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All Direct Elections Are in Jeopardy

By Konstantin Sonin

Electoral democracy in Russia is beginning to look more and more like an emergency room, but in this hospital the physicians do plenty of harm.

Last week, the Kremlin introduced a bill in the State Duma on canceling direct elections of regional leaders. Back in 1999, I wrote that bringing the powerful governors to their knees was the country's number one economic priority. Removing the arbitration courts from the governors' control, for example, could have significantly curtailed the practice of rigged bankruptcies. This was back when Russia still had a bankruptcy law, of course.

The governors were brought to heel long ago, however, and nothing good can now come from Putin's proposed reform. If the Kremlin has a supply of fresh faces it plans to install in the regions, perhaps it ought to put them in charge of the regional offices of the Interior Ministry and the Federal Security Service.

Bolstering the executive chain of command in order to step up security and the war against terrorism has nothing to do with the governors, however. In many countries, including some less centralized than Russia, the federal government is in charge of security. The FSB is a federal agency, but if elected governors are interfering with its operations, maybe the problem is in the FSB, not the governor's office.

Scrapping gubernatorial elections can't be the last step in this process. Even in regions with appointed governors, the mayors of many large cities -- Yekaterinburg, Petrozavodsk, Vladivostok -- have held no less power than their nominal superiors. Many mayors have beaten the incumbents in gubernatorial elections. This was back when Russia still had gubernatorial elections, of course.

In nearly half of Russia's 89 regions, one-third of the population lives in the region's largest city. Under Putin's current plan, appointed -- and therefore less legitimate and influential -- governors will have to compete with the elected mayors of big cities. Scrapping mayoral elections is therefore the obvious next step in the process. Inductive reasoning suggests that all remaining direct elections will be gradually phased out as well.

For supporters of representative democracy, not all the news in September was bad, however. Indonesia, a multiethnic country with a population of some 225 million, rich in oil and oligarchs, with plenty of local princelings, armed separatists, Islamist terrorists and advocates of a return to single-party rule, successfully held its latest presidential election. The incumbent president, who had done little to pull her people out of poverty, to root out corruption in the government or to improve security, was defeated. Nice to know, isn't it?

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