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NTV and Medvedev Target Luzhkov

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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Police officers detaining protesters in Moscow on Sunday during an unauthorized protest against Mayor Yury Luzhkov. **Ivan Sekretarev**

A simmering conflict between Mayor Yury Luzhkov and President Dmitry Medvedev broke into the open over the weekend as Medvedev criticized the mayor and major television channels aired unprecedented critical reports.

NTV got the ball rolling with "Delo v Kepke," a 20-minute report aired in prime time Friday evening that accused Luzhkov of helping his wife, Yelena Baturina, become the country's richest woman and of neglecting his duties when Moscow was choking in smog during this summer's wildfires.

The program, whose title roughly translates as "The Cap Affair" in an allusion to the mayor's trademark flat cap, contained few new allegations, but it marks the first instance in a decade that national television has directed open criticism against a high-ranking official like Luzhkov.

While the broadcast and other television reports Sunday resembled the "television wars" of the 1990s, they also revealed that Medvedev is too weak to use his constitutional authority to fire the powerful mayor, an opposition politician said.

Luzhkov sparred openly with the Kremlin last week when he backed a highway through the Khimki forest outside Moscow and criticized Medvedev's decision to suspend construction work following environmentalists' protests.

Medvedev retorted Friday at a conference in Yaroslavl that he disagreed with Luzhkov's position and that "officials should either participate in building institutions or join the opposition."

On Wednesday, an anonymous Kremlin source told national news agencies that City Hall was trying to "drive a wedge" between Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Luzhkov fought back Friday, saying he would not step down before his term runs out next year and denying any conflict with the Kremlin, just differing opinions.

On Sunday, Channel One took aim at Luzhkov on its evening summary of the week's news, criticizing Baturina's construction company, Inteko, and interviewing drivers upset over Moscow's notoriously bad traffic. The report ended with footage from opposition web site Gzt.ru of Luzhkov nodding off during a recent presentation of a book on how to improve Moscow's traffic situation.

Meanwhile, the news channel Rossia-24, which belongs to the same state holding as Rossia One, on Sunday showed a report critical of City Hall's failure to preserve the capital's historic buildings, while NTV carried another report about Baturina's business interests.

Outside City Hall, police on Sunday broke up an unsanctioned anti-Luzhkov rally, detaining 31 opposition activists, including Konstantin Kosyakin and Sergei Udaltsov, Interfax reported. Organizers of the so-called "Day of Wrath" protest said it targeted the federal government as well as Luzhkov.

Luzhkov, who turns 74 on Sept. 21, has run the capital since 1992, making him the last of the long-serving regional bosses after Kalmykia's leader, who had held office since 1993, announced earlier this month that he would step down when his term ends in October. (Because of Moscow's federal status, the mayor is also a governor.)

Medvedev has said regional bosses should not serve more than three terms and recently replaced many so-called dinosaur governors, raising speculation that Luzhkov's days are numbered. Luzhkov drew a barrage of criticism for only hesitantly interrupting his vacation during last month's smog, which caused a sharp rise in the city's death rate.

Friday's television program rehashed a Lifenews.ru report that the mayor, an avid beekeeper, gave more attention to his bees than to Muscovites choking from smog. Returning from his vacation, Luzhkov signed two decrees: one allocating 105 million rubles ($3.4 million) for disabled Muscovites suffering from smog, and the other allocating 256 million rubles ($8.3 million) to an agriculture company owned by City Hall that, among other things, produces honey. The NTV report said Luzhkov wanted to move his bees into areas not affected by fires.

Yabloko leader Sergei Mitrokhin, a veteran in city politics, said there was no doubt that the program had been ordered by the Kremlin. "It shows how unhappy they are with Luzhkov's statements on Khimki," he said by phone.

He added that it also showed Medvedev's weakness. "If he were a strong president, he would fire Luzhkov straight away," he said.

One of the most interviewed people in the report was journalist Sergei Dorenko, a long-standing critic of Luzhkov and Putin who, incidentally, anchored the last program to openly criticize Luzhkov, in 1999 on ORT, now Channel One. Dorenko aired his report, which tried to link Luzhkov to the 1996 murder of U.S. businessman Paul Tatum, at a time when Luzhkov was co-leading a party that presented a serious threat in State Duma elections that fall to the Unity party, which backed then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Luzhkov's party ended up merging with Unity to form United Russia, where Luzhkov is a member of the party's supreme council.

Dorenko, who has served as editor-in-chief of the Kremlin-friendly radio station Russian News Service since 2008, denied that he had taken part in politically ordered journalism with the NTV report.

"I'm not naive. I think there was an instruction to do this — but [NTV] wanted to do this for a long time ... openly criticize a billionaire with 100,000 cops," he wrote on his blog, referring to Luzhkov and his control over the city's large police force.

Once-privately owned NTV was a pioneer in critical reporting in the 1990s, but it saw a political turnaround after being seized by creditor Gazprom in 2001. Medvedev chaired Gazprom before he became president in 2008.

Friday's program, which was only announced by NTV the same day, was produced by the same team responsible for "Kryostny Batka," a report aired in July about Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko that depicted him as Europe's last dictator. Belarus is locked in a constant battle with Gazprom about energy prices.

Like "Kryostny Batka," the Luzhkov report resembled a systematic attack rather than balanced journalism, and the authors made no attempt to quote any Luzhkov allies or to get a comment from the mayor or City Hall.

Notably, they also quote nobody from United Russia and make no mention of Luzhkov's position on its supreme council.

Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov, United Russia's No. 2 leader after Putin, described the film as simplistic but said it would be discussed with the party's hierarchy. "I will speak with Yury Mikhailovich [Luzhkov]. We must evaluate the situation inside the party's supreme council. It's not that simple," he said in a statement Saturday on the party's web site.

Andrei Richter, a journalism professor at Moscow State University, dismissed some media reports that the program marked a return to the 1990s, when politicians-turned-businessmen attacked each other via the media organizations they owned.

He said Luzhkov could hardly retaliate by ordering a similarly damning report about

Medvedev — if indeed Medvedev was behind it.

TV Center, the television channel controlled by City Hall, aired a report Saturday in which anchor Alexei Pushkov did little more than belittle the "media campaign" against Luzhkov.

"Now it has reached television, but nobody authoritative has appeared on air so far — just those who have attacked the mayor with an amazing frenzy for 10 years," he said, the Newsru.com web site reported.

Among others, Luzhkov's critics in the program are eccentric entrepreneur and barter proponent German Sterligov, and Duma Deputy Anton Belyakov, a member of the Kremlin-friendly Just Russia party who has criticized City Hall before, like during the controversial razing of houses in Moscow's Rechnik neighborhood in January.

Moskovsky Komsomolets, a popular tabloid that is fiercely loyal to Luzhkov, does not have a weekend edition, but an announcement that it had published about the upcoming NTV report was missing from its web site. The announcement could still be found via Google cache.

Luzhkov has been hit by a string of scandals over the past year as authorities opened corruption cases against several senior City Hall officials. Analysts have said the cases were probably orchestrated by the Kremlin.

Some observers have suggested that Luzhkov is being protected by Putin, who as president in 2007, reappointed the mayor for a fourth four-year term, and that the struggle reflects increasing rivalry within the country's ruling tandem in the run-up to a decision about who is going to run in the 2012 presidential election.

But speculation that the mayor's star was sinking began last year after Putin called for a crackdown on Cherkizovsky Market, effectively forcing Luzhkov to close it.

In April, Luzhkov was for the first time openly accused of corruption in the Duma when Liberal Democrat leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky lambasted him while a smiling Putin presided over the Duma session. Luzhkov sued Zhirinovsky for defamation, and a Moscow court has ordered Zhirinovsky to pay 500,000 rubles ($16,000) in damages.

The mayor and his wife regularly sue critics who claim that Inteko is favored by City Hall when it allocates lucrative deals. Baturina is ranked as Russia's wealthiest woman by Forbes' Russian edition, which estimated her wealth at $2.9 billion earlier this year.

Some NTV viewers in Moscow did not see Friday's program in its entirety. Television screens went dark for two minutes of the report that dealt with the relationship between Luzhkov and businessman Telman Ismailov, owner of Cherkizovsky Market, Russian News Service reported. The segment was also missing from the online version of the program, which NTV placed prominently on its web site over the weekend.

NTV blamed the blackout on a technical glitch but did not explain why the segment was also missing from the online version, Interfax reported.

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