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Luzhkov Weighs His Legal Options

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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Luzhkov said in an interview released late Wednesday that he would not challenge President Dmitry Medvedev's decision to fire him a day earlier, The New Times magazine reported on its web site. But a **Igor Tabakov**

Ousted Mayor Yury Luzhkov weighed his options Wednesday as federal authorities vowed to pursue corruption investigations into the city's old guard.

Luzhkov said in an interview released late Wednesday that he would not challenge President Dmitry Medvedev's decision to fire him a day earlier, The New Times magazine reported on its web site.

But a close friend said earlier in the day that the mayor would go to court.

Amid signs that a new political era was beginning, acting Mayor Vladimir Resin said City Hall was working as normal even though its leadership collectively tendered its resignation Wednesday.

"Our task is to maintain the development that we have had for all those years in the future and to boost it," he told reporters, according to a statement on City Hall's web site.

All city administration officials had to formally resign the day after the mayor's departure as stipulated by law, City Hall said in a statement.

Medvedev fired Luzhkov on Tuesday, saying he had lost confidence in him. The decision followed an unprecedented anti-Luzhkov campaign on state-controlled television.

Luzhkov, who had ruled the capital for 18 years, will challenge Medvedev's decision in court, even if it seems pointless, State Duma Deputy Iosif Kobzon said, according to news reports.

"He said he will do it anyway, so people learn about his position," he told Komsomolskaya Pravda.

A legendary crooner, Kobzon is a close friend of Luzhkov and spent hours with the mayor after his dismissal Tuesday.

Kobzon said he did not know which court Luzhkov would appeal to, but lawyers quoted in news reports said the Supreme Court would be the arbitrator of such a lawsuit.

But The New Times, citing an interview with Luzhkov that will be published Monday, said the former mayor would not complain to the Supreme Court. It did not elaborate.

Analysts said Luzhkov's time in politics was over.

"There is no place for him in the existing parties and no time to set up a new one. The best thing he can do now is become a pensioner," said Alexei Mukhin, an analyst with the Center for Political Information.

Federal investigators promised Wednesday to pursue corruption investigations involving City Hall officials that were opened in recent months. But Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin denied reports that new investigations had been opened since Luzhkov's ouster, RIA-Novosti reported.

Acting Mayor Resin said a deputy mayor accused of corruption had resigned and that he had halted a controversial construction project near the Kremlin.

Deputy Mayor Alexander Ryabinin "tendered his resignation for personal reasons, and I approved this," Resin said, Interfax reported.

Ryabinin, who was responsible for construction and land issues, was under investigation on suspicion that he pressured a businessman into handing a retail property over to his own daughter.

Ryabinin was the most senior Moscow official to be targeted by investigators in what analysts said was part of a Kremlin campaign to unseat Luzhkov.

Resin also announced the halt of construction of a Kremlin museum annex on Borovitskaya Ploshchad.

The project has come under fire from architectural preservationists, who say the new building will ruin views of both the Kremlin and Pashkov House, a historical palace located on the same square, which is part of a UNESCO world heritage site.

Resin said he made his decision after seeing television coverage that criticized Luzhkov over the project.

He said, though, that Luzhkov had nothing to do with the construction because it was overseen by the federal government. "I withdrew the building permit to have it discussed by the architectural council. Let specialists have their say," he said, adding that City Hall would seek compromises in disputes with preservationists.

Konstantin Mikhailov, an activist with the Arkhnadzor preservation group, said he hoped that the decision marked the start of a policy change. "Many other scandalous projects in this city are continuing, and I would like to see them being reconsidered, too," he told The Moscow Times.

But in a typical Catch-22, the Kremlin museum said it would ignore Resin's decision. Museum director Yelena Gagarina told RIA-Novosti that she was not subject to City Hall and that construction could only be halted by the Culture Ministry or Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Also, city authorities for the first time ever have sanctioned a gay rights rally, an activist said. The city's central district prefecture has allowed the rally to go ahead this Friday, Nikolai Alexeyev, the organizer of repeated attempts to hold gay pride marches, wrote on his blog.

Under Luzhkov, who called homosexuals "satanic," City Hall regularly banned gay rallies, leading to violent clashes with activists.

Protesters will gather outside the offices of Swiss International Air Lines to call for a boycott of the airline, Alexeyev said.

He has threatened to sue the air carrier for breach of contract after it did not stop police from hauling him out of a Geneva-bound plane before takeoff at Domodedovo Airport on Sept. 15.

Resin, however, made it clear that City Hall's stance on gay rallies would not change under him.

"I have not heard about [Friday's rally], but I will tell you: I treat everybody equally, but I do not support this," he said, referring to gay rallies.

Resin, 74, was one of Luzhkov's closest allies and has also been linked to corruption after overseeing the city's vast construction sector. He is widely believed to be a transitional figure before a Kremlin-chosen successor takes over.

The ruling United Russia party, which controls a two-thirds majority in the Moscow City Duma, began consultations Wednesday about possible candidates. United Russia has two weeks to present a list of candidates to Medvedev.

Meanwhile, NTV television announced another damning report about Luzhkov. A report titled "Moscow. The Bells Toll" will be shown on the "Russian Sensations" program Saturday night,

according to a trailer released on the show's web site. Speaking about Luzhkov, the trailer says, "He was thought to be infallible, but it turned out that he was shortsighted."

NTV initiated the media attacks on Luzhkov on Sept. 10 with a report called "The Cap Affair."

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