

Kremlin Blames Technical Glitch for 'Fake Firing' of Kaliningrad Governor

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Nikolai Tsukanov

The Kremlin has apologized for a "technical glitch" that caused an announcement to appear briefly on its website in the early hours of Thursday morning claiming that President Vladimir Putin has dismissed the governor of Russia's Baltic exclave, Kaliningrad.

The governor, Nikolai Tsukanov, remains in his job and "there is no question of an early resignation," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in comments carried by state-run news agencies.

Peskov sought to stress the Kremlin's support for the governor, saying Tsukanov will run for a second term this fall, and enjoys the president's endorsement for his re-election bid.

"A technical glitch happened during the night, and a decree about Tsukanov's early resignation was issued," Peskov was quoted as saying by state-run news agency RIA Novosti.

"That decree was recalled, it was removed from the presidential website. You are all witnesses to that. Tsukanov remains governor."

"Unfortunately, that decree was a technical glitch, we extend our apologies for that," Peskov said in comments carried by state-run news agencies.

Meanwhile, political analysts and Russian media speculated as to whether the announcement had indeed been merely a glitch, or was a "black mark" for the governor, as business daily Vedomosti put it.

Head of the Petersburg Politics think-tank Mikhail Vinogradov called the incident "unprecedented," saying it "causes bewilderment, nothing like that happened before," Vedomosti reported.

The announcement, which appeared on the Kremlin website around midnight, said Putin had signed a decree dismissing Tsukanov from his job, but the official would continue as acting head of Kaliningrad until a new governor is elected. The news spread quickly on Russian news agencies over the next half-hour.

A presidential appointment of someone as an "acting" official is often a demonstration of the Kremlin's backing, political analyst Konstantin Kalachev was quoted by Vedomosti as saying — suggesting that a show of support was the original intention, which has backfired because of sloppy execution.

"I think there really was a technical mishap — the habit of working with 'canned' statements and boilerplate interfered," he said, Vedomosti reported. "They didn't check to see that Tsukanov has a scheduled election coming up."

Another statement on the Kremlin website, dated a day earlier, said Putin had met with Tsukanov to discuss social and economic problems in Kaliningrad and included a transcript of the initial part of the conversation.

Tsukanov asked Putin for his "approval" before his term runs out on Sept. 28, according to the transcript.

"There a lot of tasks and there is an understanding of how those tasks can be solved," the governor told Putin. "I need your support very much. I would like to work for the benefit of the Kaliningrad region and run in the election."

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