

Luzhkov May File Suit Over Ouster

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The  Moscow Times

Former Mayor Yury Luzhkov will mount a legal challenge to his dismissal by President Dmitry Medvedev, Interfax reported Wednesday, citing a close friend of the ousted official.

Medvedev removed Luzhkov by presidential decree Tuesday in an effort to impose his authority following public criticism from the mayor. A lawsuit could further prolong the messy dispute.

Luzhkov has made no public comment since his firing, but former colleagues and legal experts say he has the right to contest it in court. The dismissal followed several programs on state television portraying him and his wife, a billionaire construction boss, as corrupt.

"Yuri Mikhailovich [Luzhkov] told me yesterday that he would file suit," said Iosif Kobzon, a famous singer and confidant of the ex-mayor, Interfax reported.

"I told Yury Luzhkov that it was absolutely useless, but he is a man of principle and by all appearances will stand his ground," Kobzon added. The mayoral friend was seen leaving the mayor's office with Luzhkov on Tuesday after his dismissal.

As if to mirror Kobzon's talk of a legal challenge, Kommersant cited unnamed sources as saying state investigators were looking into allegations of "illegal actions" by Luzhkov and his wife and real estate mogul, Yelena Baturina.

The newspaper said the checks, which hadn't reached the level of formal investigations, were based in part on claims made by opposition politician Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Zhirinovsky, a flamboyant deputy parliament speaker who generally supports the Kremlin and has vehemently criticized Luzhkov.

Luzhkov ran Moscow for 18 years, but he provoked the Kremlin's ire by targeting Medvedev with thinly veiled criticism in a newspaper article in early September.

A legal complaint would put Luzhkov at the mercy of a court system that, government critics said, both Luzhkov and the Kremlin have used to further their political and economic aims.

His ouster opened the door for the Kremlin to tighten control over Moscow, the country's financial powerhouse with a 1.1 trillion ruble (\$36 billion) budget.

It also raised concerns of a war over assets, including the property empire run by Baturina, whose Inteko construction company is one of Moscow's largest.

Medvedev, who appointed Luzhkov's ally and first deputy mayor Vladimir Resin as acting mayor, is expected to choose a new mayor from a list of candidates proposed by United Russia, the country's ruling party. It is headed by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Putin, who had steered Medvedev into the presidency in 2008 and has hinted that he may return to the Kremlin via the 2012 presidential election, made clear Tuesday that he will have a say in the decision of who leads Moscow, a city of 10.5 million people and a major source of votes.

He said United Russia hadn't yet come up with a list of candidates. But most of the names dropped by Russian media are Putin allies.

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