

Tough Rules in Gubernatorial Vote

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The State Duma on Tuesday passed in a second reading a bill reinstating the direct election of governors. Above, the Duma building. **Andrei Makhonin**

Direct gubernatorial elections are on track to become law before Vladimir Putin returns to the Kremlin — but with barriers that promise to make it difficult for opposition candidates to run and for dissatisfied voters to remove unpopular governors.

The State Duma on Tuesday passed in a key second reading the bill returning the elections, which were abolished by Putin during his second term as president in late 2004.

The legislation introduces provisions that did not exist before 2004, including the right of the president to call candidates for "consultations" before they register to run in elections and the right of regional lawmakers to ban independents from running.

The bill also makes it more difficult for voters to remove governors, demanding not only a court ruling proving that the official violated the law, but signatures from 25 percent of the region's population to stage a referendum on the dismissal and a vote of more than 50 percent

in the subsequent referendum to remove him.

Currently, governors are appointed by the president and confirmed by regional legislatures, which are controlled by the ruling United Russia party. United Russia also has the right to recommend candidates to the president.

Pro-Kremlin United Russia, which holds a majority of seats in the Duma, and the Liberal Democratic Party unanimously voted for the Kremlin-sponsored bill, while the Communist Party and A Just Russia unanimously voted against it. The vote was 236-91, with no abstentions, Interfax reported.

The Communists object to the president's right to call candidates and to the requirement that a court ruling is needed to call a referendum on a governor's dismissal, Communist Deputy Ivan Melnikov [told](#) journalists Monday.

Melnikov said the new rules are "so harsh that the bill's norms contradict its concept and it becomes practically impossible to get elected or to recall a governor," RIA-Novosti reported.

But Sergei Neverov, a senior United Russia deputy, defended the presidential consultations. The governor is "a position integrated in the power vertical" and the president "must influence the situation if it goes beyond limits," Neverov wrote in a commentary [published](#) Tuesday in Izvestia. He did not elaborate.

The bill, which is posted on the Duma's website, requires both party nominees and independents to collect "5 percent to 10 percent of the signatures of municipal lawmakers and elected officials from municipal bodies" located in the region to run for governor. Signatories must represent at least three-quarters of the municipalities in the region.

The bill also bans a governor who was fired by the president from running in gubernatorial elections for two years and obliges a governor who resigned voluntarily to get permission from the president to run in early elections.

According to the bill, a governor can't rule a region more than two terms in a row.

Previous rules for gubernatorial elections required party nominees and independents to collect signatures from the populace in support of their bids or make a cash deposit with election officials.

Alexei Titkov, an analyst with the Institute of Regional Politics, said the new rules blatantly sought to eliminate candidates considered undesirables by the Kremlin.

"But the difficulty for authorities lies in the fact that they can't have elections with a single candidate, while any alternative opens the possibility for protest votes," Titkov said by telephone.

Before 2004, the law allowed regional election committees to refuse to register independent or opposition candidates by declaring signatures in their support invalid, but at least the candidates had the alternative of making the cash deposit, Titkov said.

Kremlin consultations with candidates also took place but were informal, he said.

The old and new legislation on direct gubernatorial elections have one thing in common, he said. "The issue of removing candidates boils down to a correlation of political forces and political bargaining," he said.

Media tycoon Alexander Lebedev, who made failed mayoral bids in Moscow and Sochi in recent years, told The Moscow Times that he had a feeling that the Kremlin "is reluctant to return to gubernatorial elections and therefore has invented a bill with a large number of filters."

The third and final reading of the bill is set for Wednesday, after which it will go to the Federation Council for approval and then to the president for his signature.

The legislation will take effect after its publication, which is expected before Putin's inauguration as president on May 7.

The earliest that direct gubernatorial elections could take place is in seven regions in the fall, followed by seven to nine regions next spring.

The Duma on Tuesday passed in a second reading a bill exempting political parties from having to collect signatures in support of candidates in all elections except presidential and gubernatorial elections, Interfax reported.

The bill also reduces the number of signatures that a candidate of a party not represented in the Duma has to collect in support of his presidential bid from 2 million to 100,000, while independents would have to collect 300,000 instead of the current 2 million.

Some public groups that have the right to run in municipal elections would remain obliged to collect signatures in support of their candidates.

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