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A New Prosecutor May Finally Draw the Line

By Konstantin Sonin

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The pundits have mentioned a number of high-profile candidates to succeed Vladimir Ustinov, who was dismissed as prosecutor general last Friday, including two presidential envoys to federal districts: Dmitry Kozak and Alexander Konovalov. Whoever becomes Russia's next chief prosecutor will inherit the same task that Ustinov faced: putting the business deals of the 1990s to rest. The question is not whether Ustinov's replacement will bring to justice everyone who got rich through criminal activity, but where to draw the line between the deals that come up for review and those that don't.

Once this line is drawn, it will have to be defended on one side from the many government officials at the federal and regional levels who have everything to lose in the ongoing battle against corruption, and on the other side from those bent on bringing down all the heads of major companies.

The expansion of quasi-state-controlled companies, in which the Prosecutor General's Office has played an important role, is unlikely to stop with the natural resources sector. A new political assault on Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov, for example, could raise the issue of nationalizing AFK Sistema, whose assets include Mobile TeleSystems. This may sound far-fetched, but the expansion of the state has taken on a logic and life of its own.

The same applies to the campaign against corruption in the regions. The charges brought recently against Alexei Barinov, the governor of the Nenets autonomous district, and Volgograd Mayor Yevgeny Ishchenko, could be brought against almost any regional leader. The challenge now facing the state is to put the past behind it and focus on reducing the present level of corruption and ensuring that the next generation of regional leaders is less corrupt than the last. Most importantly, a way must be found to prevent the Prosecutor General's Office from being used to settle personal scores.

The post of chief prosecutor is not only politicized in fledgling democracies like Russia's. John Kerry, who ran for the U.S. presidency in 2004, served as a district attorney in Massachusetts in order to raise his profile before launching a successful political career. Eliot Spitzer, the favorite in this year's New York gubernatorial race, cut his teeth as the state's attorney general.

Russia has had a variety of chief prosecutors in the post-Soviet era, including the pawn Alexei Ilyushenko, the political victim Yury Skuratov, and Ustinov, who was an important architect of government policy during his tenure. It remains to be seen if the next prosecutor general will prove capable of charting his own course.

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