

Moscow Region Governor to Leave Post in May

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

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Boris Gromov attending a United Russia leadership meeting in 2009. The vacant seat next to him is reserved for Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov. **Igor Tabakov**

The powerful governor of the Moscow region will step down once his term ends in May, signaling that the Kremlin is serious about removing unpopular governors before the possible return of direct gubernatorial elections this year.

Boris Gromov, who has ruled the foreign investment-rich region surrounding the Russian capital for 12 years, announced that he would quit Friday, the same day that unpopular Saratov Governor Pavel Ipatov resigned.

"I have carried out my duties for 12 years, and I think that is enough," Gromov said in a brief statement published on his administration's website.

In a nod to a spurt in foreign investment under his watch, Gromov noted that the Moscow

region has become a national economic powerhouse. "And I am proud of that," he said.

More than 20 foreign companies entered the Moscow region in 2011, joining the likes of IKEA, Auchan and John Deere, and total foreign investment could reach \$8 billion in 2012, Gromov's top official for foreign investors, Tigran Karakhanov, told reporters in December. Foreign investment into the region has jumped 30-fold over the past decade, he said in November.

Despite the phenomenal growth, Gromov, 68, had faced mounting pressure amid corruption scandals involving his administration, and his decision to leave office was not a surprise. Analysts said the Kremlin has been trying to get rid of Gromov for months and now seems to have found a solution that offers dignity to the former military general, who oversaw the withdrawal of the Soviet army from Afghanistan in 1989.

Gromov, who was popularly elected to his first term in 2000, has seen his legacy fade amid corruption allegations. In 2011, an international arrest warrant was issued for his former top finance official Alexei Kuznetsov on charges of embezzling more than 27 billion rubles (nearly \$1 billion) in regional funds. Prosecutors said in 2010 that the embezzlement nearly led to the region's bankruptcy.

Kuznetsov has left the country and remains at large.

In what some saw as a warning to Gromov that his days were numbered, Gazprom-controlled NTV television aired last year a scathing documentary about Kuznetsov that also targeted Gromov.

"If we consider how many resources the Kremlin has spent to get rid of Gromov, you can see his departure as a victory for Gromov," said Pavel Salin, an analyst with the Center for Current Politics, a Kremlin-connected think tank. "Gromov was given a chance to save face."

The Kremlin has not commented on Gromov's departure, one of the last veteran regional leaders to make his exit after Mayor Yury Luzhkov and similar leaders of St. Petersburg, Bashkortostan and Tatarstan in the past two years. Among the people mentioned by analysts as possible candidates to replace Gromov are Regional Development Minister Viktor Basargin, Natural Resources and Environment Minister Yury Trutnev and Transportation Minister Igor Levitin.

The government is eager to replace governors who are unpopular or nearing the end of their terms to avoid the risk of embarrassing election results, said Natalya Zubarevich, director of regional programs at the Independent Institute for Social Policy. "The regime is operating under the logic of self-defense," she said.

President Dmitry Medvedev has removed more than half of the country's 83 regional leaders since he took office in 2008. Saratov Governor Ipatov announced his resignation Friday shortly after Arkhangelsk Governor Ilya Mikhalechuk and Volgograd Governor Anatoly Brovko also left their posts. Approval ratings for the three governors were among the lowest in a recent survey by the Public Opinion Foundation. Forbes Russia magazine [reported](#) in January that Vyacheslav Volodin, who became the Kremlin's first deputy chief of staff in December, was seeking the ouster of the trio.

Ipatov, 61, refused to comment on his resignation, saying only that it was planned, Interfax reported.

Incidentally, Ipatov, a former nuclear power plant director, was the first governor appointed by then-President Vladimir Putin after direct gubernatorial elections were abolished in 2004. He was reappointed by Medvedev in 2010.

The Kremlin said in a statement that Valery Radayev, speaker for the Saratov regional legislature, would serve as acting governor.

Signs of Ipatov's impending departure had been accumulating since the beginning of the year. In January, Prime Minister Putin criticized the Saratov regional administration for having "very, very low" approval ratings.

Just 14 percent of local residents approved of Ipatov's work, while 62 percent disapproved, making him one of the country's most unpopular governors, Gazeta.ru reported in November, citing an unpublished poll by the Public Opinion Foundation.

In February, Saratov regional lawmakers asked Medvedev to fire the governor, and Ipatov also lost a vote of confidence in the Saratov city legislature. Both the city and the regional legislatures are controlled by the ruling United Russia party, of which Ipatov is a member.

Criminal cases were then opened against his subordinates. "The next step would probably have been to open cases against him," political analyst Yevgeny Minchenko told Forbes Russia

Ipatov's poor relationship with Volodin, who before moving to the Kremlin represented Saratov in the State Duma, was also a key factor in the governor's ouster, analyst Zubarevich said. "This is simply a fight between clans. It's like bulldogs under the carpet," she said.

Medvedev is expected to sign the bill to return direct gubernatorial elections into law by early May — at the end of his presidential term — but a Kremlin source told Kommersant on Saturday that the leaders of Belgorod and Bashkortostan would be appointed because the new procedure would not be in place before their terms expired.

United Russia officials also have started negotiations over who will replace Omsk's governor, Leonid Polezhayev, who is expected to retire in May. Under the existing procedure, the political party with the most legislative seats in a region — inevitably United Russia — is allowed to nominate gubernatorial candidates to the Kremlin.

Polezhayev has ruled Omsk region, whose economy relies heavily on oil, since 1995.

The Kremlin source also told Kommersant that Novgorod, the cradle of Russian democracy in the 12th century, would probably become the first region to elect a governor under the new legislation. The first term of its incumbent governor, Sergei Mitin, expires in August. Mitin, a former deputy agriculture minister, said in January that he hasn't decided whether he would seek a second term.

Some former regional leaders have welcomed the return of direct elections. "I think it is much better when the governor is elected because you have the support of the population," former North Ossetia leader Alexander Dzasokhov said Friday.

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