

THE MOSCOW TIMES

MOSCOW UNIVERSITY'S GREAT NON-ELECTION

By Konstantin Sonin

Tuesday, December 13, 2005. Issue 3315. Page 10

The month of December has been particularly kind to political incumbents seeking another term in office. Mayor Yury Luzhkov scored a commanding victory in the City Duma election. Nearly all of his favored candidates won seats. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev was re-elected in a landslide, receiving 91 percent of the vote. Nazarbayev is well on his way to becoming one of the Third World's longest-serving leaders. He still has a long way to go before he catches up with such titans as Enver Hoxha, who served as president of Albania for 41 years, and Alfredo Stroessner, president of Paraguay for 35 years. But he's closing fast on major figures like Ferdinand Marcos, who ran the Philippines for 21 years, and Augusto Pinochet, the dictator who ruled Chile for 17.

Yet these results pale in comparison with the victory of Moscow State University rector Viktor Sadovnichy, who on Nov. 18 was re-elected to the post he has held since 1992 with 99 percent of the vote. With all due respect to Muscovites and the good people of Kazakhstan, the election of the rector of Moscow State University, or MGU, was no less significant for the future of this country.

Sadovnichy's candidacy was supported by all of MGU's many departments and faculties. This sort of unanimity led Expert magazine columnist Maxim Sokolov to remark that elections like this were no better than having the national political leadership appoint the heads of our universities.

Sokolov is right -- to a point. The main problem with last month's MGU election was not that Sadovnichy came out on top. In many ways he is an eminently suitable candidate. If the election had been truly competitive, however, rival candidates would have been encouraged to put forward the sort of fresh ideas and programs for reform that the country's leading institution of higher learning so desperately needs.

Among other reforms, MGU needs to grant students more freedom to select their courses during the first two years of their degree programs. Under the current system the best students in the sciences are required to take a series of second-rate courses in the humanities; and vice versa for the humanities students. This and other important issues facing MGU were not raised during the election because all of the university's departments nominated the same man.

Does this mean we should allow politicians to appoint the heads of our universities? Judging by the other appointments made by the current administration and the history of political control of education during the Soviet era, this is not a viable option. The way forward might be to create a board of trustees at MGU similar to the board of directors at a corporation. Such a board would have to be small so that every vote counted. It should include not just leading academics and former politicians, but also MGU grads and businessmen who have made sizable donations to the university. The rector would be chosen by the board and would be accountable to it.

A number of pitfalls would have to be avoided in the creation of a board of trustees. For example, a way would have to be found to prevent the rector from embezzling money from the university budget in collusion with the trustees. A university's board of trustees faces a much more difficult task than a corporate board of directors. It cannot rely on such accepted performance indicators as profit and market share. The politicians and businessmen on such a board are generally incapable of evaluating the credentials of candidates for academic posts or the potential of new research programs.

These are real problems, but they should not be allowed to exclude the possibility of an MGU board of trustees. The choice between single-candidate elections and the elimination of elections altogether is no choice at all.

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