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Expect Fewer Bland Apparatchiks

By Nikolai Petrov

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A new law on gubernatorial elections came into effect on June 1, but there will be only a few gubernatorial elections during the next two years because the Kremlin hurriedly replaced roughly one-fourth of all the governors beforehand. That leaves only four regions where governors will be elected this fall, and seven more next year. But just as former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was unable to control perestroika, the Kremlin is likely to fail in managing gubernatorial elections to the extent it has planned.

It has become clear from a number of recent mayoral elections that the Kremlin is finding it increasingly difficult to manage the democratic process at the regional level. From now on, even in the unlikely scenario that United Russia candidates sweep elections nationwide, the winners will no longer be bland party apparatchiks but increasingly independent politicians.

Since the Kremlin did not make gubernatorial appointments before June 1 in Amur, Belgorod, Bryansk and Novgorod, there will be elections in these four regions in October. These regions were left alone most likely because the Kremlin considers them to be of little importance or

the expected winners lack enough influence to threaten the status quo.

Perhaps United Russia will run incumbents in the first two gubernatorial races, including veteran politician Yevgeny Savchenko, who has held office since 1993. The Kremlin might choose to run new candidates in the remaining two elections.

Although the federal law on gubernatorial elections took effect on Friday, the regions are busy fashioning their own versions of the law. According to the model proposed by the Central Elections Commission, the law only allows for parties to put forward candidates, not for individuals to run independently.

The federal law calls for a municipal filter ranging from 5 percent to 10 percent of all municipal deputies, and most regions have opted for the maximum allowable. The Belgorod and Voronezh regions have set their barriers at 5 percent, Kursk at 6 percent, Leningrad and Lipetsk regions at 7 percent and Khabarovsk at 8 percent. Meanwhile, the Oryol, Sverdlovsk, Tambov and Tyumen regions, as well as the cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg, have all set their barrier at 10 percent. In other words, candidates will have to collect signatures from 200 to 300 deputies and heads of municipalities from at least three-fourths of the territory of their respective regions.

Aside from the obvious purpose of weeding out candidates unwanted by the regional elites, the municipal filter has a positive side. Candidates must go through a process similar to primaries in which they are evaluated by municipal deputies. More important, even candidates from United Russia will have to explain their platforms to municipal leaders, and even those who have little chance of registering will be able to express their views. This is a small, but important, step forward for the country's development of its political institutions.

Another bit of good news is the appointment of senior United Russia official Oleg Morozov, who has a great deal of experience at the regional level, as head of domestic policy in the presidential administration. Of course, individual appointments by themselves do not fundamentally alter the political landscape, but they are a sign that the process of change has begun.

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