The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Luzhkov Resumes Vacation

By Alexander Bratersky

August 18, 2010



City Hall said Wednesday that Mayor Yury Luzhkov was resuming his interrupted vacation, despite smoldering anger over his slow response to the record heat wave and air pollution from burning peat bogs outside Moscow.

Luzhkov, 73, was vacationing in an undisclosed location to receive treatment for a sports-related injury when on Aug. 8 he rushed back to the city for a meeting with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who thanked him for his "timely" return.

City Hall said First Deputy Mayor Vladimir Resin would be acting chief in Luzhkov's absence. The Mayor's Office has said Luzhkov, who had scheduled a vacation for Aug. 2 to 22, has more than a year of unspent vacation days.

The mayor was widely criticized after Lifenews.ru published what it said was an audio recording of City Hall spokesman Sergei Tsoi denying that the city was facing an emergency because of the heavy smoke.

Tsoi has since said he would sue the publication for distorting his comments.

Ordinary Muscovites were largely forgiving of the mayor's decision to head back out of the city Wednesday, as forecasters were predicting that daytime highs could fall by as much as 15 degrees Celsius to a moderate 20 C by Saturday.

The peat smoke has mostly cleared, although the city government reported on its web site that carbon monoxide levels remained elevated.

“What can he do about the weather? What difference is it where he is?” said Alexei, 38, who was pushing a stroller with his child and his pregnant wife, Lyudmila, in central Moscow.

But Yekaterina Smirnova, 25, an economist who was walking her lap dog in a city park, said she was angry about Luzhkov's attitude. “I think it shows how the government, and Luzhkov personally, cares about people during difficult situations,” she said.

Opposition groups were even more critical of Luzhkov, whose political future has been clouded since the Kremlin began leaning on other long-term regional bosses to hand over power.

“People were not given enough information on how to fight the heat,” said Sergei Udaltsov, head of the Left Front opposition group. The government's slow response to the heat and smoke resulted in a sharp spike in deaths among elderly Muscovites, he said.

City health authorities had said the daily death toll doubled to 700 per day because of the record heat and heavy air pollution, a figure later challenged by the Health and Social Development Ministry.

Yabloko party leader Sergei Mitrokhin, a former Moscow City Duma deputy, told The Moscow Times that Luzhkov's presence in the city made little difference.

But the fact that his vacation is even an issue suggests that the city itself is in serious trouble.

“When the mayor was sitting in his office all day, the problems were not resolved either," Mitrokhin said. “We have to return to mayoral elections in both Moscow and St. Petersburg."

The country's two biggest cities are formally regions, meaning that their heads are appointed by the president and confirmed by local lawmakers.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/08/18/luzhkov-resumes-vacation-a736