



# Elections abolished for Russian governors

BY VLADIMIR N. LYSENKO

A new law that allows Russian President Vladimir Putin to appoint Russia's 89 governors has deepened the rift in Russian public opinion over the process of centralization in Russia. Putin signed the law on December 13, after it was approved by the State Duma. This law abolishes the direct election of governors in the regions of the Russian Federation. The Russian President will now propose his candidate to the legislative assembly of a region, and the assembly will either approve or reject the candidate. If an assembly twice rejects the candidates proposed by the President, the assembly will be dissolved, and new elections called.



Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Putin proposed the measure after the Beslan school attack in September. The president claimed the law would strengthen control of the country and help the fight against terrorists.

The opinion of the Russian political elite is split over the law. The majority of governors and presidents of the republics supports Putin's initiative. In the south Urals, the President of Bashkortostan, Murtaza Rakhimov, said, "We strongly and unconditionally support the measures undertaken by the Russian President in order to provide security of our country and its citizens and to make all levels of power better ruled" (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, October 8, 2004). The representative of the opposition, Aleksander Ivanchenko, ex-Chairman of the Central Electoral Commission of Russia, is opposed to the law: "Appointment of regional heads doesn't comply with the Constitution, which establishes both the democratic republican regime in Russia and federative nature of organization of the state power" (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, October 30, 2004).

## Russia's 89 constituent units

The 1993 Constitution of the Russian Federation defines Russia as a federal state consisting of 89 constituent units, called "subjects of the federation" in Russian:

- 21 national republics
- 55 oblasts and territories
- 2 cities (Moscow and St. Petersburg)
- 10 autonomous okrugs

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## Centralization: expanding "vertical power"

After coming to power in 2000, Vladimir Putin started his first presidential term by beginning to centralize executive power in the Russian Federation. Russians call this expanding "vertical power". In May of 2000, he divided Russia into seven federal districts headed by the authorized representatives of the President, most of whom are generals. In addition, each region of the Russian Federation got a federal inspector appointed to exercise control over the popularly-elected governors. In November, 2004, Putin introduced a bill in the State Duma to raise the minimum number of members a political party must have to win seats in the Duma. The limit, which was 10,000, has been raised to 50,000. To claim seats, a party will also have to have at least 500 members in at least 45 of the 89 regional legislatures.

## Opinion split over law

More than 70 opinions on the bill were submitted to the State Duma by legislative assemblies of the regions. Only the legislature of the Murmansk oblast objected to Putin's draft. Other regional legislatures in their opinions supported the concept. However, all regions strongly opposed dissolving regional legislative assemblies for refusing to approve a candidate proposed by the President.

Opposition to the law comes from Russian popular opinion and from beyond Russia's borders. The results of polls made by VZIOM (the oldest Russian independent public opinion research centre, headed by sociologist Yuri Levada) show that 52 per cent of Russians surveyed prefer electing governors and only 28 per cent favour appointing them. On December 10, Giovanni di Stasi, President of the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, expressed the council's fears that by making it easier to dissolve regional parliaments, the law would weaken Russia's federal structure. US President George W. Bush, many European leaders and the general public of many European countries have also criticized this law.

## A legal challenge?

A group of famous Russian lawyers and human rights defenders has brought the issue to the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation. The lawyers and rights advocates are hoping that the Constitutional Court will examine Putin's proposals and find them unconstitutional.

Yet despite both internal and external opposition, President Putin seems undaunted. He intends to introduce a similar procedure for the mayors of big cities, who would be appointed by Putin's governors. ☺