

Russians Sick and Tired Of Phony Democracy

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For the Kremlin, there are several takeaways from the disastrous mayoral election in Moscow.

President Vladimir Putin's endorsement is now an electoral liability, not an asset. Newly elected Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, a political heavyweight and a rumored successor to Putin, was mortally wounded by Alexei Navalny, a political upstart who is now Putin's peer competitor. Transferring power to Putin's chosen successor could be problematic.

Imitation politics, restricted access and tightly managed competition can no longer safeguard Putin's system. People want the real deal and a part of the action. Crowding out strong challengers destroys legitimacy. Faking political competition turns people off. The only good way forward is to open the system completely and learn to win competitive races or lose gracefully.

The Ice Age parties sitting in the State Duma are a drag on the regime. The Kremlin-loyal

opposition is a spent force. United Russia scares off its own candidates. An early parliamentary election that clears the slate may now benefit the Kremlin.

Political repression against the anti-Putin protest is ineffective. The first post-Soviet generation does not know the paralyzing fear of a totalitarian state. To instill that fear would require Syrian President Bashar Assad's tactics in Syria. Navalny has demonstrated that his supporters would dare the riot police on the streets if the cause is right. Better to wind down the repression, free all political prisoners and strike down Navalny's verdict. This may strengthen the Kremlin's hand in future battles.

Voters want to engage directly with their candidates and elected officials. Shunning television debates and street meetings is no longer a winning tactic. Unscripted engagement with people requires a new type of leader. Spreading monstrous lies about the opposition turns voters against the regime.

The conservative revolution to rally the regime's base is a dud. It mobilizes the regime's opponents but leaves loyalists indifferent or disoriented.

The Kremlin's conservative focus is at odds with the values of the most important electoral demographic — big-city Russians. These are the people who want to live in a European-style state with individual freedoms, equal justice under law, free media and free elections. They represent a new Russian nationalism that is about civic patriotism, not about ethnicity, race or religion. They want integration with Europe, not with Central Asia.

Having hit the wall with repression, the Kremlin seeks salvation in managed openness. This could get quite unmanageable.

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