

Governor Shake-Up in Karelia

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Nelidov, right, at a meeting with former Prime Minister Vladimir Putin last year.

The former head of the Leningrad region assembly was nominated Tuesday to become governor of the Karelia republic, a move seen as another attempt to replace a regional governor before direct gubernatorial elections go into effect this fall.

Alexander Khudilainen, 57, was nominated by President Vladimir Putin to become the acting head of the Karelia republic, a tourism hot spot bordering Finland, after the previous governor, Andrei Nelidov, resigned, it was announced on the presidential website.

Nelidov, who was nominated in 2010 by then-President Dmitry Medvedev to head Karelia, was considered among the least open of regional leaders.

According to a gubernatorial survival rating list recently prepared by the St. Petersburg Politics think tank, Nelidov had almost no chance of keeping his position.

Some local bloggers discussing Nelidov's departure pointed out that as he hailed from the

Leningrad region, he had no ties to the local elite and was unable to establish a relationship with them.

"I am not strong in politics, but it looks like they believe Petersburg bureaucrats are better than local ones," said one blogger in a comment posted on Vesti Karelia.

While some experts noted that Khudilainen has Finnish ancestry and speaks Finnish — a positive sign for investors — regional analyst Alexander Kynev said his ties to the Leningrad region would play an important factor.

"Karelia is seen as a development zone for Leningrad region politicians," said Kynev, referring to the region connected to St. Petersburg and home to a pro-Putin political elite.

If his nomination is approved, Khudilainen would be taking over a region struggling with ethnic tensions between locals and North Caucasus migrants.

In 2006, a domestic dispute in the city of Kondopoga led to widespread ethnic violence that was fueled by nationalist sentiments.

Khudilainen indicated earlier that he holds a more supportive position toward migrants and welcomed them to work in the Leningrad region's agriculture industry.

"The majority of migrants don't drink," he told Fontanka.ru in 2011.

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