

Kremlin chief of staff dismissed amid continuing political turmoil in Russia

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In a carefully scripted event on Friday, Russian President Vladimir Putin accepted the resignation of his chief of staff, Sergei Ivanov. He is being replaced by Anton Vaino, a young and relatively unknown government insider of Estonian descent who was a deputy of Ivanov. The surprise move is one of a series of recent dismissals of leading officials with close ties to the Putin administration.

Ivanov, considered a close personal confidant of the Russian president, was placed in major government posts with Putin's rise to power in 1999. He was Putin's chief aide for more than four years. Prior to this, he was deputy chief of the Federal Security Services (FSB) and subsequently served as a deputy prime minister and defense minister. Ivanov was regarded as a rival of Dmitri Medvedev for the Russian presidency during the period in which Putin had to leave office due to term limits and effectively handed power to a caretaker.

As of August 12, Ivanov has been demoted to the position of special representative of the president of the Russian Federation on questions of conservation, ecology, and transportation. According to *RIA Novosti*, "In recent years in his work as head of the Kremlin administration, Sergei Ivanov devoted considerable attention to questions of ecology, actively supervising a program for the preservation of the population of far eastern leopards and, in connection with this, even met with the model, actress, and animal rights defender Pamela Anderson."

The Kremlin and Ivanov himself insist that the move was voluntary and the fulfillment of Ivanov's promised request to only serve till 2016. A special televised appearance with Putin appeared intended to quell rumors of a major rift. Ivanov will continue to serve on the country's Security Council.

Press reports describe Putin's new 44-year old chief of staff as a colorless technocrat who has never been implicated in political or financial scandals, although there are some tendentious claims that he has ties to Sergei Chemezov, an oligarch in the Russian defense industry and head of a major state-owned firm. Vaino has been active in the Russian government since 1996, when he served in the Russian embassy in Tokyo. After working for a couple of years on Asian matters for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in 2003 he entered the presidential administration.

The sudden changing of the guard in the Kremlin has provoked a flurry of speculation in press outlets, with commentators putting forward differing interpretations. Ivanov's dismissal may be part of an effort to cut loose former close allies and bring in a new generation of less experienced but loyal servants, under conditions in which the Putin regime finds itself besieged by an unrelenting economic crisis, a burgeoning geopolitical conflict with the United States and looming parliamentary elections.

Despite something of a recovery in oil prices, the Russian budget continues to experience a shortfall greater than official predictions. The deficit, which stood at 3.3 percent of gross domestic product as of July 2016, is .3 percent higher than the upper limit called for by Putin at the start of the year. As a result, government officials have had to tap the country's reserve funds more than expected. Russia remains mired in a recession that began in 2015. Although there has been a small uptick in wages in recent months and continued low unemployment rates, real incomes have not fundamentally recovered from a near 10 percent decline last year.

At the same time, the US is pursuing a relentlessly anti-Russian foreign policy, with last week's

provocations initiated by the US-backed stooge regime in Ukraine against Crimea being only the latest salvo. Washington has made clear its desire for regime change in Moscow and is preparing for war with Russia.

Parliamentary elections will occur in Russia on September 18. While the ruling United Russia (UR) party is expected to emerge victorious, deep social discontent exists within the country. In 2011, this boiled over into a major rebuff of UR candidates, allegations of electoral fraud, and the emergence of a protest movement.

It is within this context that the Kremlin has been systematically replacing key political and economic leaders. Putin has dismissed eight governors and presidential representatives from regions around the country and sacked top figures regarded as close friends, including the head of the Russian railways, Vladimir Yakunin, in August 2015 and the director of a major state bank, Vladimir Dmitriev, in February 2016. Oleg Belozеров, a relatively unknown 46-year-old logistics specialist and deputy transportation minister, was chosen to replace Yakunin as the director of one of the country's essential pipelines for the movement of goods and people.

Noting the immense power and resources under the discretion of major state firms like those previously overseen by Yakunin, Nikolay Petrov, a professor at the Higher School of Economics, observed in an interview with the *Christian Science Monitor*, "Some of these companies, like Gazprom and Russian Railroads, were like states-within-the-state."

This spring Russia's antinarcotics official, Viktor Ivanov, left office and in May, Kremlin security chief Evgeny Murov lost his post. Recently, police brought criminal charges against Andrei Belyaninov, the country's chief customs officer, for alcohol smuggling. Television exposés revealed the allegedly corrupt and illegal dealings of this former insider, including the discovery of over \$800,000 in Russian and foreign currency stashed away in his luxury home.

Putin has simultaneously replaced the governors of three regions—Yaroslavl, Kirov, Kaliningrad—the last of which is a geostrategically critical stretch of Russian territory sandwiched in between Poland and Lithuania. The Kaliningrad post was handed to the regional head of the FSB. The fired governor of Kirov oblast, Nikita Belykh, who was not a member of the governing

United Russia party and maintained ties with the liberal opposition, is now facing corruption allegations.

Whether the Kremlin's actions are defensive measures aimed at forestalling an internal rebellion against Putin's rule, advance efforts to shore up the Russian president's position before challengers emerge, or simply a "rotation" of the elite as some have suggested, is unclear. As the pressures facing it mount, the Putin government will be beset by continuing turmoil.



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