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Putin Fires Minister in Medvedev's Cabinet

By Alexander Bratersky

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Correction appended

President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday fired Regional Development Minister Oleg Govorun, whom he had publicly chided a month earlier, and appointed the former governor of Kostroma, Igor Slyunyayev, in his stead.

Govorun, a member of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's Cabinet, had been on sick leave since late September, shortly after Putin publicly criticized his performance at a budget meeting.

The sacking comes just five months after Govorun's appointment as minister. Analysts and former top officials said Govorun might have asked to resign, being unable to fulfill Putin's orders and believing he might become a scapegoat.

"He was an experienced member of the king's court, and he probably understood that his mission was impossible," Ivan Starikov, a Federation Council senator during Putin's first presidential term and now a member of the opposition, told The Moscow Times on Wednesday.

During a Sept. 19 budget meeting, Putin reprimanded Govorun and two other ministers for insufficiently carrying out orders that he had signed on the day of his inauguration, May 7.

"All those promises would be carried out by regions, and if governors couldn't carry them out, Govorun would become a scapegoat," Starikov said by phone.

Reports that Govorun had submitted his resignation to Putin circulated for several weeks, but the Kremlin and the Regional Development Ministry repeatedly denied them. On Tuesday, Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, again rejected a report that Govorun had resigned.

The Kremlin said Wednesday in a brief statement on its website that Putin had signed an order dismissing Govorun.

Two other ministers Putin reprimanded at the mid-September meeting, Labor and Social Services Minister Maxim Topilin and Education and Science Minister Dmitry Litvinov, remain in their posts.

Alexander Pochinok, labor and social development minister during Putin's first presidential term, called the dismissal a push for other ministers to work harder.

"Changing ministers after five months is extraordinary," Pochinok said. "By dismissing Govorun, the president is sending a signal that he wants to push the system to work more efficiently."

Putin greeted the newly appointed minister, Slyunyayev, at his Novo-Ogaryovo residence, outside Moscow, on Wednesday. The president urged him to work quickly and efficiently to construct and repair provincial housing.

"The ministry faces many problems, but I beg you never to forget and to pay special attention to one of them: dilapidated and unsafe housing," Putin said during the meeting, according to a transcript on the Kremlin's website.

"We have a related program that allocates funding, and it is important that every ruble is spent effectively to resolve in a timely manner the problems that have accumulated over decades," he said.

Slyunyayev praised the program, the Housing Reform Fund, as a "very efficient, effective tool that has helped resolve the problem of old and dilapidated housing in recent years."

He said one of his first tasks as minister, however, would be to make sure that housing across the country receives sufficient heating this winter.

Slyunyayev, an Omsk region native who turned 46 on Oct. 4, graduated from a Moscow police academy with a degree in law and worked at a private bank in the 1990s before entering government service. He served as deputy transportation minister from 2000 to 2003 and as

a Federation Council senator representing the Altai region in 2006.

Putin appointed him in October 2007 as Kostroma's governor, a position he held until he resigned without explanation in April.

Slyunyayev joined a flock of governors leaving office ahead of the return of direct gubernatorial elections last weekend. The early departures allowed the Kremlin to install new governors, thus limiting the number of gubernatorial elections and ensuring that allies remained in office.

Mikhail Vinogradov, an analyst at the St. Petersburg Politics think tank, told Kommersant FM radio Wednesday that Slyunyayev had a controversial stance during his stint in Kostroma.

"He had a reputation of being a market reformer, but his style and political views resembled those typical of a former law enforcement official," Vinogradov said.

The prime minister wished Slyunyayev well Wednesday but warned of the pressures to fulfill his duties.

"Experience has shown that the minister of regional development has to have strong nerves," Medvedev said on an official visit to the Kaliningrad region, the RBC news agency reported.

Correction: Due to an editing error, an earlier version of this story incorrectly stated that Ivan Starikov was prime minister during Vladimir Putin's first presidential term. In fact, Starikov was deputy economic minister under Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov at that time.

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