

Moscow Gets a Hunter and a Technocrat

By [Alexandra Odynova](#)

October 21, 2010



Sergei Sobyenin listening to President Dmitry Medvedev speak during his inauguration as Moscow's new mayor at a City Hall ceremony on Thursday. **Grigory Dukor**

Sergei Sobyenin, who was sworn in as Moscow's mayor Thursday, has kept such a low political profile that his former colleagues are divided on his personality, with some describing him as a good manager and others as "a robot."

But one thing is clear. Sobyenin is a shining example of the iron system that Vladimir Putin built out of the tumultuous 1990s: A skilled technocrat, Sobyenin turned Tyumen into one of the country's most prosperous regions and led local initiatives that went on to be embraced nationwide. He also was the first governor to join United Russia and has shown little tolerance of free media, former colleagues said.

"He is not just a screw in the system. He is an ideologist behind it," said Natalya Chestyakova-Yaroslavova, a senior member of Sobyenin's campaign team in Tyumen's gubernatorial elections in 2001.

In stark contrast to flamboyant, outspoken former Mayor Yury Luzhkov, known for his love for bees and a flat cap associated with the working classes, the conservatively dressed Sobyenin cracks no jokes and rarely smiles, keeping a taciturn expression.

“In Tyumen he was called a robot,” said Vadim Bondar, a former State Duma deputy for the Tyumen region.

Who Is Sergei Sobyenin?

Natalya Chestyakova-Yaroslavova, a senior member of Sergei Sobyenin’s successful campaign team during the 2001 gubernatorial elections in the Tyumen region, says her former boss is a political fighter who knows how to work with foreign investors, isn’t afraid to make tough decisions and took tight control of the local media as governor.

From Sobyenin’s election until he moved to Moscow in 2005, Chestyakova-Yaroslavova kept in contact with him and his office, first as his aide for public communications and later as a senior manager at a Tyumen region energy company.

Here are some of her reflections on Sobyenin:

On information policy:

After Sergei Semyonovich [Sobyenin] came to power in the Tyumen region, all information channels were taken under his control. I personally saw how free speech shrank as more and more topics were censored.

On his supporters:

[His wife] Irina Sobyenina is interested in charity work ... but she will not be involved in business.

His team understands the language of symbols, myths and legends, and values them.

On his work style:

Sergei Sobyenin’s behind-the-scenes mentality is close to that of private clubs and secret societies. This allows him to excel at contacts with those who are used to solving high-stakes issues in a small circle.

He is sharp and misses no details and hears what is said even if his face does not betray it.

He knows where the interests of global investors coincide with those of top Russian bureaucracy.

He has no problems ordering big budget decisions and is swift to change the rules to match his decisions on that. This makes him an effective representative of Russia’s big capital, which is concentrated around taxes, benefits and access to profitable businesses.

He usually enters the game plan at the final stages of any given project and gives no credit to

those who have carried the project that far.

Any position for him is only a stage.

On what to expect:

Rallies and public protests aren't really the format Sergei Sobyenin reacts to in the end. But he will surely backtrack to buy time in the short term. And while opponents will rejoice at his concessions, real changes will be implemented, lightning fast and without involving the general public.

New money will usher in new people, new people will bring their own teams, and a new social and human rights bureaucracy will emerge.

I think things did not really work out in Tyumen between Sobyenin and the local intelligentsia and skilled professionals. He replaced the elites there almost completely.

But Sobyenin knows by heart the saying: "In order to be liked by the general public, spruce up the bazaar." And the pensioners, for example, are happy with a fountain he built in front of the Tyumen outdoor market.

The changes will be radical, but nothing is set in stone yet. A lot hangs now on the people whose opinions Sobyenin reacts to.

— *Reported by Alexander Bratersky*

Bondar, who belonged to the now-defunct Union of Right Forces party, called Sobyenin a "complete technocrat," but said this was his advantage.

"He could look straight at a computer, working and keeping on talking about various things at the same time," Bondar said in a telephone interview.

Chestyakova-Yaroslavova called her former boss a seasoned bureaucrat. "He is sharp and misses no details and hears what is said even if his face does not betray it," she told The Moscow Times.

Tyumen residents still praise

Sobyenin, saying he made the region more prosperous and improved roads, a perpetual sore point in Russian infrastructure — including in Moscow.

"We all were very sad when he left us. Tyumen was blooming under him," said Eduard Yarchin, an economist from Surgut, a city in the region.

He said Sobyenin won support from public sector employees by providing them with modest but regular subsidies of 1,000 rubles (\$30) from the regional budget twice a year. (Speaking ahead of his confirmation as Moscow's mayor, Sobyenin promised to preserve similar payments provided by Luzhkov to low-income Muscovites.)

Mikhail Averin, head of the liberal Yabloko party's branch in the Tyumen region, said Surgut has "good memories" about Sobyenin.

"Sobyenin is quite a well-known personality in the city. Tyumen remembers him," Averin said by telephone.

Moscow now has a chance to become a "prettier city," just like Tyumen did, he added.

Averin also praised Sobyenin for his diplomatic skills, saying he managed to get along with influential local figures including Alexander Filipenko and Yury Neyolov, who headed autonomous districts located within the Tyumen region.

"He showed an absolutely nonconfrontational personality and managed to gather many decent people around him," Averin said.

Tyumen's business environment thrived under Sobyenin and continued to do so after his departure, with Tyumen ranked as one of the country's 10 most business-friendly cities by Forbes last year.

"He had the money, and he was not afraid to spend it," Chestyakova-Yaroslavova said.

"He always calculates his steps first. I believe that the Kremlin has great confidence in him now," Bondar said, adding that Sobyenin was never afraid of making unpopular decisions if he thought them necessary.

Sobyenin is also described as having a harsher side. Despite the economic improvements he implemented or oversaw, he is said to never have favored media freedoms and at times clashed with journalists critical of him.

"I personally saw how free speech shrank as more and more topics were censored," said Chestyakova-Yaroslavova, who regularly contributed to the Tyumen media during Sobyenin's term.

The New Times opposition weekly said in 2007 that Sobyenin was behind the firing of a popular local journalist, Natalya Yemelyanova, who in 2003 wrote a critical article about Sobyenin's plan to bring in cows from France to develop local agriculture.

"It was his favorite idea at the time," Chestyakova-Yaroslavova, who worked as Sobyenin's aide for public communications at the time, said about the cows.

But she added that she doubted Sobyenin played a direct role in Yemelyanova's dismissal. "Some officials just pretended to get orders from him," she said.

During his time in Tyumen, Sobyenin also anticipated many policies that were later implemented by the federal government.

He was the first governor to join the ruling United Russia party after its establishment in 2001, and the first to initiate "optimization" drives at state-funded institutions — which turned out to be bureaucratic-speak for mass cuts in financing for hospitals and schools.

Tyumen also was one of the regions where the much-discussed monetization of state benefits was tested before being introduced nationwide in 2005.

Sobyanin, 52, was born in a village populated by Mansi, an indigenous people of West Siberia, but lists his nationality as Russian and said in one of his rare interviews that he has Cossack heritage.

In an indication of his fondness for privacy, as governor he even declined to reveal his religious views on the request of local Old Believers, a former aide said on condition of anonymity.

A lawyer by education, Sobyanin worked at a Chelyabinsk factory for some time before going into politics, quickly rising through the ranks of the Communist Party and other Soviet-era institutions in the 1980s.

He served as the mayor of the oil-rich Siberian town of Kogalym from 1991 to 1993 and went on to become a local legislator in 1994 and a Federation Council senator in 1996.

Sobyanin won the 2001 gubernatorial elections in oil-rich Tyumen despite a lack of public exposure, capitalizing on public discontent with incumbent Leonid Roketsky. Soon after the victory, he was also elected chairman of the TNK oil company.

In late 2005, Vladimir Putin, then the president, appointed him as Kremlin chief of staff, replacing Dmitry Medvedev, who was named a first deputy prime minister.

Sobyanin headed Medvedev's own presidential campaign in 2007 and became a deputy prime minister after his patron's landslide victory in 2008.

The Tyumen campaign, however, appears to be the landmark of Sobyanin's own career, acquaintances said.

"We needed a figure who would be able to kick out Roketsky," said a former member of his campaign team who declined to be identified.

The battle for control of one of the country's lucrative oil-producing regions was dirty. "Some people stood up during Sobyanin's meetings with voters to ask questions like, 'Do you have a villa in Spain?'" said a lawyer from Surgut who worked in the campaign.

But Sobyanin has never been accused of any specific wrongdoing.

"I, personally, have never heard that Sobyanin was involved in any direct corruption," said Bondar, the former Duma deputy.

Sobyanin has ties to some of the country's top oil businessmen, including Vladimir Bogdanov, the billionaire head of Surgutneftegaz and a close ally of Putin. Bogdanov, whose operations are based in Surgut, is believed to have advised Sobyanin during his gubernatorial campaign.

But Sobyanin's former acquaintances said billionaire Roman Abramovich was reluctant to finance the campaign because he did not expect him to defeat the incumbent.

“After we won, Abramovich’s team described what we had done as ‘the takeoff of the Concorde,’” the former senior campaign staffer said.

When he is not working, Sobyenin has his favorite pastimes — in particular, hunting, a hobby that he mentioned in an interview in which he also criticized trophy hunters who chase captive or semi-captive animals bred in hunting facilities. “I think this a joke, not hunting,” Sobyenin said in an old interview cited by Izvestia. He also enjoys skiing.

Although Sobyenin usually appears serious, he has been known to joke. Leonid Dutov, a roommate from his student days, told the Vzglyad newspaper about a trick Sobyenin played on the students in the 1980s after returning from Britain, where he had managed to win a rare trip outside the Soviet Union.

“He showed us photos where he was together with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan,” Dutov said in the interview published Wednesday. “Now I understand that the photos were doctored, but at that time we all believed they were real!”

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