

Luzhkov, Backed by Party, Hangs On

By [Nikolaus von Twickel](#)

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Mayor Yury Luzhkov delivering a speech during the Moscow regional session of United Russia held Tuesday. **Alex Aminev**

Mayor Yury Luzhkov defiantly fought back against an unprecedented smear campaign on state television Tuesday, promising that he would not resign.

“I do not fear those attacks and will fight,” he told a United Russia meeting in the capital.

The meeting voted unanimously to support Luzhkov, a powerful leader who has governed the city since 1992.

Luzhkov suddenly became the subject of rare critical reports on the country’s major television channels after sparring publicly with President Dmitry Medvedev last week.

The reports on NTV, Channel One and Rossia One mentioned massive corruption, nepotism and Moscow’s miserable traffic, all long-standing allegations once ignored on the Kremlin-controlled networks.

In his first public comments released earlier Tuesday, Luzhkov lambasted the broadcasts as “dirt.”

“I tell you categorically: This is dirt, some sort of mush, collected solely to attack the mayor,” he told Ren-TV anchor Maria Maximovskaya [in an interview](#) Monday night, excerpts of which were released Tuesday in a television news report titled “The Bell Tolls.”

Luzhkov said he would not resign because he had done nothing wrong. “To excuse yourself is the wrong way to defend yourself in Russia. To start to excuse yourself means you are guilty,” he said.

The mayor, who turns 74 next week, also offered a recalcitrant retort when Maximovskaya asked him whether his billionaire wife, Yelena Baturina, 47, could have become the country’s richest woman if she had not married him.

“My wife is a talented person. Everybody who has worked with her knows this. ... She would be even wealthier if she were not married to the mayor of Moscow,” he said.

Luzhkov and Baturina have rarely responded to journalists’ questions about her vast wealth, preferring instead to sue the authors of critical reports.

Much smaller than the three major channels, Ren-TV is seen as a last haven for critical television journalism, and Maximovskaya is regarded as being among the last critical news anchors.

Notably, though, excerpts from the interview were posted on United Russia’s official web site.

The public bashing of Luzhkov widened Tuesday when A Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov called for the mayor to resign and to be investigated.

Writing [in his blog](#), Mironov, who also serves as speaker of the Federation Council, accused Luzhkov of having lost “all sense of reality” because he did not immediately return from vacation when Moscow was hit by toxic smog from wildfires last month.

“He was absolutely drawn away in his Austrian remoteness,” Mironov wrote, referring to speculation that Luzhkov had been at his chalet in the Austrian ski resort Kitzbühel.

“It will be very bad for Moscow and the whole country if “A” isn’t followed by “B” — that is Yury Luzhkov’s resignation,” he said.

Mironov also called for an investigation of the mayor and his wife to prevent “the emergence of new Luzhkovs and Baturinas.”

He went on to attack United Russia for being complacent about Luzhkov: “Who are you folks: guardians of the people as you like to call yourselves or skillful imitators who use the word ‘conservatism’ to hide the fact that you serve big private interests?”

Last year, United Russia adopted “Russian Conservatism” as its official ideology.

Speculation has been swirling about whose side United Russia would take in the conflict.

Luzhkov is a founding member of the ruling party, headed by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, and has been credited for returning high election results in the capital.

State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov, United Russia's No. 2 after Putin, said Tuesday that Luzhkov had told him during a meeting the previous day that the television reports about him were wrong. Gryzlov added that the party leadership was watching closely. "We exchanged opinions about it," he said.

Neither Gryzlov nor Putin openly mentioned Luzhkov at a party conference in Nizhny Novgorod later Tuesday.

The official reason for the party meeting with Luzhkov was changes in the party's city leadership, Gryzlov said. On Monday, State Duma Deputy Yelena Panina was appointed new party secretary, replacing Yury Karabasov, the party said on its web site. Karabasov, 71, resigned last week for personal reasons after serving eight years, Prime-Tass reported.

The Moscow meeting greeted Luzhkov in true Soviet Communist style — with standing ovations — when he walked in, the GZT.ru news portal reported.

A subsequent resolution, published on the party's Moscow branch web site, seemingly attacked Medvedev by saying the campaign against Luzhkov was "initiated by those for whom immediate political interests were more important than the country's modernization and aimed at destabilizing the political situation in Moscow and the whole country in the run-up to the coming elections."

Medvedev has championed modernization over the past months, but it remains unclear whether he will stand for re-election in 2012.

Medvedev, meanwhile, celebrated his 45th birthday in Sochi and made no public comments about Luzhkov. But his chief of staff, Sergei Naryshkin, defended the Kremlin's position, saying it was "normal" to replace aging regional leaders.

"The policy of rotating staff is the president's prerogative," Naryshkin told reporters in Novosibirsk when asked whether Moscow could expect a leadership change, Interfax reported.

He noted that 25 governors have been replaced in the last 2 1/2 years.

Medvedev took office in May 2008. He is not a member of United Russia.

Baturina released a glowing congratulatory statement for Medvedev's birthday. "Your many years' experience in the higher echelons of power, your commitment to the country and your significant achievements as president have given you the reputation of a strong and wise leader," said [the statement](#) published on the web site of her real estate company, Inteko.

No congratulatory statement from Luzhkov was released.

Meanwhile, the number of defamation suits filed by Luzhkov and Baturina is growing daily.

Ekho Moskvyy editor Alexei Benediktov said Tuesday that the radio station and other media outlets had been notified that the mayor was suing them for mentioning a report that claimed

Luzhkov had allocated twice as much money for his bees than for Muscovites suffering from last month's smog.

Luzhkov is also suing the Tvoi Den tabloid and a Tvoi Den journalist who authored a story citing the Lifenews.ru web site, Benediktov told Interfax. Lifenews.ru, which belongs to the same publisher as Tvoi Den, first published [the story](#) in August, together with scans of what it said were Luzhkov's orders.

The reports appeared to drastically simplify the scanned orders, which only showed that Luzhkov had signed off on 105 million rubles (\$3.4 million) to send disabled and elderly Muscovites to health sanatoriums after the smog and 256 million rubles to finance a city-owned agricultural company that produces honey, among other foodstuffs.

Under Russian media law, republishing potentially libelous remarks from other media sources is equal to quoting such remarks directly.

Luzhkov slammed the bee reports at the United Russia meeting. "Can you imagine an idiotic mayor earmarking 200 million for bees and only half that amount for people with disabilities?" he said, Interfax reported.

"Yes, I am involved in beekeeping. It's interesting," he added. "But I don't need state funds for it."

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