The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

In Reversal, Duma Limits Gubernatorial Elections

By Alexander Winning

March 23, 2013



Backtracking on a key concession made to anti-Kremlin protesters, the State Duma has passed in a third and final reading a bill that would grant regional authorities the right to cancel direct gubernatorial elections.

The passage of the bill appears to reflect lawmakers' dissatisfaction with liberal legislation passed during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency and could have sweeping implications for regional politics, as critics of the bill say it could allow the ruling elite in Moscow to handpick loyal governors, irrespective of people's wishes.

During voting in an afternoon session Friday, 305 lawmakers voted in favor of the bill, with 93 against. The number of "nay" votes was highly unusual for the lower house, which is known for rubber-stamping draft legislation backed by the ruling United Russia party.

The bill, which was passed in a crucial second reading Tuesday, is expected to be approved

by the Federation Council before the end of the month, after which it will head to President Vladimir Putin's desk to be signed into law.

Amid unprecedented protests over the fraud-tinged 2011 Duma vote, Medvedev reinstated direct gubernatorial elections in the final days of his presidency in early 2012, eight years after Putin discontinued them in the wake of the 2004 Beslan hostage crisis. In an argument similar to the one used by Putin in 2004, supporters of the bill approved Friday say that gubernatorial elections provoke instability and need to be handled carefully.

According to a copy of the bill on the Duma website, the legislation would allow regions to decide on an individual basis whether to hold elections or to seek presidential approval.

Should regions decide to cancel gubernatorial elections, political parties represented in regional legislatures would present up to three gubernatorial candidates to the president after consulting with smaller parties. The president would then choose three final candidates whose eligibility would be voted on by the regional legislature.

On Friday, Just Russia and Communist lawmakers said on the Duma floor that they would vote against the bill, describing it as "fractious" and saying it reflected a return to rule by presidential decree.

Anton Belyakov, a Duma deputy with A Just Russia, took the floor first, reminding colleagues that Putin had publicly supported direct gubernatorial elections in the past.

"We can't give some regions the right to elect governors directly and not give the same right to others, even in the Caucasus republics," Belyakov cited Putin as saying.

Arguing for the ruling party, Vladimir Pligin, head of the State Duma's Constitution and State Affairs Committee, the body that amended the bill ahead of its second reading, warned opponents that they would be responsible if ethnic conflict boiled over as a result of elections in volatile ethnic republics.

"The bill is extremely important. This responsible political decision eliminates many problems," he said.

Although lawmakers from all four Duma factions authored the bill, A Just Russia and the Communists earlier expressed anger that Pligin's committee had rejected their amendments to the bill.

Nine gubernatorial races are scheduled for the fall, in what would be the second time that regional heads have been elected since Medvedev returned the elections last year. Posts are up for grabs in the regions of Moscow, Magadan, Vladimir, Zabaikalsky and Khabarovsk, the republics of Khakasia, Ingushetia and Dagestan, and the Chukotka autonomous district.

According to current rules, governors throughout Russia are elected by a direct popular vote, although candidates need the support of at least 5 percent of a region's deputies, and independent candidates must collect signatures of at least 0.5 percent of the local population.

Two analysts said the gubernatorial bill appeared aimed at ensuring stability in regions

known for interethnic strife but said it set a worrying precedent whereby the Kremlin could call off votes when favored candidates come up against stiff opposition.

"In the North Caucasus especially, elections turn into a battle between different ethnic, religious and interest groups. It is often not voters' respect that wins elections, but financial and administrative resources," said Yana Amelina, a Caucasus analyst with the Russian Institute of Strategic Research, a state-run institute.

"I would rather the Kremlin appointed a Russian to head the Caucasus republics, rather than a local who gets involved in interethnic squabbles," she said, describing direct elections in Dagestan and Karachayevo-Cherkessia in particular as "premature."

Alexei Titkov, of the Regional Politics Institute, pointed out that the majority of lawmakers behind the gubernatorial bill are from the North Caucasus, adding, "Ethnic diversity can make elections risky, divisive events."

Neither analyst saw the bill as a flat-out ban on gubernatorial elections, but Titkov said the Kremlin administration would likely conduct informal discussions with many regional capitals to determine where the new rules would be applied. Regional authorities could also end up lobbying the federal center to cancel elections, he said.

But Pavel Salin, an independent political scientist, said the bill reflected fears among the ruling elite that the Kremlin was losing control over the regions.

"Just look at what happened in October," Salin said, referring to elections in the Bryansk and Ryazan regions, where the vote results were disputed in court after United Russia candidates ran away with victory. Both regions were considered United Russia strongholds, but their elections were marred by reports of falsifications.

Looking ahead to the upcoming elections, Salin predicted that authorities would likely decide in the summer whether the regions that would opt to could choose candidates via regional legislatures.

He said that even the Moscow region could cancel its September election if acting Governor Andrei Vorobyov came up against a strong candidate from within the opposition's ranks. "The regions where gubernatorial votes will be held this fall are far less loyal than last year's selection, so I wouldn't rule anything out," he said.

Contact the author at a.winning@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/03/23/in-reversal-duma-limits-gubernatorial-elections-a22612