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No Experience Without Votes in the Regions

By Konstantin Sonin

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On Saturday, President Vladimir Putin met with foreign political experts and journalists who are members of the Valdai Discussion Club, a talking-shop the Kremlin set up in 2004 for informal, high-level discussion of all matters Russian and political. Questions Putin faced included some about the possibility of him running for a third term in office -- as usual, he answered that he had no plans to change the Constitution to allow him to do so -- and about the current procedure for appointing regional governors -- the president said we should not say they are "appointed," as the candidacy must be approved by the legislature of the region in question.

It might seem there is no particular link between the third-term problem and the abolition of gubernatorial elections. Yet the link is there, and it's a direct one. Reinstating gubernatorial elections would significantly increase the stock of politicians who could be serious candidates for the presidency.

The main reason many analysts suspect Putin will somehow manage to stay on in power after 2008 is that there are no guarantees that his successor will be a politician able to hold on to power. Thus, after Stalin's death, the post of prime minister -- the highest government office in the country -- went to Georgy Malenkov, who had been Stalin's No. 2 for the last five years of the Generalissimo's life. But it very soon became apparent that the ability to be a successful politician on someone else's watch, even at a very high level, was no substitute for an aptitude for politics, where the main task is getting personal support from potential allies.

Communist Party General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev, while heading the Moscow city and then the Ukrainian party organizations, managed to pick up the keys to the hearts of hundreds of members of the party's Central Committee. Similarly, as long as there were gubernatorial elections, there was a supply of people who had at a bare minimum shaken thousands of hands and fielded masses of questions -- from voters, journalists, and opponents -- during electoral campaigns. Putin, incidentally, also gained this kind of experience while running election campaigns for St. Petersburg's first (and last) mayor, Anatoly Sobchak. (U.S. President George W. Bush has had similar experiences in addition to the two gubernatorial campaigns he won; in his youth he worked in the U.S. Congress on election campaigns, all of which were failures.)

The idea that local elections are the best school for politicians is nothing new. Professor Roger Myerson of Chicago University has consistently maintained -- in both his academic work and pieces written for newspaper opinion pages -- that Iraq should first have held provincial elections, and only after that a national vote. What if, for example, the radical Moqtada al-Sadr were elected governor first? Perhaps Iraq wouldn't be where it is today -- having successfully formed a national government to which, unfortunately, no one bothers to listen.

Two years ago, following the Beslan tragedy, Putin gave the clearest formulation yet of his priorities regarding domestic policy: the centralization of state power and the strengthening of the country's territorial integrity. These are positive goals, but it is hard to understand how abolishing direct gubernatorial elections will help in achieving them. Centralizing power should be achieved through a complete de-regionalization of the "power" agencies -- from the Federal Security Service to the tax police -- and by producing a more appropriate balance of power between the regions and the center. Gubernatorial elections -- which, by the way, were some of the most successfully functioning institutions in post-Soviet politics -- should have been left to act as, among other things, schools at which both politicians and voters could learn.

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