

Kremlin Ousts Last Yeltsin-Era Governor

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

April 09, 2012

The  Moscow Times

A senior regional Gazprom executive has been confirmed as the next governor of Omsk, replacing the country's last Boris Yeltsin-era governor in a shuffle that may lead to a political thaw in the resources-rich region.

Viktor Nazarov, 49, an Omsk-born United Russia party official

with a legal background, was confirmed by 43 of the 44 lawmakers in the regional legislature Monday, a week after being nominated by President Dmitry Medvedev.

Nazarov heads Gazprom Mezhhregiongaz Omsk, the local subsidiary of state-owned gas giant Gazprom. The company has a strong position in the region, controlling the local oil refinery, one of world's biggest.

Nazarov on Monday promised an economic shift in the region but cautioned "not to expect fast changes," RIA-Novosti reported.

Nazarov will be inaugurated on May 30, replacing Leonid Polezhayev, 72, who took office in 1991.

Polezhayev, who has a reputation as an authoritarian leader, saw his last years in office tarnished by scandals, including a standoff with Omsk Mayor Viktor Shreider, also a member of United Russia. The longtime battle between the two officials over the economic development of the city of Omsk has prompted public protests and contributed to a drop in United Russia's local approval ratings. The party collected less than 40 percent of the Omsk vote in December's State Duma elections, one of the lowest among the regions.

The poor showing was a direct reflection of Polezhayev's low popularity, analysts said. Polezhayev had the lowest ratings of any of Russia's 83 regional leaders, according to 2011 research prepared by St. Petersburg Politics, a think tank.

The end of Polezhayev's tough rule promises to start the beginning of "a political thaw" in the region, regional analyst Alexander Kynev said.

"The situation in the region will change radically, like what happens in post-authoritarian countries," said Kynev, adding that one change would be an increase in opposition activity.

In an indication that the opposition sees Nazarov's arrival as a signal of change, local Communists de facto supported his candidacy. "We did not vote for Nazarov but for the end of Polezhayev's epoch," said Alexander Kravets, a Communist deputy in the Duma, Kommersant reported.

Omsk's mayoral election on June 17 will offer a litmus test of whether change is coming to the region, with several opposition candidates, including the head of the local branch of Yabloko, Sergei Kostarev, making plans to run.

A popular blogger and media entrepreneur, Ilya Varlamov, is also considering a bid for the mayor's office, Kostarev told RIA-Novosti.

Perm Governor Oleg Chirkunov has notified Medvedev that he will step down early, RIA-Novosti reported Monday. Chirkunov is serving a second term, which will expire in 2015.

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