

Sobyanin's Star Rises at Mayor Talks

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Sobyanin attending a meeting over the weekend with United Russia's leadership at the prime minister's Novo-Ogaryovo residence outside Mos
Alexei Druzhinin

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin fueled speculation about the identity of Moscow's next mayor by holding a United Russia meeting Friday with only one of the potential candidates in attendance.

Sergei Sobyanin, Putin's deputy and chief of staff, was promptly tagged by the media as the main favorite after attending the meeting to discuss mayoral nominees at Putin's residence outside Moscow.

The 52-year-old Sobyanin is not seeking the job, but his chances to get it anyway have increased, Kommersant [reported](#) Saturday, citing unidentified officials.

"According to Kommersant's information, he is not very excited about this. But the party — or at least its leader — could say: 'It is necessary,'" the newspaper said, quoting a Soviet-era

slogan in an apparent reference to Putin, who heads United Russia but is not a card-carrying party member.

Sobyanin, a former governor for his native Tyumen, headed the Kremlin administration from 2005 to 2008 when Putin was the president.

But Nikolai Petrov, an political analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center, said Sobyanin was unlikely to become the frontrunner because Putin needed him too much in his current position.

“Putin will have to look for a person to replace Sobyanin, who is now in charge of the government's communications with the governors,” Petrov said by telephone Sunday, saying Sobyanin's potential appointment would be a big sacrifice for Putin.

Pictures from the meeting in Novo-Ogaryovo featured Sobyanin sitting on Putin's right, facing senior United Russia officials. Also in attendance were Kremlin first deputy chief of staff Vladislav Surkov and party officials Boris Gryzlov, Andrei Vorobyov, Oleg Morozov and Vyacheslav Volodin.

Gryzlov, the State Duma speaker who heads United Russia's faction in the lower chamber, told journalists after the meeting that the new mayor would have “experience managing big projects,” United Russia said on its web site.

Gryzlov also pledged that the new mayor would retain social benefits for Moscow residents, including city-sponsored payments for pensioners, who formed the backbone of Luzhkov's support base.

United Russia must present its mayoral candidates to President Dmitry Medvedev by Tuesday. Yury Luzhkov was fired by Medvedev over a “loss of confidence” last Tuesday.

Putin hosted the party officials after meeting with Medvedev briefly earlier Friday. Putin told Medvedev that he would start talks on the mayorship later the same day, the Kremlin said in a statement. The prime minister usually ignores party consultations over the appointment of regional leaders.

It remained unclear Sunday whether United Russia had finalized its list of candidates. All discussions on the next mayor are going on behind closed doors, and no officials have proposed considering the opinion of Muscovites.

Analysts say the party needs a loyal mayor to secure victory in 2011 State Duma elections.

Other mayoral candidates listed by the media include Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu; Alexander Khloponin, a former business executive who now serves as the presidential envoy to the turbulent North Caucasus Federal District; former Luzhkov deputy and Nizhny Novgorod Governor Valery Shantsev; and Vladimir Kozhin, head of the Office of Presidential Affairs.

Meanwhile, acting Mayor Vladimir Resin has appointed Vladimir Shukshin as a deputy mayor in charge of investment issues and cooperation with the law enforcement agencies, Interfax reported Saturday.

The appointment was an apparent attempt to fill a vacancy left by deputy Mayor Alexander Ryabinin, who resigned after being questioned by investigators in a bribery case pending since March.

Ryabinin, who oversaw construction and land issues, remains at liberty. The Investigative Committee promised earlier to wrap up his case “soon.”

Meanwhile, Resin confirmed in televised remarks Saturday that the scandalous construction of a storage facility for Kremlin museums near the Kremlin had been frozen amid criticism over the project's architectural design. But, Resin said, the matter was decided by federal authorities and was not related to Luzhkov's dismissal.

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