

Smolensk Governor Resigns, LDPR Duma Deputy Takes Over as Acting Regional Head

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April 22, 2012



Sergei Antufyev

President Dmitry Medvedev has proposed a deputy from the Kremlin-loyal Liberal Democratic Party to lead the Smolensk region, a move analysts see as rewarding the party's support for the Kremlin.

Alexei Ostrovsky, a deputy from Vladimir Zhirinovsky's nationalist party and head of the State Duma's social and religious organizations committee, was appointed acting Smolensk governor, the presidential news service said Friday.

Ostrovsky, 37, said his appointment to the job was a surprise but added that it was "logical," since he had been on the president's personnel reserve list and has worked in the Smolensk region for the past nine years, Interfax reported.

Despite Zhirinovsky's notoriety for his nationalist agenda, his party has maintained a pro-Kremlin line and avoided opposition protests.

Senior United Russia party official Sergei Neverov described Ostrovsky as a “patriot.”

Presidential spokeswoman Natalya Timakova said that although the party is an “oppositional one,” it has been committed to “maintaining constructive dialogue” with the authorities, RIA-Novosti reported Friday.

The Liberal Democratic Party came fourth in the Smolensk region in December's State Duma elections, achieving only 14.7 percent of the vote.

Former Smolensk Governor Sergei Antufyev, a member of United Russia, had headed the region since December 2007. His term was due to end in December.

According to a governors survivability rating, published by a St. Petersburg think tank, Antufyev had the lowest rating because of the party's poor results in the region.

Analysts have also noted that Ostrovsky's appointment was made possible by his party's shift away from its far-right agenda.

Zhirinovsky said he views Ostrovsky's appointment as “positive,” the Regnum regional newswire reported Friday.

Ostrovsky, a graduate of the prestigious MGIMO diplomatic school, is known for his support of controversial initiatives against the opposition.

In 2007, he joined in a push for legislation to strip deputy status from politicians considered “extremist.” The proposal was seen by opposition groups as a Kremlin maneuver to silence dissent.

If the appointment is approved, Ostrovsky will become the first Zhirinovsky party governor since Yevgeny Mikhailov, who was elected in the Pskov region in 1996.

But Mikhailov changed his party affiliation to United Russia in 2000.

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