

Kremlin Makes Concession on Gubernatorial Vote

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President Dmitry Medvedev once declared that direct gubernatorial elections would not return to Russia in 100 years.

But on Monday, less than three years after making the vow, Medvedev asked the State Duma to reintroduce the elections in what looked like a major concession to the opposition protesters who took to the streets after last month's parliamentary elections.

Political analysts said the text, published on the Kremlin's web site, left many questions unanswered and predicted that the Kremlin would still retain a strong grip over regional politics through the use of indirect pressure and other means.

Government officials were quick to point out that the draft legislation does not allow the president to reject candidates as previously suggested by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Under the Kremlin [bill](#), gubernatorial candidates can get on the ballot as independents by collecting signatures from voters, the number of which would be decided by each region, or with the support of political parties, which will "consult" with the president on their choice.

Larisa Brycheva, head of the presidential administration's legal department, told reporters that parties would decide for themselves whether to consult with the president — and his opinion would not be binding.

"Even after consultations with the president, [a party] could put forward its own candidate," Brycheva said, according to RIA-Novosti.

She said such a mechanism was necessary "to sometimes warn parties about making mistakes," Kommersant [reported](#).

When Putin first suggested reintroducing the direct election of governors during a televised Dec. 15 call-in show, he said the Kremlin should have the right to veto candidates.

But when Medvedev took up the proposal in his state-of-the-nation address a week later, he did not mention any restrictions.

Both Putin and Medvedev have in the past staunchly defended the 2004 decision to abolish the direct election of the country's 83 regional leaders, which was one of the most controversial reforms of Putin's two presidential terms from 2000 to 2008.

The decision was made after the Beslan school attack, where at least 334 hostages were killed, including 186 children.

Putin said in December that the abolition had been his own idea and argued that it was necessary because governors had obtained office "through semi criminal local elites" in the 1990s.

Medvedev infamously said in September 2009 that he had been personally involved in the decision and that there was no reason to change it "neither now, nor in 100 years."

Observers said Monday that the about-face provided a clear indication that the legislation was a direct response to last month's street protests, where an unprecedented 50,000 to 100,000 people held two rallies in Moscow to demand a repeat of the Dec. 4 Duma vote. Hundreds also protested in other cities.

"This is a clear concession, but it's too little and too late," said veteran analyst Andrei Piontkovsky.

He also said the bill's language left many questions unanswered and that it was unlikely that its submission to the Duma would keep demonstrators from taking to the streets again. Another protest is scheduled for Feb. 4.

Alexander Kynev, an analyst for regional politics with the Foundation for Information Policy Development, said the bill's language left it unclear how gubernatorial runoffs would be conducted and noted that no regions have an established law on how many signatures independent candidates must collect. "The only standard we have is 2 percent of [a region's]

population," he said.

Kynev said the new legislation was unlikely to free the regions from their current political impotence against the federal government. "For that you need multiparty parliaments and accountable lawmakers," he said.

Rostislav Turovsky, a regional analyst and professor at Moscow State University, agreed that the Kremlin would remain in control even with the new legislation.

"A certain filter will remain, the only question is how tough it will be," Turovsky said.

He said the Duma might introduce stricter requirements for candidates. But even with lenient regulations, there will be "informal ways" to influence elections by rejecting signatures or pressuring the opposition, he said.

Turovsky suggested that the Kremlin would allow the opposition take some governorships to give the impression that the law was working but that the opposition's gains would not shift the ruling United Russia party's dominance.

United Russia, which is led by Putin, signaled Monday that it would seek no changes to the bill. "United Russia supports the president's proposal in the form in which the text was submitted to the Duma," senior party official Sergei Neverov told Gazeta.ru.

United Russia has 238 of the 450 Duma seats, enough to pass the law. Brycheva, with the presidential administration, said she expected the bill to become law in May. Medvedev will be out of office by then. The next president, presumably Putin, who is expected to win a third term in a March election, will be sworn into office in May.

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