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No Real Elections in Regions

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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The Kremlin has begun dismantling the modest political reforms that were instituted after the protests of late 2011 and early 2012. Events in Ukraine might have convinced leaders that tighter controls over the political system are the best means for preventing a "Euromaidan" from breaking out in Russia. But the decision to reverse even modest democratic reforms will only further destabilize Russia's weak political system and lead to negative consequences for the country and the authorities themselves.

The authorities have reintroduced restrictions on the registration of political parties. For the last two years, parties have had relative freedom and ease in registering, with the exception of Alexei Navalny, whose party the authorities have constantly blocked. Russia now has 75 political parties, 10 times more than two years ago.

Now, however, the authorities have introduced new "filters" for parties wanting to participate in federal and regional elections. Any party wanting to take part in the State Duma elections in 2016 must have at least one faction elected by party lists in at least one region of the country, or else have won at least 3 percent of the votes in the previous Duma

election.

Only 12 parties currently meet those criteria — the four in the Duma and eight others. All the other parties will now have to collect voters' signatures to prove support, making it a simple matter for officials to disqualify any given party on technicalities. The Kremlin is thus deliberately and significantly limiting future competition between parties and encouraging politicians to join the ranks of larger parties that have major resources.

At the same time, government officials have stepped up pressure on Russia's few remaining independent media outlets. The Dozhd television channel, which has gained popularity among the youth and intellectuals, was yanked off many cable television providers. A new CEO took over at the popular Ekho Moskvy radio station, prompting the station's editor-in-chief Alexei Venediktov to bluntly call it a form of pressure. An election for a new chief editor at the station is slated for early March, and the main question is whether Venediktov, who has promised not to alter his boldly independent editorial policy, will keep his job.

But the most serious restrictions are taking place at the local level. A few days ago, the National Council of Municipalities headed by Duma Deputy Vyacheslav Timchenko approved the latest reform to local government that effectively eliminating democratic self-governance at the local and regional levels. It puts an end to direct mayoral elections in major cities. Voters will not even elect their city district councils. Instead, those bodies will consist of regional legislature deputies delegated to serve that particular city.

While only formally preserving self-governance at the municipal and regional levels, the Kremlin is incorporating municipal and regional authorities into the state's power vertical and making them answerable to the governor, not to the citizens they ostensibly serve.

If a city or town is so small or poor that it poses no threat to the ruling regime, it can retain local government. But the Kremlin exercises significant control over the larger and more powerful urban centers, with Moscow and St. Petersburg the prime examples. Mayors and city managers who are effectively appointed by governors will not enjoy the support of the local population and will lack any mechanism for meaningful dialogue with citizens. The new program primarily benefits governors who want to command and control everything but works to the great detriment of the people and the country as a whole because it eliminates all incentives for the government bureaucracy to develop the economy and the social sphere. Unqualified and incompetent officials who hold office only by virtue of their loyalty to the governor are the last thing Russia needs, particularly as the country goes deeper into recession.

Russia's municipalities have steadily lost both political authority and income flows in recent years. Governors have already co-opted social policy, health and education from the purview of local governments. The share of tax income going to local budgets continues to decline. Now only small towns will retain local governance, and their financing will represent only about 5 percent of the region's consolidated budget. Government officials will control all of the rest.

In this way, the federal authorities have swallowed up local government, leaving only a few table scraps as a token gesture to the increasingly remote idea of democracy.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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