

Table

Freedom House Nations in Transit Scores for Russia 2000–2009

| | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 |
|------------------------|-------------|-------------|----------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Electoral Process | 4 | 4.25 | 4.5 | 4.75 | 5.5 | 6 | 6.25 | 6.5 | 6.75 | 6.75 |
| Civil Society | 3.75 | 4 | 4 | 4.25 | 4.5 | 4.75 | 5 | 5.25 | 5.5 | 5.75 |
| Media | 4.75 | 5.25 | 5.5 | 5.5 | 5.75 | 6 | 6 | 6.25 | 6.25 | 6.25 |
| Governance | 4.5 | 5 | 5.25 | 5 | 5.25 | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a |
| National Governance | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a | 5.75 | 6 | 6 | 6.25 | 6.5 |
| Local Governance | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a | 5.75 | 5.75 | 5.75 | 5.75 | 5.75 |
| Judicial | 4.25 | 4.5 | 4.75 | 4.5 | 4.75 | 5.25 | 5.25 | 5.25 | 5.25 | 5.5 |
| Corruption | 6.25 | 6.25 | 6 | 5.75 | 5.75 | 5.75 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6.25 |
| <i>Democracy Score</i> | <i>4.58</i> | <i>4.88</i> | <i>5</i> | <i>4.96</i> | <i>5.25</i> | <i>5.61</i> | <i>5.75</i> | <i>5.86</i> | <i>5.96</i> | <i>6.11</i> |

NB.: lower scores = more democratic

Source: Freedom House, www.freedomhouse.org

Analysis

Contemporary Regional Politics in Russia: A Chronicle of Degradation

By Grigorii Golosov, St. Petersburg

Abstract

When Putin cancelled the gubernatorial elections, he changed the way regional politics operate, but did not fundamentally transform the system in which the governor is the predominant actor at the regional level. The combination of gubernatorial elections and proportional representation at the regional level had been starting to build a political process of compromise among various parties, but the cancellation of the gubernatorial elections prevented these processes from evolving further. Now, the governors have a strong political interest in making sure that United Russia wins as many seats as possible. However, at the Kremlin's orders, they must do so in a way that gives the electoral process the appearance of legitimacy.

Cancelling Governors' Elections

On 14 September 2004, immediately after the terrorist attack in Beslan and its bloody outcome, Vladimir Putin announced that "compassion alone is insufficient, it is necessary to act," and called for a "fundamental restructuring" of the operational mechanism of governmental authority in Russia. The most important and far-reaching of his recommendations was the cancellation of direct gubernatorial elections. The new order came into effect at the beginning of 2005. Under the current system, the president of Russia proposes the appointment of governors. Once the nomination is made, the regional legislature must approve the candidate. If the legislature votes against the president's recommen-

ation, then it would have the opportunity to vote for the same or different candidate twice more. If the governor is not confirmed after three votes, the president has the right to disband the legislature. In this case, he would then, at his discretion, appoint an acting governor who would take over as the regional executive. In practice, such a scenario has never taken place. As a rule, the legislatures confirm the candidates proposed to them by an overwhelming majority and frequently unanimously. In this sense, the right of the legislature to confirm the presidential appointees does not have real political consequences.

The new system of appointing governors has seriously affected the internal political life of the regions,

but did not change it in a fundamental way. By the fall of 2004, in the majority of Russian regions, the governors were the dominant political actors. Cases in which they lost the elections were becoming rarer and regions lacked political institutions with similar weight that could serve as checks and balances against their power. The regional legislatures lost their political significance in the second half of the 1990s. In the first half of the 2000s, they consisted, as a rule, of representatives of the local administrations and business elites. The basic goal of these members was to lobby their own material interests in the corridors of the executive branch. The governors controlled the most important media and the vast majority of regional political regimes were authoritarian in character.

It is important to note that the curtailment of democracy at the regional level took place before the authoritarian turn in Russian federal politics. The Duma elections of 2003 were significantly more democratic than the regional elections that took place from 2000 through the first half of 2003. Moreover, in 2002, the federal center initiated an important reform which could have led to a democratization of regional political life: it adopted a law according to which the regions should elect no less than one-half the members of the regional legislatures, or one of its chambers, by the proportional representation system. And, in fact, the elections of the regional legislatures which took place from December 2003 to Spring 2005 demonstrated a significant revival of political life in the regions. The representation of political parties grew significantly, and this trend affected not only United Russia, but many other parties as well, including the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), the Union of Right Forces, Yabloko, Rodina, and the Party of Pensioners.

Changing Regional Practices

This does not mean that the governors gave up their positions as the most important political actors in the regions. The real result of the reform was that the governors could no longer maintain control over the regional legislatures simply by satisfying the lobbying demands of the local economic groups. Coalition politics was now at the top of the agenda, requiring pre-electoral agreements between the governors and various political parties. Typically, even then the governors made their main bet on United Russia. But many of them followed a more complex strategy, supporting other parties, and in several cases, creating their own electoral blocs, which participated in the elections alongside United

Russia. As a result, the governors continued to maintain political control over the legislatures, but now at the basis of this control lay coalitional coordination and compromises. In the future, this path could have led to the democratization of regional political life.

The cancellation of the gubernatorial elections cut off these progressive tendencies since they did not figure in the federal government's political strategy. One of the most important consequences of the new format of regional politics was that, although the influence of United Russia in the regions had grown, the level of its electoral support did not meet the expectations of the Russian political leadership regarding the State Duma elections of 2007. These elections had enormous significance for the question of Putin's succession since he had reached the end of his second term as president and could not participate in the next presidential election. This meant that the candidate who ran for president had to be a politician who was deliberately weak, not widely known, and not in possession of great political resources. If he did have such resources, he would be a threat to Putin, who did not plan to give up real power. In these conditions, it was extremely important that United Russia did not simply win the State Duma elections, but that it did so in a landslide against all other competitors. In the run up to the presidential elections, the State Duma elections had to demonstrate a clear national consensus. However, the results of the regional elections of 2003–2005, when the share of voters who backed United Russia varied from 25 to 30 percent, did not promise such an outcome.

The previous federal elections, both in 1999 and 2003 demonstrated that the governors wielded colossal resources for influencing the results of the voting. This is not surprising. The regional leaders perform the basic organizational functions in elections, effectively controlling the system of electoral commissions. Accordingly, the key to realizing Putin's strategy in the 2007 and 2008 elections was creating conditions in which the governors' interest in political survival was directly tied to the electoral success of United Russia. Such was the goal of the new system for appointing governors. First, the Kremlin was exclusively responsible for nominating candidates for governors' posts. Therefore, United Russia's electoral results could be one of the criteria for evaluating the incumbents. Now the federal government could simply remove governors in regions where United Russia did not perform well. Second, the participation of the regional legislatures in the process of appointing governors meant that it no longer made sense to engage in coalitional politics. The governors

now had a direct incentive to secure a majority in the regional legislatures for United Russia.

United Russia Predominant

Today, it is clear that the federal government's strategy seeking to direct the election activities of the governors in favor of United Russia was a complete success. Beginning in 2005 there was a transition in the level of support the party received in regional elections. In order to achieve that breakthrough, the federal government had to take several additional steps: banning electoral blocs, dismantling the Rodina party and Party of Pensioners, and removing the ability of voters to vote "against all," an option that up to 15 percent of regional voters were choosing. Of course, the determining factor was that now the governors bore personal political responsibility for the results of United Russia.

It is clear that in cancelling the governors' elections, the federal government did not have any particular concern for the consequences for regional politics as such. Extensive personnel turnover among the governors was not planned and did not take place. Immediately after the introduction of the new system, many of the governors began to appeal to Putin to be reappointed and such requests were generally granted. During 2005 and 2006, the president made 53 appointments, and this list only included 14 newcomers, while the others simply continued to carry out their duties. This personnel continuity makes sense since it is hard to imagine that newly appointed governors would be able to deliver the necessary results in federal elections as successfully as seasoned veterans of regional politics. The governors who lost their posts were generally governors who came to power with the support of the Communist Party or preserved their ties to the opposition or those who had lost control over the situation in their regions. In 2007 the number of governors who lost their posts grew. In particular, the governors of Smolensk and Yaroslavl oblasts were fired following the poor showing of United Russia for the Duma elections in their regions.

Thus the result of the reform of the regional political systems was a return to the configuration of 2000–2003: a monopolistic model of authority which completely concentrated power in the hands of the governors, leaving weak legislatures, media and civil society institutions. Regional authoritarianism was fully incorporated into the structure of national authoritarianism. At the same time, the situation deteriorated in several respects. One example is the system of controlling the regional legislatures. In 2000–2003, when elections were conducted on a non-party basis, the governors did not

have to exert special efforts to secure the victory of the candidates they preferred. Often it was enough to simply announce support for these candidates and the candidates' own resources would be sufficient for success.

Now, when these elections are held partially or fully on the basis of party lists, and the significance of these elections has grown, such a model is no longer sufficient. Therefore the administrative machines for voting and falsifying the results of elections, which were created for achieving the success of United Russia in 2007 and Medvedev in 2008 were not dismantled after achieving their political goals. Instead they were used in full force in the regional elections. Now the governors were guided not only by their desire to demonstrate their loyalty to the federal government, but their own political considerations.

Controlling Regional Elections

It is well known that before every series of regional elections (they take place in March and October of every year), the Kremlin, through the Presidential Administration's Chief Department of Domestic Politics, informs the regional authorities their impressions of what kind of results United Russia should achieve in each particular region. It is assumed that a performance significantly below these thresholds could cost the governor his position. Frequently, however, the governors strive to not only achieve their planned target, but to over fulfill them. Their own political interests drive these efforts. First, according to the practice in place before the cancellation of gubernatorial elections, all significant financial industrial groups and all important institutional clients of the governor (such as major universities) should have their own representatives in the regional legislatures. Earlier such representation was achieved on a non-party basis. Now the situation is such that the only way to ensure continued representation is to increase the number of seats allocated to United Russia. Other parties are simply not appropriate as channels for such representation. Second, these parties are not always viewed as sufficiently loyal to the governors and sometimes are in conflict with them. The conclusion which many governors draw from this constellation of conditions is that it is necessary at any price to win as many seats as possible for United Russia.

The apotheosis of such an approach was the regional elections which took place on 11 October 2009 in three regions – Moscow, Marii El, and Tula. According to the evaluations of many observers, these elections were characterized by massive abuses on the part of the authorities, expressed in the failure to register many op-

position candidates, the absence of conditions under which they could conduct an electoral campaign, and outright falsifications. It is impossible to say that these abuses were unprecedented. Several of the elections that took place in March 2009 were not much better. The difference, however, was in October 2009 the desire of the governors to guarantee the best results for United Russia led to very few seats for all the other parties. Moreover, LDPR and Just Russia won representation in only one region each.

The outcome of the regional elections led the opposition in the State Duma to stage a protest, which achieved national political significance. This protest drew the attention of the press to the massive falsifications in the elections. It seems that these consequences contradicted the plans of the Kremlin. The results of the elections that will take place in 2011 and 2012 are largely predetermined and the risks are much less serious than four years ago. In these conditions, the primary concern of the Kremlin is the legitimacy of the elections. An important factor determining the legitimacy is the participation in them of the official opposition parties. Their role in the contemporary political system is not great, but their complete marginalization and alienation from the system is not in the Kremlin's plans. In any case, it finds unacceptable a situation in which the stability of the political system in general is undermined by risks associated with the situational political interests of the governors.

In these conditions, it appears that the Kremlin gave the regional authorities a direct order to not use so many

crude and obvious forms of falsifications. This had an immediate impact on the results of the regional elections which took place on 14 March 2010. The level of United Russia's success fell significantly since in four of the eight regions where elections were held, it did not reach 50 percent of the vote and only scored an average of 50.6 percent. In contrast, the Communists' performance was much better than in previous elections conducted on the basis of party lists. On average it won 19.7 percent of the vote, and more than 20 percent in four of the regions. Just Russia and the LDPR were less successful, but they did win representation in all of the regions being contested. However, the elections did not change the overall political situation because in all regions United Russia managed to preserve a legislative majority due to the support of the winners in the single-member districts.

This outcome does not provide the basis for optimism. A situation in which the Kremlin must directly intervene in order to preserve an appearance of democracy in the elections demonstrates the deep degradation of regional politics in Russia. All elements of open public competition have been removed. Conflicts continue but they are not carried out and resolved in the electoral arena; rather they are addressed in the difficult process of interaction between the federal center and the regional influence groups, which is carefully hidden from the public.

About the Author

Grigorii Golosov is the director of the Inter-Regional Electoral Network of Assistance.