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Poll Shows Sobyanin With Huge Lead in Mayoral Race

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Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin **Igor Tabakov**

Less than two months before the Moscow mayoral election, an independent public opinion poll shows acting Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin with a double-digit lead over the other 39 potential candidates, none of whom received even 10 percent of respondents' support.

The poll published Wednesday by the Levada Center named anti-Kremlin leader Alexei Navalny as the second-most popular candidate, but he was separated from Sobyanin by at least 30 percent of the projected vote.

Among all the poll's respondents, some of whom said they had not decided whether to vote or not, 34 percent said they would vote for Sobyanin compared to 4 percent for Navalny. Of those who said they would vote in the Sept. 8 election and had made their final choice of candidate, the margin was even greater, with 78 percent saying they preferred Sobyanin and just 8 percent saying they would support Navalny.

Sobyanin, who served as Moscow mayor for over two years before abruptly stepping down last month to trigger a snap election, has been the prohibitive favorite in the race from the start. Before taking the top job at Moscow City Hall in 2010, he served as chief of staff for Vladimir Putin for two years during Putin's term as prime minister and for three years during Putin's second term as president. The acting Moscow mayor is often mentioned as a possible successor to Putin as president.

Navalny, on the other hand, may not even get a chance to run in the mayoral race. Currently standing trial in the provincial city of Kirov on charges of stealing 16 million rubles ($500,000) worth of timber from the state, Navalny would be barred from running in elections if convicted. The verdict in his trial — which critics say has been fabricated as punishment for Navalny's vehement government criticism — is expected to be announced July 18.

In a demonstration of Navalny's uncertain status, he was briefly detained by police Wednesday for unknown reasons after submitting signatures for his candidacy to the Moscow elections commission, Interfax reported. The police quickly released him and apologized.

According to Alexei Titkov, an expert in regional politics at the Higher School of Economics, no single candidate can be viewed as a serious competitor to Sobyanin, and Navalny is likely to be barred from running, but Sobyanin is not necessarily so beloved by city residents.

"Many plan to vote for Sobyanin by inertia or because he hasn't done anything bad, but he has no fervent supporters," Titkov said. "If Sobyanin's team takes any steps ahead of the elections that make the lives of Muscovites worse, his support may waver."

Denis Volkov, one of the authors of the Levada survey, explained its results by the lack of media coverage of opposition politicians, the fact that they lacked so-called "administrative resources" and the general lack of faith in fair elections on the part of Muscovites.

"It is known beforehand that there will be no competition, and even if someone [oppositional] is allowed [to run], this will be an outcast who has not yet made a name for himself as a politician due to insufficient media coverage," Volkov said by telephone.

In addition, the authorities, unlike opposition candidates, have "organizational resources to make someone vote" for their candidate, Volkov said.

At the same time, opposition supporters "often mobilize closer to elections," so Navalny's rating may grow and Sobyanin's may fall, even if only by several percentage points each, the pollster said.

Sobyanin is running as an independent candidate but has the backing of his party, pro-Kremlin United Russia, which wields considerable influence despite having grown less popular in recent years.

Konstantin Yankauskas, a municipal deputy representing the Zyuzino District who signed for Navalny's registration bid and helped him draft his election program, said "there is room for Navalny's support to grow" among the 33 percent of respondents in the Levada poll who

said they would vote but had not picked a candidate.

Writing on his Facebook page, Yankauskas praised Navalny's current 8 percent level of support, noting that the election campaign had barely begun.

"The figures for Sobyanin's rating so far can be explained by the feelings of hopelessness and the lack of options, [feelings] that city and federal media are trying to impose on Muscovites," Yankauskas wrote. "If we manage to get information about Navalny's [election] program to the majority of our citizens and tell [them] that at last there is an alternative at the elections, Sobyanin's rating will start to fall."

Navalny campaign manager Leonid Volkov was not available for comment Wednesday evening. Neither Navalny nor any other member of his campaign team had publicly commented on the poll by late Wednesday.

The Sobyanin campaign did not release a statement on the poll but did publish the figures on its website.

According to the poll, other hopefuls are even further behind Sobyanin than Navalny. Communist Ivan Melnikov was third most popular with 6 percent of people saying they would support him, and Sergei Mitrokhin of the liberal opposition party Yabloko followed him with 3 percent. All the other candidates were backed by 1 percent or less of those polled.

The poll was conducted July 4-8 among 1,000 Muscovites and had a margin of error of 4.8 percentage points.

By late Wednesday, on the eve of the deadline for mayoral hopefuls to file registration papers with the Moscow City Elections Commission, at least five candidates had submitted their documents, according to media reports.

They were Sobyanin, Navalny, who is running as the candidate from the RPR-Parnas party, Nikolai Levichev of A Just Russia, Ivan Melnikov of the Communist Party, Sergei Mitrokhin of Yabloko and Mikhail Degtyaryov of LDPR.

For registration, party candidates are required to provide at least 110 signatures of municipal deputies or municipal heads in support of their bids, while independents must also collect at least 73,000 signatures of ordinary Muscovites.

The Moscow elections commission will stop accepting registration papers of candidates at 6 p.m. Thursday, according to the commission's online news website, Mosgorizbirkom.ru.

Another anti-Kremlin protest leader, Sergei Udaltsov, who is under house arrest on suspicion of plotting riots but has declared his intention to run for mayor as an independent, will ask a court to extend the period allotted for him to collect signatures on the grounds that the commission had refused to accept his nomination papers from his representatives until Wednesday, Interfax reported.

Forty candidates submitted papers to the elections commission for their nomination as candidates, which is different from the registration process and had a deadline of 6 p.m. Wednesday, Mosgorizbirkom.ru reported.

The elections commission is expected to decide on the registration of the candidates by next Sunday, July 21.

Sobyanin on Wednesday predicted that at least six candidates will take part in the mayoral race, Interfax reported. He did not say who in particular he thought would be in the running.

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