

Moscow Mayor Declares Overwhelming Support, But Protests Suggest Otherwise

A controversial renovation scheme passed legal hurdles this week, with Mayor Sobyenin claiming overwhelming support

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If you happened to find yourself in the State Duma on Tuesday, June 6, you might be forgiven for thinking Russia had finally found something more popular than President Vladimir Putin.

Inside the chambers of Russia's legislative assembly, Moscow's Mayor Sergei Sobyenin was speaking about his much-discussed demolition program for the capital's khrushchevki residential blocks. Sobyenin claimed resounding support for his program. He reported 88 percent of voters supported the initiative — eclipsing Putin's own approval ratings, which hover around 86 percent.

The project, which will last roughly 20 years, involves the demolition of 4,500 residential apartment blocks built during the post-war era under Khrushchev. Residents will be

relocated, and new buildings erected. Moscow residents have been told the program will result in a boost to their living conditions.

“This discussion has not left anyone indifferent,” Sobyenin told Duma deputies. “It has touched every single Muscovite.” According to the mayor, discussions surrounding the demolitions of the residential buildings has been “complex, cheerful, and active.”

But many do not share his enthusiasm.

As Sobyenin told Russia’s lawmakers of his latest urban success, residents who disagreed with City Hall’s proposal lined the streets outside the Duma. The demonstration was small — about 100 people — and apparently unplanned. These were residents who had asked to sit in on the Duma’s hearing and voice their concerns.

The impromptu demonstration began when supporters of Sobyenin’s program were ushered inside the Duma building by police officers. Those who sought to speak out against the scheme were filtered out.

As tensions boiled, policemen shot each other confused glances, and protesters began to sing well-known Soviet anthems from World War II. The afternoon ended with opponents of the scheme marching on the Presidential Administration in central Moscow.

The protest outside the Duma was not the first time concerned Moscow residents have gathered to resist Sobyenin’s demolition project. The last round of protests, which were sanctioned by the city, took place May 27-28 and drew some 6,000 people. The first protest, on May 14, was attended by 20,000. There have been several other, more modest protests in districts outside the center.

Despite mounting criticism, the Moscow government has refused to blink. City Hall continues to push its agenda aggressively on the internet, where paid trolls pose as desperate Muscovites in substandard housing. As reported in earlier editions of *The Moscow Times*, the accounts encourage fellow citizens to vote in favor of the demolition project, churning out posts supporting Sobyenin on Russian social media.

The online campaign may be winning support elsewhere, but those opposed to the destruction have shown little intention of backing down. Tuesday’s march was noteworthy in a country where protests are usually limited to one-man pickets as rare display of civic activism. It stood out both for its spontaneity and dedication of its supporters.

Rather than fading away in the face of adversity, Moscow’s demolition protests have already shown that the movement is beginning to develop of a life of its own.

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