

## Bad News From the Sept. 8 Election

By [Victor Davidoff](#)

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For the liberal opposition in Russia, election day on Sept. 8 brought two pieces of bad news. The first was that the ruling United Russia party won in Moscow. The second was that the ruling United Russia party lost in Yekaterinburg and Krasnoyarsk.

The voting map by district shows why opposition leader Alexei Navalny's attempt to "change Moscow" was futile. He took the central districts of the city, where his core constituency — the creative class working in the new economy unrelated to the energy sectors — lives. Voters in the working-class satellite districts cast their ballots for the status quo.

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Voting for the status quo in Moscow isn't a paradox — it has a rational basis. Moscow is an oasis of economic well-being in an otherwise poor Russia. Moscow lives off exploiting the natural resources of the rest of the country, particularly Siberia and the Urals. Almost half the state budget comes from oil and gas, which are extracted in regions far from Moscow, but all the energy companies are based in the capital and pay their taxes there. Moreover, the current tax system allows Moscow to pump almost two-thirds of the regions' income into the center. The state returns only a part of that back to the regions, and even then in proportion to the regions' political loyalty.

This system has left the Russian regions in dire economic straits. Unemployment is pandemic. A monthly salary of 15,000 rubles (\$460) is considered good, and doctors and teachers, who get their salaries from the local budgets, often earn even less. Meanwhile, regions are falling into poverty. The number of individual entrepreneurs with small businesses fell by more than 50 percent outside Moscow in the last year according to a report in Vedomosti, while the number in the capital remained unchanged.

Navalny's platform proposed changing the traditional structure of the Moscow economy. It would have put a stop to using the semi-slave labor of illegal migrant workers and instead would have given that work to people from other Russian cities. The proposal caused Navalny trouble with Muscovites and gave him the image of a nationalist who was an enemy of migrant workers.

Now if you want to know what a real nationalist sounds like, you should listen to Anatoly Bykov in Krasnoyarsk. Bykov cannot take part in politics himself because he was convicted of an attempted murder. But everyone knows that he is the real head of the local branch of the obscure Patriots of Russia party, which won the city council elections.

Bykov admires Josef Stalin and believes that the West tore apart the Soviet Union and is currently working to break up Russia. He calls the liberal opposition traitors who have sold out to the U.S. But he's no fan of the Kremlin, either. He accuses the country's leaders of "implementing the program of financial groups," which has turned Siberia into a colony. The local Patriots of Russia published a flyer that laid out their platform in verse: "Our bureaucrats were all like Judas / They sold out to Moscow en masse / Laying waste to our factories / And turning our land into colonies."

Bykov predicts that "if people rise up in mass protest, no one will be able to put them down — not the OMON [riot police] and not the army."

Like Bykov, Yevgeny Roizman won the mayoral election in Yekaterinburg by opposing United Russia. In some ways, Roizman and Bykov are two of a kind. Both have criminal pasts. In the early 1990s, both got involved in businesses with the suspected involvement of criminal gangs. Both advertise their religious beliefs and strong support of the Russian Orthodox

Church, even though Roizman is ethnically Jewish.

Roizman gained nationwide notoriety after he founded the organization, City Without Drugs, whose activists were accused of a number of felonies. Several of them were convicted of imprisoning and beating people, and in one case of killing a person that the organization was supposedly treating for drug addiction.

Roizman himself appears to have no understanding of what is legal and what is not. He openly brags that his team beat up drug pushers with baseball bats and burned down the houses of Roma people who were suspected drug dealers.

Roizman and Bykov are also alike in that both tried to establish their political careers with puppet parties run from the Kremlin but quickly realized that an anti-Moscow platform would reap greater political dividends.

Political analyst Andrei Piontkovsky commented on the rise of figures like Bykov and Roizman, saying: "Every serious poll shows a dramatic rise in the inclination to protest in the regions. As has happened in the past in Russian history, behind the Fronde — an opposition movement led by the upper class — a peasant rebellion is gathering strength."

It's not that the Kremlin doesn't recognize the threat of a modern peasant rebellion. One of the main themes of President Vladimir Putin's electoral campaign was the "preservation of Russia's unity." Perhaps Putin was thinking of the Sverdlovsk region, which declared itself the Ural Republic in 1993. This "republic" only lasted four months, but it created a precedent: an ethnically Russian region declaring autonomy from Moscow.

Unfortunately, even if the Kremlin siloviki understand the problem, they can't offer a nonviolent solution. They are like Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito, who couldn't come up with another way of preserving the country from dissolution except by using force.

Only one hope remains: that sooner or later the leaders in the Kremlin will heed the words of the liberal opposition leaders who insist that Russia in the 21st century can't be ruled by the same methods that the tsars or Stalin used.

Both the reign of the Russian empire and the Soviet Union — and their rulers — ended badly.

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