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Governor Reshuffle in Border Regions Shows How Kremlin Is Militarizing Russia's Elites, Experts Say

By Moscow Times Reporter

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Former Bryansk Governor Alexander Bogomaz (L) and former Belgorod Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov (R). **duma.gov.ru; council.gov.ru**

President Vladimir Putin replaced the governors of the Bryansk and Belgorod regions on Wednesday, installing a military general and a former official from occupied Ukraine to lead the two border regions heavily affected by the four-year war.

The Kremlin said Belgorod Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov and Bryansk Governor Alexander Bogomaz, who served in their posts for over five and 11 years respectively, stepped down of their own accord after working for years "under genuinely extraordinary conditions," adding that they "demonstrated high effectiveness."

The Belgorod and Bryansk regions have been plagued by frequent cross-border drone attacks

as well as damaged infrastructure since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Putin has named Belgorod native Alexander Shuvayev, a highly decorated army general, as Belgorod's interim head, and Yegor Kovalchuk, who previously served in the occupied Luhansk region of Ukraine, as Bryansk acting governor.

Meeting with the two men in the Kremlin on Wednesday, Putin stressed the "strategic importance" of securing Russia's border areas.

Political analysts have pointed to several different reasons behind the reshuffle, including corruption scandals in both regions, broader efforts to militarize Russia's elite and growing fatigue with the war.

Belgorod under Gladkov, a PR-savvy governor

As Belgorod's governor, Gladkov was popular among locals and became one of Russia's most visible regional leaders. He regularly posted updates on drone strikes and local disruptions on the Telegram messaging app, where he boasts over 460,000 subscribers, or more than 30% of the region's population.

"Gladkov was a very popular governor, widely liked by the population," despite Belgorod facing constant Ukrainian attacks and recurring water, electricity and heating outages, said Nikita Parmyonov, head of the independent local media outlet Pepel.

"In many ways, this was thanks to a PR machine that built Gladkov's image as a transparent governor who cares about the population's problems," Parmyonov told The Moscow Times.

"There were plenty of complaints, of course," Parmyonov said. "But residents didn't want Gladkov to leave his post, willing to overlook corruption scandals and the PR missteps of recent months."

His departure followed weeks of rumors that he would soon be dismissed. In mid-April, he announced that he was taking an extended vacation.

Sources close to the presidential administration told the Vedomosti business daily last month that Gladkov could step down for health reasons, without providing further details.

A source familiar with Gladkov told the exiled news outlet Meduza he "was genuinely burned out" and "worn down" by the drone attacks, internet shutdowns and Belgorod's economic problems.

"With this kind of job, you sleep two or three hours a night. Your nerves are completely shot," the source said.

Political analyst Yekaterina Schulmann said she could "easily believe that Governor Gladkov himself asked to step down."

"His position has become absolutely nightmarish and bears no resemblance to the one he was originally appointed to," Schulmann wrote on Telegram. "It is now hard even to imagine and

hard to remember the wealthy, comfortable and exceptionally quiet Belgorod region as it was before 2022."

Others pointed to apparent tensions between Gladkov and federal authorities including the Defense Ministry, which he openly criticized over the Ukrainian attacks and cross-border incursions.

"Everyone in the Federal Security Service (FSB) simply hates Gladkov," a source close to the Kremlin told the exiled investigative outlet IStories, claiming that his Telegram channel, a popular source of information about upcoming drone attacks, was the reason.

"They forbade him from releasing information but he kept doing it, because in his view it saved lives," the source said.

Another source in the ruling United Russia party told IStories that Gladkov was "very confrontational and has fallen out with everyone," adding that he had also clashed with the Prosecutor General's Office and state communications regulator Roskomnadzor.

Putin himself had always viewed Gladkov with skepticism, the source added.

Parmyonov said that while the security services had complaints about Gladkov, he maintained good ties with the presidential administration.

In 2025, his deputy Rustem Zainullin and several other regional officials were charged with corruption over the construction of defensive fortifications along the Ukrainian border. Still, Zainullin was only dismissed last month, officially "due to loss of trust."

Gladkov's departure may have been coordinated with the presidential administration to frame it as the start of a new phase in his career and to distance himself from the corruption case, Parmyonov said.

A source close to the presidential administration told Meduza that "during 2023-2024, [Gladkov] was performing fairly well and there was even discussion of his promotion."

Reports said that Gladkov could be offered a position in the presidential administration overseeing relations with political parties and civic organizations in the regions, as well as local elections.

Vedomosti, citing anonymous sources, reported last month that Gladkov could be promoted to deputy economic development minister and later suggested he could become Russia's ambassador to the breakaway Georgian region of Abkhazia.

Who is Shuvayev, Belgorod's newly appointed interim governor?

Shuvayev, a native of the Belgorod region, fought in the invasion of Ukraine and previously served in the Russian military's campaigns in Syria, Georgia and the North Caucasus.

Before his appointment, he served as deputy governor of the Irkutsk region as part of the Kremlin's Time of Heroes program, an initiative designed to promote military veterans into senior government roles.

According to Parmyonov, local officials and Belgorod residents see Shuvayev's appointment as "a disaster."

"He is a man without sufficient managerial experience and with a military mindset," Parmyonov said, adding that he was unlikely to govern the region effectively during wartime.

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Exiled news outlet Novaya Gazeta Europe last week cited anonymous sources as saying that the Kremlin had been dissatisfied with Shuvayev even before his appointment.

One source familiar with the region's politics said that Shuvayev had performed poorly at a meeting with Putin, adding that "military lobbyists understood he was no good."

Another source claimed Shuvayev had gotten intoxicated before "an important meeting" without providing further details.

Political scientist Ivan Preobrazhensky told The Moscow Times that while it is unclear what kind of administrator Shuvayev is, one of the reasons behind the reshuffle was the Kremlin's ongoing campaign to militarize the elite.

Schulmann shared a similar view, adding that "the president is calling for a new elite."

"The idea is that military figures are supposed to be in favor, since, in case anyone hasn't noticed, there is a war going on," she said.

What does the reshuffle mean for Bryansk?

Experts said that Bogomaz's resignation and the naming of Kovalchuk to head the Bryansk region also fit the trend toward militarizing the country's officials.

Before his appointment, Kovalchuk had since 2024 served as chairman of the Russian-installed administration in eastern Ukraine's Luhansk region, which Moscow claims to have annexed.

Kovalchuk's appointment reflects "the coercion of part of the Russian ruling class, which had previously avoided and resisted involvement in the war, to work in the occupied territories of Ukraine, become implicated in [the war] and then be allowed to return and continue their careers as usual," Preobrazhensky said.

Kovalchuk also has experience in administration. He previously headed the department of housing, utilities and energy in the Khanty-Mansi autonomous district and later served as deputy governor of the Chelyabinsk region.

Yet Preobrazhensky said Bryansk residents should not expect any major changes in the region, which has also been marred by corruption scandals.

Several deputy governors and local officials have been sentenced for bribery and corruption in

recent years, including former Deputy Governor Aleksander Petrochenko, who was sentenced to 10 years in prison in March.

Preobrazhensky said the simultaneous resignation of two governors "is a standard situation," when Putin chooses a relatively quiet period to carry out a reshuffle.

"This is why the quiet period in spring is convenient," he said, referring to the months ahead of the September elections, when governors in several regions, as well as State Duma deputies and members of regional legislative assemblies, will be elected.

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