

Kremlin Direct Elections Quickly Become Indirect

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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The political reforms announced by the Kremlin at the peak of the winter protests have become neutered by terms and conditions that are buried in the small print of the legislation. Like a bank advertisement promising interest-free loans in large type but listing the real terms in small print beneath, the promised direct gubernatorial elections are becoming increasingly indirect.

On Friday, Vladimir Pligin, head of the State Duma's Constitution and State Affairs Committee, said that in addition to a filter requiring candidates and parties to pass presidential review, a strict filter at the municipal level would also be introduced. What's more, regional legislatures will have the right to disqualify independent candidates entirely.

It is clear that Moscow is still afraid of elections even when it controls nearly every aspect of the process.

When Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev felt threatened by the mass protests in December and February, they promised to loosen control over elections. But the moment their fears passed after the March presidential election, their position on electoral reforms changed. It is now clear that the Kremlin will abandon any complex system that takes public opinion into account and to revert to a simple mechanism for controlling elections.

The same thing applies to legislation on new political parties. It is now easier to create and register parties, but the ban on forming party blocs for Duma elections and the authorities' refusal to hold early Duma elections have eviscerated any attempts to build up opposition parties.

Medvedev's Open Government is another attempt to offer a palliative. A wide variety of experts and even opposition members have been invited to participate in the body, but their contributions might never be considered — no matter how wise, practical or worthy.

The Kremlin's current position suggests that the system will remain closed and inflexible. Not only does it fail to take the interests of the regional elites into consideration, it also ignores public opinion.

Nobody can say with certainty whether the public protests have died down or whether they will break out again — not only in Moscow, but in the regions as well. One of the reasons demonstrators originally took to the streets was to protest their lack of representation in government. Since the current watered-down version of reforms ignore these important issues, they are likely to make a bad situation even worse.

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