

Putin Calls for Popular Vote for Senators

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

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Vladimir Putin, second right, and Speaker Valentina Matviyenko, right, in the Federation Council on Wednesday. **Alexei Nikolsky**

President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday proposed that Federation Council senators be elected through a popular vote — but only after being nominated by gubernatorial candidates.

He put forward legislation that would require politicians running for governor in regional elections to nominate three senators for the public to vote on.

The potential senator with the most votes would serve in the Federation Council, the upper house of parliament. The other two would be possible replacements in case the elected senator resigned or was deemed unfit to rule.

"The Federation Council should be more democratic," Putin told the upper house, run by his close ally, Valentina Matviyenko.

"We have to make the procedures more open," Putin said. "All decisions by ruling officials

should go through a public audit."

The proposal follows the instatement of gubernatorial elections as part of political reforms meant to appease the public after a spate of mass protests.

If passed, the legislation may strengthen the public's view of the body, long seen as a cushy job for retired regional officials.

Putin stressed that senators should have lived for five years in the regions they are representing.

He said the legislation would also prohibit regional governors from firing their respective senators, who could only be recalled by a popular vote.

He added that the procedure does not violate the Constitution, which says the Federation Council should not be formed directly by a popular vote.

Any change to the Constitution could be problematic for the Kremlin, since the ruling United Russia party does not have a constitutional majority and would need to cooperate with other parties to amend the document.

But the Liberal Democratic Party and the opposition-minded A Just Russia have been known to vote in line with the Kremlin in the past.

The new legislation also lower senators' minimum age from 35 to 21, the same as in the State Duma, the lower house of parliament.

In response to questions from senators, Putin admitted that he "shares concerns" that elected governors might include candidates who would serve the interests of business clans.

But, he said, gubernatorial candidates would be concerned for their reputation.

"I doubt that a governor, during that critical moment of being elected, would allow a person with low authority to run alongside him, even with a lot of money," Putin said.

Putin fielded a question from Senator Lyudmila Narusova, widow of Putin's mentor Anatoly Sobchak and mother of Ksenia Sobchak, a television personality-turned-opposition activist.

Narusova, whose senatorial seat representing the Bryansk region would be voted on in October, said the rules for selecting candidates were "not written clearly."

She was the only senator whom Putin did not address by first name and patronymic, a sign that relations between them may have been strained due to her daughter's political activity.

In a recent interview with Novaya Gazeta, Sobchak said Putin "might feel that I have betrayed him" for supporting the opposition.

When Bryansk Governor Nikolai Denin runs for re-election, he may choose not to nominate Narusova because she lacks strong personal ties to the region.

The Novgorod, Belgorod and Amur regions will also soon hold gubernatorial elections,

in which opposition candidates are unlikely to fare well.

Numerous obstacles, such as a mandatory number of signatures from municipal deputies, drastically reduce the opposition's chances of securing a foothold.

Nevertheless, Senator Alexander Torshin told The Moscow Times that the proposal to bring popular elections to the Federation Council was a product of changing political sentiment.

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