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Governor Elections Require a Smart Filter

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The reintroduction of gubernatorial elections has failed. In response to mass protests, the State Duma recently passed what was supposed to be an election-reform law. But the new legislation will clearly fail to satisfy protesters and the other Russians who sympathize with them. The law contains so many restrictions and requirements that there is no chance that the gubernatorial elections will be anything close to free or fair.

Before their abandonment in 2004, Russian gubernatorial elections were an imperfect, but relatively effective, tool that provided a real threat to most notorious corrupt politicians. The incumbents were replaced at a pace compatible with that in mature democracies such as the United States. In fact, President Vladimir Putin has never enjoyed support from the majority of Russians on the question of direct gubernatorial elections. From the moment he repealed them eight years ago, the majority of Russians have consistently told pollsters they consider the move wrong and would prefer that direct elections be reinstated.

The 2012 reforms are also a failure from a PR standpoint. Of course, most of the protesters in Moscow and the overwhelming majority of those who voted against United Russia in the

regions are not experts on electoral systems, but anyone can see that the new system falls far short of true elections.

Does that mean no real reform is possible? I would argue that there is a reasonable compromise between citizens' desire to directly elect their regional leaders and authorities' fear that an undesirable person might be elected. Grigory Golosov, a professor at the European University at St. Petersburg and a leading political scientist, suggests that governors be elected directly and freely but that the president be given the right to dismiss the governor over "a loss of confidence" and call new elections.

How might this look in practice? If, for example, the rising opposition leader Alexei Navalny were to beat incumbent Mayor Sergei Sobyanin with 65 percent of the vote in an open race for the governor's spot, Putin could dismiss Navalny after a waiting period of from one to three months and call for new elections. If Navalny wins the second time with an 80 percent to 20 percent spread, dismissing him would be tougher, but this is exactly the kind of information the president needs to govern efficiently. But if United Russia puts up a strong candidate and Navalny wins 55 percent to 45 percent, his second dismissal would be easier.

It might not even be necessary to dismiss him a second time because if Mayor Navalny knows he can be removed with only a word from Putin, he might become more accommodating toward Kremlin leaders. Finally, Navalny might be challenged by a rival in the opposition camp who says, "I am not as oppositional as Navalny, so vote for me because I stand a better chance of remaining in office."

Russians need the right to directly elect their leaders, but at the same time the president needs the right to dismiss those leaders when circumstances objectively warrant such a move.

Konstantin Sonin is a professor at the New Economic School in Moscow and a columnist for Vedomosti.

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