

Sobyanin Calls for Early Mayoral Vote

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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Mayor Sergei Sobyenin speaking at a meeting of the Moscow Public Chamber in April 2012, where he announced his desire for early mayoral elections. **Igor Tabakov**

Correction appended.

Mayor Sergei Sobyenin will ask President Vladimir Putin to declare early mayoral elections, the first in Moscow since 2003, in a move analysts said would help ensure Sobyenin's election in September amid a worsening political climate for the mayor.

Sobyenin said his decision was made in the spirit of democracy: With direct elections of regional heads restored last May, polls showed that two-thirds of Muscovites want to choose their leader, Sobyenin told a meeting of the Moscow Public Chamber on Tuesday, Interfax reported.

Putin is expected to accept Sobyenin's resignation and appoint him acting mayor in the next few days, and elections will likely be held on Sept. 8, election day in Russia.

Analysts said the move would raise Sobyenin's chances of winning the vote, which would keep him in charge of the capital through 2018.



Alexei Navalny
Igor Tabakov / MT

Regional political expert Alexander Kynev wrote in a column on Gazeta.ru that political and economic conditions are expected to worsen by 2015, when Sobyenin's current term ends. In particular, looming deadlines for a slew of major construction projects — including a massive metro construction program — could damage Sobyenin's popularity if the city misses them.

And nobody else is currently ready to seriously contend for the job, Kynev said, an obstacle for independent candidates that is compounded by tough registration requirements and the short period that challengers will have to mount a campaign.

To register, independent candidates must gather signatures from 6 percent of municipal deputies, covering 75 percent of municipalities, which is nearly impossible to accomplish, said Yury Zagrebnoi, a political analyst and editor of Mossovetinfo.ru, a local news portal.

In Zagrebnoi's words, independent candidates have "practically no chance" against Sobyenin, a close Putin ally, meaning that the vote will likely be between candidates from docile parliamentary parties, generally careful not to irk the Kremlin.

Sobyenin, 54, was immediately recommended for the post by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and other senior members of the ruling United Russia party in a flurry of online [statements](#) on Tuesday.

A recent poll by researchers at Moscow State University found that 54 percent of respondents would vote for Sobyenin, compared to 13 percent for former Mayor Yury Luzhkov — who told Interfax that he would not run — and 12 percent for billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov.



Mikhail

Prokhorov

Igor Tabakov / MT

Prokhorov has shown signs of political potential in Moscow. He won about 20 percent of the vote in the city in presidential elections last year, finishing second to Putin in the region, and said last June that he would run for [mayor](#).

But on Tuesday, the businessman-turned-politician [wrote](#) on his blog that he would make up his mind about a possible run only after consulting with lawyers, and only after the date of the election was set.

Another possible candidate, opposition leader Alexei Navalny, [told](#) Lenta.ru on Monday that he would participate in Moscow mayoral and City Duma elections as long as he had the opportunity. But Navalny faces his own hurdles — he could be disqualified from the race if convicted of stealing timber in what many see as a politically tinged trial taking place in Kirov.

Moscow City Duma elections are scheduled for next year.

Political expert Yevgeny Minchenko, who co-produces a periodic "survivability rating" of regional heads, [told](#) Kommersant that practically nobody could put together a campaign to challenge Sobyenin on such short notice, especially not during the summer, when many Muscovites leave town.

"Imagine a brawny athlete who's been training for a year. He goes up to a bespectacled wimp and says, 'Let's spar.' What chances do you think the wimp has to withstand a muscled boxer?" Minchenko said.

Since Sobyenin was appointed in 2010, Moscow has weathered the largest anti-government protests in a generation and more than doubled in size with the addition of a spur jutting from its southwest border. Sobyenin has also overseen the renovation of the city's parks, notably Gorky Park.

But he's struggled to solve the city's gridlocked traffic, and government campaigns to clear the streets of allegedly unlicensed food vendors and replace sidewalk asphalt with tiles — which have crumbled despite promises about their longevity — have won him a fair share of criticism.

A plurality of Muscovites — 36 percent — consider his performance "average." Thirty percent appraised him as "good," and 14 percent as "bad," according to the results of a February poll by the independent [Levada Center](#).

Curiously, as recently as February, Sobyenin rejected early elections. "I don't yet feel that Muscovites have such a desire," Sobyenin [told](#) Kommersant at the time, saying polls found that 70–80 percent of respondents didn't want them.

Before becoming mayor, Sobyenin was a deputy and chief of staff to then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. In the early 2000s, he was governor of his native Tyumen region. Sobyenin took over City Hall from Yury Luzhkov, who ran the city from 1992 to 2010, when he was fired by Medvedev.

Correction: Due to an editing error, the caption for the photo for "Sobyanin Calls for Early Mayoral Vote" article said Mayor Sergei Sobyanin was pictured speaking at a meeting of the Moscow Public Chamber on Tuesday. In fact, the photo was a file photo taken at a meeting in April 2012.

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