

Matviyenko, Don't Pack Your Bags Just Yet

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In the run-up to the elections, we are seeing the beginning of a shakeup in top political positions. The Kremlin started with Valentina Matviyenko. She will be moved out of St. Petersburg, where she is governor, and sent to Moscow, where she will serve as speaker of the Federation Council.

It is difficult to say to what extent this is a Matviyenko phenomenon or whether it reflects the people's irritation with the authorities in general. In any event, the Kremlin wanted to get rid of a large political dead weight who was not liked among residents of St. Petersburg.

This reminds me of how Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev reacted to regional elections in 1989. He interpreted the losses to the Communist Party during elections for regional heads — particularly in the Leningrad region — as a sign of how poorly they relate to specific officials, while he failed to understand that voters were expressing their negative attitude toward government as a whole. As a result, the Soviet Union simply changed faces in top regional

positions, but the overall decrepit political and economic state of the country remained largely unchanged.

On June 24, President Dmitry Medvedev, during a meeting with governors, surprised many when he supported the idea of nominating Matviyenko as the new Federation Council speaker. There were plenty of regional heavyweights at the meeting. The main agenda item of the meeting was to discuss Medvedev's idea to decentralize federal authority. Suddenly, Rustem Khamitov, the leader of Bashkortostan, voiced the idea of nominating Matviyenko as speaker. He was warmly supported by Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov.

Although Matviyenko's ouster was likely prepared ahead of time, Medvedev staged the event to make it look like her appointment was an initiative of the governors.

Meanwhile, several days before Medvedev's meeting, Kremlin first deputy chief of staff Vladislav Surkov, who was visiting St. Petersburg to discuss election prospects, met with Matviyenko. Surkov reportedly told Matviyenko that she has hurt United Russia's ratings and should not wait until the beginning of the campaign to leave St. Petersburg.

Matviyenko, after some deliberation and consultation, wisely chose to accept what had already been officially announced on June 28. But according to changes in the law last year, a deputy mandate is a prerequisite for nomination to the Federation Council. This means that before Matviyenko could become a senator and then speaker, she would have to be elected as deputy — either on a municipal, regional or federal level.

To make things easiest, she chose the municipal route. She will run for a councilwoman's post in one of the city's 111 district councils. But this would require calling an early special election, which is pegged for September.

Matviyenko hasn't faced the voters in a direct election since 2003, when she won the governor's seat in an election that many considered unfair because of heavy support from the Kremlin. Since then, Matviyenko's popularity has dropped markedly. Moreover, Communist and Yabloko parties are considering an invitation to join forces with A Just Russia under the slogan "Petersburg Against Matviyenko."

Thus, before Matviyenko packs her bags to relocate to Moscow, she will still have to pass a very difficult test in the St. Petersburg special election. This will also be a big test for United Russia, which is more significant for the Kremlin than the Matviyenko appointment.

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