

European Watchdog: Bring Back Direct Elections

October 28, 2010

The  **Moscow Times**

The Council of Europe on Thursday called on the Russian government to reintroduce direct gubernatorial elections and strengthen local democracy.

"Russia must reintroduce direct elections for regional governors, revoke the recent law concerning the dismissal of mayors, and improve legal safeguards to ensure that local authorities are not subject to excessive supervision by higher levels," the council said in a [statement](#) released in Strasbourg.

The recommendation was adopted 61-30 at a session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, an assembly promoting local democracy in the framework of the 47-member council, Europe's top human rights organization.

The vote comes one month after President Dmitry Medvedev fired Mayor Yury Luzhkov, highlighting the Kremlin's grip over regional authorities.

Medvedev has said he firmly opposes a return of the vote, scrapped by his predecessor,

Vladimir Putin, in 2004.

Last year, Medvedev also signed a law that empowers local legislatures to oust mayors on charges such as mismanagement, neglect of duties or losing the respect of lawmakers. The president also granted new powers to governors to fire mayors.

Federation Council Deputy Speaker Svetlana Orlova, head of the Russian delegation to the congress, said the country's local democracy was actually making good progress. The idea that gubernatorial elections mean more democracy just "reflects Western stereotypes," she said in an e-mailed statement.

Orlova also complained that the Council of Europe showed double standards by not opposing various local election procedures in other countries. In an interview with Itar-Tass, she pointed out that Sweden also has no direct elections for regional heads.

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