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[Moscow reconstruction: interim results](#)



Gray walls, low ceilings, dull furniture and a lackluster lamp. Sergey Sobyenin, the mayor of Moscow, is the only one who shines in this gloomy interior. Yet another annual Moscow Urban Forum, a grandiose event attended by world celebrities in city planning and sponsored by City Hall, has wrapped up. The MUF is organized primarily as a form for touting the successes of Sobyenin and his colleagues, although it has to be admitted that there are also interesting lectures, roundtables and presentations. Sobyenin shines not without reason: life-size models of apartments planned for “resettlers” moving from Khrushchev-era apartment buildings (Khrushchyovkas) as part of the reconstruction program [were on display](#). “Everything is shipshape, thought out down to the last detail, right down to the design of door knobs and electric stoves,” as a press release puts it.

The notion of “resettlers” is an important touch. It has almost become an official term to define those who will receive new apartments to replace demolished ones. In Russian, the word bears a certain historical and legal imprint, and is often accompanied by the adjective “forced;” it can also be translated as “migrant”, “settler” or “displaced person”, but in Russian it never has any positive connotations: “A forced migrant shall be a citizen of the Russian Federation who was forced to leave his/her place of permanent residence due to violence committed against him/her or members of his/her family or persecution in other forms (...),” as the [Law on Forced Migrants](#) puts it. Sergey Ivanov’s painting *Death of a Settler* is well-known among Russians, many of

whom encounter it for the first time in textbooks. As the title suggests, the picture is anything but light-hearted.

This is a small but telling thing; it illustrates the level of sensitivity shown by City Hall in dialogue with its citizens. However, we should not imagine that the municipal officials involved are demonic characters who want only evil. They're just typical Russian officials who truly believe that they mean good for the city and its residents. What's more, sometimes they succeed. They simply do not see the point in having a dialogue with society, and don't know how to conduct one. The reconstruction story is a perfect example. The renovation program was supposed to be a triumph for City Hall, but instead it has turned into a mixture of twisted meanings, dubious compromises and outright lies that officials were forced into by public pressure.

Coercion to compromise

Incidentally, Sobyenin is entitled to shine in the gloomy interior of a model "resettler apartment": City Hall proudly reports that nearly 90% of apartment owners in buildings earmarked for demolition support renovation. This is only understandable. As a person who once lived in a Khrushchyovka I can certainly state that even the models presented by City Hall are better than real Khrushchyovkas. Anything is better, except a cardboard box. However, the attempt to boil down the reconstruction project to the demolition of Khrushchyovkas was only one of many mayoral lies.

Khrushchyovkas, concrete-paneled apartment buildings constructed in the 1960s (and named for the leader of the day) are obsolete from every point of view; Sobyenin and President Vladimir Putin discussed the demolition and resettlement plan back in April. The program is not the first: Khrushchyovkas have been taken down both by Sobyenin's predecessor, Yury Luzhkov, and Sobyenin himself. The program is useful: gray, dilapidated five-story apartment buildings do no good for the appearance of the capital of a huge country, and life inside them is a real and not particularly pleasant adventure. If reconstruction were really about continuing the demolition of Khrushchyovkas, it would elicit no discussion. Obviously, the media would have uncovered corruption during the implementation of the program, and ordinary citizens would have sighed over the journalists' investigations into suspicious billion-ruble spending - but that would be it. Russians are quite accustomed to this scenario, since the media are not an important public institution in the country, and even the top publications never manage to inspire actual change. Reports of rampant theft by officials are just part of the nation's view of how things are, and even create something of a bond among citizens.

However, as soon as the preliminary lists of approximately 8,000 apartment buildings destined for demolition appeared, it turned out that Sobyenin had lied. And that got on people's nerves. Not only were notorious Khrushchyovkas to be torn down, but also more livable buildings, whose owners were quite happy with them.

It is noteworthy that housing is almost the only asset held by the majority of Russians, and any assault on it triggers an aggressive reaction. Social media bubbled and seethed with indignation, and protests were in the air. And then came the first draft of the bill, which completely disregarded the interests of the owners, not to mention their rights. If I were to briefly summarize the bill, leaving out the legalese, it would go something like this: "City Hall has the right to tear down any building, evict any owner and not observe any norms while building housing to replace the demolished apartment buildings."

Even President Putin had to publicly promise that he would not sign a law that violates citizens' rights. Chairman of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin (there are rumors that he perceives Sobyenin as a rival in a covert struggle for the post of prime minister) intervened and the vote was postponed. Parliament decided to discuss the bill with the public, which is unheard of in Russia. More than 20,000 Muscovites participated in a rally against renovation: a huge number, especially as the organizers took pains to stress the apolitical nature of the event and did not allow Alexey Navalny, the most popular Russian opposition leader, to take the podium.

It seemed that Sobyenin had lost the war on all fronts.

Reaction to protests

As political scientists would put it, Sobyenin (who earlier served as deputy prime minister and as head of the presidential administration) is a man of great influence, part of Putin's entourage. It seems that his gravitas was big enough to solve the problem: adoption of the bill was sped up, and parliamentary hearings took place

without a scandal. The issue of reconstruction ceased to be the primary and most painful topic on the Russian political agenda.

However, there is a whole series of significant nuances: The list of buildings subject to demolition was cut in half. More than 100 amendments were introduced before the final vote. The most odious points were deleted. Some owners' rights were taken into consideration after all. Eventually, City Hall is going to offer Muscovites resettlement options. They have been promised they'll be resettled "within the same district" and in equivalent-standard apartments. The protests forced City Hall to look for compromises.

Nevertheless, neither recognition of mistakes nor an honest confrontation with the resettlers followed. The compromises were presented as protection of citizens' rights by Sobyenin (apparently, this was protection against Sobyenin himself, although City Hall spokespeople didn't acknowledge the contradiction). The authorities still aren't ready to be involved in a dialogue with society; they don't consider citizens to have agency as political actors, and in any citizens' attempt to point out their rights, they see only plots by external enemies. When the reconstruction scandal was in full swing, a transcript of a meeting at City Hall was leaked to the media: The protest organizers were described as "liberal oppositionists" interested in "destabilization of the country" who "muddied the waters" and "fomented unrest." But while opposition leaders sought to join the grassroots protest, they certainly didn't initiate it.

Nevertheless, concessions have already been made, which shows that authorities at all levels in Russia panic in the face of a protest. The federal authorities respond to organized political protests with repression (for example, Navalny's regional offices are searched; volunteers are detained; campaign materials are confiscated and checked for "extremism"). However, if there is a chance to keep protests apolitical, the authorities give in under pressure, at least to some extent. In other words, in spite of the conviction formed during Putin's third presidential term, protests in Russia can bring some results.

Currently, due to the lack of legal means to exert pressure on the power elite (elections at all levels are a fiction, words of criticism in the media have no effect although they are not officially banned) citizens are forced to play a dangerous game while testing the elite's endurance. Citizens cannot guess in advance what the result of the next attempted protest against blatant injustice will be: a partial victory, a fine or prison sentence.

By the way, there is yet another characteristic of the authorities, well-known to all Russians: they are always ready to lie. Having appeased the protest with promises, they can always back away from any agreements, and ignore those promises. Deputy Mayor of Moscow Marat Khusnullin, in charge of urban development and construction, announced on July 6 that the final lists of buildings covered by the reconstruction program will appear by the end of the month. The true extent of concessions by City Hall has yet to be seen.

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