

Senator Reform Just Plain Bad

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As part of the political reforms that the Kremlin announced in December, a new bill has been introduced that would change the way the Federation Council is formed. When President Vladimir Putin presented the proposed changes to senators last week, he said, "The Federation Council should be formed in a more democratic way, and the upper house should become more regional."

The Federation Council has plenty of problems in both of these areas. Most of the senators have only an indirect relationship with the regions they are supposed to represent. In reality, they represent the interests of the Kremlin and major corporations. With the political pendulum beginning to swing away from the federal center and toward the regions, Russia is gradually shifting away from the "federation of corporations" that it became over the last decade and toward a "federation of regions." Restructuring the Federation Council has become the inevitable result of this shift.

According to the Kremlin's plan, each gubernatorial candidate will put forward three senatorial candidates, one of whom the governor will choose to become the senator. Deputies

from each regional legislative assembly will nominate senators representing the legislative branch.

The residency requirement will also change. All senatorial nominees must have lived for at least five years in the regions they are nominated to represent, with the exception of all incumbent senators and State Duma deputies.

Although it is a slight improvement over the current law, this bill is just plain bad. There are still no direct elections, and a governor cannot under any circumstances remove a senator in whom he has lost confidence. As a result, the senator is not accountable to the governor or the people.

These changes are a democratic improvement, as Putin claims, only in the sense that the Kremlin and powerful business clans can no longer directly appoint the senators of their choice. This may be true, but now these clans can effectively "buy" senators without worrying that they might later be replaced, even if they act against the interests of the regions they represent. Without the right to recall senators, the regional political elite have lost even more control over the very people who are supposed to protect its interests. What's more, the Kremlin dropped the minimum age for senators from the proposed threshold of 30 to 35 years down to just 21.

Once again, the Kremlin powerbrokers have proved themselves unwilling to improve the dysfunctional political system they themselves have mangled. The Federation Council could be improved by returning to the procedure used from 1993 to 1995, when senators were directly elected by the people. Or they could use the model from 1996 to 2000, when the Federation Council was composed of a mixture of senators, governors and the speakers of regional parliaments.

Instead, the Kremlin is proposing a system that ostensibly allows voters to express their will but actually shields those in power from accountability to the electorate. What's more, this system has no feedback mechanism, and the senators are unaccountable to the people. Any arrangement that does not take regional interests into account and denies the regions political representation not only is destined for an early demise but also poses a threat to the entire political system.

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