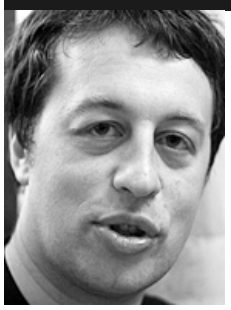
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Why Putin Might Want Navalny as Mayor

By Konstantin Sonin

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The debate over how many votes opposition leader Alexei Navalny will garner in the Moscow mayoral elections Sept. 8 seems pointless to me. Even the leading polling firms have too low a reputation to rely on their findings, and this race is so unlike previous ones that a simple analysis of the numbers will not give the full picture. However, it is both interesting and important to discuss what could happen if this or that scenario unfolds, especially if Navalny were to win more votes than any other candidate and became the next mayor

of Moscow.

If a Navalny win seems unrealistic to you, the following thoughts will strike you as an exercise in futility. You might as well laugh at my naiveté and read a different article. But if Navalny were to win, leaders would be faced with a dilemma: Should they falsify the results or accept them? The authorities might very well make the right decision based on purely pragmatic considerations rather than high ideals. This is because a Navalny win would be far from a bad result for President Vladimir Putin. The reason is not that it would mark the start of "transfer of power to the next generation" — a painful task for almost all politicians. (Although Putin might have political ambitions beyond the end of his current term in 2018, even the longest political life comes to an end at some point.) The reason is that having Navalny in the mayoral spot would, to a large extent, guarantee the stability of Putin's presidency.

How is that possible? Why would Putin let let a hard-line opposition leader who has declared his desire to become president occupy the second or third most powerful post in the country? Because it would not be as bad as it might sound. A political structure in which the president's main opponent heads the country's largest city would not interfere with economic growth and would be entirely stable. The same situation has occurred in many countries similar to Russia and in several of Russia's regions. And although the rivalries did become very heated at times, nothing disastrous occurred.

During his first year as mayor, Navalny would have to establish ties with local and federal businesses — a necessary step for any new mayor. After that, he would have to begin taking responsibility for what was happening in that enormous city and, whether he wanted to or not, would have to maintain a working relationship with federal authorities.

Lastly, if Navalny does become the mayor of Moscow, it would significantly weaken his chance of becoming a candidate for the presidency. True, former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and former Russian President Boris Yeltsin did serve at some point in their careers as the mayor of Moscow, but they were not Muscovites and were not perceived as representatives of the capital. In the same way, acting Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin would not be held back by his association with the capital if he took part in federal elections.

But on the whole, any Muscovite mayor would have difficulty getting elected to a federal post. Moscow is different from the rest of Russia, for instance, in its attitude toward President Putin. Electing an opposition leader to the mayoral post will only confirm this fact and will not be destabilizing.

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