

Escalating Uncertainty

THE NEXT ROUND OF GUBERNATORIAL ELECTIONS IN RUSSIA

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Subnational electoral competition has been crucial to nationwide democratization in countries like Mexico. To what extent could the recent return of gubernatorial elections in Russia's regions open such possibilities in Putin's Russia? This question appears especially pertinent if we take into account the "cracks in the wall" of the political regime that became apparent following the parliamentary elections of December 2011. This period has been characterized by political uncertainty, with popular mobilization and emboldened opposition on one side and on the other the liberalizing steps at the end of President Dmitry Medvedev's term followed by a crackdown under President Vladimir Putin. In this memo, I argue that the political dynamic set by the new round of gubernatorial elections might serve to enhance the political uncertainty that the regime has been working so hard to contain.

The return of gubernatorial elections (the law went into effect in June 2012) has been one of the most important political reforms undertaken by Medvedev at the end of his presidency. This unexpected step on the side of the Kremlin can be seen from two different perspectives. On the one hand, there has been a growing consensus among experts and likely an understanding on the part of the authorities that the system of gubernatorial appointments in place since 2005 has been vulnerable to the loss of administrative control in some regions and potential destabilization on the national level, as the growing number of unpopular governors become unable to guarantee the electoral results the Kremlin desires. This trend has been especially apparent in regions where long-serving governors (insiders) were replaced by *varyagi* (outsiders) who were not embedded in local networks of power and were lacking skills that would allow them to easily integrate and build cooperative relations with regional elites. Cases of post-Stroev Orel, post-Rossel Sverdlovsk, and post-Titov Samara regions are illustrative in

this respect.¹ The shortage of administratively proven cadres also had complicated the appointment system, a fact long realized by the Kremlin. Therefore, authorities had their own rational administrative reasons to bring back the gubernatorial electoral mechanism.

At the same time, most experts have focused on the political rationality driving this reform, especially considering its timing. Putin first noted the need for the reform in December 2011, in the midst of the popular protests that unraveled in the aftermath of the 2011 parliamentary elections. This promised reform thus has been widely interpreted as a concession to protesters (at least in the beginning), although the actual law was shaped into one that allows maintenance of the political status quo.

Instead of restoring free gubernatorial elections, the new law has erected serious barriers, allowing the Kremlin to control candidate registration and prevent opposition candidates from running. The main barrier is the municipal filter: each candidate is required to get the support of five to ten percent of municipal deputies (regions themselves got to legislate the precise percentage). The overwhelming control of most municipalities by the party of power means that opposition candidates will likely be unable to get the needed signatures. The second filter is presidential: the president can consult with all candidates and selects three to run. Additionally, although the law allows for self-nomination, each region has to legislate whether it will allow self-nomination in addition to party nomination. So far, no region has allowed the self-nomination of candidates in gubernatorial elections, thus making this option illusory.

In short, the return of regional elections has occurred in a very constrained fashion with the aim of enabling the preservation of the status quo and a high degree of control exercised by the party of power and personally by the president. At the same time, as with the change of any rules and institutions, the processes that unfold in the context of institutional change can be more complex and unpredictable than what their creators had in mind. Furthermore, the inevitable return of public politics and politicization of the regions makes it even less likely that the Kremlin will be able to manage the process according to its plans all the time. Hence, there is space for thinking about potential unintended consequences of the return of gubernatorial elections, even with all the barriers and constraints that are in place. Below I consider three potential outcomes that could endanger the regime's ability to control the political process. I follow this with a brief overview of the upcoming gubernatorial elections (scheduled for October 14, 2012) and conclude with an analysis of the effects of uncertainty on the regime.

Unintended Consequences

First, when elections are free, they inevitably create uncertainty with regard to the victor and therefore encourage elite fragmentation and competition. The new law reinstating gubernatorial elections aims to reduce uncertainty by creating mechanisms of control

¹ Yegor Stroeve was the governor of Orel from 1993- 2009, Eduard Rossel was governor of Sverdlovsk from 1995-2009, and Konstantin Titov was governor of Samara from 1991-2007.

over who can run in the elections. However, the main mechanism—the municipal filter—might not be as bulletproof as the regime wants, especially with the passage of time and with the potentially growing victories of opposition candidates in local elections. Therefore, the new opportunities created by the return of gubernatorial elections might embolden elites who, in the context of the appointment-based system, might have opted for a strategy of acquiescence. The existence of latent and open intra-elite conflicts in many regions is well known. Regions that have lost their long-serving governors—the individuals who played the role of an arbiter among rival groups and got outsiders as replacement governors—are the main candidates for experiencing such conflicts and for creating the ground for competitive gubernatorial elections.

Second, with increasing stakes in the control of municipalities, competition at the lowest level of elections to municipal assemblies is likely to increase and has been increasing already as opposition parties invest more in these elections. There are multiple cases when opposition candidates have won local elections in Russia—they took almost a third of the Moscow city district council seats this past March. They also won in mayoral elections in Togliatti, Taganrog, and Yaroslavl, as well as in the small town of Chernogolovka (near Moscow). There are also regions, such as Orel, where the Communist Party controls 12 percent of seats in the municipal assemblies, thus enabling real opposition candidates to overcome barriers. Opposition leaders seem to understand the stakes involved in local elections and realize that some of these victories, especially the one in Yaroslavl, have been helped by financial, administrative, and civic support from other cities.

Finally, it has been argued that elections form a platform for resolving collective action problems and enabling peaceful revolutions.² This logic might apply in gubernatorial elections in Russia as well because the stakes in gubernatorial elections are higher than in local elections. The regional population understands that executive power is predominant in Russia and is likely to be more engaged in regional politics once elections are back. Therefore, cases of electoral fraud committed during gubernatorial elections are likely to attract more public attention and resistance. This might especially be the case when strong opposition candidates are able to run in elections. Given the importance of gubernatorial elections, people might use the timing of elections to indicate their discontent with authorities. Although the protests that shook Russia in the months following the parliamentary and presidential elections have been in decline, the new civic mood and “mode of action” set by Moscow is likely to spread to other large cities in Russia. The Moscow-based middle class has been a trendsetter for well-earning professionals elsewhere in Russia. Public opinion polls conducted in July also reveal the growth of popular support for mass protest, while showing a declining number of those who anticipate change in the prevalence of a protest mood.³

2 Joshua Tucker, “Enough! Electoral Fraud, Collective Action Problems and Post-Communist Color Revolutions,” *Perspective on Politics* 5, 3, 2007, 537-553.

3 <http://www.levada.ru/01-08-2012/rost-protestnykh-nastroenii>

October 14th Elections

The Kremlin has been preparing for the new round of gubernatorial elections. In the first five months of 2012, almost a fourth of governors were replaced. These replacements were in regions where it was uncertain whether authorities would be able to control electoral results. Therefore, the first elections, to be held on October 14 in five regions – Novgorod, Ryazan, Belgorod, Amur, and Bryansk—are intended to be the most conservative and controlled.⁴ Thus, experts have ranked three of the governors that will run for election – Evgenii Savchenko (Belgorod), Oleg Kozhemiako (Amur), and Sergei Mitin (Novgorod) – as “highly likely to be elected.”⁵ These assessments are confirmed by the fact that no serious opposition candidates are set to run in these elections. At the same time, the outcome is uncertain in the two remaining regions (Bryansk and Ryazan), where experts predict the possibility of a second round of elections and even potentially the incumbent governor’s defeat. In Ryazan, the incumbent governor, Oleg Kovalev, faces active elite opposition. Igor Morozov, a well-known regional politician who participated in the 2004 gubernatorial elections and represents Ryazan in the State Duma, has been nominated to run from the Patriots of Russia party. In Bryansk, a candidate from the Communist Party, Vadim Potomskii, claims to be ready to pass the municipal filter and, in that case, is likely to be a real challenge for the unpopular incumbent governor Nikolai Denin. How this uncertainty will be resolved is unclear at the moment. Experts note that the Kremlin might allow an opposition victory in one of these cases to prevent immediate popular disillusionment with new gubernatorial elections. At the same time, it is reasonable to expect that a Kremlin loss in both regions would make the regime appear weak and encourage more contestation.

Successful victories for the opposition in such cases as mayoral elections in Yaroslavl present lessons of potential strategies for success in local elections. In Yaroslavl, the opposition candidate was supported by a political coalition that included the Communists, the center-left party Just Russia, the liberal Yabloko party, and the Solidarity movement. The elections in Yaroslavl also manifested high civic engagement—many volunteers who monitored the elections came from Moscow and other cities, contributing to the victory of the opposition candidate.

Effects of Uncertainty on the Regime

In the realm of economics, uncertainty leads investors to underinvest and eye profitable future investment options. In the realm of politics on the other hand, the logic turns upside down and uncertainty leads to overinvestment driven by fear of greater political (and hence economic) loss, at least in Russia. In short, the Kremlin would have to invest more of its resources—administrative, financial, and cadres—to ensure the desired outcome. Indeed, recently published documents in *Novaya Gazeta* (July 18, 2012) reveal a very close monitoring by the center of local and regional elections and interference in electoral processes in order to ensure victory for the party of power. Therefore, the first

⁴ The presidential administration has been closely involved in the elections in each of these regions.

⁵ According to the Political Expertise Group led by Konstantin Kalachev.

effect of the return of gubernatorial elections is an increase in pressure on the system (contrary to the original intent of the reform), which is likely to create conditions for further escalation of uncertainty.

Secondly, if the opposition is able to win some or any regional elections, these victories will set a precedent, emboldening opposition in other regions and revealing that the regime is not invincible. This dynamic would once again work to escalate the uncertainty threatening the regime. In short, even if the Kremlin has attempted to avoid electoral uncertainty in gubernatorial elections by introducing serious barriers to candidate registration, the dynamics of the electoral processes unfolding over time might work to increase the initial small uncertainty that is present thus opening new windows of opportunity for the political opposition in Russia. What will be left for the opposition then is to organize more effectively on the regional and local level and to create broad-based coalitions in support of single opposition candidates who can challenge the incumbent. This is a strategy that has been shown to work in many other countries that have experienced liberalizing electoral outcomes in the context of competitive authoritarian regimes.⁶

⁶ Marc Morje Howard and Philipp D. Roessler, "Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes," *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (2), 2006, pp. 365-381.