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## In Desperate Need of a Real Parliament

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By Konstantin Sonin

Two events this month proved that Russia has no real parliament — neither a lower nor an upper chamber. The first event was when State Duma and Federation Council lawmakers published income declarations.

The most unpleasant aspect of this was not the discovery that the lawmakers are very rich, but that their parliamentary duties are far from their primary occupation. Most are businesspeople primarily. In theory, the more businesspeople we have in the country, the wealthier the country will be. But we also need a functioning parliament that represents and defends the people's interests.

The second event was the double explosions at the Rospadskaya coal mine in Mezhdurechensk in the Kemerovo region on May 8-9 that claimed the lives of 90 people. It also led to clashes between angry miners and the police.

Why does the mine explosion point to the need for a properly functioning parliament? First, we see that the miners there have no political representation. In a healthy democratic society, the lawmakers representing Mezhdurechensk and Kemerovo would have raised a cry in the parliament and the media. If the people elected the senators, then the senator from the Kemerovo region — whose political fate would depend on how vehemently he defended the interests of his constituents — would have acted as the “voice of the miners.”

Even if governors alone were elected by the people, then the miners would have at least some political representation. But because governors are appointed (based on the recommendation of the president), governors also utter few words on the miners' behalf. Since the Kemerovo miners have no representation, their only outlet to get their opinions heard is to block trains.

The danger of protests spreading across the country is the price we pay for the lack of free elections and normal institutions of political representation.

There are other problems as well. Protesters in Pikalyovo in the Leningrad region blocked a highway in June, and miners in Mezhdurechensk blocked a railway last Friday, forcing the authorities to send in the riot police. But back in 1984, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was able to break up demonstrations by miners without any political repercussions because the 1983 parliamentary elections had given her Cabinet a mandate to control the country's unions. However well the British miners union might have been organized, the results of the previous elections made the position of the majority very clear.

How do things stand in Russia?

The Duma elections of 1999 gave then-President Vladimir Putin a mandate to use an iron fist in dealing with separatists in Chechnya. The 2003 Duma elections gave him a mandate to nationalize Yukos. But the Duma elections of 2007 did not give Putin a mandate for anything because the elections were not truly free and fair.

During the boom years, Putin could rule without a mandate. But he will have difficulty doing that now.

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