

When Activists become Elected Officials

COMPARING TWO GOVERNANCE STRATEGIES IN WESTERN SIBERIA

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The challenge facing the non-systemic opposition in Russia is how to grow. Opportunities for growth may be assessed through the prism of two Novosibirsk City Council deputies who seek major change but apply different governance styles. Sergey Boyko, head of the Novosibirsk Headquarters of Alexei Navalny's political movement, before it was recently disbanded, has a revolutionary approach. This is manifest in tone and with the objective of changing the system as quickly as possible. Second-term Independent deputy Natalia Pinus, former director of the Akademgorodok Community Development Foundation, advocates evolution through a more risk-averse pace and tone. This approach has already yielded some evidence that small changes in a closed political system can generate increased voter interest and support. Because the revolutionary approach is perceived as intransigent in Russia, incremental movements showing relentlessness rather than combativeness are worth exploring.

Accumulated Dissatisfaction

Looking at his own words, Boyko [believes](#) that "elections in Novosibirsk are elections for all of Russia... The capital cities Moscow and St. Petersburg have their electoral behavior, and villages have theirs. Novosibirsk is the golden middle; how people vote in Novosibirsk, plus or minus, is how the rest of the country votes." If this is true, the [non-systemic opposition](#) is growing, but we need to look beyond the figure of Navalny to understand how and why this is happening.

Throughout Russia, there is a solid foundation for the non-systemic opposition to grow. Recent surveys have [reported](#) that 42 percent believe the country is on the wrong track. In response to a question asking if "government and public interests correspond," 75

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percent [responded](#) “no” or “more no than yes.” Such views have hardly moved since 2018 when pension reform inspired shifts in attitudes, and the “wrong track” jumped from 27 percent to 42 percent. Those reforms [made](#) people more “aggressive” and “less satisfied.” For his part, President Vladimir Putin still [holds](#) a solid 63 percent approval rating and maintains the top spot for trust with 31 percent. Levada Center’s Denis Volkov [describes](#) the situation as, “Putin has sagged a lot, while the rest have practically not grown. There is still a wide gap between trust in Putin and all other politicians.”

The non-systemic opposition is primarily identified with Navalny, and he is their only representative on the Levada trust list (“Name a few politicians, public figures you trust the most”) with 4 percent. When asked what motivated people to participate in “Free Navalny” protests earlier this year, only 15 percent said it was support for Navalny’s activities. The primary [rallying force](#) at those protests was the much broader “accumulated dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in the country.” The non-systemic opposition needs to find a way to leverage this dissatisfaction and grow with or without Navalny.

Boyko and Pinus Surface

Novosibirsk’s 2020 City Council elections demonstrated that the political landscape is evolving in Russia’s third-largest city. Nine out of 50 City Council deputies consider themselves independents. They represent a range of ideas and strategies. The largest group consists of the four Navalny Coalition-2020 members. Outside of that group, one finds Pinus, as well as the legendary activist Rotislav Antonov, who was thrown out of Coalition-2020 because he believes “Crimea is ours.” There is also the League of Effectiveness Coalition with three members from one district that includes Igor Ukrainsev from the Green Party. The headwinds they face are significant thanks to an alliance between the Communist mayor and United Russia governor (23 United Russia deputies and eight Communists).

Boyko’s distant but second-place finish in the 2019 Mayoral contest provided the runway for Coalition-2020 landing four votes on the Council. This is the first opportunity to see what governance by the Navalny forces looks like. After a disappointing 4th place mayoral finish, Pinus [expressed concerns](#), “I am afraid of the revolutionary approach, I see how people focus on provocations, and I do not see that as productive.” In a more recent article, she asked, “What should those who want change but don’t want revolution do?”

Evolution versus revolution was reflected in their mayoral and council races. Boyko’s logo is a clenched fist grabbing a bridge and tall buildings, with the slogan, “Boyko fights.” Pinus was a campaign game-changer in 2015, holding meetings with constituents in courtyards. Her slogan, “Let’s choose a new Mayor,” accompanied a stunning black and

white portrait of the candidate. These deputies represent different generations – Millennial Boyko (38 years old) vs. Generation X Pinus (47) – and pathways to politics. Boyko went from business to running for regional deputy in 2015. He and other members of the PARNAS coalition were denied registration. Several protested with hunger strikes that landed Boyko in [intensive care](#). He subsequently focused on organizing protests against increases in housing fees and the pension age. Pinus left the business sphere to volunteer as the head of a community foundation before running for City Council in 2015. As a deputy, she was the first to present monthly reports online and hold an open competition for how to spend money allocated for local projects. She also launched a major campaign to force the city to publicize the names of municipal companies/debtors (“*dolzhniki*”) that owe the city rent for public land.

Different Styles

The dissimilar strategic approaches employed by Boyko and Pinus can be seen in how they handled several major issues in their first six months on the Council.

On the Budget

The system for formulating budget amendments is oppressively complicated, but there is reason for optimism. After Pinus and Antonov’s five-year battle, the mayor released documents showing not only the “*dolzhniki*” but also information that 75 percent of those who owe more than \$600,000 [are bankrupt](#). From their camp, Coalition-2020 submitted three amendments as one (only the basics are provided here):

- 45 million rubles from the mayor’s office to improve parks and squares;
- 50 million from City Council for the construction of a school in Boyko’s district; and
- 50 million (almost 2/3) from the City Government to purchase snow removal equipment.

Boyko’s spirited [presentation](#) of the amendments included mocking other nonsense items, such as the Council president’s right to turn off the microphone when an opposition deputy “who only demonstrates ignorance and impoliteness” is speaking. The Coalition promoted the amendments through a Change.org petition that gathered [5,764 signatures](#). However, Natalia Pinus’ [response](#) may have set a precedent. She was seeking, “to test the mechanism, so the amendments are not radical... if you suggest something radical... it won’t be supported and we don’t get to try the mechanism.” She offered:

- 10 million from the City Government to support (automobile) accessibility in all ten city districts;
- 10 million from the “holiday events” fund to buy snow removal equipment; and
- 1 million from the City Council to light a new stadium.

Everyone had an opportunity to present and debate the amendments. There was considerable press coverage and public discussion about not only the budget but also the need to change the amendment process. All of the mayor's amendments passed; the opposition failed, with 33 deputies voting to reject. They failed "[because](#) the initiatives were similar ... and yet the deputies could not agree among themselves." Levada's Denis Volkov [highlights](#) the problem in a recent piece, "a weakness in alternative politicians... they cannot unite and present their point of view to society... this is an indicator they do not have enough strength, means, or desire to act as a united front... it is important to earn some points of their own, rather than to act in solidarity."

On the Mayor's Annual Report

Pinus' [response](#) to the Mayor's 2020 Annual Report focused on criteria: "There are none. They just say what they did, not why it was done, nothing, it isn't connected to any strategy, just actions... four sessions to support entrepreneurship? Maybe there should have been eight, or none." She also presented results from an evaluation with objective indicators such as the percent of buildings in dangerous conditions. In 2019, this evaluation ranked Novosibirsk five-out-of-five for large municipalities. So far, there is only one 2020 indicator reported: satisfaction with the mayor. Novosibirsk is [last](#) out of all 35 municipalities in the region.

Boyko's [rejoinder](#) was to launch a provocative online competition, "The 2020 Dynamic Slowing Down Award." Voters were invited to choose the best from the report in seven categories. Winners included:

- **Focus on Results!** To organize the attendance of the mayor's representatives at 10 Council sessions and more than 80 Commission sessions in 2020.
- **Impressive Numbers!** Housing conditions were improved for four World War II veterans.
- **Results Were Achieved!** Despite all efforts, Novosibirsk has yet to appear on the list of cities where the urban environment is considered "comfortable."

Another one of Pinus' major issues has been the so-called Dimakova Square situation. After years of protests, petitions, and public hearings, the mayor assured the 40,000 people in this district that the whole area – the only green space in an area of high-rise buildings – would be a public park. But, the day before the annual Mayor's Report, Pinus appeared live on Facebook (driving her car), saying, "I just heard the mayor sold half of Dimakova Square under market price without an auction." This information was not included in the Annual Report.

When it was time for the Annual Report session, Boyko could not attend because he was in jail serving a 28-day sentence for organizing pro-Navalny protests (he and his team continued making social media posts). Prior to the session, the mayor met with everyone

except Independents. Boyko's legally authorized representative was not allowed into the hall.

Pinus went [live](#) on Facebook from the session to report that United Russia had secretly signed up for all of the commenting slots. Only one deputy, Igor Ukrainsev, was able to [slip in](#). He made critical comments saying, "A simple secretary could collect the reports of all departments... and send them to the deputies," and addressing the mayor directly he said, "I understand 'you don't give a damn' about the opinions of independent deputies and the assessments of Novosibirsk citizens, but I hope you will listen to these assessments!" The three Coalition-2020 deputies walked out in protest before the vote. Pinus and Ukrainsev [livestreamed](#) their frustration after the session. The final vote was 34 for, 5 against, 7 abstaining, and 3 not voting. During Boyko's fresh-out-of-prison livestream, he supported the walk-out. Then, several weeks later, the Mayor's Office Monitoring Commission announced 15 criteria for evaluating the mayor.

On the 2030 "General Plan"

The General Plan ("Genplan") is the template for regional land use. The current plan has been in place since 2007. The Dimakova Square scandal, which continues to rage, helped bring its content and procedures to light. The machinations used to make the sale went beyond the usual absurd. Pinus posted that two United Russia deputies lost in 2020 because one was against the land sale and the other was *not against it enough*. Prior to the session, Pinus was still awaiting a court date set after she and others were charged with illegal picketing.

Details aside, Coalition-2020 and Pinus shared the position that the Genplan needed to change, but no amendments were legitimate without a public hearing. A 50-minute agenda was set to eliminate any opportunity for them to voice their concerns. Pinus requested an additional 20 minutes for discussion, but the Council voted against it. The initial vote was 43 for the plan and 5 against (Coalition-2020 and Pinus). Other Independents voted in support believing that any change is better than no change. Boyko tried to force a delay in the required second vote by proposing an amendment, but his microphone was turned off. He continued shouting until the Council Speaker told Boyko to calm down and offered to give him a pill. Later, Boyko [highlighted](#) his own performance through his social media.

Conclusions

In 2015, there were only two Independent deputies on the Novosibirsk City Council, and now there are nine. The Novosibirsk non-systemic opposition deputies agree on most local issues, but they differ in personality and strategy. Pinus' re-election provides some evidence of growth from her evolutionary approach. In 2015, she won with 26 percent,

and in 2020, she reached 52 percent. Her district had more voters than any other, and she received more votes (3,901) than any other candidate.

Boyko's YouTube channel has 23,000 subscribers. This and his other online tactics are informative, entertaining, and receive a lot of hits—far more than any of Pinus' livestreams or interviews. But there is a disconnect between hits and voting. Two weeks before the 2020 election, the Navalny team posted their Novosibirsk anti-corruption video, which registered almost 5 million views, but only 36,615 people voted for the 31 Coalition-2020 candidates in a city of 1.5 million people. A similar dissonance between video views and action was revealed recently in relation to the "Putin Palace" video and the January 2021 Navalny protest turnout.

Pinus has demonstrated that a less theatrical, relentless push can inspire small but important changes, such as the publication of the "*dolzhmiki*" and the introduction of evaluation criteria for the mayor. Still, Boyko has responded honestly and thoughtfully to skeptics on his livestream chat. When one said he was "completely useless on the Council," Boyko replied that he would therefore try to make a better effort to report concrete results. When another said that he "speaks very well" but wondered what he had actually done for his district, Boyko [responded](#), "You need to ask my constituents."

At the current pace, the ultimate judgment for Boyko and Pinus and their strategies will come in 2025. In the ideal world of local politics, there is a direct link between delivering for your constituents and votes. The challenging political environment in which these deputies operate requires going beyond assessing effectiveness in terms of votes, and appreciating any gain in the direction of transparency and good governance. For example, they, along with other independent deputies, have already had an impact on what it means to be a public servant and how they should interact with constituents.

The value in the different gifts Boyko and Pinus bring to the city is clear. Online numbers indicate more people are paying attention, but will they vote? It is worth imagining a slightly flashier, less detailed Pinus, and a more willing-to-compromise, less aggressive Boyko to provide the right synthesis. Dimakova Square presents an opportunity to strategically unite the positive qualities that evolution and revolution bring to the struggle. If Boyko is right that Novosibirsk is a bellwether for Russia, this could also provide a recipe for the growth of the non-systemic opposition through loud, creative, but less-combative relentlessness that allows for compromise.