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The Kremlin's Cognitive Dissonance

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It seems that for the past five months the authorities have been suffering from cognitive dissonance in their relations with Muscovites.

This is a disorder in which someone's beliefs do not match objective reality. Unable to change his convictions, the person instead rejects reality and enters an imaginary world. That explains why Russian leaders behave as if they enjoy the support of the majority of Muscovites, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

There have been more street protests in Moscow in the past five months than in the previous 15 years combined. Of course, the demonstrators account for only about 1 percent of Moscow's population, but that means that there are several angry, opposition-minded people in practically every apartment building in the city. A Ph.D. in sociology isn't necessary to understand that Muscovites are unhappy with the ruling regime.

It is no surprise, then, that most Muscovites — roughly 52 percent — voted against Vladimir Putin in the March presidential election. This is important because Moscow is the nation's capital, where most of its skilled professionals and money are concentrated. And the majority of Muscovites sent Putin an unequivocal message in March: They do not want him as

president.

Have leaders done anything in the past five months that could be interpreted as a concession toward angry Moscow residents — not empty promises, but concrete actions? Have they re-instituted the direct election of mayors or brought criminal charges against those who falsified the December State Duma election results?

In reality, leaders have been moving in the opposite direction. The direct election of mayors has nearly disappeared. Central Elections Commission head Vladimir Churov, who became a lightning rod of protest anger following the widespread falsification of Duma and other elections, has apparently been decorated for his services rather than getting sacked. And opposition leader Alexei Navalny, rather than being given a government post or the chance to run for mayor, has been repeatedly arrested and sentenced to 15-day prison terms.

The political leadership has fallen into a trap of its own making. With Moscow lacking a legitimately elected mayor, senators or Duma deputies, it is unclear who is able to respond to the demands of the Moscow protesters. The process would be much simpler if there were elected public officials.

Exacerbating this trap for Putin is billionaire and former presidential candidate Mikhail Prokhorov. He came in second place in Moscow in the presidential vote, attracting millions of Muscovites' votes, but he remains silent concerning their demands.

At the same time, Putin has nobody but himself to blame for this problem. Any political analyst worth his salt predicted that the continued dismantling of electoral institutions would make the situation increasingly unmanageable.

And that is exactly what happened. The system of governance is breaking down. What is needed are mayors with political legitimacy in the eyes of the people who could directly address the street rallies and reach a settlement with demonstrators. It is symptomatic that appointed Mayor Sergei Sobyanin visited OMON riot police officers in the hospital who were injured in the May 6 protests but ignored protesters who were hospitalized as a result of injuries caused by police during the same clashes.

Everything has turned out exactly as most independent analysts warned. Cognitive dissonance makes it impossible for leaders to admit that they were wrong and the experts were right, and that the only way to effectively run the country is to back up and address the demonstrators' demands.

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