

## Grassroots Capacity Building

### WHY MUNICIPAL POLITICS IN MOSCOW ARE IMPORTANT SIGNPOSTS OF RUSSIA'S DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

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Scholarly attention to Russia's civil society is often driven by headlines. Cycles of protest and repression energize debate over whether Russian civil society is dormant, qualitatively different in form from its Western counterparts, or a possible threat to the regime. Policy debates, meanwhile, are dominated by concerns over Russian laws restricting the activity and funding of nongovernmental organizations and what the future of democracy aid will look like when democracy promotion is no longer a foreign policy priority for the United States.

Meanwhile, in Moscow, opposition-minded individuals are quietly working to get elected to municipal government with the help of civic initiatives. Over the last five years, seats held by opposition deputies on Moscow's district councils have increased almost four-fold and the number of opposition candidates running in municipal elections has increased from two hundred in 2012 to over a thousand in 2017. Moscow's well-organized and local-issue-focused opposition municipal deputies are developing effective electoral strategies. Their experience is an example of the possibilities for democratization in an electoral authoritarian regime and may have a lasting impact on Russia's political system.

#### **Moscow's Municipal Government**

Self-government is enshrined in Article 130 of the Russian Constitution. It guarantees Russian citizens the right to elect autonomous organs of self-government to address issues of local importance. In practice, the powers of these institutions are limited. In Moscow, the city government has two parallel branches: one elected and one appointed. The mayor's administration oversees appointed prefectures and appointed district

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administrations. At the same time, each district in Moscow also elects council members—between eight and twelve per council per district—every five years. The councils are responsible for sports and leisure activities, beautification and repairs, and the approval of local budgets. They have no independent tax base or regulatory powers.

For many years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, district councils were dominated by prominent members of local communities, such as head doctors of clinics or principals of schools. The councils met rarely, had little interaction with residents, and rubber-stamped budgets given to them by district administrations. In March of 2012, the status quo was upset when these councils became sites of contestation between the dominant United Russia Party and oppositionists. That year, nearly 200 opposition candidates ran for municipal council seats and 70 won. In September 2017, over a thousand independent and opposition-aligned candidates ran in the municipal election and 267 seven won.

The uptick of interest in Moscow’s municipal politics among the opposition follows the Kremlin’s decision to resurrect gubernatorial elections in response to the anti-electoral fraud protests of 2011-2012. Since 2012, aspiring gubernatorial candidates—including candidates for mayor of Russia’s federal cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg—need to be endorsed by between 5 and 10 percent of the municipal deputies in their region. This so-called “municipal filter” was intended to be a type of quality control to ensure that candidates had local support. In practice, however, because so many municipal councils are controlled by United Russia, the filter restricts gubernatorial competition and keeps anti-systemic candidates out. Unlike most regions in Russia, as of September 2017, a quarter of all municipal deputies in Moscow are members of opposition parties or independents. Their presence opens the door for the possibility of registering an opposition candidate in the 2018 mayoral election.

### **Connecting Protest, Local Issues, and Municipal Government**

In 2013, while observing Alexei Navalny’s campaign for mayor of Moscow, I interviewed forty opposition deputies about their decision to enter organized politics as well as their experiences in office up to that point. In October 2017, I returned to re-interview these opposition deputies—many of whom had run for re-election in September—as well as newcomers to municipal politics in Moscow.

During my initial set of interviews, opposition deputies described several common pathways into local government. Many had previously been largely disinterested in organized politics in Russia, calling it “boring” and “highly corrupt.” One deputy, a businessman in his 40s, said that he had never voted. However, events surrounding the heavily manipulated 2011 Duma election served as a political awakening. Some deputies stated that Vladimir Putin and Dimitri Medvedev’s announcement of a switch in position, made in September of 2011, was a “slap in the face,” while others were

disturbed by the videos of blatant ballot-box stuffing that circulated on social media. In both cases, their first step into politics was signing up for training to be election observers for the 2012 presidential election. During this training, they were persuaded by local civic groups such as Our City, Solidarity, and Association for Municipal Deputies to run for municipal office. These groups provided information about municipal government, training on how to run a campaign, and connected candidates to lawyers willing to help defend their registrations against efforts by local election commissions to disqualify them.

At the same time, local branches of Yabloko approached prominent community activists to run for municipal office. The party changed internal regulations to allow non-party members to be nominated in local elections. For activists, balloting on behalf of an officially registered political party allowed them to skip the collection of signatures for their candidacy, simplifying the process of registration. Yabloko, on the other hand, benefitted by running candidates with established local reputations. The activists, working on issues of the environment, urban development, and the protection of historical sites, were already well known and connected within their own communities.

In 2017, unlike in 2012, fewer aspiring deputies were complete newcomers to political or social activism. In interviews, those elected for the first time in September 2017 described previous experiences as election observers and a general interest in political issues. While in 2012 opposition parties recruited local activists to run in the election, this time around, activists saw participating in elections as a way to advance their socio-political agendas. The ability of candidates to lawfully organize events during their campaign period, as well as the right of elected deputies to hold events in their districts (*rayons*) without seeking permission from city authorities, was highlighted during interviews as a useful tool by activists in the Moscow region.

During both election cycles, the focus was largely on local issues. Both the newcomers as well as the activists saw municipal government as a means to encourage urban development (*tochechnaya zastroika*) and solve local problems such as crumbling playgrounds and issues with housing and communal services (*ZhKKh*). As one deputy noted to me in an interview, “When your roof leaks, you need to get out there, on the wet, slippery surface. You need to solve problems from the top instead of running around below with a bucket collecting dirty water.” Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin’s planned program of demolition of Moscow’s Khrushchev-era apartment buildings (*khrushchevki*) motivated a new crop of candidates to run for office in hopes of influencing which buildings were slated for renovation.

### **Experience in Office**

After two terms in office, deputies could report some successes. Many described learning how to work the existing imperfect system from the inside.

Much of the scholarship on the nexus of Russia's state-society relationship is dominated by work on informal institutions and networks. Informal know-how, developed to circumvent the malfunctioning formal institutions of the Soviet Union, has evolved and persisted in contemporary Russia. The result of relying on informal practices is that while people are able to achieve their goals, the formal institutional structure is hollowed out, preventing, in turn, much needed systemic change. In Moscow, however, the council deputies were not circumventing the rules; they were rigidly following them.

Using their limited powers of oversight, deputies related how they pushed through residents' complaints and hindered everyday acts of corruption. For example, deputies are entitled to receive an official response to any correspondence addressed to the city's prefecture or administration. Some deputies used this power to help resolve individual residents' complaints that had been previously ignored by city authorities. As a result, some pensions were finally paid and some municipal programs received funds that they were long promised.

Municipal deputies are also asked to review and affirm local repair work before contractors are paid. Using this oversight power, they managed to impede the common practice of skimming money from local budgets by assigning unneeded repairs to local roads. These small acts of resistance were incredibly labor-intensive for deputies, who are unpaid. Each repair site had to be physically inspected and then the deputy had to write a protocol explaining why they refused to sign off on the work. The progress these deputies described was slow but meaningful.

When it came time to run for re-election, opposition deputies, who had campaigned largely as outsiders in 2012 on a platform oriented around their opposition to United Russia, were able to demonstrate a modest track record of political activism to voters. Most emphasized their work on behalf of residents through weekly open office hours, on the phone, via email, and at public events. During door-to-door campaigning, they distributed leaflets that summarized their time in office and asked residents about local problems.

### **Conclusion: Gatekeeping and Capacity Building**

Why does the experience of municipal deputies matter? First, there are now enough opposition deputies on Moscow's district councils to meet the threshold (110 signatures) for registering an opposition candidate to run for mayor in 2018. In 2013, Navalny relied on the signatures of independent deputies to run for mayor but still needed the support of United Russia to pass through the municipal filter and register his candidacy. Dmitri Gudkov, a leader of Russia's 2011-12 protests and a former member of the Duma who has declared his intention to run for mayor in 2018, can appeal for support from almost four times as many municipal deputies as were available to Navalny. Many of those

elected in 2017 were helped in their campaign by a civic project organized by Gudkov. Although deputies told me that they had not been asked to guarantee their support of Gudkov in exchange for this help, it is reasonable to assume that many will give him the signatures he will require. In this way, opposition municipal deputies may enable more competitive gubernatorial elections in the future.

Second, municipal government offers a training ground for aspiring opposition politicians. Much of the criticism directed at opposition political parties and organizations in Russia is based on their lack of experience within government. Of course, most areas of Russia's political system are largely inaccessible for those who are in opposition to the current leadership. Municipal government, on the other hand, remains relatively open. Deputies only need a few thousand votes to be elected, and entry barriers are relatively low. Once there, deputies can gain valuable insider experience that can be used to demonstrate competency in subsequent elections—as several did during the campaign for the Moscow City Duma in 2014 and the municipal election in 2017.

Lastly, and perhaps most crucially, municipal deputies are embedded in larger activist networks where they work on new political strategies and gain important training. As one example, Maksim Katz was elected as a municipal deputy in 2012 on a platform that explicitly criticized United Russia and the ineffectual nature of municipal government. Since then, he has founded a civic organization promoting the use and development of public transit, worked on Navalny's mayoral campaign in 2013, run for the City Duma, and coordinated with Dmitri Gudkov on the "United Democrats" campaign. Katz's experience is not unique. By working in several different spheres and on different political campaigns, oppositionists are learning new strategies, which enable them to run smarter and better campaigns. Door-to-door campaigning, stump speeches, and online fundraising are all examples of recently adopted techniques.

As the most recent municipal election in Moscow demonstrates, learning among the political opposition is already producing results. Opposition candidates won a majority or plurality in thirty councils around the city. Eight districts in Moscow, including the one in which Vladimir Putin lives and votes, did not elect a single United Russia candidate. As [research](#) into the causes of the Color Revolutions has shown, the most successful cases of regime transition came as a result of innovative electoral strategies employed by the opposition. Moscow's municipal deputies are building a repertoire of strategies that may one day help them defeat regime-backed candidates.