully justified in taking his children to Scandinavia for a few days.

"Those who follow my work know that I don't abuse my vacation privileges, to put it mildly. Over three years, I've accumulated 131 unused vacation days," Belykh wrote.

He added in an [interview](#) with RBC the same day that he was in Sweden showing his three children "where Karlson and Pippi Longstocking live" — referring to the Swedish children's book characters beloved in Russia.

Belykh is the only Putin-era opposition activist currently in high government office. Once co-head of the Union of Right Forces with current protest leader Boris Nemtsov, Belykh ceased to be an active government critic when he was appointed governor of the impoverished Kirov region in 2008.

Despite Belykh's likely ideological differences with Putin and the ruling United Russia party's poor showing in the Kirov region in December's State Duma elections, analysts warned about reading too much into the scolding.

"Putin wanted to send a signal about utility prices, and Belykh, being a well-known governor, got singled out," said Alexei Mukhin of the Center for Political Information, adding that he didn't consider it a sign that Belykh would be forced out anytime soon.

Leonid Gozman, a close colleague from Belykh's days in the Union of Right Forces, admitted that he was not aware of the spat, but said that in the current political climate, criticism from Putin, who is slipping in the polls, could actually help a politician.

A female employee at a musical school in the Novovyatsky district of the Kirov region, where the alleged tariff hike occurred, said she was annoyed by tariffs, which she said were indeed going up, unlike her salary.

But the employee, who asked for anonymity because she was not authorized to talk to the press, said she could not quote any figures about the actual size of the hikes, which are an annual occurrence in most regions.

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