Medvedev Removes Sechin Ally From Key Oil Post

By The Moscow Times

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Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev on Friday sacked a senior natural resources official, believed to be a close ally of Igor Sechin, the head of state oil firm Rosneft, in what analysts said was a sign of growing confrontation between the two men.

In an order published Friday, Medvedev dismissed Alexander Popov, the head of Rosnedra, an agency responsible for granting licenses to develop natural resources.

Popov was an aide to Sechin when Sechin oversaw the energy sector as deputy prime minister.

Sechin, a close ally of President Vladimir Putin, was last year appointed to head Rosneft, the world's largest publicly listed oil producer, majority-owned by the government.

Sechin's confrontation with Medvedev's team has grown since then as Sechin has embarked on an aggressive consolidation of assets under Rosneft's control. Medvedev's deputy

for energy, Arkady Dvorkovich, has pushed for more privatization and less state interference in the strategic industry.

A more recent spat came over a decision by Rosnedra to award Rosneft and state gas major Gazprom licenses to tap oil and gas fields in the Arctic, which Dvorkovich has criticized.

"It is clear that the confrontation between Medvedev–Dvorkovich on one hand and Sechin on the other is growing, and all means may be used in that fight," political analyst Stanislav Belkovsky said of Popov's dismissal.

Medvedev's order said Popov was dismissed because his post was being eliminated. In a separate decree, Medvedev named Valery Pak as deputy minister of natural resources and the head of Rosnedra.

"Sechin still enjoys great political clout. This [change in Rosnedra] won't undermine his power," said Andrei Polishchuk, an analyst with Raiffeisenbank in Moscow.