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Russian Opposition Politician to Serve as Saakashvili's Deputy Governor in Ukraine

By Jennifer Monaghan

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Maria Gaidar

Russian political activist Maria Gaidar is set to become the new deputy governor of Ukraine's Odessa region, where she will work under former Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili, news reports said.

Gaidar, who earlier served in the administration of Russia's central Kirovsk region and is the daughter of former Russian Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, agreed to take up the position in southern Ukraine following weeks of negotiations, she told Kommersant on Friday.

She will now work in the gubernatorial administration of Saakashvili — an outspoken critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin — who was in late May named governor of the Odessa region by Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko.

Gaidar, who has also spoken out against Putin, used to be a member of the now-defunct

Union of Right Forces and in September last year was disqualified from running in the Moscow City Duma elections for the opposition For Moscow party on a technicality.

Commenting Friday on her appointment to the Odessa administration, where she will deal with social issues, Gaidar said it was "a great honor" to join a team where they "don't just want to enact reforms; they are already enacting them," Interfax reported.

Her appointment has sparked some controversy in Russia, however, given that relations between Kiev and Moscow have soured in the past 18 months over the ongoing crisis in Ukraine.

Nikita Belykh — governor of the Kirovsk region, where Gaidar worked from 2009 to 2011 as a deputy governor advising on social issues — said Saturday in a Facebook post that he was disappointed with her decision to leave for Ukraine.

"I don't support her decision, and I consider it to be wrong," he wrote. "To go and work for people whose relations toward our country and our people are known to be very negative ... she is pitting herself not only against the authorities but also against all Russians."

Speaking to journalists following her appointment, Gaidar tried to play down the significance of the move.

"I want to show that Russia and the Russian people are not just [about] war, but [also] cooperation, friendship and a common future," she was quoted as saying Friday by Interfax.

She added Saturday in a Facebook post that she was planning to apply for Ukrainian citizenship.

Not everyone in Ukraine is thrilled with the idea of foreigners being placed at the helm of regional government. Ukrainian news agency UNIAN reported Sunday that some 2,000 protesters had gathered in Kiev to protest various issues. Among the signs adorning the crowd were ones that read: "Down with foreigners in power!"

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