The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Navalny's Campaign Relies on Innovation

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August 21, 2013



One of mayoral contender Alexei Navalny's campaign stickers urging people at the Barrikadnaya metro to "Change Russia, starting with Moscow." **Vladimir Filonov / MT**

Standing on a soapbox, mayoral hopeful Alexei Navalny asks the people who've gathered to listen to his campaign speech near Timiryazevskaya railway station: "What do you know about me?"

After a brief silence, someone in the crowd hesitatingly replies: "Corruption."

"What do you mean corruption? You mean I stole the whole forest?" Navalny says, referring to his recent conviction on embezzlement charges, which nearly derailed his campaign.

The charges, which his supporters say were politically motivated and meant to bar the outspoken blogger from political office, saw him sentenced to five years in prison in mid-July. He has appealed the verdict and denied all charges.

The conviction has added suspense to the campaign and left observers divided over whether it

will ultimately help Navalny's political career or kill it before it's even started, since under current law, a felony conviction means he is not eligible to run for political office.

Ironically, he is widely seen as the one real competitor in a race that would otherwise be predictable — yet many believe his loss is predetermined.

Some people laugh and applaud Navalny's straightforward response over the conviction, but most of those gathered at the meeting — mostly old people and housewives with small children — seem to be seeing the popular blogger and whistle-blower for the first time in their lives.

"I don't know him; I found out about his existence only today. I saw a leaflet in a bar, and that's why I'm here," said pensioner Gennady Ratnikov, 64, before the meeting.

It was Navalny's 58th meeting with residents of one of Moscow's districts, with several dozen gathering at Timiryazevskaya.

He usually has three meetings in different districts a day, and by Sept. 8 — the day of the election — at least 100 such meetings will have been held, giving him a chance to meet with a minimum of 1 percent of voters, according to his office's calculations.

The meetings stand in stark contrast with the campaigns of other mayoral contenders, who tend to interact with voters less directly.

As Navalny's campaign chief Leonid Volkov explained, the campaign is absolutely new in terms of fund-raising amounts, number of volunteers and digital projects, but the meetings with the public are what really make it innovative. The main aim of the election campaign, he said, was to reach those people who have not yet decided which candidate to vote for.

In Navalny's speech, which is markedly different and toned down from the political slogans he usually employs at rallies, he makes a point of showing that he is just like everybody else, with the same everyday problems as ordinary Muscovites.

He stresses that he lives in Marino, in the southeast of Moscow, and speaks a great deal about his family, a touchy subject for most Russian state officials, including acting mayor Sergei Sobyanin.

"I'm asking for your support, which I really need because I want to solve the problems that I myself have been facing for the 17 years of my life spent in Moscow, and I know how to solve these problems," he tells the crowd.

Whatever issues are brought up — be it medicine, pensions, or illegal immigration — Navalny seems to have his own answer for them and a plan to go along with it.

"I know what you need, because I need the same things," he says time and time again.

But not everyone has been receptive to these words. Forty-year-old scientific worker Andrei Nikolayev said he did not believe Navalny was sincere.

"Navalny is using popular but more sophisticated methods to make an influence on the public. He doesn't work for us and doesn't represent our interests," he said.

Some people said even though they had not heard anything new from the opposition activist, they liked his speech and intended to vote for him, though they acknowledged that his victory was unlikely.

"I didn't come here intentionally, I was just passing by, heard his voice and couldn't help but stop and listen to him," said 18-year-old student Arman after the meeting, adding that he had been following Navalny's LiveJournal blog for several years.

"I think his election campaign is very good and he is doing the right things. I was impressed by the fact that he really does know about the problems our district is facing," he said.



Vladimir Filonov / MT

Navalny's supporters standing at one of his campaign "cubes" with leaflets to hand out to possible voters.

Volkov said one of the main attractions of the campaign was its reliance on innovation.

"The atmosphere and energy is different, since pensioners are not forced to come out, as they usually are by Pro-Kremlin candidates. People come here of their own free will," Volkov said, standing by Navalny's campaign headquarters in central Moscow, which, unlike the public meetings, are buzzing with Navalny's young supporters.

The headquarters look more like a classroom for a creative workshop than an electoral office: young people are sitting around with Macbooks near blackboards with tasks and plans

for street campaigning that hang on the walls; packs of newspapers for distribution throughout Moscow sit on the tables; a life-size poster of Navalny is set up and the whole room is covered with red stickers with his name on them.

Young people arrive at the office and stand in line to become volunteers, most of them students who are eager to spend the end of their summer break helping Navalny to win.

Anna Litvinenko, a 21-year-old psychology student who coordinates the work of the office, said she decided to become a volunteer at Navalny's office after his conviction on July 18.

"I realized I couldn't stand it any more and had to do something," she said.

"I like Navalny because from the very beginning he wasn't afraid to speak out against the authorities; everyone else was silent, but he started to take real action," she said.

An 18-year-old music student, Nikita Polyakov, whose duty is to register new volunteers, said even though he supported the majority of Navalny's projects, he was mostly interested in how the anti-corruption campaigner worked with the Internet.

"All politicians in Russia are afraid of the Internet, but he isn't scared of making important information public, that's what appealed to me," he said.

Most people who support Navalny know him from his LiveJournal blog, which propelled him to fame on the Russian Internet.

Regardless of the result of the upcoming election, observers say Navalny's campaign will permanently change his status from online opposition activist to genuine politician.

And while Navalny's reliance on the Internet for his anti-corruption activities has earned him a loyal following of young people, his online initiatives have also appealed to older people who are fed up with corruption.

Sixty-year-old Alexandra Tikhonova said she had been following Navalny's initiatives online and was surprised by the number of his achievements in revealing corrupt officials.

"I actually wanted to vote for Mikhail Prokhorov, but since he's not running for mayor, I chose Navalny. He's so energetic, charismatic and he's doing real things," she said.

Sergei Dmitriyev, 25, who lives in Paris and came to Moscow for a few days, said he attended the meeting out of curiosity.

"I wanted to see him before he's put in prison," he said, adding that he liked the speech but was alarmed by Navalny's nationalist comments.

During his speech, Navalny admitted to having the toughest approach on immigration policy among all other candidates and promised a 70 percent reduction of illegal immigration within a year of becoming mayor.

Observers say the nationalist rhetoric is unlikely to alienate people, however, and on the contrary, it may even attract new people to vote for him, since the issue of illegal

immigration has become a top priority for most Muscovites.

His persistent criticism of the authorities, on the other hand, might not go over so well, some analysts say.



Sergei Karpukhin / REUTERS

Alexei Navalny meeting with the media near his campaign office Tuesday.

"The only thing that might influence people not to vote for Navalny is his abundance of criticism of authorities and Sobyanin and lack of elaborate plans on how to make things better," said Vladimir Slatinov, a political expert with the Institute for Humanitarian and Political Research.

Most observers are convinced that Sobyanin's victory is already clear and that Navalny was allowed to participate only to make that victory seem legitimate. At the same time, however, the Kremlin didn't expect support for Navalny to be so high, Slatinov said, which is why his imprisonment after elections seems even more likely.

"Navalny's poll numbers are higher than that of mayoral candidates from the State Duma's so-called opposition parties — the Communists, A Just Russia and the Liberal Democratic Party — which means it will be impossible for authorities to ignore him as a part of today's political reality," Slatinov said.

According to Slatinov, it will be a great challenge for the Kremlin to decide what to do with Navalny after the elections, though in recent years it has become obvious that the authorities prefer to jail those who oppose them.

Stanislav Belkovsky, head of the Institute for National Strategy, agreed that popular support for Navalny had put the Kremlin in a tight spot.

"It's different when you go to prison as a mayoral candidate with significant popular support, there will be negative consequences for authorities if they jail him since there will be major public resistance to it," Belkovsky said, adding, however, that he didn't exclude the possibility of Navalny's imprisonment.

Adding more intrigue to the situation, Navalny voiced presidential ambitions in April, and experts say it is the mayoral election campaign that will make him a politician of federal importance and popularity.

His main election slogan "Change Russia, starting with Moscow" also hints that he has no plans to limit himself to only one region.

Although Navalny's future political career still hinges on whether or not the verdict against him is upheld, Volkov, who has known Navalny for three years, said the mayoral election would help him "sharpen his political position."

"I get the sense that in the last few months, he has become much bigger; all these meetings with the public, his opponents and participation in debates gave him a chance to rethink some issues and find deeper answers," he said.

"It's obvious that Alexei is growing as a politician. His principal position hasn't changed, but it has become better, sharper, clearer in terms of the details. These elections provide him with the opportunity to ask himself those questions that he had no time to think of in his earlier everyday routine," he added.

According to the latest VTsIOM poll, Navalny will receive some 9 percent of votes, and Sobyanin more than 50 percent. Other polls show that Navalny's percentage may surpass 20 percent.

Navalny and his team aren't discouraged, however.

His office said earlier this month that, according to their estimates, Navalny would get 18 percent of votes, while Sobyanin would get less than 50 percent, meaning there'd be a second round.

"We don't need a miracle; if the elections are fair, I'll be mayor," Navalny said at the meeting at Timiryazevskaya.

Leonid Volkov, mayoral candidate Alexei Navalny's campaign manager, on Wednesday accused Russian authorities of hiring specialists to hack a Montenegrin government website to record information about MRD, a company allegedly owned by the opposition leader.

Pro-Kremlin bloggers have recently accused Navalny of having undeclared property in Montenegro, arguing that his registration as a mayoral candidate should be cancelled.

Volkov said in his LiveJournal blog that the Montenegrin tax agency's Web site used an old version of the Joomla content management system that has not been updated for a long time. That is why the site was easily hacked, he said, providing a screenshot of a sunglasses ad from it and posting a link to the site, which said that it had encountered an “internal error.”

He also posted screenshots from OpenCorporates, a site that shares data on corporate entities, featuring the Federal Security Service's site and address as ones belonging to MRD.

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Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/08/21/navalnys-campaign-relies-on-innovation-a26992