

• Author: [Ivan Davydov](#)

## **The Renovation of Politics in Moscow**



In opposition circles, it is trendy right now to criticize Sergey Sobyenin, Moscow's Mayor since 2010. He is widely blamed for the city's latest redevelopment program, which has turned the downtown into an area completely uninhabitable in spring and summer. His taste is frequently mocked, after he signed off on crass, gaudy decorations which blight the appearance of streets and squares during holidays.

That would be quite enough of a cause for complaint. But the expenditure of these renovation projects is so vast that many suspect the money is not always heading where it is supposed to. It is why there is so much skepticism about the latest reason to be angry with Sobyenin: another unpopular renovation project, which apparently requires a demolition of thousands of buildings, all despite the objections of people living there.

The project itself lacks any respect for the property rights of Moscow's residents, and it will certainly not go down in the history books as a moment of inspired urban planning. But the fact of the matter is that Sobyenin and his subordinates are inadvertently performing a great public service: reviving Muscovites' interest in politics.

The story of the renovation project and the scandal it has sparked is, first and foremost, a story of

communication breakdown. Everything was rosy in the beginning: the prospect of tearing down “Khrushchevka” buildings first emerged during Sobyenin’s meeting with President Vladimir Putin. Five-story concrete structures constructed to resettle citizens of the USSR who occupied cellars and barracks in the days of Nikita Khrushchev are not the most comfortable type of abode by today’s standards, and many are now in a derelict state. Such buildings were demolished piecemeal by Moscow’s last Mayor Yury Luzhkov, prompting little in the way of protest.

It soon became clear, though, that Sobyenin’s plan is worlds apart from Luzhkov’s. It is not really just the notorious Khrushchevka this time. Alongside the thousands of Khrushchevka buildings slated to be torn down are several historic buildings, a number of later 20<sup>th</sup>-century houses — and, puzzlingly, numerous comfortable, newly renovated residential buildings.

Moscow City Hall has been preoccupied with drafting a federal law on renovation lately. The bill, which was rushed through by the State Duma at the first reading, left many stunned: The document stipulates that residents of the premises earmarked for demolition have been left with virtually no rights; no guarantees have been offered that they will be rehoused in new apartments in the same neighborhood. They will be left with very little choice: either vacate their premises before or after receiving a court issued eviction notice. It was initially assumed that the residents would be able to halt demolition, yet there was no voting mechanism provided for in the document. Besides, as stems from numerous reservation clauses, Moscow City Hall holds all the cards and has a number of means at its disposal by which it can effectively negate the results of a vote. Many technicalities, such as what lies in store for residents who have outstanding loans on their apartments, are simply beyond the scope of the bill. The issue of whether owners of the apartments retain their rights is addressed with a high degree of vagueness.

Moscow City Hall employs real expertise when it comes to feigning dialogue with society. Meetings with officials devoted to issues important for the city are predominantly attended by “fake citizens” who pose scripted questions convenient for the officials. There is an Internet portal called “Aktivnyi Grazhdanin” (“An Active Citizen”) devoted to voting (it will be involved again in voting over the renovation program). The municipality has repeatedly [been caught rigging the results](#) of these votes but it continues to refer to them as the “voice of the people”.

Curiously, there are groups on social networks which enroll people who present themselves as ordinary Muscovites, but who can’t help but wax lyrical about all initiatives announced by Moscow City Hall. A relevant group for this instance would be the group “Za snos Khrushchevok” — “For the demolition of Khrushchevka buildings,” which has been joined by staff from the mayor’s office and activists of pro-government youth movements who have expressed admiration for the program via Facebook. The situation is something akin to a theater, one which perennially stages the same play — a play centered on Muscovites’ love for their mayor.

Sobyenin clearly sees his program as something of a boon for the city and is dumbfounded by the surge in discontent. It simply did not occur to him or his subordinates that rigged votes and procured enthusiasm would not suffice. Real residents made a beeline for meetings with officials who were caught off guard, unsuccessfully attempting to offer up the right untruth in response to the corresponding question. Sobyenin himself literally hot footed it from Muscovites who made attempts to discuss the renovation program on two separate occasions. The well-oiled machine designed to mimic genuine dialogue between the authorities and society has stalled.

The reason is clear. Despite their shared collectivist Soviet past, Russians are individualists to the extreme. Most residents of Russian cities, including Moscow, perceive their streets and yards as alien or alienated spaces. It is simply not the done thing to become acquainted with neighbors who share the same staircase or yard. On the other hand, one’s dwelling or one’s apartment is the last stronghold — a real fortress, perhaps the only real exemplification of ownership. It is precisely that sacred space that Sobyenin has violated, stopping short of offering any satisfactory explanation of his intentions or giving credible, sufficient compensation. After all, dialogue is far from *en vogue* right now — the federal authorities have also gotten into the habit of avoiding dialogue with society entirely, instead its prior preference of simulating it.

The authorities are clearly afraid of active civic participation. Putin has been forced to become [personally involved](#). He has now commented directly on the renovation issue, promising to protect citizens’ rights. In

response, Sobyenin has back-pedaled: There are now four-and-a-half thousand buildings subjected to the program. Initially, the fate of eight thousand had been decided. Polls and voting are now allowed. The Speaker of the State Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, has [suggested](#) that the second reading should be postponed until summer, although he himself promised to adopt “the law on renovation” imminently, just a short time ago. As rumor has it, relations between Volodin and Sobyenin are far from perfect; both have their eyes’ on the prime ministerial post and, predictably, Volodin did not hesitate to take a kick at his stumbling rival.

Bickering officials, though, is less important than the effect this whole episode is having on society; citizens who have never even read a single bill in their lives, who have never shown the slightest interest in parliamentary proceedings, are now scrutinizing the renovation bill. The program has brought residents of doomed buildings closer; community spirit is reviving in Moscow’s stairwells and yards. It has effectively cultivated stronger horizontal ties and promoted self-organization skills. It has prompted individuals who had never given politics a second thought to focus on politics, and some even to step into local leadership roles.

### **Protests on May 14**

The protests could grow. Residents aggrieved by the Mayor’s program are printing and disseminating leaflets in preparation for when they take to the streets on May 14 and calling on their neighbors to join them - neighbors they barely ever gave the time of day until recently. Incidentally, Moscow City Hall was [forced to give the rally the green light](#), despite the fact that it is ordinarily virtually impossible to get permission to organize an opposition rally in downtown Moscow. Citizens are becoming increasingly convinced that if they exert sufficient pressure on the authorities, the authorities will buckle. The rally gaining authorization; the reduction of the list of homes to be demolished; the postponement of the second reading of the renovation bill in the State Duma - all of this serves only to convince protesters that their voices’ are being heard, and that through political engagement, they can bring about a positive outcome.

This is another societal muscle that has become flabby over the years of Putin’s reign, a muscle which is now being exercised once again. Russian society is becoming politicized due to absurd, ill-advised and often downright arrogant actions of the authorities. The more politicized society becomes - the greater the damage to Russia’s authorities, who are used to impressing upon the public an illusion of universal approval.

Renovation is unlikely to go ahead anyway, not least due to Moscow City Hall hardly being flush with cash right now; it is an extremely costly project, largely designed to prop up an already struggling construction industry. The problem is that with economic stagnation from sanctions and low oil prices, there are no spare funds in Russia in general nowadays, even in the relatively affluent Moscow.

But these newly acquired (or we should say revived) capabilities to exert pressure on the power elite are here to stay. Coordinated actions aimed at defending one’s rights will be commonplace for the foreseeable future. The success of these actions will live long in the collective memory. This will be true not only with respect to the Moscow municipality but also the Russian authorities in general. The period of comfortable coexistence, where citizens remain indifferent to anything which does not directly affect them, is finished. The careless actions of the authorities have brought an end to civic indifference.

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