

Russian Mayors Embattled

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Abstract

Russian mayors have become extremely vulnerable and embattled politicians throughout Russia over the past decade due to the pressure from appointed regional governors and the institution of a dual chief-executive city manager form of government in many jurisdictions. The governability of Russian cities as a whole has suffered with uncertainty about the long-term political effects.

Cities at Risk

The most recent national unified day of regional and local elections in Russia this past September 8th held true to the outcome predicted beforehand with United Russia (UR) winning throughout the country in the contests for governor and regional-local assembly seats. The one noticeable upset to UR domination occurred in the Sverdlovsk regional capital of Yekaterinburg. Yevgenii Roizman, a charismatic community organizer of an anti-drug addiction NGO nominated by Mikhail Prokhorov's Civil Platform party, was elected mayor, defeating a UR candidate heavily backed by the governor. Given the political aspirations already associated with Roizman, his election as the chief executive of the 4th largest city in Russia with a population of 1.35 million particularly stands out, elevating Roizman to something of a national political icon.

Whatever Roizman's aspirations, however, his real challenge remains the office of Russian mayor as an unlikely pathway to any future national prominence. Over the past decade, mayors throughout Russia have been politically marginalized. First, winning the office in directly contested elections does not ensure many mayors even the ability to serve out their terms, particularly for those non-UR affiliated mayors like Roizman or UR mayors who buck the establishment and their governors while in office. Second, any authority which the office of mayor holds has been undermined by the imposition of a bifurcated chief executive at the local level. A second chief executive, the city manager, is vested with direct control over the budget and city personnel in a majority of Russian cities including Yekaterinburg. The effect of both these trends has been a high turnover of mayors throughout Russia and a crisis of divided leadership over the control of city governments, with their city councils stalemated and local economic-political elites polarized. At direct risk is erosion of city government legitimacy and the further deterioration of vital services upon which all Russians remain dependent.

Political Marginalization

With the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, mayors directly elected by the voters of Russian cities were a rel-

atively new phenomenon. The collapse of the Communist political system required an office to oversee city governments and maintain a vestige of stability and order in the transitional chaotic era of the 1990s. Several cities on their own in 1994 adopted charters authorizing the direct election of what in the United States would be termed "strong mayors" with the authority to make city policies, run city services, and implement the actions legislated by their councils. Under federalism in the 1993 Russian Constitution, local city governments at least nominally constitute a separate level of government from the federal and regional levels. In 2003, a federal law on local self-government systematized the powers allocated to cities and provided Russian locales a range of options in writing their charters. The federal law on local self-government has been periodically amended by the Russian national parliament since 2003 to provide a semblance of uniformity throughout Russia with additional limitations and requirements local governments are expected to adopt in revising their own charters.

The problem is that Russian locales and their elected mayors never have been independent from the federal center. Both have been especially victimized by the authoritarian vertical power which President Vladimir Putin has extended throughout Russia over the past decade. When Putin cancelled the elections of governors at the end of 2004, the governors effectively appointed by him and later President Dmitry Medvedev only aggravated the conflict between governors and the elected mayors of regional capitals. The conflict pitting governors against regional capital mayors already had developed as a principal fault-line of post-Soviet Russian politics in the preceding decade.

Appointed governors have been evaluated in the Kremlin by their ability to manage their regional economies and manufacture favorable electoral outcomes for United Russia and Putin in presidential, State Duma, mayoral, and regional-local council elections. Mayors directly elected every four years base their own support on long-nourished ties with local economic elites. They lead communities with the largest proportion of the entire regional voting population. And they oversee the largest sectors of the regional economy generating the

most tax revenue. As such, elected mayors in capitals and the largest regional cities have an inherent political and economic base threatening unelected governors. The threat has only been magnified by the resentment of the public and local economic-political elites against several “outsider” (*varyag*) governors appointed without any prior association or personal ties with their regions over the past decade.

Governors have countered mayors by encouraging conflict and polarization. The governors have mobilized anti-mayor deputy factions on the councils and in the UR regional leadership, promised deals to wealthy and influential local economic interests in exchange for their support, and induced local police and court officials to launch investigations of malfeasance and corruption in the city administrations. In applying pressure against mayors, governors have adopted a range of measures. The regional government can cancel financial support for city projects and cut or delay funding from the annual regional budget for city transportation and street repair. United Russia can expel mayors from the party, even if they were originally elected as the UR candidate. Regional public utilities, claiming overdue payments by the city government, can reduce or shut off heat, water, and electricity for their constituents. Votes to remove mayors from office for “unsatisfactory performance” after their annual reports can be sponsored by the pro-governor UR deputies on their city councils. This virtual “state of war” by governors against mayors has undermined any effectiveness of city governments already crippled by limited tax revenue and their own inherent incompetency and corruption. The public vitally dependent on services provided by those city governments have suffered as the collateral damage from this dysfunctional conflict and polarization.

City Managers and Mayoral Turnover

Not least, governors since 2004 intent on removing mayors or otherwise politically neutralizing their threat have been aided by an option of a dual-executive form of government included in the 2003 federal law on local self-government, promoted by the Ministry of Regional Development, and adopted widely throughout Russia over the past decade. The office titled “mayor” (*mer*) in regional capitals has become in effect chair of the city or municipal district council, indirectly elected by a majority of the council deputies and vested with the general policymaking authority to represent the jurisdiction.¹ The second chief executive or head of the city (*glava*) is

the equivalent of the “city manager” (*siti-menedzher*) in Western parlance. The head-city manager is the effective economic mayor of the city budget and city administration, overseeing all municipal departments and personnel under deputy mayors, selected by a vote of the council deputies for mostly two-year renewable contracts, and chosen from nominees vetted by a commission with at least some of its members appointed by governors.

The actual policymaking authority for a council chair-mayor relative to the total direct control of city departments and the budget under the head-city manager may vary among cities. But it allows governors an indirect means to take over the city financial and electoral base by placing their political loyalists in the key positions of city manager and council chair-mayor, eliminating the threat posed by directly elected strong mayors. Over the last few years, strong mayors in regional capitals like Nizhny Novgorod, Yekaterinburg, and Volgograd who opposed city-manager government were pressured to resign, voted out by their councils, fired by their governors, or criminally charged and imprisoned, as in Smolensk and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii. By September 2011, 44 percent of all 83 regional capitals already had instituted a bifurcated chief executive. By June 2012, an estimated 85 percent (10,600) of mayors in all Russian municipalities were indirectly elected by their councils with economic chief executive responsibilities vested in city managers.

Despite its widespread application, there has not been complete uniformity among Russian cities adopting a bifurcated chief executive with a city manager. Siberia and the Far East, always renowned for their more populist democratic cultures, include many cities like the regional capitals Krasnoyarsk, Novosibirsk, and Vladivostok that resist any charter revisions to eliminate their directly elected mayors even though a majority of city council members represent UR. The European areas of Russia to the Urals have been the cities most likely to adopt city-manager reform in their city charters; the areas east of the Urals from Siberia to the Far East have been the cities most likely to retain directly elected strong mayors.

The cities with strong mayors in Siberia and the Far East have been the notable exception over the past decade. Governors motivated to assert their authority over city administrations have accomplished it by forcing city-manager government in their regions. The result has been a very high turnover of Russian mayors who have been forced out of office before the end of their elected terms, with a “mayor-less” (*bez mera*) political leadership void almost a norm in more cities.

Just from February 2010 through September 2013, 25 of all 81 regional capital mayors in Russia (31%)

1 Kaliningrad and Yekaterinburg to date are the only regional capitals directly electing their council chair-mayors. In some cities, the council chair-mayor is interchangeably and conventionally termed the city “head.”

failed to serve out their elected terms.² They resigned, were voted out by their councils, or were fired by their governors for violating their official legal responsibilities.³ Over the same period, an additional 24 mayors, many of prominent large cities, suffered a similar fate of forced resignations and ousters in regions like Rostov (Novocherkassk) Irkutsk (Bratsk), Samara (Syzran), and Novosibirsk (Berdsk). Of all 49 mayors, 14 lost their offices after they were arrested for crimes ranging from bribery to murder. Nor have city managers, mostly former UR council deputies or regional officials, fared any better. As reported in the Russian media, an increasing number of city managers have been arrested for swindling and even murder, leaving their cities “head-less” (*obezglavennii*) and eroding any semblance of honesty and professionalism for an office modeled after United States and Western European city administrations.

At an extreme, the million people of the regional capital and national hero-city Volgograd have been “mayorless” and “head-less” over the past three years. A former governor, who fired their mayor in February 2011 and pressured the city council to adopt a dual-executive city administration despite widespread public and city council opposition, was himself fired by President Medvedev in January 2012. He was replaced by a governor who supports reinstating a directly elected mayor in the capital against a council distrustful of him as an outsider from Astrakhan and split by factions among its UR majority. Opposition political parties and even some UR deputies reject the legitimacy of a mayor indirectly chosen by its UR majority even after the entire Volgograd council was just re-elected on September 8th. In limbo remains the council choice of a city manager, still unfilled since 2011, and council sentiment to revise the city charter back to a pre-2011 single mayor directly elected by voters in the next citywide election of 2018.⁴

2 81 excluding the federal city districts of Moscow and St. Petersburg, although President Medvedev fired Moscow Mayor Luzhkov (2010) and St. Petersburg Governor Matviyenko (2011) resigned in the same time-period.

3 2010: Smolensk, Tula, Blagoveshchensk (Amur), Murmansk, Barnaul (Altai), Yekaterinburg (Sverdlovsk) and Nizhny Novgorod. 2011: Belgorod, Vladimir, Kostroma, Volgograd, Tula, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii (Kamchatka), Ulyanovsk, Krasnoyarsk, Bryansk, Yakutsk (Sakha). 2012: Orel, Ryazan, Stavropol, Kemerovo. 2013: Voronezh, Makhachkala (Dagestan), Yaroslavl, Tomsk.

4 With a Volgograd council split by factions since 2011, a series of deputy mayors have been reassigned by consent “acting” city manager to run the city administration. Only by November of this year has enough consensus even formed on the council to appoint members for an actual commission reviewing city manager candidates and presenting the finalists for a majority vote as the legally empowered city head under the charter.

Political Uncertainty

The political blowback has been a wave of citizen-initiated spontaneous and uncoordinated protests and grassroots organizations throughout Russia. Unrelated to the national democratic opposition movement, these protests and organizations defy the stereotype of an apathetic Russia public, targeting specific failures of local governments in handling the most basic daily concerns which Russians face in utilities, pollution, street repair, traffic congestion, public transportation, snow removal, and garbage collection. There also has been an irrational new fear with racist overtones among citizens about street crime and gang violence associated with the influx into Russian cities of 11.2 million migrants, mostly from the former Soviet Central Asian republics along with those from Russia’s own North Caucasus. It is a fear only heightened by weak and divided local chief executives seemingly unwilling or unable to protect citizens and, by default, encouraging anti-migrant vigilante groups.⁵

These protests and grass-roots organizations are unlikely to subside. The national in a political sense has become local as a direct consequence of the crisis in city leadership. As never before, conditions have produced the incentives for a new younger generation of anti-establishment leaders in their 30s like Roizman, Aleksei Navalny in Moscow, Yaroslavl’ mayor Yevgenii Urlashov, and others yet unknown emerging in many areas of Russia and riding the crest of this localized popular discontent.

The Putin leadership has not been indifferent to the crisis of city government and leadership and to the threat posed by localized protests and a new generation of anti-establishment leaders even before Putin won his 3rd term as president in 2012. While campaigning, Putin promised a major priority of his presidency would be restoration or retention of directly elected mayors, particularly in all regional capitals, to enhance the greater political independence and budgetary solvency of Russian cities. Two months after his election, the Russian Ministry of Regional Development posted a draft model bill on its webpage for consideration by the Russian parliament. By June 2012, a presidential-sponsored draft bill was under consideration by the State Duma, offering a greater range of options for all cities and municipal districts to adopt reinstating some form of directly elected mayors.

Over the last few months of Medvedev’s presidency, newly appointed governors to regions like Volgograd

5 The federal response ironically makes mayors even more politically vulnerable with a law now signed by President Putin after the October anti-migrant riot in the Biryulyovo district of Moscow holding both mayors and governors directly accountable for inter-ethnic relations in their locales.

in early 2012 already echoed this new federal mandate restoring directly elected strong mayors as a fundamental difference from their predecessors. The new appointees conspicuously included Viktor Basargin, the most recent Russian Minister of Regional Development, now appointed Perm' governor. As governor, Basargin denounced city managers once trumpeted by his former ministry as a flawed reform and endorsed restoring the directly elected mayor of the Perm' capital. In effect, Basargin has aligned himself with local human-rights activists, who unsuccessfully opposed the dual-executive city manager government just instituted in late June 2010 for the capital.

Notwithstanding initiatives by other governors to restore directly elected mayors, Putin's draft bill has been effectively tabled with little likelihood of its imminent passage by the Russian parliament 18 months after it had been posted on the Ministry webpage. In Yekat-

erinburg, Mayor Roizman confronts a reality in which the UR dominant city council will appoint a city manager likely selected by his arch-rival Sverdlovsk governor to block his authority and to render his election somewhat meaningless. The city-manager reform had been imposed on Yekaterinburg by a former governor as recently as October 2010, ending the reign of the long-term popularly elected strong mayor Arkadii Chernetskii. In Yaroslavl', Mayor Urlashov, who won election in May 2012 as an anti-establishment candidate promising repair of city streets, already has been arrested and removed from office in July 2013 on what seems a contrived charge of soliciting a bribe from a road-repair company executive closely tied to the local UR leadership. Thus, all Russian mayors like Roizman remain vulnerable and embattled with the governability of Russian cities at stake.

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ANALYSIS

Corporate Power and Urban Policy in Norilsk

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Abstract

Norilsk is a typical monotown in that the predominant company Norilsk Nickel essentially holds all power. The local government merely implements corporate policy decisions. With the collapse of state subsidies for northern cities, Norilsk Nickel is trying to shrink the population of the city, relocating residents who are not essential to mining and production operations. The result is that the city will provide fewer services to its inhabitants and will not pursue efforts to diversify.

Typical Monotown

Norilsk is a unique urban center in the context of Russian resource cities. With 175,000 inhabitants, it is the second largest city north of the Arctic Circle (after Murmansk), and one of the largest cities in northern Siberia.

The city typifies the classic post-Soviet "monotown" in many respects, with the Mining and Metallurgical Company Norilsk Nickel being the only major economic presence in the city. The disappearance of crucial state subsidies in the 1990s has meant that Norilsk Nickel has had to provide many of the formerly state-run social services, adding to the company's financial burden.

While the shrinking population is commonly viewed as a negative consequence of economic decline and

deindustrialization in Russia, the budgetary policy of Norilsk's local legislature indicates that Norilsk Nickel is pursuing a smaller population and a fundamental shift in the nature of the city's work force. Interviews with representatives of the city's Chamber of Deputies reveal that plans outside of the company's long-term strategy are not particularly feasible, as the Chamber has little independent power. Given the company's dominance, both financially and institutionally, its concerns are almost certain to overshadow those of the local population in the city government policy-making process.

Governance

As in many Russian urban centers, Norilsk's governance