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Luzhkov's Wife Links Attacks to 2012

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Mayor Yury Luzhkov making the covers of leading news magazines on sale at a Moscow news kiosk on Monday. **Igor Tabakov**

Backers of President Dmitry Medvedev's re-election in 2012 are behind a campaign to unseat Yury Luzhkov because his loyalty is not guaranteed, said Yelena Baturina, the Moscow mayor's billionaire wife.

"Several functionaries" in the Kremlin have ordered damaging media reports against Luzhkov to force Medvedev to fire the 73-year-old mayor, Baturina said in an interview published Monday in the The New Times magazine.

Baturina's development company Inteko confirmed her comments.

"My father always said, 'If you tell someone for three years that he's a pig, he'll start to oink,'" said Baturina, 47, referring to a second weekend of documentary-style films broadcast on national television accusing Luzhkov of corruption and favoritism toward his wife.

Luzhkov, who has weathered past clashes with the federal government, is facing his biggest

challenge since becoming mayor in 1992. The Russian capital is a crucial prize in any national election, and Luzhkov has consistently delivered the city for Medvedev and his predecessor, Vladimir Putin, now prime minister.

The possibility that Luzhkov may support Putin instead of Medvedev in the run-up to the 2012 election is the reason people in the presidential administration want him removed, Baturina said.

Natalya Timakova, Medvedev's spokeswoman, did not answer repeated calls to her mobile phone.

The "media campaign" against Luzhkov has not affected the city's debt trading and won't influence the results of a Wednesday auction, said Sergei Pakhomov, head of the capital's state debt committee.

Moscow plans to sell 17 billion rubles ($547 million) of bonds due November 2015 at a yield of 7.4 percent to 7.48 percent in the auction, Pakhomov said by telephone Monday.

"This is an attempt to force him to make a decision that he isn't ready to make because there's simply no basis for it," Baturina said, referring to Medvedev. "I don't understand why both of the country's top leaders are pretending that nothing is going on."

It's impossible for all sides to save face in the showdown over the Mayor's Office, Baturina said.

Luzhkov has joined Baturina in Austria to celebrate his 74th birthday on Tuesday, the mayor's spokesman Sergei Tsoi said on Ekho Moskvy radio. Luzhkov is taking a week off after a meeting with the presidential administration, Kommersant reported Monday, citing an unidentified Kremlin official. He has been given time to contemplate his resignation, the newspaper said.

Luzhkov was prepared to step down two years ago after Medvedev said that any regional leaders who insisted on direct elections rather than being essentially appointed by the Kremlin should resign, Baturina said. When Luzhkov approached the president with his resignation letter, Medvedev told him that he had "completely other people in mind," she said.

Long-standing leaders of regions such as Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and Sverdlovsk have since left office.

Her family won't leave Russia and will continue doing business even if Luzhkov is forced to step down, said Baturina, the only woman on Forbes magazine's list of Russian billionaires.

Baturina said it's "100 percent wrong" to think that there's a conflict of interest between her husband's position and her development business. Inteko won only one city building tender and was forced to abandon it because local authorities did not meet their obligations, she said.

All of Inteko's other deals were with the federal government or private people, she said.

"As long as I don't break the law, I have the right to do what I do," Baturina said. "I have no

idea what preferential treatment I'm supposedly getting."

What's disturbing about the conviction on fraud and tax evasion charges of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, once Russia's richest man, is the "selectivity" of the case, she said. Baturina said she first met Khodorkovsky in 1987, when she and Luzhkov worked on the Moscow city committee on cooperatives, the Soviet Union's belated experiment with free market capitalism.

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