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Luzhkov Plans to Sue TV Channels

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Mayor Yury Luzhkov.

Mayor Yury Luzhkov and his billionaire wife, Yelena Baturina, pledged on Monday to sue national television channels for running a series of unprecedented critical reports about them, apparently at the Kremlin's behest.

Meanwhile, a Luzhkov deputy under investigation on corruption charges offered a face-saving option for the Kremlin if it decides to blink in the showdown with Luzhkov: Blame everything on flamboyant Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky.

Luzhkov's office distributed a statement Monday saying the mayor and City Hall would file defamation lawsuits against the television channels that "actively gave out negative information" about Luzhkov and the city government. The statement, which called the accusations baseless, did not identify any channels.

NTV television aired a report on Friday evening that accused Luzhkov of helping his wife, who heads the Inteko real estate company, become Russia's richest woman by improperly

distributing property in Moscow. The report also criticized his absence from Moscow while it was blanketed in thick smog from burning peat bogs and forest fires in August.

Three state channels — Channel One, Rossia One and Rossia-24 — joined the anti-Luzhkov campaign over the weekend, accusing the mayor of a wide variety of sins, from Moscow's notorious traffic jams to spending millions of municipal dollars to save bees from last month's record heat wave.

Last Wednesday, an unidentified Kremlin official was quoted by the Russian news agencies as saying the presidential administration would not tolerate any attempt by Luzhkov to drive a wedge between President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Luzhkov assailed Medvedev's decision to suspend the disputed construction of a Moscow-St. Petersburg highway through the Khimki forest in an article in the Rossiiskaya Gazeta government newspaper on Sept. 6. Putin signed off on the route in 2003.

Inteko's press office said Monday that the company was preparing court documents that accused the television channels of "showing knowingly false materials without caring to simply check the information and effectively saying nothing new."

Luzhkov and Inteko have almost never lost a defamation case in Moscow courts.

NTV's general director, Vladimir Kulistikov, and the press service of the All-Russia State Television and Radio Company, which controls Rossia One and Rossia-24, said they were not afraid of being sued and promised to continue covering Moscow affairs critically, Interfax reported.

Deputy Mayor Alexander Ryabinin, who is under investigation for possible corruption, told reporters Monday that the campaign against his boss was spearheaded by Zhirinovsky.

"This all is a campaign against the Moscow mayor, and I am just a cog in the machine," he said, according to Interfax. When asked who was behind the crackdown on Luzhkov, Ryabinin simply said, "Zhirinovsky!"

Last week, Investigative Committee head Alexander Bastrykin accused Ryabinin of fleeing from Russia to escape the corruption case. Ryabinin and Luzhkov's office denied the claim and maintained that the official was on vacation in the Arkhangelsk region and would return to work Monday, which he did.

Luzhkov sued Zhirinovsky earlier this year after Zhirinovsky accused him and City Hall of corruption in remarks made during a State Duma session in April. A Moscow court has ordered Zhirinovsky to pay 500,000 rubles ($16,600) in damages to Luzhkov.

Zhirinovsky made no immediate comment Monday about Ryabinin's accusation.

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