

Direct Elections Give Excellent Feedback

Sergei Sobyenin will occupy the second-highest post in the country when he is sworn in as mayor of Moscow on Thursday. The first is either the president or the prime minister, depending on which of them is calling the shots.

Because the Moscow mayor is appointed, it will take him time to win Muscovites' support. In a normal situation, the campaign and election process reveal which candidates have the greatest political support. Boris Yeltsin was appointed first secretary of the Communist Party in early 1986, and Yury Luzhkov was appointed mayor to replace outgoing Mayor Gavriil Popov. Neither was elected, but both managed to gain popularity and legitimacy. Yeltsin was pulled from his post in fall 1987, but already by spring 1989 he received 91.3 percent of the vote with a 90 percent turnout in Moscow region elections for the Congress of People's Deputies. Luzhkov first stood in elections four years after his appointment as mayor and garnered 87.5 percent of the vote.

The main problem the new mayor will face in managing Moscow is that without elections, there is no feedback mechanism. Now-scrapped elections on the regional level and for single-mandate districts in the Moscow City Duma provided exactly the information Luzhkov needed to continually adapt to Muscovites' shifting moods. A careful reading of Luzhkov's stint as mayor indicates that he was not the bull-headed cartoonish figure ridiculed in the columns of intellectual and cultural commentators, but a politician who knew how to make use of information about the mood of the "silent majority" of Muscovites.

Without that information, it would have been impossible for him to win elections or govern the enormous city. That information cannot be obtained from opinion polls or artificial structures such as the Public Chamber. Of course, the mood of the people can be easily ascertained from mass demonstrations and revolutions, but as interesting as those events might be for historians, experience shows that they come at a very high price for citizens and politicians. That is precisely why the holding of free elections in the regions is advocated not only by those who value democracy for its own sake, but also by those who see elections as a necessary feedback mechanism enabling leaders to govern more effectively.

Sobyenin has no choice but to try to build his own system for obtaining feedback, even though Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has done everything in his power over the last 10 years to dismantle the mechanism that existed. But some highly placed official will eventually have to buck that trend. The political system our leaders are trying to construct is ineffective and completely unsustainable. The Soviet Union was the only country in history to have built a political system devoid of competition at almost every level. It attained that condition in the mid-1970s and maintained it for only a brief period before it collapsed — not least because leaders lacked the means of obtaining feedback from society.

Ultimately, Sobyenin will have to think seriously about creating a feedback mechanism, and the best way would be to reinstate direct elections in Moscow with United Russia candidates running head-to-head against opposition candidates, including those from parties that have been denied registration on doubtful grounds over the past decade. In that way, he could improve the lives of Moscow's residents and improve an institution that is so important for any democracy to function.

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