

Navalny's Moral Victory Puts Kremlin In a Bind

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The election dust has settled down. Let's return to the recent mayoral election in Moscow and see what it revealed about Russian voters, government officials and the political opposition. Why focus on the Moscow mayoral elections and not on the regional elections that were also held across Russia on Sept. 8? The answer is that Moscow's race most clearly reflected the political trends taking shape in the country.

First, the fact that 70 percent of Muscovites stayed home on election day despite the efforts of the authorities to increase voter turnout is an indication not only of voter passivity but of the widespread belief that it is impossible to effect a transfer of power through elections. Rather than taking this apparent calm as a reason to relax, the authorities should see it as a cause for concern. If citizens cannot make their voices heard through elections, they will take to the streets in the next wave of protest rallies.

The authorities took a new approach in the Moscow election by allowing the opposition to participate but not granting them the possibility of winning. The Kremlin let opposition

leader Alexei Navalny run to increase voter turnout and to lend legitimacy to the election as a whole, confident that he could not win. The experiment ended in a complete fiasco, an indication of the inability of Kremlin strategists to foresee the consequences of their actions.

The Kremlin failed to muster a large turnout among its traditional electoral base, thereby robbing Mayor Sergei Sobyenin of a convincing victory. In fact, there is some doubt that he won at all. Because Muscovites viewed this election as a vote of confidence in the federal authorities — and in President Vladimir Putin personally — the results could hardly give the Kremlin grounds for optimism. What's more, the lack of strong support for Sobyenin probably means that he is out of the running as a possible successor to Putin.

The Kremlin will inevitably conclude that it cannot afford to permit prominent opposition figures to participate in elections. The Putin regime has chosen to hold onto power through repression, and some softening can't change it. Once the leadership has threatened the people with a raised fist, any relaxation of that stance would be an admission of weakness. And once the authorities have taken a swing at the opposition, the decision to permit an outspoken critic of the regime such as Navalny onto the political stage raises doubts about the regime's strength.

This means the authorities made a mistake by conducting their experiment with Navalny. The authorities themselves seemed to help rally the protest vote around Navalny, but at the same time, they appeared disoriented and confused when confronted with real political competition and a savvy, grassroots election campaign.

The government's repressive machinery was in disarray during this election. In fact, the siloviki were put in an unenviable position. One day Navalny is convicted and thrown in jail, and the next he's set free. One minute he is detained, but the next he is again released. Under such circumstances and with such a blurring of the rules, how can an honest siloviki agent properly repress anybody? And with the rules of the game shifting and the focus of the regime's ire uncertain, the siloviki are at a loss as to where and against whom to focus their efforts.

In short, the Kremlin has failed to find a new method for legitimizing the leadership in the capital and, consequently, of securing the continued stability of Putin's regime.

Navalny won a moral victory, not only as a result of the dedication and pioneering methods of his campaign team but because the Kremlin could not adapt to the situation it had created. Ironically, the authorities helped Navalny to become an opposition leader with a national reputation.

The Moscow election reveals a number of trends that will determine the development of Russian politics.

A new generation of angry Russians is looking for a way to organize and for a leader to represent it. This generation is more willing to confront the authorities than the disaffected, but more passive, generation that preceded it.

Navalny began rallying support across the whole political spectrum, winning allegiance

from liberals and nationalists alike, although it is unclear if he can make inroads with leftist voters. This was the first attempt to consolidate discontented voters of differing ideological camps and could become the bud of a growing democratic movement.

The first topic of political discussion is that of Russian nationalism. Regardless of how that issue plays out, it is already clear that the movement is largely anti-Putin. This nationalism, although politically amorphous, will eventually clash with imperial sentiment and influence the political scene.

The politics of the 1990s — along with its generation of politicians, parties and style of political activity — is finally becoming a thing of the past. Now a new opposition is forming. Despite its uncertain internal balance of power, it will inevitably cause numerous problems for the authorities — at least as long as they believe that they are battling the opposition of 20 years ago.

Navalny is moving toward a semi-autocratic form of leadership that could easily take on a nationalist and populist character. This is largely a response to demands from society, but it also results from a lack of competition in a democratic environment. This new semi-autocratic leadership style is a challenge not only for the authorities but also for the liberal segment of society.

From now on, the authorities are unlikely to risk providing a platform for serious opponents bent on undermining their monopoly on power. The only option for the Kremlin is to employ harsher repressive measures. However, the Kremlin finds itself in a bind. If it does not crack down on the opposition, it runs the risk of losing everything. If it does use a heavy hand, however, it risks sparking Western boycotts of the Winter Olympics and the Group of Eight summit, both to be held in Sochi in 2014. The Kremlin must now decide if it will employ coercion. And if so, exactly how much and against whom.

The Moscow election demonstrated that new political aspirations are appearing in Russia and the question is whether the new protest generation will defy the Kremlin by demanding to change the country's leadership or changing the rules of the game.

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