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Putin's Game of Thrones: The Men in Epaulets Take Over

In a matter of hours, Putin replaced four governors, four envoys and an ambassador with men with security services backgrounds.

By Daria Litvinova

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Alexei Nikolsky / Kremlin Pool Photo via AP

In fine Soviet tradition, Vladimir Putin spent Thursday, July 28, meeting with agriculture workers in the open fields of the Tver region. The president tasted cranberry yogurt and other local produce. Meanwhile, in line with more recent Russian tradition, he implemented a massive, out-of-the-blue staff reshuffle.

Four regional governors, four presidential envoys and an ambassador had all been dismissed by Putin by Thursday afternoon.

Some of the changes were a follow up to previous operations by the security services. Nikita

Belykh, the now infamous governor of the Kirov region, recently arrested for allegedly accepting a six-figure bribe in euros, was fired for "losing the president's trust."

In a parallel development, the Federal Customs head, Andrei Belyaninov, "resigned." Belyaninov's home was searched by the Federal Security Service (FSB) on Tuesday, July 26. Embarrassing pictures of lavish interiors, expensive paintings and piles of cash stacked in shoe boxes made front-page news.

Two of the three other governors were replaced by officials with a background in security services. Mostly the men were veterans of the FSB or its Soviet predecessor, the KGB.

"I can't remember a time when so many security service guys ascended to power at once," Dmitry Gudkov, an independent State Duma deputy, wrote on his Facebook page. "We don't know anything about these people's management expertise. Readying the guns for battle, closing ranks — this is what these appointments are all about. [The Kremlin] can't trust anyone but those in uniform."

The reshuffle comes amid an apparent redivision of influence among different Russian law enforcement bodies. In recent years, serious changes have taken place in terms of distribution of influence among Putin's "politburo." The FSB and the Federal Guard Service (FSO) have all gained more power, political analyst Yevgeny Minchenko told the Novaya Gazeta newspaper.

These are turbulent times for the Russian government. This year, the Federal Drug Control Service and the Federal Migration Service were both shut down and integrated into the Interior Ministry. In the last two years, three active governors have been arrested. A deputy culture minister is in jail. The team of top Moscow investigators has been arrested on charges of corruption and for apparent connections to the mafia.

The whole bureaucratic apparatus seems to be in a state of flux. This Thursday, Putin added details to the picture.

To replace the disgraced Belyaninov, Putin dismissed Vladimir Bulavin from his post as presidential envoy in the North-Western federal district, and appointed him to the lucrative position of Head of Customs. Bulavin made a career in the FSB. Between 2006 and 2008 he worked as a deputy director of the service, and then moved on to the Security Council.

Two regional governors moved up the ladder in the same morning, while the other two were fired altogether.

After five years in his post, Nikolai Tsukanov, the governor of the Kaliningrad region, replaced Bulavin as the presidential envoy in the North-Western Federal District. He, in turn, was replaced by Yevgeny Zinichev, head of the Kaliningrad branch of the FSB.

Sergei Menyailo, the notorious governor of Sevastopol, a city in the disputed Crimean Peninsula, was also dismissed from his office, and appointed to be the presidential envoy in Siberia. His predecessor, Nikolai Rogozhkin, an army general, was dismissed just months before he was due to retire.

Nikita Belykh, the disgraced Kirov region governor, was replaced by Igor Vasilyev, head

of Rosreyestr, Russia's real estate watchdog. Meanwhile, the Yaroslavl region got Dmitry Mironov, deputy head of the Interior Ministry, as its new governor, instead of Sergei Yastrebov.

Through another decree, Putin also merged the Crimea Federal District with the Southern Federal ⊠District. Oleg Belaventsev, his presidential envoy to the former Crimean district, was accordingly dismissed and deployed to the same post in the North Caucasus Federal District. There, he replaced Sergei Melikov, who was appointed to be deputy chief of the newly created National Guard.

There is nothing new in officials with a background in law enforcement getting top positions in government. Indeed, as political analyst Yekaterina Schulmann notes, the trend has been clear for the past 15 years: "Men with backgrounds in military or security services have been a constant presence in the first echelon of Russian officialdom, including governorship."

Moving people around shows that authorities prefer siloviki as a group socially close to them, the expert adds.

The other trend to watch is the rejuvenation of Putin's elite as he starts preparing for his next presidential term in 2018. The old guard is slowly leaving the scene, sometimes involuntarily. Young appointees, usually with a background in law enforcement, are now taking their places.

"It's not just about replacing certain people, it's about replacing ⊠the system," says political analyst Nikolai Petrov. "What we're seeing ⊠is a monocentric system growing, as well as Putin's personal power. It's obvious that he is more worried about increasing his personal power than improving the economy."

Commentator Stanislav Belkovsky puts it bluntly enough: "All the figures appointed today are Putin's personal bodyguards."

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