

At Least 7 Judges Quit Supreme Arbitration Court

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Court chairman Anton Ivanov, above, would effectively be demoted, if the bill is passed. **Maxim Stulov**

At least seven Supreme Arbitration Court justices have resigned after President Vladimir Putin this week submitted a bill to the State Duma that would merge the legal body into the Supreme Court.

The arbitration court on Thursday confirmed that seven judges had resigned, while an unidentified court official told Kommersant that more resignation notifications have come in since then, most of them from veteran judges.

The arbitration court currently has only 53 sitting judges out of a maximum of 90 permitted by the structure, and when the resignations are factored in, it stands to lose about 13 percent of its judiciary personnel.

Putin's bill would hand over the arbitration court's functions — most of which involve settling economic disputes — to the Supreme Court over a six month period. The number of Supreme Court judges would rise from 125 to 170.

Putin said that the merger would streamline judicial procedures, but critics have accused him of attempting to combine legal bodies whose functions are too diverse. Some observers have also suggested that the move was aimed at weakening the influence of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev by curtailing the powers of his allies to select deputy prosecutors and regional prosecutors, and by effectively demoting arbitration court chairman Anton Ivanov, Medvedev's former law school classmate.

The arbitration court did not confirm exactly who had resigned, but it is believed that they were long-serving members of the court, who would be entitled to the highest pensions.

The judges also may also have resigned out of a reluctance to relocate to St. Petersburg, where the new court would sit, or they may have felt offended by the need to participate in the selection process for appointments to the new court.

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