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# The New Boss in Yekaterinburg

By Peter Rutland

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On May 29, Yevgeny Kuivashev became governor of the Sverdlovsk region after the regional parliament approved his appointment. Yekaterinburg, the provincial capital and the fourth-largest city in Russia, may serve as an example of President Vladimir Putin's policy toward regional leaders.

Kuivashev was the latest in a serious of Kremlin appointments over the past few months in crucial regions before the new rules mandating the direct election of regional governors go into effect in June.

Kuivashev's predecessor was Alexander Misharin, who resigned on May 14. Rumors of Misharin's departure had been circulating since he was injured in a road accident in December. Prior to his appointment as governor in 2009, Misharin was a career railway manager. As governor, he relied on a tight network of loyal officials and was widely seen as lacking the political skills necessary to win a direct election. One of his signature achievements was abolishing the position of elected mayor for Yekaterinburg.

Kuivashev, 41, has enjoyed a meteoric political career. After graduating from university as a paramedic, he received a law degree from the Federal Border Guards Institute in Moscow in 1999 and returned to a political career in his native Tyumen region.

In January 2011, he was appointed deputy presidential envoy for the Urals Federal District, based in Yekaterinburg, and was promoted to the position of presidential envoy in September. Putin appointed him acting governor on May 14 and then nominated him for the permanent position on May 24.

Rumors have been swirling about the reasons behind Kuivashev's rapid ascent, which is all the more surprising given the modest oratorical and analytical skills that he displayed in his acceptance speech before the regional assembly on Tuesday. According to some reports, he is a protege of Rosneft president Eduard Khudainatov, whose own political career started in the same Poikovsky district as Kuivashev. The New Regions website reports that Kuivashev's wife is the sister-in-law of Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, former Tyumen governor, who went on to become Putin's chief of staff from 2005 to 2010.

Many local residents were not happy that a new governor had been foisted on them by the Kremlin. But a meeting to protest the appointment drew only a few dozen people, and the assembly confirmed Kuivashev by a vote of 46 to 2. Even the Communist Party did not oppose his candidacy. Dmitry Shadrin, a Communist leader from the region, actually said a strong vote for Kuivashev would serve the region by strengthening his image in Moscow, an example of how deeply ingrained the logic of the power vertical has become.

Kuivashev may be able to manage the somewhat tense relationship between Yekaterinburg and Tyumen better. Some of the oil and gas money from Tyumen is behind the construction boom in Yekaterinburg, but the glistening new business centers do nothing to help local families struggling to find housing. Downtown one-bedroom apartments sell for upwards of $100,000, while the average monthly wage is $700. The most critical comment in Kuivashev's address was his acknowledgement of the region's environmental problems. He noted that an evaluation of the region's rivers range from "dirty" to "extremely dirty." (Swimming is forbidden at most of Sverdlovsk's children's summer camps due to concerns over water quality.)

Kuivashev's appointment may be the shape of things to come. Putin will continue to staff the power vertical with bland apparatchiks whose key characteristic is loyalty, while Russian voters resign themselves to confirming incumbents rather than being offered a real choice in the voting booth.

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*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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