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Russian Officials Spurn 'Russophobe' Kazakh Cabinet Minister

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Askar Umarov. **Vladimir Smirnov / TASS Host Photo Agency**

A cabinet member in Moscow-friendly Kazakhstan's newly appointed government has emerged as an unlikely divisive figure among Russian officials.

Former media executive Askar Umarov was named Kazakhstan's new information minister when President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev reshuffled the government in response to this month's anti-government protests that turned violent.

A senior Russian diplomat said he was put off by Umarov's alleged past remarks calling Russians "drunks" and "colonizers" with inherently poor service skills.

Yevgeny Primakov, who heads the Russian Foreign Ministry's international cooperation agency Rossotrudnichestvo, wrote on social media Wednesday that his department "doesn't cooperate with Russophobic trash."

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"Minister Askar Umarov is not welcome at the Baikonur Cosmodrome," wrote Dmitry Rogozin, the head of Russia's state space agency Roscosmos, which leases the space launch facility from Kazakhstan for around $115 million a year.

Some of the quoted posts that Primakov attributed to Umarov deride Russians living in ex-Soviet Kazakhstan as "colonizers who should be grateful that their rights are observed."

Another anonymous social media post cited by Primakov reads:

"If an Astana [Kazakh capital Nur-Sultan's former name] business has a Russian owner, the service there is terrible, as if you're back in [the Soviet Union]. Is it in their blood?"

According to the Kommersant business daily, media reports attribute the posts written by a user who goes by "Askar Kumyran" to Umarov.

Umarov also took to social media to defend himself against the "demonization of my image."

"Once again I want to confirm my commitment to the principles of tolerance and friendship of nations, unity of the people of Kazakhstan and fraternal relations with neighbors," Umarov wrote on Facebook.

"I am not what they're trying to portray me as," he added.

The Kremlin said Thursday it was willing to work with any member of "brotherly" Kazakhstan's cabinet.

"Indeed, the minister had made awkward and inappropriate remarks," President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

"But we should judge Umarov by the statements he will make in his new status," he added.

Tokayev last week made an unprecedented request for aid from a Russian-led regional military bloc to quell riots that led to looting and deaths in major cities including Almaty.

Observers said the Collective Security Treaty Organization's (CSTO) "peacekeeping" mission, which began withdrawing from Kazakhstan earlier Thursday, set a dangerous precedent for authoritarian leaders to seek the Kremlin's help in cracking down on dissent.

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