

Navalny Rises as Head of Post-Soviet Generation

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Whatever the final tally on Sept. 8, the Moscow mayoral race is likely to be a paradigm-shifting event for Russia.

It marks the end of imitation politics. In a "dizzy-with-success" moment, the Kremlin first helped opposition leader Alexei Navalny prove his credibility as a genuine alternative to Putin's system. Then, it allowed him to run in a relatively competitive election in Moscow.

With Navalny emerging as the only politician who dares to publicly challenge President Vladimir Putin and his inner circle, the Moscow race is turning into a referendum on Putin's rule. There is little public discussion on whether Navalny is fit to replace acting Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, but there is a heated debate on whether Navalny would be a better leader than Putin. It's a good debate to have.

Sobyenin is a no-show in this election. His plans for Moscow are largely ignored by a public

fixated on the riveting duel between Navalny and Putin. Other candidates have faded into irrelevance. It is a sign of public hunger for politicians who have strong views in an era of zero tolerance for fakes.

With his fearlessness, Navalny eclipses other opposition leaders, many of whom will soon find themselves forgotten if they do not jump on his bandwagon. Billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov will pay dearly for his unmanly decision to drop out of the Moscow race.

The Moscow election exposes a bitter generational divide in Russian politics. It is a conflict between the first post-Soviet and the last Soviet generations, as people in their 20s and 30s see their future being stolen from them by people in their 60s. Navalny's campaign secures his role as the leader of the post-Soviet generation.

Navalny's political breakthrough is his seamless fusion of liberal values, personal freedom, rule of law and civic patriotism. This "liberal nationalism" will help Navalny steal the "patriotism franchise" from the conservative right and looney Communists. Navalny's appealing vision for Russia as a European democracy clashes with those who see the country as a Eurasian satrapy. Here, Navalny, who wants Russians to live like Europeans and plans to introduce visas for Central Asians, is at odds with Putin's call for a Eurasian Union.

Russian politics will now be defined by the rivalry between Putin and Navalny. It's the Kremlin's big unforced error.

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