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Local Self-Government Flounders in Obscurity

By Jonathan Earle

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Deputy Mikhail Shaposhnikov, the United Russia lawmaker who sponsored the legislation, insisted that the law simply allows deputies to return recently granted authority that experience shows they don't want or use.

Two municipal deputies picketed outside the Moscow City Duma last month, but nobody seemed to notice. Few passers-by stopped to ask what their handmade signs meant, and only a handful of journalists showed up to record their entreaties.

To be ignored, it seems, is the plight of the municipal deputy, among the lowest-level elected officials in the country. Only 8 percent of Russians even know what they do, according to a July poll by the Public Opinion Foundation.

But although they receive little attention or clout, municipal deputies, of which there are hundreds across Moscow's 125 districts, have enjoyed a resurgence in the past year, thanks to dozens of energetic young people who sought and won municipal seats in March.

Their victory was seen as a silver lining to an otherwise disappointing election for protesters, who saw Vladimir Putin regain the presidency in a landslide against a familiar lineup of aging, Kremlin-screened opponents.

At a post-election opposition rally last year, three newly elected deputies, all in their 20s, joined seasoned anti-Kremlin leaders on the stage, eliciting perhaps the loudest cheers from the crowd and cries of "Good job!"

Taking the microphone, newly elected Deputy Konstantin Yankauskas seemed to get carried away in the euphoria of the moment. "For five years, we'll stick it to [ruling party deputies] and monitor every step!" he exclaimed.

Outside the Moscow City Duma on a slushy February morning, Yankauskas's optimism seemed a world away.

The two municipal deputies, Mikhail Velmakin and Sergei Sokolov, were protesting a bill — now law — that transferred certain powers from deputies to appointed local administrators.

Critics say the law is an experiment gone wrong that will destroy municipal councils in almost half of the city's 125 districts, which consist of between eight and 20 deputies each.

"Events are being accelerated to destroy as many municipalities as possible and move as many districts as possible to the new structure of authority," Velmakin said.

Supporters, led by a powerful deputy from the ruling United Russia party, say it will boost efficiency and relegate municipal deputies to their rightful role.

Even municipal deputies have difficulty summarizing what exactly they do.

Deputy Ilya Sviridov, a supporter of the new law, said his job consists of submitting written inquiries on behalf of residents, keeping his finger "on the pulse" and defending residents' rights against, for example, illegal construction. He also helps organize public events.

"I try to be [residents'] representative to the government because I can't be refused — I'm an elected deputy," he said in an e-mail last month.

Last summer, some deputies made noisy but ultimately futile attempts to shield protesters' outdoor, Occupy-style camps from liquidation by riot police.

Municipal councils receive a yearly budget — 6,000 rubles ($200) per resident — which they can spend on beautifying courtyards, repairing apartments of the needy, and other tasks. Last year, the city allocated 4 billion rubles ($132 million), and it plans to spend 5 billion this year.

Unlike many official positions in Russia, being a municipal deputy carries almost no perks. In exchange for their troubles, deputies receive free public transportation. They don't even get paid. "It's nothing more than a piece of paper saying that you're a deputy," said Deputy Maxim Kats by telephone.

Kats, 28, a former professional poker player, became a household name in opposition circles after his election in May and was later voted onto the opposition Coordination Council,

the 45-member panel tasked with organizing the ebbing protest movement.

The law that passed the Moscow City Duma last month will see municipal deputies in 58 districts transfer authority over children's issues and the organization of holiday celebrations and sports competitions, to local administrators appointed by the mayor.

The "voluntary" transfer of power, from elected to appointed officials, raised eyebrows. Velmakin said deputies were pressured to vote "yes," but he wouldn't name names. A group of municipal deputies issued a statement calling the bill "hasty" and demanding more hearings.

Even the Mayor's Office weighed in, with Deputy Mayor Anastasia Rakova saying in January that it would be wrong for all municipalities to transfer their power to district administrators, Mossovetinfo.ru reported.

Deputy Mikhail Shaposhnikov, the United Russia lawmaker who sponsored the legislation, insisted that the law simply allows deputies to return recently granted authority that experience shows they don't want or use.

"If you ask deputies how many are involved in [youth issues and event planning], maybe one or two members of any municipal council would raise their hand," he said by telephone.

Now they can focus on beautifying parks, squares and courtyards, and renovations of apartment buildings and entranceways — "Issues that affect all residents," Shaposhnikov said.

But deputies like Kats, who often refer to themselves as "independent" or "opposition," saw the law as a power grab, the government's latest attempt to fortify its position against outsiders.

"They're trying to protect themselves against the possibility of losing control, as they would, for example, if voters were to elect an independent majority," Kats said.

Sokolov and Velmakin point to how the measure was proposed as an experiment for three districts, then expanded to 58 districts after the bill reached the city duma. "What started as an experiment turned into a new system," Velmakin said.

Shaposhnikov dismissed the charge as undemocratic. It would be unfair to prevent deputies who want to forfeit their authority from doing so, he said, adding that so far none had come forward saying they were pressured.

Yury Plusnin, a professor at the Higher School of Economics who specializes in public administration, agreed that the reform benefits the state, which he said "controls everything in Moscow," but he disagreed that it's also a power grab. "It's not at all a centralization of power; it's just putting things in their place," he wrote in an e-mail.

The fact is that local self-government is already fictitious in Moscow and most other cities in Russia, he said. "I don't think deputies' authority will change as a result of this reform. Now it will simply match reality."

"Under Federal Law No. 131, which regulates local self-government, they scratched their left ear with their right hand. Now they'll use their left hand; it's more comfortable that way," he said.

Standing out in the cold, Sergei Sokolov said he's fighting not just against the new law, but for the return of what he says are people's legal right to local self-government.

He's not alone in calling for more decisions to be made on the neighborhood level. Among the proposed slogans for an opposition march earlier this month was, "Real authority and real money to local self-government!"

"The entire country obeys the Constitution," when it comes to local self-government, he said, "But in Moscow and St. Petersburg, deputies' power has been given to administrators. Municipalities don't influence anything right now," he said.

As a matter of law, Sokolov may be right, but it doesn't seem like the public cares. The Public Opinion Foundation poll found that 71 percent of Russians have no idea what municipal deputies do. More troubling, perhaps, 50 said they had no interest in finding out.

Housebound voters visited by a Moscow Times reporter in May uniformly said they had no idea who municipal council candidates were. Some even asked mobile polling station workers and monitors to pick for them.

Moscow is too big, impersonal and dependent on state handouts to practice real local self-government, Plusnin said.

Most people don't know their neighbors, and 90 percent of "native Muscovites" receive some kind of government benefit, compared with 74 percent nationwide, Plusnin said.

"What kind of self-government could you have among these people! They're thinking not about independence and responsibility, but about the feed trough. People who stand around the feed trough are not capable of self-government," he said.

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