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Putin's Speech Omits Anticipated Bombshell

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Perhaps the biggest surprise about President Vladimir Putin's speech was that it contained no surprises.

Expectations were high in the hours before the annual address after privately owned Dozhd television reported that Putin would propose abolishing mayoral elections and regional legislatures.

But Putin made no such proposal, instead only speaking briefly and vaguely on the issue of local governance, saying that local elections must guarantee that well-prepared and goal-oriented people serve in government.

Dozhd, citing an unidentified source close to the presidential administration, reported late Wednesday that reform of local government would be the main topic of Putin's speech and that Putin would propose abolishing mayoral elections and changing the legislative

system on the local level.

"The main new thing will be to change the vertical power system of governance in order to escape conflicts as happened in Astrakhan and Yaroslavl," the source said, Dozhd reported.

The source said governors would appoint mayors, and there would be no more regional legislatures.

A State Duma deputy confirmed to The Moscow Times that Putin had planned to make such an announcement in his speech. The idea is nothing new. Speculation has swirled since Putin's first Kremlin stint in the 2000s that he wanted to make such a sweeping political reform.

But the deputy, who requested anonymity so as not to damage his political career, said after Putin's speech Thursday that infighting amid Putin's aides killed the announcement.

The deputy said serious discussions were held on this issue up until the last minute between two teams within Putin's circle: one led by Kremlin first deputy chief of staff Vyacheslav Volodin, who proposed keeping the institution of mayoral elections, and the so-called siloviki, or officials from military and security services, who insisted on abolishing them.

The deputy said someone from Volodin's team leaked the information to Dozhd and that the leak eventually became one of the team's weapons in defending its position in the argument with the siloviki.

"I am very glad that the message about mayoral elections was the opposite from what was expected. I know there was a fight about it," the deputy said.

Putin began his speech by talking about local governance. Emphasizing that local administrations were "full of problems" such as corruption, internal conflicts, and bureaucratic confusion, Putin called on lawmakers to re-examine these problems and to solve them within the coming year. He did not elaborate about the way to bring about the needed changes.

Opposition candidates have been elected mayor in several cities, including Civil Platform politician Yevgeny Roizman in Yekaterinburg this fall and Yevgeny Urlashov, also of Civil Platform, in Yaroslavl last year.

Both have faced conflicts linked to local United Russia politicians. Roizman has clashed with the Sverdlovsk governor, and Urlashov was detained earlier this year on suspicion of bribery.

The Duma deputy who spoke about the conflict between Volodin and the siloviki argued that Putin had made the right decision in keeping mayoral elections.

"This summer, a strategy was adopted in which all opposition politicians were to be pushed down to the municipal level in order for them to prove their viability," the deputy said.

If mayoral elections were abolished, these people would be on the loose and free to come back to Moscow to try to get federal positions, the deputy added.

Staff writer Ivan Nechepurenko contributed to this report.

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