

The Kremlin initiates an early election of the Moscow mayor

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On 5 June the mayor of Moscow Sergei Sobyenin handed in his resignation. President Vladimir Putin accepted his resignation and formally agreed that Sobyenin would run for this office in an early election. This will be held on 8 September. In line with the amendments in the election law of 2012, the mayor of Moscow, being the head of an entity of the Russian Federation will be elected in a direct election. Candidates have to go through a municipal filter (i.e. to present legally confirmed signatures from 6% of deputies in at least three quarters of the capital's municipal bodies). Candidates without recommendations from political parties additionally have to collect signatures from 1% of voters. Besides Sobyenin, the following candidates have stated they will run for mayor: Ivan Melnikov from the Communist party, Vladimir Ovsyannikov from LDPR, Sergei Mitrokhin from Yabloko, blogger Alexei Navalny and others.

Commentary

- The resignation has opened the door to Sergei Sobyenin to success in the early mayoral election. His victory is in line with the Kremlin's interests and currently seems quite easy to achieve, without the necessity to resort to vote-rigging on a massive scale and with the minimum of competition. Sobyenin, formerly the head of the Presidential Administration, has the reputation of being one of Putin's trusted men and during the electoral campaign he can count on support from the government and the media. Nor should it be a problem to ensure legitimacy for him since he can rely on votes from a significant section of Muscovites who see him rather as an effective manager than a politician (according to the public opinion poll by FOM, he is supported by 46% of Muscovites).
- This early election places the opposition in a difficult position as it is fragmented and not prepared for the campaign or participation in the election at such a short notice. Furthermore, the use of the "municipal filter" limits the possibilities of registering independent candidates and establishes a basis for the use of formal pretexts to challenge candidacies which the Kremlin views as being undesirable. For this reason it will be of key importance whether the opposition will succeed in reaching a consensus over supporting a common candidate who would be able to meet the formal requirements. The early election disrupts the opposition's plans as representatives of opposition circles expected that they would obtain more seats in district councils than

they currently have at the municipal election scheduled for 2014. This would make it easier for the opposition to register their candidates in the election for the mayor if it had been held according to plan – in 2015.

- By announcing an early election, the Kremlin wants to fill the position of the head of one of the key regions in Russia, when the situation in Moscow is stable and the results of the election predictable. The deteriorating economic forecasts and growing social problems (for example those linked to illegal immigration) may increase discontent with the policies of the authorities among Muscovites and make it more difficult to hold the election according to the Kremlin's wishes in the future. Moscow is an area of intensified activity of civil society and opposition. As the results of the parliamentary election of 2011 and the presidential election of 2012 as well as accompanying civic demonstrations have shown, political sentiment in Moscow may spread to Russia as a whole and pose a threat to the stability of the political system in the country.