The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Work Begins On Election Reforms

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December 28, 2011



The Kremlin and the government will draft bills introducing direct gubernatorial elections and a revised system of parliamentary representation by mid-February, President Dmitry Medvedev ordered Wednesday.

The new system would split the country into 225 electoral districts, which, Medvedev said, would eliminate the current situation where some of the 83 regions have no representatives in the lower chamber, Vesti state television reported.

Medvedev did not elaborate, but Gazeta.ru said last week that each district would likely elect two deputies to the State Duma.

The system, invented in 1989 by aides of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, stands to benefit only the two biggest parties in the country — currently United Russia and the Communists — while robbing the smaller ones of representation, St. Petersburg-based political analyst Grigory Golosov told the online daily.

Both the direct gubernatorial elections and proportional representation system were abolished during Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's presidential tenure between 2000 and 2008.

His ally and successor Medvedev promised to roll back Putin's reforms last week in his state-of-the-nation address, which came after tens of thousands gathered in Moscow for biggest opposition protests since 1993 to protest United Russia's widely questioned victory at the Duma elections on Dec. 4.

Medvedev last week also ordered that registration thresholds for political parties and presidential candidates, also introduced under Putin, be drastically lowered. But the changes would only come into effect after the presidential elections in March, which Putin is poised to win.

Medvedev also issued a raft of other orders on Wednesday, including a proposal for creating public television, possibly based on one of the state-owned channels, which was also among the ideas he put forth in his state-of-the-nation address.

He also ordered new anti-corruption measures, including control over large expenses of officials and obliging more state employees to disclose their income declarations, the Kremlin's web site reported. Deadlines for the orders range from mid-February to July.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/12/28/work-begins-on-election-reforms-a11693