

Agriculture Minister's Priorities Shaped in Childhood

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May 28, 2012



Fyodorov **Sergei Porter**

When he was a boy, Agriculture Minister Nikolai Fyodorov feared roving wolves on his way to school.

The school was seven kilometers away from his remote village, a distance that he covered by foot. In spring, the school break lasted longer than for most other Soviet children because slush and rains turned the ravines on the route into deadly traps.

Those rough times left indelible memories — so much so that he set about improving rural life in his native Chuvashia as soon as he came to rule the republic years later, in the early 1990s.

"On becoming Chuvashia's president, the first thing I decided was to create comfortable living conditions in the villages," Fyodorov said in a Monday meeting with reporters to introduce

himself in his new capacity. "What prompted it may have been that I had seen them on my own."

Longtime president of Chuvashia before he stepped down in 2010, Fyodorov received the agriculture portfolio in Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's Cabinet announced last week, in a move that prompted questions about his links to the industry.

Outside the classroom, Fyodorov helped his father grow vegetables in their family garden. The patch had a greenhouse — perhaps the only greenhouse in the republic — at a time when the Soviets frowned on too much private property, he said.

"The first cucumber or the first tomato that appeared on the outdoor market in Cheboksary came from the Fyodorov farm," Fyodorov said proudly, referring to the republic's capital.

His father was the son of a rich peasant dispossessed in 1929 and later wounded fighting for the Soviet army in the assault on Nazi-held Königsberg during World War II.

The rural programs he started in Chuvashia as president — linking all settlements with hard-surfaced roads, providing natural gas as a household fuel, introducing a network of family practitioners modeled on Canada's, building schools and libraries — were to make farming attractive as a business, he said.

"I wish my father and I had these conditions in those years," he said, after stating that he completed most of the programs.

His goals now are to create similar conditions across the country, he said.

Fyodorov will also seek a "new industrialization" of agriculture by assisting farmers to buy energy-efficient equipment and new technologies, he said.

As another goal, he wants to increase the use of mineral fertilizers to industry standards, something farmers can ill afford now. Fyodorov said, without elaborating, that he would push for measures to reduce prices.

Fyodorov replaced Yelena Skrynnik, and the change showed in the reception area of the minister's office. Gone are the full-length mirror and the shiny artificial apple tree.

Fyodorov completed his post-graduate studies in Moscow's State and Law Institute the same year, 1985, as Larisa Brycheva, whom President Vladimir Putin reappointed as his legal aide last week. Another fellow student was Dzhakhan Pollyeva, a longtime Kremlin aide and State Duma chief of staff since January.

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