The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Kremlin Sources Say Mayor's Fate Is Sealed

By Nikolaus von Twickel

September 21, 2010

Luzhkov, seen in 2003, got birthday wishes from Putin but not Medvedev. **Igor Tabakov**

A tug of war around Yury Luzhkov persisted unabated Tuesday as Kremlin officials maintained that the mayor's political fate had been sealed even as he celebrated his birthday in the Austrian Alps.

Analysts also said Luzhkov was losing ground after a program produced in his defense was unexpectedly axed at TV Center, the television channel controlled by City Hall.

The Kremlin said Luzhkov's resignation was a done deal. The head of an unidentified Kremlin department received the mayor last Friday and told him that he had one week to resign voluntarily, Vedomosti reported Tuesday, quoting an anonymous official in the presidential administration.

A City Hall source told the newspaper that the government would propose a new job for

Luzhkov "within two or three weeks," the report said.

Earlier this month, Luzhkov became the target of an unprecedented smear campaign on state-controlled television that accused him and his billionaire wife, Yelena Baturina, of corruption and negligence.

The campaign was propped up by anonymous Kremlin officials telling national media that it was time for the mayor to step down.

On Sunday, Luzhkov left for a weeklong vacation in Austria amid speculation that he might not return to his desk.

A Kremlin source said last weekend that the mayor needed "time to think."

Vedomosti's Kremlin source said that if Luzhkov left on his own, his post might be given to Yury Roslyak, one of Luzhkov's eight deputies.

Kremlin spokespeople were unavailable for comment Tuesday.

On Tuesday, Luzhkov celebrated his 74th birthday with his family in Kitzbühel, a City Hall source told Interfax. Baturina owns a chalet, hotel and golf course just outside the posh Austrian ski resort.

Luzhkov got a congratulatory telegram from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on Tuesday, but the Kremlin published nothing from President Dmitry Medvedev.

Baturina said earlier this week that the attack on her husband is connected to a conflict between Medvedev and Putin in the run-up to the 2012 presidential election.

But Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov dismissed this, saying Putin sends routine birthday wishes to all regional leaders, Interfax reported.

Baturina, speaking to The New Times magazine, complained that "anonymous source" had become a new position in the presidential administration.

In another twist, TV Center failed to air a scheduled report in defense of the mayor late Monday.

But the report, "Russian Hell," produced by controversial investigative journalist Andrei Karaulov for his show "Moment of Truth," was widely available on YouTube on Tuesday. The 45-minute fawning report features friends of Luzhkov praising his achievements while political analysts explain that the media campaign against him is orchestrated by self-exiled businessman Boris Berezovsky.

The report's cancellation was interpreted as a sign that support for Luzhkov was fading even in his inner circle.

Alexei Mukhin, an analyst with the Center for Political Information, said TV Center's leadership was probably disoriented.

"They decided to be cautious because they fear that their own 'moment of truth' might be

imminent," he said.

TV Center has been closely controlled by City Hall in the past, and Luzhkov's spokesman, Sergei Tsoi, is chairman of its board.

But channel spokesman Alexander Pavlov was adamant that the decision not to show the report had no political connotation.

He said by telephone that the film's production company had asked the channel to drop it because the videocassette with the material had been in bad condition.

"The show is produced outside [the channel's premises], and when the cassette arrived here, it was found that it was faulty," Pavlov said.

"We have no right to show low-quality material, and I mean technical, not journalistic, quality," he said.

No technical glitches were visible in the online version of the report Tuesday.

Karaulov said his report would be aired later but refused to say when, the Marker.ru news site reported.

Meanwhile, Liberal Democrat Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky, whom Luzhkov successfully sued for defamation earlier this year, said the mayor should use his birthday to step down.

"Write your resignation letter, and your birthday will go down in history," Zhirinovsky said in a greeting published on his party's web site.

The note ended with a stab at the devastating smog from wildfires blamed for a jump in Moscow's death rates this summer.

"Happy birthday, Yury Mikhailovich. Sadly, the thousands of Muscovites who passed away this summer cannot join in on my congratulations."

Luzhkov was criticized for not immediately returning from a vacation during the smog.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/09/21/kremlin-sources-say-mayors-fate-is-sealed-a1623