The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Businesses Urge Mayoral Hopefuls to Pursue Laissez-Faire Policy

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August 21, 2013



Small businesses want to be left alone and exress concerns that corrupt officials are trying to cash in on them. **Vladimir Filonov / MT**

Small business representatives called for equality before the law and less interference from the government, sharing their concerns with Moscow mayoral candidate teams at a round-table discussion organized by the For an Honest Market movement Wednesday.

The meeting was attended by mayoral candidate Sergei Mitrokhin of the liberal Yabloko party. Two other candidates, Alexei Navalny and Ivan Melnikov of the Communist Party, were not present but were represented by Vladimir Ashurkov, a former Alfa Group top executive and a member of the pro-Navalny People's Alliance party, and Vladimir Rodin, respectively.

"Acting Mayor Sergei Sobyanin's team called this morning to tell us that he has more important meetings to attend, the event organizer Ilya Khandrikov said.

While expressing appreciation for possible forthcoming tax incentives, small businesses that were present at the round-table unanimously said they want to be left alone.

They expressed concerns that, historically, any help offered by the government resulted in more compliance checks, inspections, audits and piles of paperwork. In many cases, such help made business more difficult, because corrupt officials often wanted to cash in on successful businesses.

A cafe owner present at the meeting said that when her business, located at a train station, became successful, the landlord decided to re-write the lease agreement for the property that the cafe was occupying. When she refused to pay the higher rent rates, "musclemen" came to the shop and trashed the place, driving away her customers and making the cafe unusable. The police refused to help, because they saw it as a mere business conflict which had to be settled by what she called criminal business groups, she said.

In his response to the concerns that were put forward, Mitrokhin said he would create a mechanism to receive feedback from Muscovites and the city's small business owners.

He said there would be a department responsible for anti-corruption audits of legislation. It would consist of a team of independent lawyers who would examine laws and bills regulating the economy for possible loopholes that could be exploited for corruption purposes.

If he is elected, his future mayoral team will defend small business rights, including those to own commercial property and to buy out business premises from City Hall, Mitrokhin said.

Ashurkov, representing Navalny, said that if the opposition leader becomes mayor, he would make areas of business, currently out of bounds for small players, open to all on equal terms.

This would include allowing small business to bid for state tenders, making information related to real estate transactions in Moscow publicly available on the Internet and offering legal help to businesses struggling with corruption.

"Our goal is the publicity and transparency of the city government's work," Ashurkov said.

Rodin said that stopping the state from interfering with small business activities will be the goal of the communist team, if Melnikov gets elected.

He called on other political fractions to join forces and form a coalition government, which would make the mayor more accountable for his decisions.

Rodin called for imprisonment of government officials who "confused their public offices with business activities."

He said the government needed to provide more support to Russian farmers, giving them access to the market directly, bypassing the middleman.

Meanwhile, the Cabinet's Committee on Competition and Small Business is scheduled to discuss small business needs, tax concessions, reduced insurance rates and subsidized business financing on Thursday, Kommersant reported.

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