

## Mayoral Hopefuls Make Final Push

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A man clutching a newspaper that says, "Moscow Ahead of Elections" as he bends down at an art exhibition. **Vladimir Filonov**

The six Moscow mayoral candidates entered their final 48 hours of campaigning on Thursday ahead of Sunday's election, meeting with journalists, voters and competitors in order to press home their campaign messages and attempt to discredit their opponents.

Anti-Kremlin protest leader Alexei Navalny and the Communists lashed out at President Vladimir Putin, while Liberal Democratic Party candidate Mikhail Degtyaryov joined Navalny in targeting acting Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, and liberal Yabloko leader Sergei Mitrokhin took a swipe at all his fellow candidates.

Sobyenin is the clear front-runner in the race, with polling numbers consistently above 50 percent and Navalny a distant second. But some see a chance for a runoff, which Navalny says he is convinced he could win.

While detractors of Sobyenin, who is running as an independent candidate but boasts

the support of ruling party United Russia and the Kremlin, warn that his political apparatus could try to ensure a first-round victory by employing ballot-stuffing and other fraud techniques, a Vedomosti report this week said local authorities have told election officials to conduct a clean vote.

The report said officials had been instructed to thoroughly observe all formalities and not to restrict vote monitoring. If true, the authorities are "sending a positive signal," according to Grigory Melkonyants, a senior member of prominent elections watchdog Golos.

"Elections officials may believe it and start observing the law," Melkonyants said by telephone Thursday.

On Sunday, regional elections will also take place across Russia, with nine cities voting for mayors, seven regions casting ballots for governors and 16 regions electing legislative assemblies. The day before, Saturday, is a so-called "day of silence," when campaign activities are restricted.

In the capital, most of the parties who nominated candidates for mayor will hold rallies combined with concerts on Friday afternoon in their final attempts to win over voters. Navalny's campaign will hold an event at Prospekt Akademika Sakharova in the city center, while Sobyenin will attend a rally at Olimpiisky Sport Complex. LDPR and the Communist Party also plan to hold events.

At campaign events Thursday, candidates and their supporters issued verbal attacks on one another.

Navalny blamed Putin for attempting to harm his popularity, after the president said in an interview on state television Wednesday that Navalny "caused trouble" everywhere he appeared.

Putin told Channel One and The Associated Press that Navalny had been accused by investigators of stealing a liquor factory, having "trouble with a forest" and failing to declare firms abroad, referring to various official investigations into Navalny.

"By doing this, the authorities are making desperate attempts to bring down my rating by several percentage points," Navalny told a news conference, Interfax reported.

Communist State Duma Deputy Valery Rashkin, who is not a mayoral candidate, complained about parts of Putin's interview as well, telling the City Elections Commission that the president violated election laws by speaking about Sobyenin's polling numbers four days before the vote.

Election officials said they would look into Rashkin's complaint, but Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied that the president had done anything wrong, saying that Putin had to answer a question posed by a journalist, Interfax reported.

Novaya Gazeta might have dealt another blow to Sobyenin's reputation, reporting that Moscow civil servants have been ordered to attend a rally Sunday to mark Sobyenin's expected victory, as well as to confiscate Navalny campaign materials. Navalny tweeted the Novaya Gazeta report.

But the acting mayor garnered praise from an unusual source Thursday: jailed former Yukos owner Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who defended Sobyanin in a statement, saying that he had known him for a long time and that he was "not a bad person, despite being on Putin's team."

"It's possible that this is a good political choice for Moscow," Khodorkovsky wrote in a statement posted on his website.

But Khodorkovsky, a vehement opponent of Putin, still urged Muscovites to vote for Navalny in order to "help an innocent person avoid a jail sentence," even if Navalny "will not be allowed to become mayor." Khodorkovsky was apparently referring to Navalny's conviction on embezzlement charges, which the opposition leader plans to appeal.

Sobyanin, meanwhile, gave an interview to the pro-government Vechernyaya Moskva daily, calling on Muscovites to support him.

"We have to be together on Sept. 8. It is your voice that I need most," Sobyanin said in the interview, which was posted on City Hall's website Thursday.

Navalny, in turn, gave a wide-ranging interview to opposition-leaning Novaya Gazeta that was not published as of Thursday. The next issue of the paper is set to appear Friday.

LDPR's Degtyaryov on Thursday blamed "the mayor and the regime" for "huge traffic jams, the growing number of cars [and] rain," he wrote on Twitter.

Yabloko leader Mitrokhin wrote on his blog Wednesday that all the candidates "are dealing with Moscow's problems because they have decided to run for mayor, while I [am running for mayor] because I am dealing with Moscow's problems."

Mitrokhin also met with voters at a Moscow book fair on Wednesday and Thursday.

Communist candidate Ivan Melnikov's campaign released a music video Thursday in which a male voice recites a rap in support of the Communist Party.

The remaining Moscow candidate, Nikolai Levichev of A Just Russia, published a report Thursday about his debates from Wednesday with Mitrokhin and Melnikov on radio Govorit Moskva.

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