

RUSSIA AT A GLANCE

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Three Outsiders, or the Return of Politics for the People

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Summary

Russian regional politics have seen changes: three governors appear to have been given leeway to act independently. **Vyacheslav Fedorishchev**, the new head of Samara Region, and **Georgy Filimonov**, the new head of Vologda Region, were never in the public eye, but are learning fast. **Alexander Khinshtein**, with formidable experience at the federal level, has been true to his populist approach as the governor of Kursk Region. It appears that the Kremlin is, to a limited extent, permitting the electorate a degree of influence within the political system.

The three new governors represent a new wave of regional leaders who are linked to patronal networks. Khinshtein has leveraged support from the *siloviki* (people within the organs of power) to establish himself as a populist politician. Fedorishchev made his career alongside the current Secretary of the Russian State Council, Alexei Dyumin. Filimonov, who is a former kick-boxing champion, is linked to Sergei Kiriyenko. Their appointments signify a change in the Kremlin's approach to regional governance.

Today's Kremlin-backed populism in Russia differs from that of the 1990s. Now, the authorities operate through the governors, creating the illusion of dialogue with the people. The Centres of Regional Management do not actually create a link with the population: what matters is not simply having public support, but having people involved, through controlled channels. Another difference is that unlike in years past, local authorities blame business for their problems, not the federal authorities.

Introduction

The Kremlin is allowing governors greater freedom of expression and is trying to create a dialogue with the people through permitted channels

This latest bulletin from the NEST Centre describes an important yet unexpected development in regional policy in Russia. Three governors have been permitted to conduct their communications policy as if they were genuine politicians with the right to speak out, and not simply technocrats who are obediently carrying out the will of the Kremlin.

Two of these governors were elected to their posts in the autumn of 2024. They are 35-year old Vyacheslav Fedorishchev, the head of Samara Region, and Georgy Filimonov, aged 44, who heads up Vologda Region. Neither had been in the public eye before. The third, 50-year old Alexander Khinshtein, is well-known in Russia, with twenty years of political experience behind him at the national level. He was urgently appointed as acting governor of Kursk Region, after part of the region was seized by Ukrainian troops. Someone was needed who was not merely a bureaucrat but a demagogue with experience in handling the public's justifiable indignation over current events.

The emergence of governors who have the right to speak out on federal matters signals that the Kremlin is not opposed to giving back a political voice to the Russian electorate, in certain conditions and in a highly controlled way.

Something for Everyone

The three new governors appointed in 2024 have patronal links and demonstrate a populist approach

The career trajectories of the trio are different; what unites them is something new and unseen in Russian politics over the last ten years: all three are playing public politics. In Khinshtein's case, this was dictated by necessity. With the growing tension in Kursk Region, it was essential to remove the technocrat Alexei Smirnov as he was incapable of dealing with the concerns of people who had lost their homes, their loved ones, and their previous life as a result of the Ukrainian incursion. Overall, the appointment of three public-facing governors out of the eight new ones in 2024 suggests the emergence of a new trend.

None of the three governors had any past connection to the regions they have been appointed to (except for Filimonov who spent his childhood in Cherepovets, Vologda Region). However, all three are part of the patronal network of major Russian politicians.

Khinshtein has made his own way up the political ladder using the support of the *siloviki*. Filimonov's patron is Sergei Kiriyenko – Filimonov's father is Kiriyenko's personal friend. As for Fedorishchev, indirect signs point to his backing by Sergei Chemezov, the head of Rostec. This is suggested by Fedorishchev's collaboration with Alexei Dyumin (former Chemezov's aide) in Tula, his chairmanship of the industry commission, and his appointment to Samara, a region within Rostec's sphere of influence.

Alexander Khinshtein

Alexander Khinshtein has the most impressive biography of the three. He started out in journalism, at one of the most popular and liberal newspapers of the Soviet *perestroika* period, 'Moskovsky Komsomolets'. He continued to publish articles there even when he had become a member of the State Duma. It was when he was still a journalist that Khinshtein established close ties with the *siloviki*, and he even became an advisor to the head of Rosgvardiya, Viktor Zolotov. Khinshtien gained a reputation for publishing information which had been 'leaked' by the special services. He also publicly protected the interests of defrauded equity holders and those who opposed the pension reform; he became known as someone who stood up for citizens with justifiable grievances.

Khinshtein holds departmental awards from 15 power and law-enforcement bodies. The only one missing is from the Investigative Committee of Russia. He has had a long-standing feud with its chairman, Alexander Bastrykin.

It would appear that it was Zolotov who played a part in Khinshtein's appointment as a governor. It is possible, too, that the Mayor of Moscow, Sergei Sobyenin, supported Khinshtein's promotion. Sobyenin's protégé, Vladimir Yakushev, has taken up a leading position in United Russia, and is now doing everything to bring the party under his control. As a stand-out party careerist, Khinshtein could create unnecessary problems for Yakushev in United Russia.

Vyacheslav Fedorishchev

The youngest of the three governors, Vyacheslav Fedorishchev has also had a glittering career. Born in Rostov Region, he graduated from the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, where he then began his career. When he was a little over 20 years old, he became an assistant to the rector of the Academy, then the head of the department of strategic development of the Ministry of Economic Development. When Alexei Dyumin was appointed governor of Tula Region, Fedorishchev was made his deputy, and later promoted to first deputy.

Each of Fedorishchev's former liberal economic mentors, Vladimir Mau and Alexei Ulyukayev, were punished by the state. However, by that time, Fedorishchev had already distanced himself from them. When Dyumin became Secretary of the State Council in May 2024, he put Fedorishchev in his former post as head of the State Council Commission for Industry.

When he was appointed governor, Fedorishchev telephoned Dyumin. Fedorishchev shared with the RBK TV channel, 'He [Dyumin] is my "commanding officer". I made my report in the prescribed manner. Of course, he congratulated me, but he also immediately gave me a list of instructions and directives, and drew my attention to a number of details.' In response, Fedorishchev assured Dyumin that he would not let him down.

Georgy Filimonov

Georgy Filimonov used to be a professional sportsman, the world kick-boxing champion. (Filimonov was actually the second Kiriyenko-backed governor to hold this title, after Batu Khasikov, the governor of Kalmykia). Until his appointment as a governor he was a little-known bureaucrat and political scientist in the presidential administration, marked out only by his obscurantist views. In the two years before his appointment he was deputy head of the government of Moscow Region, with responsibility for agriculture.

Similarities and Differences

The governors share an active PR approach and use Centres for Regional Management to gauge public sentiment

Each of the new governors brings unique personal experience from their respective regions, yet they display similar behaviours. Some peculiarities may be mere coincidences, while others could reflect broader training and instructions.

EXTERNAL APPEARANCE

Khinshtein's style is to wear a polo jacket with pockets when he is meeting the people, and a smart suit when holding meetings of the local government in his office. Other Kursk Region officials also wear suits and white shirts, but – unlike the governor – they do not wear ties.

Filimonov wears tailored fit dark French jackets with an upright collar (as he says, 'Some of my jackets are reminiscent of the clothes gymnasts wear, while others are like the tunics which officers wore in the tsarist army'). His staff all wear identical sweatshirts bearing the slogan, 'Filimonov's Team'.

Fedorishchev has been largely involved with the 'special military operation' and he centres his PR around it. He plays at being at war, wearing a khaki military jacket with chevrons and the words 'Governor' and 'Fedorishchev' sewn into it in a military style.

SOCIAL MEDIA

All three are highly active on social media. Each of them sends essential daily updates from their office. Khinshtein has more than 250,000 followers on his Telegram channel; Fedorishchev has over 100,000; and Filimonov just over 60,000.

FEEDBACK

The three governors actively use the Centres for Regional Management for keeping tabs on the mood in society and checking for any discontent among the population. The Centres receive people's complaints and their comments about the work of officials. Khinshtein even made the head of his local Centre his minister of information technology. The information collected by the Centres is used to evaluate the activity of local government members and municipal leaders.

Khinshtein's Leadership Style

Khinshtein is a populist governor. His priorities are a 'hands-on' approach to management, personnel purges, and active contact with the electorate

Alexander Khinshtein arrived in post as a matter of urgency. He did not have his own team, so he started work with the incomplete government which his predecessor was putting in place at the moment Khinshtein was appointed. At his first press conference as temporary acting governor, Khinshtein signalled that he was going to take a hands-on approach to governing the region: 'It may not be the correct way', he said, 'but it's the most efficient'. He promised that there would not be major changes in personnel, but he warned that any officials who might have committed any offences had better own up to them. This all took place at the same time as the *siloviki* were preparing a case against the leadership of the 'Kursk Region Development Corporation', over thefts which had taken place during the construction of defensive lines.



Alexander Khinshtein, Acting Governor of Kursk Region

Having taken stock of the situation, Khinshtein sacked his deputy for agriculture, his minister of information and communication, and the head of the regional security committee, who had poorly handled the evacuation of residents after Ukrainian forces entered Kursk Region on 6 August 2024.

Khinshtein's approach as governor could serve as a textbook example of populism. His broadcasts of weekly government meetings recall the style of Ulyanovsk governor Yury Goryachev in the 1990s: negligent officials were reprimanded, orders issued, and discussions focused on how to serve the people.

These are some of Khinshtein's topics:

- Photo reports with commentaries about his meetings in Moscow with senior officials;
- Visits to the region by *siloviki* who are close to Khinshtein: the director of the Federal Penitentiary Service, Arkady Gostyev, and the director of Rosgvardiya, Viktor Zolotov;
- Meeting the people: unexpectedly calling in on shops to check food prices (much like Boris Yeltsin did when he was appointed head of the Moscow Regional Committee of the Communist Party 1985);
- Visiting dissatisfied residents of the occupied territories where military operations are taking place;
- Showing a caring attitude to Second World War veterans, saying that each veteran is 'a tuning fork by which we measure our hearts and souls';
- Playing up anti-immigrant sentiments: saying that 'they' will not be allowed to work as taxi drivers, bus drivers or couriers, nor can 'they' work in catering or in recruitment;
- Instructing members of the Kursk regional government to maintain active social media accounts, engage with questions from residents of the region, and refrain from deleting or disabling comments.

Khinshtein keeps a chessboard in his office, and describes it as an important educational tool. The map of Kursk Region on the wall is accompanied by the inscription, 'The land of Kursk is the cradle of Orthodox traditions, a spiritual stronghold of our people'. Alongside the official portrait of Putin, multiple awards from *siloviki* adorn the walls of his office.

Filimonov's Leadership Style

Filimonov combines a strict personnel policy with patriotism and media populism; he is in a dispute with the oligarch, Alexei Mordashov

The federal public agenda of the Vologda governor partially appeals to the image of Stalin. The walls of Filimonov's office are decorated with Stalin's portraits, along with an Orthodox Christian icon, and a large panel bearing the slogan, 'Vologda Region Represents the Strength of the Russian World' (reminiscent of Khinshtein). What is more, on Filimonov's desk there is a model of a monument to the stern Russian tsar Ivan the Terrible; the monument itself is next in line for installation.

Filimonov has invited an Orthodox priest to preach weekly sermons to his staff. However, it seems that the governor himself is actually a pagan. He hides from those around him the sacred name which was given to him in accordance with 'pre-Christian Slav tradition'; and he gave his daughters the Slavic names Veleslava and Ladoslava.



Georgy Filimonov, Governor of Vologda Region

It is thought that by appointing Filimonov the Kremlin decided to put the oligarch, Alexei Mordashov, in his place. Mordashov has not shown sufficient enthusiasm for the ‘special military operation’, and the position of his company, Severstal, in the running of Vologda Region has been weakened. Like Khinshtein, Filimonov took up his post without his own team in place, and he began by radically clearing out a number of officials in the local government and the legislative assembly. He also removed the mayor of Vologda. The first to be dismissed were those who were connected to Severstal – they formed a large part of the regional authorities.

A succession of replacements took place in the governing bodies. Filimonov brought in his friend, the well-known boxer, Alexander Povetkin, as deputy governor with responsibility for youth policy, sport and patriotic education. Povetkin lasted just seven months, before resigning, telling Filimonov, ‘I’m more interested in the family, but you go on loving sport and the motherland.’ Filimonov’s predecessor as governor, Oleg Kuvshinnikov, who had become a member of the Federation Council, was removed after less than a year in post. He was replaced by Filimonov’s former deputy for internal policy, Yevgeny Bogomazov.

In January 2025, Filimonov appointed his third minister of health for Vologda Region since he has been in office, a former principal dentist from a clinic near Moscow. His task, and that of his two members of staff, is ‘to completely re-order in the best possible way healthcare in Vologda Region, so that it is on a par with Moscow and Moscow Region’. Before him, a specialist from Samara Region was in the post from August to October, and his immediate predecessor was the principal doctor of the Vologda Region clinical hospital.

Filimonov describes his management style as combining the principles of hierarchy, reasonable strictness and military discipline, with the agile methodology, brainstorming, corporate practices and, most importantly, the principles of the *veche* – the people’s assembly in medieval Russia.

One of Filimonov’s first and most sensational initiatives which he put in place after his appointment was to restrict the sale of alcohol: on weekdays from March 2025 it will be possible to buy alcohol only between 12pm and 2pm. (Much like General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, who banned alcohol in 1985, leading to widespread resentment and a shortage of sugar which was then used for home-made alcohol – *samogon* – production.)

Filimonov is in a struggle with the oligarch, Alexei Mordashov, the principal shareholder of Severstal, the company closely associated with the region. This battle is ostensibly about personnel, but it has a media and even an environmental dimension to it.

Rumours abounded on Telegram that Filimonov is a drug addict. The governor believed that Mordashov was behind this, and challenged him to a fight. Considering that Filimonov is a world champion kick-boxer – even if it is the contactless version, accompanied by music – it would not be difficult to imagine how such a fight might end. More significant is how this conflict will develop and what it actually means.

Mordashov's reply has been to wage a serious positional war. Severstal is based in the town of Cherepovets. Nine of the 26 members of the town council who were linked to the company resigned. Such a move could paralyse the work of the council. A similar situation is brewing in the Vologda Region legislative assembly, where one fifth of the deputies and the speaker are all beholden to Severstal.

Instead of investing in the second stage of a factory for deep wood processing in Vologda, in January 2025 Mordashov's wood-processing holding, Sveza, bought up four large companies which produce paper for cigarette filters, cardboard packaging and special-purpose paper – in Pskov and Leningrad Regions. It looks like Sveza is about to pull out of Vologda Region.

The defeat of local elites is already affecting election results. In the presidential election last March, Vologda Region was one of only four regions where Putin's support was under 80 per cent. In the gubernatorial elections in the autumn of 2024, Filimonov himself received only 62 per cent of the votes. Across Russia, this was the second lowest score out of more than 20 governors who were re-elected.

The political technologist Anton Kholodov who worked in the federal headquarters of the 2024 presidential election, remarked: 'In the training course in internal policy for deputy governors at the college in Senezh [Moscow Region], Filimonov is now held up as an example, and called "the new type of governor". The fashion for the old type of technocratic governor is on the way out, and is being replaced by the modern fashion for people like Georgy Yuryevich [Filimonov], someone who's active, interesting, outspoken, maybe even harsh; but he has a high rating, and people like that.'

Fedorishchev's Leadership Style

In Samara Region, Fedorishchev is fighting against the oligarchs, carrying out purges of personnel, and using the media for self-publicity and to engage with youth

Vyacheslav Fedorishchev is also in a battle with an oligarch, although of a lower status than Mordashov in Vologda Region. His target is Vladimir Avetisyan – seen as the owner of the region – and the various structures of the Volgopromgaz company that are linked to him. Fedorishchev has frequently spoken of his dissatisfaction with the gas company, and just before the New Year warned that the authorities in Samara Region would be starting the process of returning Avetisyan's gas-holding assets to regional and municipal ownership. Appearing in front of the cameras, the governor signed an order stating the need to open a criminal investigation into Avetisyan's companies.



Vyacheslav Fedorishchev, Governor of Samara Region

Like Filimonov, Fedorishchev began with a clear-out of staff in Samara Region, albeit a less radical one. Curiously, the governor and secretary of the regional branch of United Russia, Fedorishchev, had tasked Alexander Khinshtein, then a State Duma deputy from the region and member of the General Council of United Russia, with overseeing the ‘renewal’ of the party ranks in Samara Region – prior to Khinshtein’s appointment as governor of Kursk Region. The purge of party members affected not only the previous governor’s team, but also representatives of business who were close to him.

Fedorishchev is not such a self-publicist as Khinshtein, nor is he as eccentric as Filimonov; but he constantly finds reasons to publish information and is highly active on social media, including through daily video addresses.

Among subjects which the governor of Samara Region broadcasts are the following:

- Stories on his Telegram channel about heroes of the ‘special military operation’;
- The idea that each municipal head should have a ‘hero commissar’ from the Ukraine war beside them;
- Rap music which he has written himself;
- A pioneering staff training programme for those who have fought in Ukraine, ‘School of Heroes’, along the lines of the presidential project, ‘Time of Heroes’;
- A programme called ‘Confrontation’ on the ‘Guberniya’ TV channel. This is in the format of a public debate, criticising people who are well known in the region, from the oligarch Avetisyan to the previous democratic governor, Konstantin Titov. In the programme, Fedorishchev himself openly invites the opponents he wants to speak with.

The governor of Samara Region actively engages with young people. He launched a chat-bot on Telegram to gather their ideas, and an online platform where people can leave suggestions on how to improve the quality of life in the region. Fedorishchev caused an unprecedented national scandal with his outspoken revelations about corruption in football.

Fedorishchev uses task forces in his work, which gives a sense of urgency, yet is attractive for the media. For example, he has a task force which meets each week to discuss major construction projects, and another to ensure the uninterrupted work of the military-industrial complex.

Conclusions

Controlled by the Kremlin, these populist governors aim to have a direct dialogue with the people, and narrow the distance between the authorities and society

The technocratic and bureaucratic system leads to failures in crisis situations, but the well-established method of monitoring the popular mood at a distance by the Centres for Regional Management does not solve the problem.

For their own, specific, opportunistic reasons, the authorities want to establish channels and methods of dialogue with the people. So a new type of populist governor has appeared and is being tried out, one who is appointed externally but controlled from above.

It does not really matter why the Kremlin wants to initiate or, at least, not suppress the populism of its appointees. A new outlet has emerged for the political voice of the Russian electorate, designed to create the illusion of restoring agency to the people.

Right now, people are relegated to the passive role of observers, watching what is going on via their TV screens. In place of this, there should be some form of direct participation. There has to be a shift away from society being an abstract, silent spectator, to one where there is a variety of ideas expressed, so that the distance between citizens and the authorities will be narrowed.

A particular type of populism is seen as the way to bring this about; but this is a reflected, second-level populism. If the ordinary populist politician achieves their status thanks to the support of the masses and over the heads of the elite, the Russian populist does not succeed by themselves but with the assistance of the all-powerful Kremlin behind them.

Today's populism from above is very different from the populism from below which was the mark of the 1990s. Then, populists gained points for their strong criticism of the centre, which was not providing what the people needed. Now, the whipping boy is business, either at the national level, as in Vologda, or the regional, as in Samara.

About the New Eurasian Strategies Centre (NEST Centre)

Based in London and Washington D.C., NEST Centre brings together the best expertise on Russia and the surrounding region. Its mission is to identify the forces shaping Russia's long-term future, analyse their impact and develop strategies to bring about peaceful and positive development of the country.

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