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Navalny Is First to Run a U.S.-Style Campaign

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Russia is seeing its first real election campaign for a mayoral post in many years. Actually, it is more of a one-man campaign run by opposition leader Alexei Navalny. The campaign of his opponent, acting Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, is typical of all Kremlin candidates, who avoid public stumping and debates.

Before Navalny, Russia's democratic politicians have never conducted a full-fledged -

Western-style election campaign ever since it first became possible in 1991. Every one of them apparently believed their merits were so obvious that an enlightened public would automatically vote for them.

Navalny has set a new precedent for an election campaign, meeting three times a day with voters at their workplaces and homes, handing out leaflets and explaining to everyone from university students to senior citizens why they should vote for him.

When the authorities allowed Navalny to take part in these elections, they expected that he would behave like a typical opposition figure by relying only on his LiveJournal blog to curse the regime and complain about how unfair the election is, given Sobyanin's huge administrative resources.

Instead, the authorities are facing a Western-style, well-organized election campaign staffed by volunteers and financed by numerous individual donations. They are up against a candidate who is willing to spend all day in public explaining his platform to ordinary citizens.

Now those authorities are panicking.

But Navalny still has no chance of winning the race. Most Muscovites, who are still locked into Soviet-era thinking, believe that elections are not an opportunity to vote for someone who will work for their interests. For them, elections are a sort of primal rite, like the wedding of earth and heaven, only now it is the union of the exalted mayoral post with the sacred soil of Moscow.

Does this mean that Navalny is wasting his time and that his participation in the elections will only add greater legitimacy to Sobyanin's inevitable win? Most likely, the opposite is true in the long term. Navalny's grassroots campaign has set in motion an unstoppable process. Eventually, the majority of voters will stand behind that process, especially if its leading advocates are persistent. One year from now, voters will themselves be convincing each other of the same ideas that Navalny is now proposing to them.

A year ago, the Russian opposition was asking itself if Navalny should register his own party. That is now a moot point because such a party de facto exists.

One year ago, the Russian opposition was wondering how it could expand its ranks. That has become a moot point as well. Their ranks are swelling, thanks to Navalny's decision to reach out to little old ladies and subway passengers, not to intellectuals and businesspeople.

It is interesting that the decline of authoritarian regimes in Taiwan, Brazil and a number of other countries began when the ruling regime permitted elections to be held. Apparently, the Kremlin is no exception to this rule.

Of course, this is only the start of the process, and there is still a long road ahead before major changes take place. Navalny might lose the battle for mayor, but he is in an excellent position to win the war for Russia.

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