The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Navalny Confident in 2nd Round of Election

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September 08, 2013



Navalny standing outside his polling place in southern Moscow with his wife Yulia and children Zakhar and Darya. **Igor Tabakov**

Opposition leader and mayoral candidate Alexei Navalny responded to the news of his defeat in the elections on Sunday with reassurances that there would be a second round.

A few minutes after polling stations near his headquarters closed, he told a crowd of supporters: "I want to congratulate everyone on the end of the first round of the Moscow mayor elections."

The announcement of the preliminary figures, according to which acting mayor Sergei Sobyanin got 46 percent of votes and Navalny got 36.6 percent, was met with a storm of applause and cheers from Navalny supporters and journalists.

Navalny, who couldn't conceal his joy but looked very focused, said authorities probably

falsified the final results by adding 10 percent to Sobyanin's figures in order to avoid a second round.

Navalny's campaign manager, Leonid Volkov, said the Kremlin was not ready for such an "unexpectedly small" difference between Navalny's and Sobyanin's results, and they would have to make a political decision on whether to allow a second round.

That decision would likely be made by President Vladimir Putin, he said.

Navalny's headquarters in central Moscow, which was always bustling with young volunteers during his election campaign, were mostly quiet and empty on election day, with all volunteers out observing the elections.

According to Volkov, some 8,000 Navalny volunteers served as election observers. In the final hours of the elections, he said, violations started to happen more frequently, likely as an "attempt of the authorities to adjust the situation to the Kremlin's decision."

The results that appeared Sunday evening differed significantly from the expected results published by a range of pollsters ahead of the elections. VTsIOm said Navalny got 32 percent of votes, while a week ago the figure was 15.6 percent.

Putin, who also voted today, said he believed that the candidate he voted for would win.

"A big city like Moscow needs not a politician but a depoliticized man of business who knows how to work," he said.

Sobyanin ran as an independent candidate in the elections but was widely seen as a Kremlin-backed contender, being a member of the ruling United Russia party since 2001.

Volkov described Putin's statement as a "little promotional job," which highlighted the overall uncertainty about the future course of events.

While it remains to be seen whether there will be a second round, one thing is clear: Many Navalny supporters were delighted to see the anti-corruption campaigner defy earlier polls and get such a large share of votes.

"I'm simply happy, this is unbelievable, I didn't expect such results, but it shows that our work was useful," said 17-year-old school student Vladimir Ilyin, who has been volunteering for Navalny for two months.

Although Navalny's election campaign was known for its innovation, many people interviewed by The Moscow Times at polling stations said they had either never heard of Navalny or knew who Navalny was but didn't know what his campaign was about.

Lack of knowledge about Navalny's campaign didn't stop some people from voting for him, however.

"I was going to vote for Sobyanin because I'm fully satisfied with his policy, but my son told me to vote for Navalny and so I did, although I don't know anything about him," said 62-year-old pensioner Natalia.

Eighteen-year-old Ruslan Abdaliyev said he didn't know anything about Navalny's election campaign but decided to vote for him anyway.

"It's just my decision, he's younger than Sobyanin, so he should have better ideas," he said.

Others said that all that they knew about Navalny was his conviction, which stopped them from voting for him.

In mid-July, a Kirov court sentenced him to five years in prison on embezzlement charges, which his supporters say were politically motivated and meant to bar him from political office. He appealed the verdict and denied all charges.

Navalny was released the day after his conviction, in what most observers believed was a move to make the elections and Sobyanin's victory appear more legitimate.

Forty-three-year-old tailor Oksana, who voted for A Just Russia candidate Nikolai Levichev, said she did not even consider voting for Navalny after he was convicted. "I don't know much about him, but for me it would be weird to vote for him after he was arrested."

Some people who voted for Navalny said they did so with the knowledge that he would not win anyway.

Alexander Stenin said: "I voted for Navalny only because he definitely wouldn't be elected. I also think he's kind of a swindler, but I didn't want to vote for the main swindler, Sobyanin."

Volkov emphasized that the elections were a struggle between two candidates, and not between authorities and the opposition.

Nevertheless, Volkov said City Hall had already approved a rally to be held on Bolotnaya Ploshchad on Monday. The election results will be discussed at the rally, he said.

"It will be either an event to celebrate our victory, or we will announce that we secured a second round and will discuss further plans, or it will be an event at which we will say: 'OK, the elections were fair and we got this number of votes," Volkov said.

As for possible voting violations, Navalny observers interviewed by The Moscow Times said they had not noticed any grave violations, but according to Volkov, 3 percent of Muscovites voted from home, meaning that the results of their votes could have been falsified.

"In these elections, the question of a second round depends on each percentage point, so this is a very serious question," Volkov said.

Navalny's team said in a statement that it was ready for the "Kremlin's decision that would likely not be made in favor of a second round."

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Original url:

https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/09/08/navalny-confident-in-2nd-round-of-election-a27474