

Sobyanin Flying High After First 100 Days in Office

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Judging by his words, Mayor Sergei Sobyanin has not failed to impress during his first 100 days in office, promising to solve the city's traffic problems and transform the chaotic megalopolis into a modern financial center.

Some of his words have been followed by deeds. Sobyanin has stopped several controversial construction projects, including the construction of a \$49 billion fourth ring road, and sent out hordes of tow trucks to haul away parked cars blocking traffic.

Perhaps even more important, he appears to have won Muscovites' hearts — no small feat for an out-of-towner ahead of elections for the State Duma in December and the presidency in early 2012.

But opposition politicians and analysts said Monday that it was too early to call Sobyanin a success because his accomplishments remain mostly talk rather than action.

Sobyanin, anointed with huge political clout as the long-serving chief of staff for Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, made a show of force right after taking office on Oct. 21 by demoting the city's district prefects to below cabinet rank, thus further centralizing power.

Since then, he has swept through City Hall's sprawling apparatus, sacking dozens of officials previously associated with his predecessor, Yury Luzhkov, who was abruptly fired by President Dmitry Medvedev on Sept. 28.

Sobyanin marked his first 100 days in office last Friday by making his international debut at the World Economic Forum in Davos, where he promised to transform the city into a business-friendly financial center free of corruption and red tape.

On paper, the new mayor looks good. A [survey](#) published by state pollster VTsIOM last week found that almost two-thirds of Muscovites, 63 percent, approve of his work. In contrast, Luzhkov's ratings had slid to 36 percent in late 2009.

Even independent pollsters agreed that for an outsider from behind the Urals — Sobyanin is a native of the Khanty-Mansiisk autonomous region — the new mayor has done well in winning over Muscovites.

"Sixty-three percent may be a little too high, but the mayor has shown that he is able to build up his own network and prepare the city for elections," Lev Gudkov, head of the Levada Center, said by telephone.

In a Levada [poll](#) in late December, 46 percent of Muscovites said Sobyanin's leadership had left an "average impression" on them, while 23 called it positive and 15 percent negative. Seventeen percent abstained from answering.

Neither poll captured Sobyanin's decision to raise communal service charges by some 10 percent on Jan. 1.

Some residents said they disapproved of Sobyanin because of his harsh policies against the city's ubiquitous kiosks.

"He attacked all of them, with little remorse," said Leonid, 49, who repairs watches in a little shop off Belorussky Station, where a whole row of kiosks disappeared late last year.

Leonid, who would not give his last name, suggested that life under Luzhkov was better because authorities were more flexible. "Things like these were solved humanely," he said, using the Russian expression "po-chelovechesky," which usually means paying off inspectors with bribes.

The removal of the kiosks began in early November after Sobyanin complained during a tour near the Ulitsa 1905 Goda metro station that they blocked the view of a monument.

But red-faced City Hall officials admitted later that month that no formal order to remove them had been issued and gave the city's architecture committee until May to work out a plan for their placement. The demolitions promptly ended.

Levada's Gudkov argued that the kiosk episode exemplified Sobyanin's populist policies. "It

shows there is no planning and little competency," he said.

Sergei Mitrokhin, leader of the liberal Yabloko opposition party and a veteran of city politics, said it was too early to praise Sobyenin.

"So far he has made lots of statements and announced lots of projects. But he has shied away from difficult political decisions," he said by telephone.

As an example, Mitrokhin named the controversial Master Plan for the City's Development, known as Genplan, which has been left intact.

He also said many City Hall dismissals were just for show, while key Luzhkov-era figures like his first deputy Vladimir Resin and chief architect Alexander Kuzmin remained.

"The powerful men in the construction sector go unharmed while a lot of small fry were fired," Mitrokhin said.

Konstantin Mikhailov, an activist with the Arkhnadzor architectural preservation society, was also cautious. "Some good decisions were made, but optimism is dangerous as long as dozens of projects [involving the destruction of historic monuments] are still running," he said.

Meanwhile, Sobyenin got the biggest praise from those who most vehemently championed Luzhkov's ouster.

Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the flamboyant leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, issued an uncharacteristically soft [statement](#), saying that he saw "not a single negative thing that I can blame the new mayor for."

Nikolai Levichev, leader of A Just Russia's Duma faction, praised Sobyenin for showing openness by inviting him to attend political talks.

Some Muscovites, meanwhile, were musing about whether it matters at all who is mayor.

"When they switched a regional party secretary in the Soviet Union, nothing changed," said Viktor Kuptsyov, 59, a radio engineer who works as a gas station attendant near the Olympiisky stadium. "Ultimately, everything depends on the national leadership."

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