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Sobyanin Called Shoo-In for Mayor

By Nabi Abdullaev

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A view of Moscow from the window of a passenger jet on Friday night. United Russia handed a list of four mayoral candidates to the Kremlin on Saturday. **Alexander Demianchuk**

President Dmitry Medvedev said Moscow's next mayor will be one of four candidates nominated by United Russia over the weekend, and analysts said the clear front-runner is Sergei Sobyanin, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's chief of staff.

Medvedev, who actively participated in deliberations with United Russia over the mayoral shortlist, said Saturday during a meeting with the party's leadership that he had pushed strongly for all four candidacies and would pick one as a successor to former Mayor Yury Luzhkov within 10 days as required by law.

Apart from Sobyanin, who is a deputy prime minister and widely seen as a Putin loyalist, the list of candidates includes Transportation Minister Igor Levitin, Nizhny Novgorod Governor Valery Shantsev and Lyudmila Shvetsova, a longtime Luzhkov deputy in charge of social policies.

"I believe that each of these candidates in general is able to become the head of a big city, of our capital, Moscow," Medvedev said at the meeting with United Russia officials at his Gorki residence outside Moscow.

The meeting was also attended by Vladislav Surkov, deputy head of the presidential administration and the Kremlin's pointman on domestic politics.

Medvedev said he had met with all four candidates.

Medvedev ousted the entrenched and self-confident Luzhkov on Sept. 28 in what political commentators have described as his boldest political move since his inauguration as president in spring 2008. Medvedev said he fired Luzhkov over a "loss of confidence" but has never elaborated on his reasons for removing the mayor after 18 years.

Sobyanin, a member of United Russia's supreme council, was tipped as a leading mayoral candidate even while Luzhkov, who resigned from the supreme council after his ouster, remained in office.

Political analysts have watched him closely since 2005, when then-President Putin elevated him from the post of governor of the oil-rich Tyumen region to Kremlin chief of staff. At the Kremlin, Sobyanin replaced Medvedev, whom Putin appointed as a first deputy prime minister as he groomed Medvedev to be his successor.

Analysts concurred Sunday that given Sobyanin's high status in the government, Medvedev has little choice but to pick him as the next mayor or risk undermining the stability of his ruling tandem with Putin and dealing a blow to Sobyanin's reputation.

"Sobyanin is as pro-Putin as he is pro-Medvedev," said Alexander Morozov, head of the Center for Media Studies, a think tank. "He has long experience working with the president, and will be an agreeable mayor for the capital for him."

Born in 1958 in an ethnic Mansi village in West Siberia's Khanty-Mansiisk district, Sobyanin quickly rose in the ranks of the Communist Party and Soviet institutions. In 1994, he was elected speaker of the district's parliament and became a senator two years later. Sobyanin was elected governor of the Tyumen region in early 2001. Later that year, he was elected chairman of the TNK oil company.

In 2007, Medvedev appointed Sobyanin as his campaign chief, a decision that still divides some analysts on whether he should be seen as Putin's or Medvedev's man.

Alexei Makarkin, an analyst with the Center for Political Technologies, said Sobyanin led Medvedev's campaign as Putin's man, aiming to make sure that Putin's plans materialized.

But analysts agreed that a certain trade-off has taken place between Putin and Medvedev in the drama over the Moscow Mayor's Office: Medvedev won political points by removing Luzhkov, while Putin has balanced the scales with the president by having his party install his candidate.

Putin leads United Russia, and the party has the right to nominate the next mayor because it holds a majority in the Moscow City Duma. The right, which was adopted as a law during

Putin's second term as president, allows the party with a majority in a regional legislature to submit a list of candidates for regional leader to the president, who can then pick one and send the candidacy to the regional legislature for confirmation. United Russia enjoys a majority in every regional legislature.

Sobyanin made no public comments about his nomination over the weekend. Levitin also remained silent, while Shantsev said it was a great honor to be among the candidates nominated by United Russia. Shvetsova said she would focus on social issues if she became the next mayor.

Analysts said the shortlist aimed to create a semblance of choice but also to send a signal to wary Muscovites: Shvetsova's inclusion was meant to assure residents that the generous social benefits they enjoyed under Luzhkov's City Hall would not be cut off; Levitin's candidacy demonstrated the Kremlin's understanding of concerns over congested traffic and poor roads in Moscow; while Shantsev, a long-time deputy and ally of Luzhkov, was named to calm city bureaucrats who feared purges in their ranks after the firing of their defiant boss.

Luzhkov left Moscow for Austria on Friday for a 10-day vacation necessitated by “a range of problems” connected with Luzhkov’s “private life,” Interfax reported, citing people familiar with Luzhkov's plans.

A source in Luzhkov's retinue told Interfax late Saturday that the former mayor had met the news about the list of mayoral candidates "quietly."

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