

## The Twilight of the Vertical

### CAN A GOVERNOR IN VOLGOGRAD PLAY A NEW GAME?

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Ivan Kurilla

*Volgograd State University/George Washington University*

The political crisis ignited by Russia's parliamentary elections in December 2011 was marked by mass demonstrations in Moscow but little opposition mobilization elsewhere. However, its influence on Russia's tight system of vertical power was more profound than may be seen on the surface. I will demonstrate this change through the tale (yet unfinished) of Volgograd's governor, Sergey Bozhenov, whose appointment on the eve of presidential elections was highly controversial.

#### **Setting the Stage**

Residents of the Volgograd region have elected a governor three times since the mid-1990s. All three times, voters chose a member of the Communist Party, Nikolay Maksyuta, who was not an ideologue but a "red director." Maksyuta proved capable of keeping his position without clashing with the federal government (but also without ever really gaining its support). In 2010, however, Maksyuta was appointed by presidential decree to the Federation Council (the upper chamber of the Russian parliament) and Anatoly Brovko was appointed Volgograd's governor. Typical for an appointee of former president Dmitry Medvedev, Brovko was weak. He had never been in the public eye, had not participated in any election, and was not a backroom dealmaker. He was a compromise figure fit for the relatively quiet "Medvedev interlude."

Characteristically, Brovko organized his public relations not to reach out to the local population but to secure Kremlin approval. His political acts included the creation of a personal blog (since President Medvedev considered blogging good practice) and the patriotic "Victory" center based on Volgograd's famous history and image as the

former Stalingrad. However, Brovko was unable to consolidate the traditionally divided regional elites or make the local United Russia party organization very popular. Volgograd's population did not support his policies, which were oriented to outside approval rather than electoral support. Accordingly, prior to parliamentary elections, he failed to create the kind of electoral machine needed to generate the required election results.

In the parliamentary elections, United Russia received 35 percent of the votes in the Volgograd region and less than 30 percent in Volgograd city itself. This was a significantly lower percentage than United Russia received nationwide in the disputed election. Two days later, with Brovko's clear approval, the chairman of the regional election commission claimed that a "recalculation" of the votes revealed that United Russia had really received 42 percent of the vote. However, such open manipulation proved too bold even for Moscow, and the Central Election Commission rejected the revised results.

From then on, it became clear that Governor Brovko would be removed from his post. In February 2012, Volgograd residents learned that their new governor was to be Sergey Bozhenov, former mayor of Astrakhan who had a tarnished reputation for electoral fraud.

### **The Arrival of Sergey Bozhenov**

Bozhenov's errand was clear: he was appointed to ensure that Vladimir Putin would achieve a decisive victory in Volgograd in the March 2012 presidential elections. And indeed, under the newly appointed governor, Volgograd supported Putin with 63 percent of the vote. (Characteristically, the chairman of the regional election commission kept his position.) Thus, Bozhenov accomplished the task he was appointed to fulfill. But the governor encountered new challenges.

From the outset, Sergey Bozhenov was looked on as a representative of the "hardliner" group in the Russian leadership (associated with Vyacheslav Volodin, who replaced Vladislav Surkov in December 2011 as first deputy head of the presidential administration). In February, in an unprecedented move, the rector of the Volgograd Technical University, Ivan Novakov, publicly asked regional council deputies not to approve of Bozhenov's candidacy as regional governor (which had been suggested by then-president Medvedev). His tight management of presidential elections supported the rumors of his "hardline" affiliation.

Installing the new governor assured Putin victory, but the means by which Bozhenov managed this task made him a major target for "fair election" activists. One week after the elections, Bozhenov gave automobiles to the heads of municipalities that had achieved the best election results. When activists and journalists asked what the meaning of this gesture was and how it had been paid for, he refused to answer. Meanwhile, local law enforcement took no interest in the affair. At the same time, Bozhenov quickly created a wide front of political foes from among the Volgograd establishment. His reliance on past subordinates and friends from Astrakhan and Stavropol to fill regional government positions alienated local elites, while his

interference in municipal politics created unrest among Volgograd city deputies. The new governor also made several missteps in “symbolic” management, which is important for Volgograd. For example, he proposed to rename the central embankment from the “62<sup>nd</sup> Army Embankment,” in memory of soldiers that fought during the Battle of Stalingrad, to the impersonal “Victory Embankment.”

Even the national media got in the game, covering the scandalous visit of Bozhenov and regional council deputies to Italy in April for a birthday celebration. The trip was initially called a “business visit of the Volgograd delegation” but after public inquiry it was dubbed a “private matter.” There was much speculation. *Novaya Gazeta* suggested that the whole thing had been a public relations campaign by the old corrupt elites of Volgograd, who felt that Bozhenov posed a threat to their power. In July, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* offered another conspiracy theory, suggesting that the whole scandal had been devised by the Kremlin as an attempt to draw public attention away from Astrakhan, where opposition candidate Oleg Shein was on hunger strike to protest massive violations during that city’s March mayoral election.

### **Changing Weather, Shifting Tack**

Despite all the negative attention, Bozhenov should have felt relatively secure after his good performance in the presidential elections. The criticism against him from the opposition should even have made his position stronger in the eyes of the Kremlin.

However, the future of the current political system is not guaranteed. The period of Bozhenov’s rule in Volgograd coincided with the time of rapid development of social movements in Russia and the first liberalization of electoral laws after the winter protests. The Volgograd governor’s name became prominent in two of the most public opposition campaigns of the time: against the scandalous Italian jaunt and in support of the hunger strike of Oleg Shein, Bozhenov’s Astrakhan gadfly, who claimed that he was the real winner of that city’s mayoral election. The arrival of hundreds of Moscow opposition activists to Astrakhan in support of Shein was one of the first major mobilizations of society after the March elections.

Adding to his challenges, Sergey Bozhenov faced an almost unified front against him in Volgograd at a time of changing political rules-of-the-game. The federal law that restored gubernatorial elections (if with limitations on the popular right to nominate candidates) was enacted on June 1. Nationwide policy further changed with a series of new laws passed in the summertime that created more obstacles for a functioning civil society.

Despite his reputation as a “hardliner,” however, Bozhenov has experience in contesting elections, unlike his predecessor Brovko. Despite allegations of fraud when he ran for mayor of Astrakhan (and then for parliament), he received significant support among Astrakhan residents.

This may be why his behavior is more political than anticipated, coming as it does from an appointed governor. In May and June, Bozhenov promoted a policy that seemed to be targeted at gaining public support. He created “public councils” for each department of regional government as well as a governor-level public council. This

council, headed by the influential rector of a regional medical university, Vladimir Petrov, includes people with diverse backgrounds and ages, businessmen, and bloggers. Such a composition distinguishes the body from the regional public chamber consisting of bureaucrats. The other new public councils are also filled with influential and diverse social representatives. In late June, Bozhenov delivered a special address to the Volgograd government touching upon most current regional problems. This address, a kind of political program, was widely circulated and considered to have been targeted at the electorate far more than to subordinate officials. His predecessor never produced such a program, which embraced both a list of concrete problems and called for a different (and more open) style of government work.

Governor Bozhenov's efforts to court the local population make sense only if he is planning for his future in a different type of regime. This kind of politics works in regimes in which local leaders are elected, not appointed. One could say that his attempts to gain popularity are a form of demagoguery, aimed at counterbalancing resistance from local elites. It is that too. But this means that the governor is unable to rely on Kremlin support to undercut the opposition of regional elites. His having to address the local electorate even to solve local inter-elite problems suggests that Russia's current system of vertical rule has reached a dead end. One way or another, the existence of the people has to be taken into account.

### **Conclusion**

The changing behavior of Volgograd's governor demonstrates the end of a brief period of "apolitical" governors who are merely Kremlin-appointed officials. A new generation of regional leaders—many of whom began their careers in the 1990s—must soothe the growing public unrest and take on responsibilities that Moscow is unable to fulfill. There will be dirty politics, but it will be *politics*, not the top-down stability of consolidated authoritarianism.