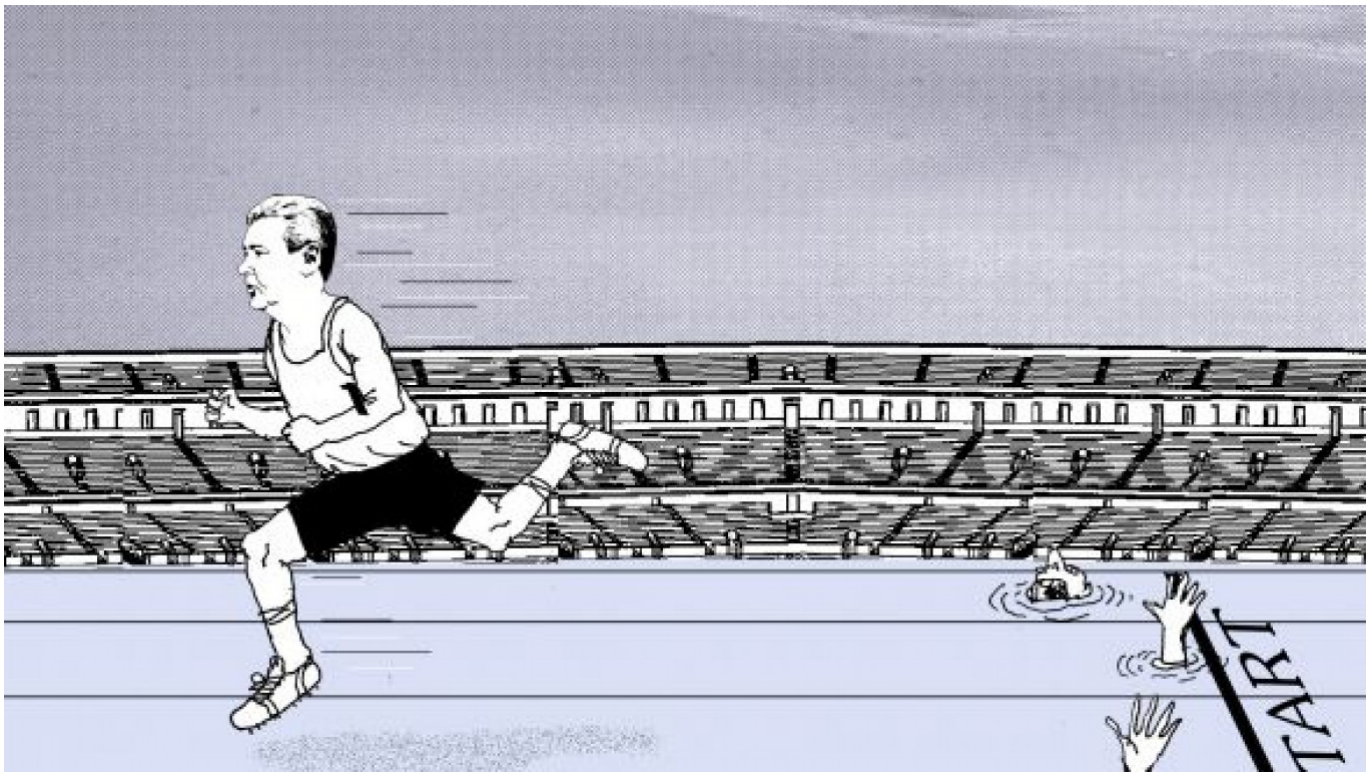
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The Kremlin's Managed Mayoral Election

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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The most intriguing aspect of the early mayoral election in Moscow is its complete lack of suspense. Almost two weeks have passed since pro-Kremlin Mayor Sergei Sobyanin unexpectedly resigned. He then called for a new election in three months, effectively eliminating any possible competition in the process. The election will be held according to the standard scenario of Russia's "managed democracy" — that is, by preventing the strongest rivals to Sobyanin from running in the race, guaranteeing low voter turnout and applying the Kremlin's massive propaganda and administrative resources to manipulate the vote.

Civil Platform party leader and billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov was expected to have been Sobyanin's main rival. During his bid for the presidency in March 2012, Prokhorov received nearly 8 percent of the vote nationally and more than 20 percent among Muscovites.

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Now, one year later, support for Prokhorov remains just as strong among Moscow voters. According to the latest Levada Center poll, Prokhorov could have kicked off mayoral election campaign with a solid 20 percent of the vote from the start. And if he had mounted an aggressive election campaign during the next three months, he might have been able to force a second round of voting, at which point he might have had a real chance of winning.

Prokhorov denied that the Kremlin had pressured him not to run for office. He said his lawyers could not find a legally viable way to quickly transfer his foreign assets to Russia to comply with the new law banning candidates and officials from holding assets overseas. Yet Prokhorov himself has mentioned that United Russia and the Central Elections Commission have threatened to exploit that law to prevent him from registering for the election.

Notably, Prokhorov did not encourage his sister, Irina Prokhorova, to run on the Civil Platform ticket. Irina, whose impressive speeches during the presidential election campaign and her strong liberal positions have made her popular among the Moscow intelligentsia, could have received substantial support from Muscovites. But for some reason, Irina decided not to run. Now Prokhorov will prepare for next year's elections in the Moscow City Duma, although this body holds only marginal influence over the city's affairs.

Sobyanin can breathe easily now that his primary rival, Prokhorov, is out of the picture. According to the Levada Center, fully 67 percent of Muscovites planning to vote on Sept. 8 will endorse his candidacy, and his popularity among the general population has risen from 36 percent one year ago to 47 percent today. By contrast, only 3 percent of the voters would cast their ballots today for anti-corruption whistleblower Alexei Navalny, only 2 percent support Yabloko party head Sergei Mitrokhin and even fewer would vote for candidates from the Communist Party, A Just Russia and the Liberal Democratic Party.

The only possible intrigue to emerge from the Moscow race is the decision by the RP-Party of People's Freedom to team up with two unregistered opposition parties to support Navalny in the Moscow mayoral race. But Navalny faces two formidable obstacles in this regard. First, the recent, Kremlin-engineered "filter law" requires that Navalny and other candidates collect signatures from 110 Moscow council members representing 110 of the city's 149 municipalities to register to run. Since most of those deputies belong to United Russia and other Kremlin-approved parties, collecting the necessary signatures is practically impossible.

The second major hurdle is the current criminal case in Kirov against him on alleged corruption charges. It was initially believed that Navalny would be arrested, but fortunately the court did not approve the prosecutors' request for an arrest warrant. At the same time, however, if the authorities hand down an indictment by July 11, the registration deadline for the election, Navalny will be denied the ability to run. In any event, if Navalny receives a conviction, even a suspended sentence, he will be disqualified from running for any political

office whatsoever.

Voters have not shown interest in any other candidates since there is a strong electoral base that does not approve of Sobyanin's record as mayor. Sobyanin promises to expand the metro system, to build roads, highway interchanges, housing and kindergartens and to improve the air and water in Moscow, and few of these goals have been achieved.

In a recent meeting at the Kremlin, President Vladimir Putin wished Sobyanin "success in the election" and gave him one of his trademark sly grins. The last time Putin himself took part in a truly competitive election was way back in 1996, when he headed Anatoly Sobchak's mayoral re-election campaign. Sobchak lost that election by a small margin, and since then Putin has preferred either canceling elections outright or manipulating them to avoid any unpleasant surprises.

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