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Regional power in Russia: why is it getting more fragile?



The degradation of Russia's system of regional government has been especially obvious during the gubernatorial election campaigns under way in 16 regions of the country. This will culminate in the inevitable victory of the Kremlin-nominated candidates on September 10.

Neither the federal authorities nor the voters seem interested in this election, and public attitudes to these developments remain a mystery: There is no reason to believe official sociology, or any analysis of the course and outcome of this gubernatorial election; its result is predetermined and citizens have no way to influence the process. A methodology that envisages the participation only of official candidates and uninspiring "spoilers" makes any protest vote pointless. Even if citizens decide to vote for another candidate in one of the regions, their votes will be declared to be in favor of the party s/he represents. In any case, President Vladimir Putin's nominee will be declared the winner.

The Kremlin's attitudes toward these processes are directly related to the place regional elections occupy in today's political system. In the past, the governor of a rich region was respected by Moscow as a negotiating partner, while the governor of a poor one was regarded a useful client for achieving the desired nationwide election results. Today, there are no rich regions in the first place (due to the budgetary policy introduced by Kudrin, under which all the money is concentrated in Moscow and then distributed in accordance with Kremlin

bosses' notions of who deserves what). Secondly, it is difficult to perceive a randomly selected person, elected as head of the region as the result of a confluence of intrigues in the highest echelons of power, as an independent politician. Such a person runs the region in the name of the president, enjoying the benefits of the president's approval rating and having no real political gravitas.

Hence, local elites and winners approved by Moscow in advance are the only parties sincerely interested in any of the fuss surrounding regional elections. Even then, their interest lies in a completely different sphere than that of Western politicians on the eve of elections. The task of a gubernatorial candidate approved by Moscow is not so much to garner votes as to perform all the prescribed rituals in a timely and orderly manner, while avoiding gross errors and scandals - especially those which could reach Moscow.

No wonder all Russian governors spend so much time in Moscow: Their main voters are located there, after all. As has been mentioned, there is no practical reason for them to flirt with the population.

And, of course, the apex of every regional campaign in contemporary Russia is the ability of a governor to arrange a visit by Vladimir Putin to his region and ensure a chance of standing next to the president in front of the cameras. A fundamental principle of the existence of the Russian authorities, and politics in general, is demonstrated during such an event: It is only Putin who matters, and those he is willing to see next to him or occupying any post that is in any way significant. In addition, local residents and elites receive a message: any impostor can and will be the head of their region simply because Putin or someone from his milieu has decided so.

Rituals of power and foregone conclusions

Such a ritual recently took place in Udmurtia, when Putin personally [ordered the resettlement of families](#) residing in temporary emergency housing, and decided on a vacation to Sochi for one of the residents. Former Secretary of the Public Chamber Alexander Brechalov, recently appointed acting head of the Udmurt Republic, was standing behind the president. Putin was reportedly planning to visit Yekaterinburg in July, thus creating an opportunity for his nominee Yevgeny Kuyvashev to pose next to him. Kuyvashev was appointed the head of the once-rich Sverdlovsk Oblast thanks to being close to one of the Kremlin clans. In fact, the campaign can be regarded as over - the numerical count of votes no longer matters. The winner has already been decided.

As for the election in Sverdlovsk Oblast, the preparations aroused great interest outside the region, primarily because Yekaterinburg Mayor Yevgeny Roizman - a well-known and single-minded politician with a high approval rating - decided to run. Roizman is much better known in the Urals and beyond than the gray apparatchik Kuyvashev. However, Roizman's chances of taking part in the election are close to zero. He cannot become an official candidate without passing through the notorious "municipal filter," which requires enormous organizational efforts. As part of this process, prospective candidates have to collect 132 signatures, in 55 municipal entities in the region (113 signatures of deputies from urban and municipal districts and 19 signatures of representatives of urban and rural communities, which are part of municipal districts). The executive authorities who control the electoral commissions can thus block undesirable candidates' access to an election campaign for a number of technical reasons: the nomination procedure can be questioned; the number and quality of signatures of municipal deputies can be challenged, etc. Given the regional authorities' strong aversion to Roizman's nomination and the federal authorities' lack of interest in publicized gubernatorial campaigns, we can sadly conclude that in Sverdlovsk Oblast, too, the election will follow the most boring scenario, with a predictable outcome.

Unfortunately, this is the reality of today's regional politics in Russia. A gubernatorial campaign starts with the presidential blessing of a candidate on TV, and culminates with Putin arriving in the region and making it clear: "Here is your future governor, there is no other." The real approval rating of the chosen one and his managerial skills, or the lively interest of citizens in elections, are of no importance. Therefore, there is no need to irritate the population by forcing them to participate in gubernatorial campaigns. One suspects that a decision to save people's fading enthusiasm for the federal elections, which require high turnout, has been taken at the highest level. The 2018 presidential election is the only political campaign whose outcome is of interest to the authorities.

From the point of view of political expediency, this approach to the formation of regional authorities seems

doomed. Given the growing social and economic crisis, the Kremlin should be interested in single-minded and reputable local authorities that Moscow can blame upcoming difficulties on.

Boris Yeltsin once applied this tactic. However, he had to face the other side of the coin: Even the most loyal officials, relatively democratically elected heads of regions, sooner or later came to the conclusion that it wasn't worth accepting responsibility for the blunders of the federal leadership. It was much easier to blame every failure on Moscow, even if the regional authorities were at fault.

Putin's power rests on the absolute obedience of the entire bureaucratic vertical. Only political mediocrities who owe their affluent life and career to Putin personally or some of his entourage can endure such an extent of obedience. All regional leaders, including the seemingly all-powerful Ramzan Kadyrov, hold on to their posts due not to their popularity among the population but based on their relations with Moscow officials and support from federal law enforcement structures. Truth be told, why should they consider the interests of the people, and irritate the president with their personal approval ratings, when they can demonstrate loyalty, obedience and humility, and therefore extend their careers indefinitely?

The fatal flaw...

The fatal flaw in this system, which will inevitably lead to its collapse, is evident. This is the notorious "negative selection," wagers on passive, non-charismatic and random people who occupy all the posts in Russia that are of any significance. Lackluster officials, hiding their drawbacks and shortcomings behind the infallible presidential ratings, do not interfere with the functioning of the system, or actively help maintain it against the backdrop of relative social and political stability. What can we expect from them in an emergency? Can they accept responsibility in a crisis? Can they rely on the legitimacy they obtained during their ritual election?

Power in contemporary Russia - reaching from the prime minister down to the lowest municipal official and the cop on the beat - rests on the authority of Vladimir Putin. The imperial façade hides an incredible fragility. Russia suffered the consequences of this situation in 1917 when the removal of a single person in power delegitimized the entire "power vertical" at all levels, turning governors, municipal officials and policemen, as well as other law enforcement officers, into a bunch of scared people incapable of taking responsibility for the future of the country, let alone maintaining public order in a critical situation.

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