

The Unintended Consequences of Russia's Gubernatorial Elections

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The revival of Russia's gubernatorial elections following the mass protests of 2011-2012 may not have promoted democratization, but neither has it proved trouble-free for the Kremlin. In light of the regime's retrenchment and the crackdown on civil society following Vladimir Putin's re-election to the presidency in March 2012, it is significant that the regime did not retract its pledge to allow gubernatorial elections. While they are not necessarily competitive, their revival must be understood from the Kremlin's perspective as a necessary evil that is fraught with unintended consequences.

The center's efforts to limit or channel the process of electing governors bear the potential to create uncertainty and instability among regime subordinates. One may infer from the regime's mixed signals in managing gubernatorial elections that this effect is an unintended consequence, especially in the alternation between liberalizing and constraining measures. The initial re-introduction of gubernatorial elections by then-President Dmitry Medvedev accompanied the liberalization of party registration, but Putin later augmented the process for electing governors to include so-called presidential and municipal "filters." The presidential filter requires political parties to consult with the presidential administration in their choice of nominees, effectively providing the Kremlin with an initial veto over the selection of candidates. The municipal filter requires candidates to obtain signatures from municipal deputies in support of their candidacy in order to obtain registration. The quota for signatures ranges from five to ten percent, with the threshold set by regional councils and the precise quantity established by regional electoral commissions. Regional electoral commissions usually invalidate enough signatures collected by opposition candidates to deny their registration, sometimes on the grounds that local deputies already provided signatures in support of another candidate. Hence, the municipal filter creates at least two opportunities for incumbents to block opposition candidates: first, by pressuring local deputies not to provide signatures in support of a candidate (or, presumably, to sabotage them by providing support for two or more candidates) and second, in the

inspection of signatures by regional electoral commissions. As a result, the new system of gubernatorial elections favors incumbents and disadvantages opposition parties so much that little change was expected from the first round of gubernatorial elections in October 2012.

Yet despite these measures aimed at constraining competition, elected governorships once more function as a symbol of political status among the regional elite. In the October 2012 gubernatorial elections, which were held in five regions (Amur, Belgorod, Bryansk, Novgorod, and Ryazan oblasts), all the incumbent governors promoted their relations with the Kremlin as an indication of their success and, in turn, successful elections were claimed as confirmation of the Kremlin's confidence. For those governors elected in October 2012, expert ratings conducted by the Agency of Political and Economic Communications suggest the impact of popular elections on governors' perceived relative influence in federal politics (i.e., in lobbying their region's interest in the presidential administration, the government, the parliament, and among the political and business elite): from June 2012 to July 2013, Oleg Kozhemyako's (Amur) rating rose from 62nd in June 2012 to 7th, Sergei Mitin's (Novgorod) rating rose from 60th to 37th, Oleg Kovalev (Ryazan) saw his rating rise from 53rd to 25th, and Yevgeny Savchenko (Belgorod) from 18th to 6th. Only Nikolai Denin's (Bryansk) rating remained unchanged at 56th, likely due to the particularly scandalous course of his election that even saw him temporarily removed from the ballot.¹

In the current round of gubernatorial elections, this association of perceived status with popular election is especially pronounced in Moscow's mayoral election, where Sergei Sobyenin resigned from office over a year early—his term was not set to expire until 2015—in order to run for election (Sobyenin showed a similar zeal in giving up his electoral mandate as governor of Tyumen oblast when gubernatorial elections were eliminated in 2005). Unlike the October 2012 elections, in which incumbents displayed little interest in even simulating competition, incumbents in Moscow and Moscow oblast have sought to make their elections appear convincingly competitive. The dominance of United Russia in regional parliaments and the dependence of local government on regional budgets mean that it is virtually impossible for opposition candidates to obtain registration without the incumbent's consent. In both Moscow and Moscow oblast, however, Sergei Sobyenin and Andrei Vorobyov pointedly included opposition leaders Aleksei Navalny and Gennady Gudkov respectively in the upcoming gubernatorial elections so as to enhance perceptions of the elections' legitimacy and transparency—a point echoed by the first deputy head of the presidential administration, Vyacheslav Volodin, in June 2013. In both regions, Sobyenin and Vorobyov went so far as to mobilize local deputies to provide Navalny and Gudkov with the necessary signatures to surmount the municipal filter (this courtesy was not extended to all opposition candidates: only six candidates were registered while another

¹ Governors are rated individually by ten experts on a scale of 1 (least influential) to 10 (most influential), then the rankings are averaged to produce an index of perceived influence (http://www.ng.ru/regions/2012-07-06/5_rating.html; http://www.ng.ru/regions/2013-08-08/5_rating.html).

ten candidates failed to clear the municipal filter in Moscow oblast, while 30 out of 36 candidates were denied registration in Moscow). Some journalistic accounts even alleged Sobyenin's personal involvement in arranging Navalny's improbable release after he was sentenced to five years in prison in July 2013. The close tie between an incumbent's ability to win a competitive election and perceived status further led to speculation that Sobyenin views the Moscow election as a stepping stone to becoming Putin's successor.

In addition to the introduction of presidential and municipal filters for direct elections, Putin also moved to give regions the option to forego direct elections. During Medvedev's presidency, nominations for governor were made by parties bearing a majority in a given region's council (in practice, United Russia). While some observers argued that this strengthened the hand of regional legislatures vis-à-vis governors, nominations ultimately were made by the party's central body rather than regional branches—indeed, recommendations for gubernatorial nominees made by regional branches of United Russia were frequently ignored by the central party apparatus.

In re-establishing the option of a non-electoral option in place of direct elections, Putin cited the potential for elections to provoke ethnic conflict in Russia's republics. He singled out Dagestan as a case in which a non-electoral option would help to preserve indigenous mechanisms for power-sharing among ethnic Avars and Dargins. However, the procedure as adopted allows for any political party represented in a regional council or the national parliament to nominate candidates for governor. In other words, the option for an "indirect" election weakens the ability of regional parties to influence the Kremlin's choice of governor by involving parties lacking any presence in regional councils.

The disciplinary subtext of this procedure cannot have escaped the notice of regional actors. Few regions now appear interested in foregoing direct gubernatorial elections: so far this has been limited to Dagestan and Ingushetia. Even in these cases, however, the Kremlin has been forced to confront regional elites. In Dagestan, Magomedislam Magomedov's claim that the republic was ready to hold direct elections for governor prompted Volodin to demand his resignation in January 2013. In his place, Putin appointed as acting governor parliamentary deputy Ramazan Abdulatipov, who in turn had the republican council reject direct gubernatorial elections. The popular mayor of the republic's capital, Said Amirov, also supported direct elections and appeared well positioned to contest the post until his arrest in June 2013. Putin's final slate of candidates (from which the regional council formally chooses the head of republic) included Abdulatipov and two unlikely challengers in the republic's Minister of Labor and Social Development, Malik Baliev, and human rights commissioner Ummupazil Omarova.

In Ingushetia, opponents of the unpopular incumbent Yunus-Bek Yevkurov gathered in Moscow in June 2013 to demand (unsuccessfully) direct gubernatorial elections. Instead, the list of nominees submitted to the Kremlin featured two candidates chosen by United Russia (Yevkurov and deputy parliamentary speaker Magomed Tatriev) and the republic's similarly unpopular former president Murat Zyazikov. Putin

in turn nominated Yevkurov, Tatriev, and the head of the republican branch of Just Russia, Uruskhan Yevloev.

In both republics, the Kremlin's preference for central appointments rather than direct elections belies the weakness of its ties to republican elites while exposing the limits of patronage and institutional control. Moreover, Putin's justification for appointments as safer than direct elections in ethnic republics may be treated at best as an expressive hypothesis awaiting evidence or, at worst, as a challenge to subnational elites to prove him wrong. In an early sign that other republics are closely watching the process in Dagestan and Ingushetia, republican councils in Bashkortostan and Tatarstan flatly refused to consider the bill to introduce a non-electoral option for selecting governors in April 2013.

The revival of gubernatorial elections puts the Kremlin's new generation of appointed governors who lack electoral experience in an awkward position. They are now assumed to potentially lack popular support until proven otherwise by a popular election, but they are not independent actors like the elected governors that preceded them in the 1990s and early 2000s. The contrast is particularly striking for a number of acting governors currently seeking election after the departure of political heavyweights. The most significant among them is Andrei Vorobyov in Moscow oblast, who took over for the popular and influential Sergei Shoigu after the latter's appointment as minister of defense in November 2012. Svetlana Orlova was appointed acting governor in Vladimir oblast after Nikolai Vinogradov's departure after sixteen years in office. Orlova lacked ties to the region, having spent most of her career as a senator in the Federation Council for Kemerovo oblast, and she is not considered popular in the region. Similarly, Konstantin Ilkovsky has been acting governor in Zabaikal krai since Ravil Genyatulin left office after seventeen years (he was originally elected governor of Chita oblast in 1996). Ilkovsky initially made his career in business in Yakutia, but in 2011 he was elected to parliament on Just Russia's party list in Buryatia. He is the only incumbent or acting governor not affiliated with United Russia, although the ruling party is not running a candidate against him. Aside from these candidates, Roman Kopin (Chukotka) is running for election for the first time, having previously been appointed governor in 2008. Kopin lacks any electoral experience though he also lacks any serious challengers. He further benefits from the difficulties faced by potential opposition in overcoming infrequent air transportation to gather signatures. In Magadan, Vladimir Pechyony was appointed acting governor following the dismissal of Nikolai Dudov in February 2013. Pechyony's position is the most secure among acting governors, having previously been twice elected mayor of the region's capital city (2004-2013). Vyacheslav Shport (Khabarovsk) and Viktor Zimin (Khakassia) are also considered relatively secure incumbents.

Given the difference in capabilities among acting and incumbent governors in the current round of elections, one might well expect a new cleavage to emerge between those governors strong enough to orchestrate (and win) convincingly competitive elections and those who keep office simply by well-worn methods including ordinary election fraud (such as the use of voter "carousels"), limiting competition through the

exploitation of administrative resources such as media manipulation and excluding opposition, or by forming alliances in the center to the exclusion of regional actors. Perhaps inadvertently, Putin raised the stakes for governors to choose between these paths by issuing a decree last spring that grants government ministers the right to propose that governors be sacked. In a meeting with the country's governors in June, Putin railed against the tendency of governors to make decisions behind closed doors, to substitute events for work, and to make promotions based on loyalty rather than merit – in effect, criticizing the way politics works in Russia but shifting responsibility to the governors. As the Kremlin increases the number of pretexts and mechanisms for governors to be fired, governors may well seek to test the waters in competitive elections as an alternative source of job security.

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