



## **National and Urban Politics Converge in Moscow: Will Local Activism Prevail?**

**Anna Zhelnina**

*Recent elections in Moscow and across Russia reflect the convergence of local activism and national anti-Kremlin politics.*

Late on the night of September 8, 2019, when Muscovites checked the results for that day's Moscow City Council election, they realized that their vote actually meant something for the first time in many years. The candidates backed by United Russia, the ruling party, had lost in 20 districts out of 45. United Russia kept the majority, but compared to the 38 seats they controlled in the previous city council, this result looked like a loss.

The Moscow City Council election was in the spotlight that day, but elections also took place at various levels across Russia: several governors, city councils, regional parliaments, and municipal deputies. This election differed from the previous electoral campaigns in Putin's Russia because of "smart voting": an idea and technology developed by the Anti-Corruption Foundation, a nonprofit headed by Aleksey Navalny, one of the most active and notable opposition politicians in Russia. "Smart voting" had one goal: to topple as many United Russia candidates as possible, at all levels of elections. Instead of picking an ideologically "correct" candidate, it suggested a single candidate in each district for opposition voters to support based on the candidate's likelihood to win, calculated by an algorithm based on previous election and polling data.

The system worked best in Moscow. United Russia suffered some losses across Russia, but it retained most of its seats (Englund 2019). And "smart voting" was not the only factor contributing to the non-United Russia candidates' success. Moscow's politics have gradually changed over the past few years and two kinds of politics converged at the polling stations on September 8: the local urban and national anti-Kremlin politics.

### **Homegrown politics: from national to local and back again**

Moscow is the political and economic center of a highly centralized country. Media headquarters are also located in the capital. When in 2011–12 large protests against electoral fraud spread across Russia's regions, Moscow and its Bolotnaya Square were the center of attention, with rallies that attracted about 100,000 people. One of the important books about the opposition in Russia is titled *Moscow in Movement*, highlighting the role of the capital (Greene 2014).

Almost every Moscow election after the Bolotnaya protests became a focus of nationwide attention: the new leaders of the anti-Kremlin movement lived in Moscow and attempted several times to challenge the regime in local Moscow elections. Alexey Navalny ran against the incumbent mayor Sergey Sobyenin in 2013; he surprised Muscovites with an impressive campaign that secured him second place. In 2016, during the State Duma<sup>1</sup> elections, the opposition tried again, but faced new restrictions on political competition and, in Moscow, failed to coordinate the efforts of different

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<sup>1</sup> The State Duma is the lower house of the Federal Assembly of Russia.

oppositional factions. These elections made it clear, however, that the opposition was running against the regime and the local agenda was secondary, even in Alexey Navalny's mayoral run.

These efforts to challenge the political establishment were accompanied by less conspicuous, but fruitful, efforts at the local level. After the Bolotnaya protests, many new activists looked for a new way to apply their energy and enthusiasm. Some turned to local politics as a domain where they could achieve change (Zhuravlev *et al.* 2014). They created neighborhood groups to work on local issues with local residents, gradually building networks and reputations. Municipal elections in Moscow, typically low-turnout affairs,<sup>2</sup> brought symbolic victories to independent candidates in March 2014, at the height of protests in the capital. Seventy (out of more than 1,500) independent deputies were elected (Gorokhovskaia 2018). These municipal victories sparked hope that change was possible: from the national-level opposition to the illiberal regime, activists turned to local politics, and over time built strong reputations and networks in their neighborhoods. They used their official status to exercise more control over local issues, but also exposed some of the mechanics of the municipal politics to interested Muscovites.

In 2017, the next cycle of municipal elections<sup>3</sup> in Moscow shook up the overwhelming dominance of United Russia in municipal councils by electing almost 300 independent deputies, after an organized effort orchestrated by the team of opposition politician Dmitry Gudkov. These elections were in the national spotlight again: independent candidates ran for municipal councils in almost every district, many of them by invitation and with support from Gudkov's team. However, something else was new: many of these Gudkov-backed candidates were local activists. Some of them did not even use Gudkov's help and ran completely independently. It became clear that local activists had become a force across Moscow.

## What Muscovites are angry about

Local activism and grassroots mobilization have been part of urban politics in Russia for a long time; politically frustrated and apathetic, Russian urbanites are more likely to participate in collective action about issues that are close to home than in more abstract and ideological causes (Семехов 2018). In Moscow, people famously protested against the construction of a highway through Khimki forest in 2007–2012 (Evans Jr 2012) and the destruction of other green zones in the city, as well as against infill construction destroying the public space in residential blocks (Ivanou 2016). Most recently, a spectrum of housing issues, such as the quality of building maintenance, taxation for “capital repairs” and the redevelopment of residential areas involving the relocation of residents became the focus of Muscovites' outrage and mobilization.

Just before the municipal elections of 2017, the Moscow government unwittingly triggered another citywide mobilization by announcing a large-scale urban renewal project, Renovation, that is supposed to demolish several thousand socialist-era apartment buildings, home to more than a million inhabitants, by 2032. With this program, the city authorities planned to maximize the profits they could extract from expensive Moscow land occupied with “inefficient,” low-rise (mostly five-story) socialist buildings, which they also thought would ensure support for Sergey Sobyenin in the upcoming 2018 mayoral election. The program proved controversial, and sparked the largest housing-related movement in recent decades: anti-Renovation rallies in 2017 attracted up to 30,000 people, a considerable turnout for Russian protests (Zhel'nina *forthcoming*). In addition to Renovation, residents of condemned residential blocks in several neighborhoods, most notably in Kuntsevo, are fighting against what they see as an illegal land grab by a coalition of the city government and developers.

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<sup>2</sup> The turnout in municipal elections fluctuates at around 15%, compared to over 20% in Moscow City Council elections and over 60% in State Duma elections.

<sup>3</sup> In municipal elections, voters elect representatives to municipal councils, a form of self-governance at the neighborhood (district) level. Within Moscow, there are 146 municipal districts.

The accumulated discontent with local political issues directly affected the district council election results in 2017, but it also resonated in Moscow City Council elections, despite the city government's efforts to prevent independent and popular protest leaders from registering as candidates.

### **Was this city council election different?**

Moscow's city council has more power than the municipal district councils, particularly over Moscow's budget. It is a sensitive arena for the government, which was determined to play it safe and not let any independent candidates near the city council. Without a party affiliation, candidates are required by law to collect signatures from 5,000 potential voters in their districts to be registered to run. Independent candidates organized impressive campaigns and collected the necessary signatures but the Electoral Committee nevertheless refused to register them on the grounds that too many signatures were "fake."

In response, street protests erupted in Moscow; they were violently repressed. Almost 1,400 people were arrested and dozens were beaten by the police. At least 10 individuals were charged with serious violations, ranging from assaulting a police officer to calling for extremist action, and now face long prison terms, despite a lack of evidence and almost no investigation of their cases (*Moscow Times* 2019). The independent deputies themselves were imprisoned on false pretenses and most of them were held in prisons until election day, to prevent them from agitating.

While these measures helped to kick some of the most popular independent candidates out of the race (for example, Yuliya Galyamina, Ilya Yashin, and Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation associates Lyubov Sobol and Vladimir Milov), other candidates secured the support of a registered political party (mostly the Communist Party and "Yabloko," as the Russian United Democratic Party is popularly known) and got on the ballot. They went on to campaign against the status quo, in what was still a risky situation.

Muscovites' frustration with United Russia was so pronounced that even most city council candidates backed by United Russia disguised their political affiliation. Some also tried to take advantage of Muscovites' sympathy for local activists. For example, Nikolay Tabashnikov, a candidate in Izmaylovo district, presented himself as a leader of an imaginary "grassroots movement," Our Izmaylovo, to capitalize on the strong activist reputation of the district. He eventually lost to Elena Yanchuk, an actual activist and municipal deputy, running on the platform of the Communist Party.<sup>4</sup>

The increased attention paid by Muscovites to local issues, including housing and Renovation-related conflicts, helped elect several municipal deputies and urban activists to the city council, among them Sergey Mitrokhin, a controversial but persistent veteran of the liberal movement and active defender of Muscovites' housing rights, and Daria Besedina, an urbanist and urban biking activist. It may sound surprising, but most members of the previous city council were party functionaries.

In the Moscow City Council election, grassroots activism and Muscovites' outrage with Moscow city politics converged with Navalny's "smart voting" platform—the organized political effort to challenge the monopoly of United Russia nationally. It is unclear whether the elected city council will truly become a competitive arena in which to question and challenge established city policies and routines, but the "smart voting" candidates who were elected have already signed an open letter<sup>5</sup> demanding an end to the repression and political persecution of activists.

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<sup>4</sup> The Communist Party is the second-strongest party across Russian regions. However, it does not present any real challenge to the dominance of United Russia: experts call it a "loyal" or "cosmetic" opposition (Gel'man 2008). The Communist Party, like other opposition parties, sometimes builds alliances with independent candidates willing to run on their platform.

<sup>5</sup> See (in Russian): <https://msk.kprf.ru/2019/09/11/125423>.

The convergence of national anti-Kremlin politics and local activism in Moscow helped to shift the status quo in the city council elections. Potentially, this could lead to the development of healthier and more responsive urban politics in the capital and inspire new political efforts by activists to “invade” the governance structures at different levels. There is, however, a risk of cooptation of the new deputies, which could create challenges for the future of both the “smart voting” strategy and citizens’ political attitudes.

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## To cite this article:

Anna Zhelnina, “National and Urban Politics Converge in Moscow: Will Local Activism Prevail?”, *Metropolitics*, 1 October 2019. URL: <https://www.metropolitiques.eu/National-and-Urban-Politics-Converge-in-Moscow-Will-Local-Activism-Prevail.html>.