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Why Voters Don't Care About Mayoral Race

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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One of Josef Stalin most-quoted phrases is: "It doesn't matter how people vote. What matters is who counts the votes." This describes Russia's elections even now.

The Moscow mayoral election is an extremely important event for government officials, the liberal opposition and journalists. The only group for whom the elections are not terribly

important is Muscovites. They know perfectly well that nothing in the city will change after Sept. 8. The election has almost no significance for the roughly 90 percent of Russians who live outside of the capital and care little about Moscow's problems — if for no other reason than that they have problems far worse in their neglected, poor regional cities and towns.

Meanwhile, all the actors in the election farce are playing their roles perfectly. The "systemic opposition" parties in the State Duma are expected to simply show up for the performance to create the semblance of a competitive and legitimate election. The Communist Party's candidate in the race, Ivan Melnikov, has gone even farther by presenting himself as the representative of all leftist forces.

Opposition leader Alexei Navalny is also playing his role properly. He is not running for mayor because he actually wants to deal with Moscow's tedious problems of traffic jams, illegal immigrants and high utility bills. By running as the only "real" opposition candidate, Navalny is attempting to position himself in the public mind as the sole leader of the country's opposition forces.

Far from center stage, the Yabloko party is conducting a unique campaign devoted entirely to the municipal problems of the capital. It is also carrying out its designated role by retaining its supporters and proving to the public that the country's oldest liberal party still adheres to its original agenda and has a right to a continued existence, despite losing representation in the State Duma.

Finally, it is important for the authorities to hold an election and give legitimacy to the Kremlin's favored candidate, incumbent Mayor Sergei Sobyanin. And it is safe to predict that whenever doubt arises as to the legitimacy of any elections in the future, the authorities will not tire of referring again and again to the "model 2013 democratic election in Moscow," trying to make the illogical connection that whatever happened in Moscow somehow applies to the rest of Russia.

At the same time, the authorities hope to use a Sobyanin victory, which is all but guaranteed, to prove that even in the chronically dissatisfied, oppositional and liberal capital, there is, in fact, a silent majority that remains loyal and satisfied with the situation. The Kremlin would like to prove that a significant percentage of liberal, opposition-minded Moscow voters are not so unhappy with President Vladimir Putin and his agenda to actively support the opposition's top leader.

This election is a farce precisely because its pre-planned outcome is satisfactory to all players in the theatrical show — with the exception of ordinary citizens, whose interests are irrelevant to the aspirations of both "systemic" and "opposition" politicians alike.

No matter how it concludes, all of the participants will be happy with the race. Only one thing could spoil their collective joy: if Muscovites do not turn out to vote. In that case, the elections commission will not even wait for orders from the top before it rigs the vote to get the desired result.

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