

The View of Russian Electoral Reforms from Russia's Ethnic Republics

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President Putin's proposal to eliminate gubernatorial elections throughout Russia caught the leaders of Russia's ethnic republics by surprise. Although it was widely known that such ideas had been circulating in the Kremlin for some time, no one in the regional governments expected this "reform" at the time it was announced. Nevertheless, reactions to the initiative were both quick and varied.

In this memo, I examine the initial reactions to this initiative on the part of various political actors in the region and analyze the factors that led these politicians to take the stands that they took, focusing primarily on the ethnic republics of Russia's Volga region. I also examine the public reaction to this initiative, particularly among Russia's ethnic minorities. I conclude by discussing the impact that the appointment of the leaders of Russia's ethnic republics will have on regional politics and relations between the regions and Moscow.

Republic Presidents Support Initiative

The presidents of several of the Volga republics quickly came out in support of Putin's initiative. In fact, the two presidents that spoke out earliest and most forcefully were the ones who were most involved in the drive to increase republic sovereignty vis-à-vis Moscow in the early 1990s. Tatarstan's President Shaimiev, speaking the day that Putin unveiled his initial proposal, said that he supported the changes because in many regions corrupt or unqualified candidates have risen to power through elections. He also noted that the necessary changes would require amending the Tatarstan constitution. In a later speech, he argued that seventy percent of Russia's regional leaders were inept and over half have come to power by illegal means. Speaking three days later, Bashkortostan's President Rakhimov argued that the reforms will increase the level of democracy in Russia, since "what took place during the elections of heads of regions cannot be described as anything other than a bacchanal."

There are several reasons that powerful regional leaders like Shaimiev and Rakhimov have decided to support Putin's reforms. First, their support is an indicator of the extent to which political power in Russia has shifted from the regions back to Moscow since Putin became president. They know that if Putin truly wants to eliminate gubernatorial elections, they have no power to change the situation. Furthermore, they believe that if they quickly declare their support for Putin's initiative there is a good chance that they

may be appointed to retain their positions. If, on the other hand, they oppose Putin on this issue, it will almost certainly be enacted anyway and someone else would equally certainly replace them as president.

Second, regional presidents may be inclined to support the elimination of gubernatorial elections because most of them, including the two quoted above, are bumping up against term limits or have little popularity in their home regions and see presidential appointment as a more sure way of retaining power for the long term than relying on elections or handing the presidency to a handpicked successor. Rakhimov was recently quoted as saying that he thinks it is abnormal to restrict regional leaders to two terms in office. Governor Rossel of Sverdlovsk Oblast expressed a similar sentiment. Both Shaimiev and Rakhimov have been in power since before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Both have already had to resort to dubious court rulings to allow themselves to serve more than the legally allowed two terms. While Shaimiev has never had to deal with serious opposition in his election campaigns, Rakhimov has repeatedly had to resort to manipulation of the electoral system in order to maintain his hold on power. Most recently, he only won reelection in 2003 after convincing Putin to support him rather than his main challenger, leading the challenger to suspend his campaign between the first and second rounds of the election. In this environment, it is not surprising that regional leaders may prefer the security of having to answer only to Moscow, and not to the inhabitants of the region.

A final reason for the presidents' support may have to do with their belief that they can strengthen their own power by ending the popular election of mayors and heads of rural districts. Rakhimov, in fact, openly stated that he would like to set up a system where district administrators are appointed by the governor and then confirmed by the regional legislature or the district council. Shaimiev was one of the first regional leaders to openly propose that mayoral elections be replaced with a system where governors appoint mayors. In fact, presidents in both Tatarstan and Bashkortostan already appoint rural district administrators. Mayors, however, are elected in both republics and although they are generally allied with the presidents, they have on occasion expressed opposition specific policies of the regional administration.

Opposition from Other Quarters

Other regional political leaders, and especially legislators, were more likely to oppose Putin's initiative. Despite the positions of the heads of their republics, several top officials in both Tatarstan and Bashkortostan criticized the end of gubernatorial elections. The chairman of the Tatarstan State Council's Economy and Investments Commission argued that this measure had nothing to do with fighting terrorism, the ostensible reason for its introduction. Instead, he said, it was aimed at replacing the federal state with a unitary power structure where all figures of authority throughout the country answered only to Moscow. Similar sentiments were expressed by the head of the Unified Russia faction in Bashkortostan's parliament, who called the proposed reforms a major blow at civil democratic freedoms and unacceptable for Bashkortostan.

Nationalist politicians were particularly opposed to the elimination of gubernatorial elections, claiming that such a move would spell the end of ethnic republics' statehood. One such politician in Tatarstan said that given the high likelihood that the plan would be

adopted, the only way out of the situation would be to eliminate the position of republic president and make Tatarstan a parliamentary republic.

Public Reaction

Public reaction on this issue has been fairly muted. In several regions, small demonstrations were held in opposition to the appointment of governors. In Kazan, a small demonstration for this cause attracted about 400 people on October 23, including members of the local Communist Party and moderate Tatar nationalists. The small size of this demonstration is in sharp contrast to the tens of thousands who demonstrated in Kazan in 1991 when President Shaimiev was threatened with removal by Moscow politicians for his failure to oppose the August 1991 coup. Other than a few dedicated activists, few people in the republics care about regional sovereignty at this point, since a majority has decided that sovereignty has brought few benefits to anyone other than the regional administrators.

More significant opposition to the elimination of gubernatorial elections has come from regional legislatures. The Chuvash State Council passed a resolution noting that the proposed changes “contradict the constitutional right of citizens of the Russian Federation to directly elect the highest official of the federation subject.” Although the Tatarstan parliament voted in favor of Putin’s proposal, its resolution called for the law to expire at the end of Putin’s presidency. Furthermore, several deputies from the Unified Russia party said during the debate on this measure that the elimination of direct gubernatorial elections was inimical to the preservation of liberal values in Tatarstan.

Potential Impact on Russian Politics

The replacement of elected governors with ones appointed by Moscow is part of a general trend in Russian politics toward strengthening central power at the expense of all potential sources of opposition. Since coming to power, Putin has undertaken a gradual though systematic effort to dismantle federalism in Russia. One of Putin’s first moves as president was to appoint seven representatives to oversee groups of provinces and to take away some of the power that had devolved to the regions under President Yeltsin. The removal of governors from the Federation Council was another step in this effort. The move to appoint governors should be seen as the final step in this process. Appointed governors, like the Communist Party Obkom secretaries in Soviet times, will simply enforce Moscow’s policies in the regions, rather than advocating regional interests in Moscow, as governors who were answerable to the electorate did at least some of the time.

Unfortunately for the central authorities, their efforts to control the regions through appointed governors are unlikely to bring about the desired results. Rather than having reliable, competent administrators who implement the central government’s policies without much discussion, Moscow is likely to get cautious, semi-competent yes-men who will often be unable to control events in the regions they are appointed to rule. In a manner that became ubiquitous under Soviet rule, appointed governors will fear that making controversial decisions will result in their removal and will attempt to smooth over problems so as to project an image of well-being in their region to Moscow. The result will be that such problems will fester just below the surface until they become uncontrollable.

The situation is likely to be particularly problematic in Russia's ethnic regions. Some examples of Moscow-supported governors that were elected in manipulated elections may be instructive. Throughout the 1990s, outside observers marveled at the relative stability in Ingushetia, given its precarious geographic position on the border with Chechnya and the close ethnic and linguistic ties between the Chechen and Ingush. Much of the credit for that stability was rightly given to Ingushetia's president during this period, Ruslan Aushev. Yet Aushev was forced to resign in December 2001 and his successor, Murad Zyazikov, who was handpicked by Moscow, has proven unable to build a reliable power base in the republic. The result has been an escalation of violence and the emergence of Ingush terrorist groups that work together with Chechen rebels. These groups were involved in a daring raid on the capital of Ingushetia in June 2004 and may have been involved in the Beslan hostage tragedy in North Ossetia in September. Similarly, an ongoing political crisis in Karachaevo-Cherkessia over the murder of seven people by the local president's son-in-law has been exacerbated by the perception among much of the population that the president is a Moscow stooge who does not have any legitimacy with the local population. Again, the main cause of this perception was the manipulation of elections and the failure of the "winning" candidate to build a reliable power base among the clans that have traditionally allocated power in the region.

Although President Putin believes that the end of gubernatorial elections will improve governance by making Russia's regions more controllable and by improving the quality of governors, the end result is likely to be the exact opposite. Appointed governors will have trouble controlling the political situation in their regions, will allow small problems to fester until they become uncontrollable, and will fail to provide Moscow with reliable indications of the political, economic, and social needs of the population in their region. President Putin would be well served to shelve this unneeded reform.