

How Navalny Has Cut Sobyenin Down to Size

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Watching Sergei Sobyenin run for mayor of Moscow makes you wonder if his real motive was more compelling than an intolerable urge to seek the popular mandate to fix Moscow's traffic.

Sobyenin, who earlier this year showed no interest in running, would not have called the snap election without President Vladimir Putin telling him to. His mandate is from Putin. He owes him his rise to the pinnacle of power.

Putin wants Sobyenin in control of Moscow in 2017-18 when he will have to make a decision whether to seek another presidential term himself or put forward a credible successor. A popularly elected Moscow mayor could be better positioned for the presidency than a prime minister or defense minister.

If Putin runs in 2018, Sobyenin could stay on to secure the capital and get promoted later, if Putin heads for the exits, Sobyenin is well positioned to run for president. He is equidistant

from all major players in Putin's circle and can ensure the elite cohesion.

Sobyanin has taken the succession tip seriously. He has positioned himself as a modernist, reaching out to Moscow's disgruntled middle class and eschewing heavy-handed tactics. He has distanced himself from the disgraced United Russia party and is not exactly basking in Putin's glow.

This has spooked others with claims to Putin's succession. Sobyanin was to be denied an easy victory in Moscow, which the mayor planned to achieve in traditional ways by not registering strong opponents.

Instead, he was pushed by the Kremlin to help opposition leader Alexei Navalny and others clear the "municipal filter." The plan, aired by presidential administration head Vyacheslav Volodin, was to "add legitimacy" to the election by registering a real alternative who, the polls showed, could not win. Sobyanin, meanwhile, would be bloodied in a competitive race.

And so he has been. Navalny's revelations about luxurious real estate registered in the names of Sobyanin's daughters, allegations of nepotism to help the business of his son-in-law and wasteful spending on city projects have tarred Sobyanin's reputation. His refusal to participate in the debates exposed his weakness as a politician. His ratings are sliding. A run-off could damage him permanently.

This inside plot to cut Sobyanin to size helps Navalny burst on the national stage as the genuine alternative to Putin. The law of unintended consequences works in mysterious ways.

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