

DEMOCRACY IN THE PUBLIC CHAMBER

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The Russian Public Chamber has a good reason to consider the issues concerning the General Plan for Development of the city of Moscow. This fact was recognised by the members of the Moscow City Council, headed by Vladimir Platonov, when they finally arrived at the Public Chamber. Their arrival, in itself, meant that they were effectively admitting the legitimacy of this issue's discussion.

This has turned out to be the only, albeit a minimal, opportunity for independent experts to express their ideas concerning these problems. Indeed, unfortunately, the General Plan for Development of Moscow

has never been subject to any independent scrutiny. At one time, I presented an amendment, which allowed the City Council to order an expert analysis of the General Plan. This amendment was inserted into the text of the Urban Development Code of Moscow. The amendment could have been put to good use if they had invited independent experts instead of bureaucrats from the Mayor's office. However, City Council threw away this opportunity and has not achieved this standard to this very day.

It is obvious, that the Moscow City Council does not fit the bill as an independent agency capable of opposing municipal authorities. In order to change the situation, we should begin with elections. Such elections ought to be civilised and not conjure up the memory of the events of October 2009. This should involve at least a minimum level of political competition. There must be a degree of dignity while tabulating the votes. It is extremely important to reduce administrative political influence, not only during the election period, but between elections as well. This could guarantee all parties equal access to Moscow's mass media.

Over time, the Moscow City Council has gradually lost its independence. At the beginning of its work in the 1990s, it was relatively independent. However, year after year, especially at the beginning of

powers, which it later voluntarily relinquished. In particular, it had more powers in the field of urban planning. Previously, disputes could be openly discussed in the City Council. At that time, I hadn't yet become a Council Member, but I still knew that, from time to time, the City Council firmly opposed Mayor Yuriy Luzhkov. Even during that period, the Duma was not an absolutely independent institution. However, at least it was capable of doing something. It is enough to say that, in those days, the sessions took place at least three times a week, in contrast to the regime nowadays, when the Members of the Council gather only once a week. This Duma seemingly has nothing to do. It exists only in order to adopt the projects initiated by the Mayor's Office, and nothing else. It lacks any real mandate or function.

Of course, from the very beginning of its existence, the Duma was strictly subordinate to Luzhkov. This is no surprise, completely subordinated rubber-stamping parliaments have become an obligatory element of the current political system. The City Council has merely hastened its evolution towards this model.

Changes in federal legislation have also played a role in this regard, because of trends that valued less control over executive power and the minimising of the power held by legislative bodies. This process also included urban planning legislation.

However, we shouldn't isolate the situation in Moscow into a separate category just because it is a metrop-

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the last decade, its independence started to disappear rapidly, until it completely vanished. Initially, the City Council, at least had certain

olis, though this idea can also be justified. Along with this, there exists the opposite reality that, the most powerless governments and deputies

work in small rural municipalities. As the saying goes “it is as broad as it is long.” This situation doesn’t depend on the size of the city. If citizens are active in any country, they are similarly active both in huge metropolises and in small rural municipalities. Conversely, if they behave passively and delegate their rights to executive power instead, this also tends to happen everywhere.

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If we talk about social forces that are capable of opposing the strength of bureaucracy and big business, I would say that they do really exist. It is obvious though, that their activity is local and extremely sporadic. For example, there is an organisation called ArchNadzor (Architectural Control), which struggles for the protection of architectural monuments and, sometimes, it is also quite effective in its efforts. Nevertheless, this organisation cannot cover all lines of activism. Political parties are better adapted to this system in terms of their carrying out activity to the fullest extent. Social organisations do not have the same opportunities. Some environmental organisations are also focused on Moscow, but they are also extremely weak. There are initiative-based groups of city-dwellers, but, as a rule, they only tend to demonstrate interest in their own backyard.

Opposition on this level is very important. Thanks to this opposition and our efforts, we have managed to roll back the tide of high-rise development, and to exclude some urban planning projects from the General Plan, such as the earlier-intended construction of waste incinerators.

As for the intellectual stratum of Moscow, **a significant part of Moscow intelligentsia is directly dependent on the Mayor’s Office.** Among them there are leading figures, such as the heads of theatres, museums, universities, and state-financed organisations working in the sphere of cultural activity. Together, these individuals constitute a rather solid layer of the intelligentsia. In this context, their support for the Mayor is inevitable. As for the part of the intelligentsia that doesn’t enjoy such support, it essentially behaves like a firm opposition. In reality, this part of the Moscow intelligentsia is, after all, a minority - a protest minority. ■

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THE FINAL REHEARSAL FOR THE CHANGE OF MOSCOW MAYOR



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The reasons behind the current outburst of the ‘protest movement’ by societal figures in the city of Moscow against Yuriy Luzhkov do not directly correlate with the work that he is carrying out here and now. Today, Mayor Luzhkov is not doing anything conceptually new in comparison with what he did three, five or even ten years ago. I believe something else here has happened. **The so-called ‘intellectual class’ or more simply, the successors of Soviet intellectuals, are sensing a power vacuum and the possibility of filling this gap from within their own ranks.**

Russia has never had what can be considered a civil society. From times immemorial, this role has been practically played by a ‘general public’ that is closely linked with the country’s political players. The general public is, in effect, the soft intellectual underbelly of Russian power. It tends to treat leadership with traditional piety, but the powers that be also listen attentively to how things are happening below at the lower levels. They want to know “does it ring true there”? With few exceptions made by infrequent revolutions, the tone is usually defined by representatives of the intellectual elite, who tend to be closer to representatives of the power structures. This very elite is still active today and its first blow came, directed against Yuriy Luzhkov when they finally felt that his power is beginning to wane.

Indeed, **within power circles, opportunists have revealed themselves. Once they noticed the rising opposition within the ‘intellectual circles’, they simply started to try on the Moscow mayor’s shoes**

to see if they fit. These two processes have converged and have combined with resonance. As a result, an illusion has been created to the effect that there is an ‘opposition’ per se to the dominant influence of the Moscow bureaucracy. Against this background, I think that the central government will sooner or later endorse the idea of sacrificing Luzhkov for ‘new political sentiment’ in order to confirm its commitment to taking a ‘new course’.

Does this movement bear any relation to the problem of the Moscow’s municipal administration’s self-governance? Unfortunately, I think that it doesn’t. Luzhkov’s substitute will not end up bringing about any particular change in relations between the bureaucracy and the general public. It is just the case that **some bureaucrats will replace others.** They may be either more progressive or more reactionary than is the case with Luzhkov. I think that the most likely scenario is one where everything will remain pretty much the same.

The substitution of the Moscow administration could, however, effectively inspire the usually cowardly ‘intellectual class’ to take action. In fact, the federal government should answer one question when it comes time to make its difficult staffing decision. **Is it possible to create a local revolution in a particular supercity, or once this has started in the capital city, will such a revolution inevitably spread all over the country?** This leads to the main question. Is the Russian Government ready for this revolution and does it really want it? ■