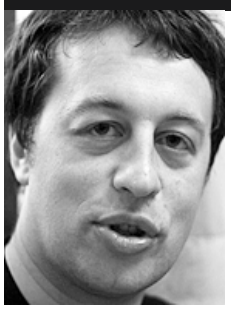
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Navalny's 27% Is a Win for Entire Nation

By Konstantin Sonin

September 18, 2013




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It rarely happens, but there was more than one victor in the Moscow mayoral election on Sept. 8: opposition leader Alexei Navalny, Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, Muscovites and all of Russia could be considered winners.

Navalny can be considered a winner because he earned 27 percent of the vote. That is a staggering figure and all the more impressive because candidates for the Liberal Democratic Party and Just Russia — the "systemic" opposition parties that typically specialize in drawing

the protest vote from disgruntled citizens unwilling to vote for United Russia — received only one-fourth as many votes as Navalny.

What's more, Navalny achieved a high percentage of the vote under very difficult circumstances. Not only were he and his supporters and donors subjected to repressive measures by officials, but his main rival took full advantage of his administrative resources and generous coverage by state-controlled television. In fact, these elections might mark the end of television being used as the main tool for manipulating the electorate. Take, for example, Sobyanin, who could not have been shown in a better light than he was by state-controlled television, and yet he only managed to win the election by a slight margin. Navalny and his staff took to the streets to speak with individual Muscovites in a grassroots blitzkrieg, making every one of his supporters an informed stakeholder in the process. As a result, it can rightfully be said that Navalny has experience, skills and supporters not shared by anybody else in Russia.

Although the opposition doubts Sobyanin received the 52 percent of the vote ascribed to him by the Moscow Elections Commission, nobody doubts that he earned at least 48 percent. That means he managed to win the most votes without widespread falsification at the polling places, which is itself a victory considering the problems with previous elections.

Sobyanin previously also won elections in regions far from Moscow, meaning that, with the exception of President Vladimir Putin, he is the only politician in Russia who has shown his acceptability in both the capital and the rest of the country. The Sept. 8 election made Sobyanin the second most important politician in the country and the first, by some margin, to be considered a successor to Putin if something were to happen to him.

Muscovites won because for the first time in many years, it is possible to say with certainty that the final results truly reflected the votes of the people. The fact that two-thirds of voters did not turn out was their own conscious choice. The main point is that it would no longer be fair to say, "I won't vote because the final result will be tilted in favor of the authorities anyway."

Thousands of active Muscovites not only voluntarily served as election monitors, but it was their efforts that made these true elections. This experience was also an example to other regions of Russia and a call to everyone who did not turn out on Sept. 8: "Cast your ballot because your vote will be counted."

The whole country won because any time the opposition participates in elections — or even wins, as Yevgeny Roizman did in the Yekaterinburg mayoral race — it reduces the likelihood of political upheavals. And that is always a cause for optimism.

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