

Navalny as an Icebreaker

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July 31, 2013

The  **Moscow Times**



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After a Kirov court sentenced opposition leader Alexei Navalny to five years in prison on July 18, an unauthorized rally of about 10,000 Navalny supporters gathered in Moscow. Thousands of supporters also gathered in St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, Kaliningrad, Krasnodar, Omsk, Chelyabinsk, Kazan and Voronezh.

According to many observers, Navalny's sentence and his release pending appeal were indicative of a clash between the differing approaches of the siloviki and political strategists. The siloviki argue that the disease must be nipped in the bud with tough, decisive actions

by the authorities. The political strategists maintain that it is better to let Navalny run in the Moscow mayoral election against acting Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, who is favored to win by a large margin anyway. That would not only add legitimacy to the elections, but would publicly demonstrate the political weakness of the opposition's most prominent figure.

Both tactics might prove successful in the short term. The authorities have only to decide if they want to play in a no-holds-barred fistfight or a measured game of chess.

There should be no illusions that the game Sobyenin is playing is independent. The same goes for Andrei Vorobyov, governor of the Moscow region, who also used his influence to ensure that opposition candidate Gennady Gudkov was registered for the gubernatorial election.

At this point, the Moscow mayoral election will probably unfold more along the lines of the 2012 presidential election than the recent mayoral elections in Khimki, where the protest vote was spread thinly among an array of opposition candidates. Navalny will attract the votes not only of his own supporters, but also the protest vote against a snap election that was clumsily engineered to give Sobyenin an artificial boost in legitimacy. In an attempt to make Sobyenin's victory more impressive, the Kremlin apparently told billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov not to join the race. And by bowing to that pressure, Prokhorov has enabled Navalny to consolidate the entire protest vote. At the same time, Navalny is less pliable than Prokhorov and therefore more attractive in the eyes of voters than the extravagant billionaire.

This is the case where the main goal is not to win the elections, but to participate and to gain as high a percentage of votes as possible. Navalny's prison sentence doubled his popularity, but even now it hovers around only 10 percent. And it is difficult to imagine that the authorities would commit a blunder so large in the next five weeks that Sobyenin will not walk away with a victory in the first round.

It is also unfortunate that Sobyenin is refusing to participate in debates against Navalny, particularly over issues of most concern to Muscovites, such as illegal migration, high utility fees, transportation problems and inflation.

At the same time, however, Navalny's participation in the Moscow election effectively breaks the ice in a political arena in which the Kremlin enjoyed total control. This political system can be best described as "orchestrated competition" that is controlled by the national leader. So far, this limited competition has only been permitted in Moscow and the Moscow region, but the precedent set by Navalny has also given new hope for opposition candidates in elections in Yekaterinburg and Yaroslavl.

Let's hope that "orchestrated competition" will one day turn into true competition, and the sooner the better.

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