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Luzhkov-Medvedev Row Escalates

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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His train may already have left the station. President Dmitry Medvedev's administration has made statements to Russian media about the possible departure of Mayor Yury Luzhkov, pictured in this file p
Igor Tabakov

An extraordinary battle between Mayor Yury Luzhkov and President Dmitry Medvedev gathered steam Wednesday as the City Duma issued a motion supporting the mayor, the Kremlin warned that his resignation was imminent, and media reported that more damning television coverage was on its way.

City Duma deputies unanimously passed a motion that heavily criticized what they called a campaign to discredit Luzhkov.

"These irresponsible and unprofessional reports ... do not further the development of democracy," said the statement, published on the Duma's web site.

All 35 deputies supported the motion, including three Communists, who form the only opposition in the chamber, Interfax reported.

On Tuesday, Luzhkov vowed to fight for his political survival after being targeted in an unprecedented campaign on state-controlled television over the weekend. He denied any wrongdoing.

But Vedomosti on Wednesday quoted an unidentified Kremlin official as saying a decision to fire Luzhkov had been "made in principle" and could be announced soon.

"It is possible that both sides will be given time to cool off, and the operation will be finished within two or three weeks," the official said.

An unidentified government source, however, told the newspaper that the mayor would step down in December.

Ekho Moskvy radio quoted an unidentified Kremlin official as saying it was not up to Luzhkov to decide whether he remained in office. "It is the president's prerogative," the source said.

Speaking to The Moscow Times, a Kremlin spokeswoman confirmed the quotes from the presidential administration. "Yes, these statements are real," the spokeswoman said, in turn requesting anonymity, citing Kremlin policy.

Igor Yurgens, head of the Institute of Contemporary Development, a think tank chaired by Medvedev, said the sole aim of the campaign was to prepare the public for Luzhkov's ouster.

Discontent over the mayor is rising in the capital, Yurgens told reporters Wednesday, Interfax reported.

According to the Levada Center, an independent polling agency, Luzhkov's approval ratings in Moscow slid from 65 percent in 2001 to 36 percent last fall, the last time it conducted a survey on him.

Opposition bloggers accused Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin of lacking the courage to fire Luzhkov right away.

Putin, who gave a big speech at a United Russia conference in Nizhny Novgorod on Tuesday, has not commented on the affair. Putin chairs United Russia, which was co-founded by Luzhkov.

"If Luzhkov prevails, the influence of television channels will be greatly reduced. How then are they going to hype Putin's plan?" Denis Bilunov, a leader of the Solidarity opposition group, wrote on his blog.

But Sergei Markov, a State Duma deputy with United Russia, denied that the Luzhkov affair would have any negative consequences for the country's ruling tandem.

"The [television] campaign is not meant to make Luzhkov resign, just to beat him a little," Markov said by telephone.

Meanwhile, national media reported that the "information war" was just heating up. NTV television is planning a report about his billionaire wife, Yelena Baturina, in its program "Russian Sensations," Russian Newsweek reported Wednesday on its web site, citing sources

in the Ostankino television complex.

The Gazprom-owned channel last Friday aired a program accusing Luzhkov and Baturina, who owns the Inteko construction company, of massive corruption.

But Prosecutor General Yury Chaika said Wednesday that his agency would not investigate City Hall's construction sector.

Chaika explained that prosecutors had recently investigated the legality of city construction throughout the country. "Moscow was fully checked, and there is no need to do this again," he said, RIA-Novosti reported.

The city construction department is at the heart of allegations that Luzhkov helped Inteko get lucrative deals.

Luzhkov and Baturina also fired a new round of threatened lawsuits against media that repeated the allegations.

On Wednesday, London's Financial Times became the first foreign publication to be targeted. The paper's Moscow bureau chief Charles Clover confirmed that editors had received a letter from Luzhkov's lawyers threatening to file a lawsuit for an article published Tuesday that repeated some allegations from the weekend TV reports.

Clover said the newspaper had decided to issue an apology.

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