

Attacking Luzhkov Is Like Playing With Fire

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As the clamor grows with every passing day from liberal circles for President Dmitry Medvedev to fire Mayor Yury Luzhkov, I have a piece of friendly advice for Medvedev: Don't rush into it.

It is true that Luzhkov — who because of peculiarities in the Russian political system serves at the pleasure of the president — has overstepped the bounds with his media appearances. In comments made to Rossiiskaya Gazeta early this month, Luzhkov allowed himself to ridicule Medvedev's decisions and has sought to position himself as immune from Medvedev's power under Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's protective umbrella.

It is also true that for a mayor of a major city to have a billionaire wife whose sizable income comes from construction projects with the city government led by her husband may look unseemly and unacceptable. But neither is illegal.

The mad rush to indict Luzhkov on corruption charges does not accurately reflect the popular mood toward the mayor by ordinary Muscovites. He may have forfeited the trust of the educated elites, but he still enjoys popular support and would probably win an open and democratic election.

That is why the character assassination campaign against Luzhkov unleashed by the federal television channels is the worst possible response to the mayor's chutzpah.

For one thing, it is trashy journalism. It makes television look like barking dogs on the Kremlin's leash, not agents of media freedom. If Luzhkov were so bad, where was your negative coverage before?

It also puts the president in a bind. He has the power to fire Luzhkov with a stroke of a pen and does not need this feeding frenzy to justify his decision. But if he fails to fire him after the public scorching of the mayor's reputation, he will look weak and open himself up for more insubordination. This is indeed a serious argument the liberals are pushing.

There is a big catch, though: The liberals do not have the votes to elect Medvedev as president in 2012, while Luzhkov does.

Luzhkov has already threatened the Kremlin with taking away Moscow's branch of United Russia for his own political gain. It is uncertain whether United Russia or its presidential candidate would be able to win a fair election in Moscow without the support of Luzhkov's huge political machine.

Medvedev needs to cut a deal with Luzhkov before Putin does to secure his return in 2012.

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