The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

We Need Debates, Not a Cheap TV Show

By Boris Kagarlitsky

August 07, 2013





Boris
Kagarlitsky

Acting Mayor Sergei Sobyanin's refusal to engage in televised debates with opposition leader Alexei Navalny was met with a sharp reaction from many Russians, who accused him of being a coward. Meanwhile, almost no one has asked about what participants in the debate would say, what problems should be put before them and what positions they might defend. Yet these are the most important issues facing voters.

The problem is that debates are perceived by most Russians as little more than a show.

The last televised debates were met with a large collective yawn. What's more, most Muscovites learned about the possibility of debates only when the media reported that they would not happen. In the end, few would likely be upset if the debates don't take place.

The problem is not only the political apathy of a large part of the population but also our television, which long ago lost the ability or desire to hold serious and substantive discussions. Most talk shows on television turn into vulgar spectacles, where the debate inevitably turns into a scandal, recriminations replace arguments and conveying anything to the viewer proves to be an almost impossible task. At the same time, if the debates were serious, they would be boring for most Russians.

Meanwhile, there are more than enough important issues to debate. Moscow has become one of the most unlivable cities in Europe. The destruction of the historic city center continues, housing prices are going through the roof, the roads are jammed for hours on end and immigration policies have led to ethnic tensions.

A detailed explanation of how each candidate plans to solve these and other problems is something that Muscovites are entitled to have. We need a serious debate among candidates, as well as a true conversation with citizens. We also need to read their platforms, which should be made available on each candidate's website. Moreover, these should be genuine plans and not pre-election manifestos consisting of meaningless slogans.

Municipal elections should help to publicly articulate and discuss Moscow's largest problems. Of course, under Western European conditions it is not uncommon for even municipal elections to become politicized, but this happens against the background of the development of self-government, when competing political forces rely on well-established teams of activists and professionals. In Moscow, there are practically no local government structures and no way for Muscovites to solve the local issues that affect them. But Navalny is trying to shift the focus of the mayoral race to a vote of confidence or distrust of the Kremlin and President Vladimir Putin. The focus should be on Moscow and its problems.

The more politicized Moscow elections are, the less likely they are to actually change anything in the city. Each political group is mobilizing the supporters that it already has. The vote is divided according to ideological sympathies and not connected to what we think of the public transport system, for example, or policy toward illegal immigrants. To solve the issues that really affect the daily lives of Muscovites, we need a real, serious discussion, not another cheap television show. We need a social transformation in which we must all be participants.

Boris Kagarlitsky is the director of the Institute of Globalization Studies.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/08/07/we-need-debates-not-a-cheap-tv-show-a26558