The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Kremlin Is Split Over Navalny

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

July 22, 2013



The events surrounding opposition leader Alexei Navalny and the Moscow mayoral election have finally come to resemble a Hollywood soap opera. First, Navalny could not gather the required number of signatures from municipal deputies to register as a candidate. Then, acting Mayor Sergei Sobyanin instructed deputies from United Russia, which Navalny had famously dubbed "the party of crooks and thieves," to sign off on his candidacy, in accordance with the recent "filter law" on registering candidates for elections. Next, Navalny is sentenced to five years in prison and taken immediately in handcuffs to a Kirov prison. He announces that he is withdrawing from the mayoral race. The next day, Navalny is set free pending appeal on the condition that he promises not to leave the country. After this, he announces that he will take part in the election after all. This Navalny soap opera promises many more exciting episodes in the coming weeks.

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Everybody is at a loss to understand what's happening. Does the Kremlin have a definite policy concerning Navalny? In fact, it has two policies. And that's why it is almost impossible to make any predictions.

The Kremlin elite have split into two warring groups: the siloviki and political strategists. The siloviki, consisting primarily of Investigative Committee head Alexander Bastrykin and the Federal Security Service, believe that it is necessary to jail every last prominent opposition member, even if it requires bringing absurd charges in kangaroo courts. The siloviki dismiss concerns that these show trials will spark protests, pointing to the sentencing of former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky who has been languishing in jail for 10 years. After initial outrage, the West has largely dropped the matter, even the European Court of Human Rights seems to be in no hurry to condemn Russia for it, and there have been no street protests in his defense.

The second group is made up of Kremlin spin doctors, such as presidential administration head Vyacheslav Volodin and, in all likelihood, Sobyanin. They believe that jailing opposition figures is short-sighted folly. After all, public opinion surveys indicate most Russians, including Muscovites, are apolitical and have no interest in Navalny or protesters with their demands for free and honest elections. What's more, they are perfectly happy with life under Putin and by a 10 to 1 margin are prepared to vote for Sobyanin over Navalny in the Sept. 8 mayoral election. So why jail Navalny and boost his popularity by turning him into a hero?

It would make more sense to let all comers run in the elections and even help them pass the municipal filter to qualify. That way, the ruling party can dominate elections just as they delivered a resounding defeat to opposition leader Yevgenia Chirikova in the Khimki mayoral election last year. That approach would enable them to kill two birds with one stone: make the elections more transparent, fair and therefore legitimate, and at the same time humiliate the opposition by demonstrating that it does not enjoy the support of the masses.

Last week, we saw the two-pronged policy at work: one Kremlin group convicted and jailed - Navalny on Thursday, and the other group temporarily released him on Friday. At first glance, Navalny's return to the Moscow election would seem to be a victory for Kremlin spin doctors,

but Putin has a greater personal affinity for the siloviki camp, which may gain the upper hand. In any case, Navalny will surely serve his five-year sentence once the Kirov appeals court upholds the conviction.

The harsh sentence against Navalny is an orchestrated and deliberate act of intimidation. First, it is intended to prevent Navalny from ever taking part in any elections, according to Russian law. Even the five-year prison sentence is no coincidence. Navalny will be released in July 2018 after the next presidential election in March 2018.

At the same time, the Navalny conviction is intended to intimidate all opposition and civil society activists, as well as the business community and the political elite. Leaders are letting everyone know that it takes only a word from the Kremlin to easily put any individual behind bars. Josef Stalin's old principle has been brought back into play: Once a political target is identified, fabricating a criminal conviction against him is no problem at all.

Notably, Navalny was convicted on international Nelson Mandela Day. While Mandela gives inspiration to every freedom-seeking person struggling against tyranny, Putin may find his own twisted inspiration in the fact that the South African government kept Mandela in prison for 27 long years, while the minority ruling elite kept a tight grip on power for over four decades.

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/07/22/the-kremlin-is-split-over-navalny-a26048