The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Losing Confidence in the Direct Election Bill

By Nikolai Petrov

January 23, 2012



The Kremlin is trying to present President Dmitry Medvedev's new bill as a way of bringing back direct gubernatorial elections, but it is more of a Trojan Horse than a political reform.

According to the bill's language, regional heads will be "vested with authority." Previously, "vested with authority" was a euphemism for the president appointing them directly, with regional assembly deputies rubber-stamping his choice. Otherwise, they would run the risk of seeing their parliament dissolved by the president if they balked. Now, the phrase "vested with authority" is meant to mean "elected by the people." But this is not a return to the previous system of direct gubernatorial elections that was in place before then-

President Vladimir Putin cancelled them following the Beslan school terrorist attack in 2004.

Medvedev's bill aims to free the Kremlin of responsibility for governors that the people supposedly elected, while preserving the same control it always had over gubernatorial

appointments. Under the new rules, parties would have the right to put forward a gubernatorial candidate of their choice but only in "consultation" with the president. Translated into Kremlin lexicon, "consultation with the president" essentially means "with the president's approval." In this way, the Kremlin very much retains the "filter" that it claims it had removed.

In addition, the bill allows the president to fire a governor who was elected by the people if the president has "lost confidence" in him based on just allegations of corruption or a conflict of interest. No court decision is required. Thus, the mere threat of being accused of corruption or a conflict of interest is enough to keep a governor loyal to the Kremlin.

In other words, it is only important if the president loses confidence in a governor. Apparently, the confidence of the governor's electorate — the very people who voted for him and entrusted him with authority — matters little.

As simple as it is for the Kremlin to remove undesirable governors, Russian voters have no mechanism to do the same thing. To strip a governor of his post, voters would have to first obtain a court decision and then win an absolute majority among all registered voters, which is a near impossibility.

The main problem with Medvedev's bill is that it doesn't change the most important part of the old system, in which governors were appointed by the Kremlin. Governors still remain beholden to the president, not the people. Given a choice of loyalties, a governor will always throw in his lot with the president, who can strip him of power overnight by one stroke of his pen.

It is already clear that the Kremlin has no interest in improving the quality of governors. Take, for example, the unpopular Volgograd Governor Anatoly Brovko, who "voluntarily" stepped down just one day after Medvedev submitted his bill concerning gubernatorial elections. In his place, the president appointed someone even worse — the scandal-plagued former Astrakhan Mayor Sergei Bozhenov. This decision has already provoked public protests. Moreover, Medvedev's bill specifically states that any governor who is appointed will enjoy diplomatic immunity for one full year.

As long as the dual Kremlin filters remain in the bill — de facto requiring gubernatorial candidates and their parties to "consult" with the president and giving the president to fire governors basically at will — the new law will be meaningless.

Nikolai Petrov is a scholar in residence at the Carnegie Moscow Center.

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https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/01/23/losing-confidence-in-the-direct-election-bill-a12073