

Luzhkov Caught in Unguarded Vienna Moment

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Sitting on a bench close to St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, former Mayor Yury Luzhkov and his billionaire wife, Yelena Baturina, were listening to street musicians performing "Podmoskovnye Vechera" and "Hava Nagila" when they were spotted by two Russian reporters.

The two were Marina Bozhko from Interfax and Natalya Kopylova from RIA-Novosti, who were walking back to their hotel after attending a corporate finance conference in the Austrian capital Monday evening.

Grabbing the unique opportunity of an improvised [interview](#), the journalists approached the two and got lucky, Bozhko told The Moscow Times on Tuesday.

"They immediately agreed to speak to us," she said, adding that Luzhkov and Baturina were sitting there like ordinary people.

"There were no guards around," she said by telephone from Vienna.

Luzhkov was wearing his trademark flat cap and a sleeveless jacket and was in high spirits.

"He was really, really welcoming to us, and they made a lot of jokes," she said.

Luzhkov told the journalists that he would not leave politics but rather fight for the reintroduction of direct gubernatorial elections — especially after what happened to him.

The mayor was sacked by President Dmitry Medvedev two weeks ago for a "loss of confidence" after serving 18 years at the helm of the capital.

"I would have rather proposed my candidacy to Muscovites and not to the president or the City Duma," Luzhkov said, noting that there was a significant difference between elections and a nomination.

Muscovites, he argued, suffered double when then-President Vladimir Putin canceled gubernatorial elections in 2004. "On the one hand, they have no governor, and on the other hand they have no elected mayor," he was quoted as saying. Luzhkov filled both roles in Moscow, which is a city and a subject of the Russian Federation.

Luzhkov also refused to endorse any of the four candidates forwarded by United Russia last Saturday to succeed him.

"I have no motive to interfere in the nomination process in any way," he said.

On the list are White House chief of staff Sergei Sobyenin, Nizhny Novgorod Governor Valery Shantsev, Deputy Mayor Lyudmila Shvetsova and Transportation Minister Igor Levitin. Medvedev said in comments released Tuesday that he would propose a candidate to the City Duma "in the nearest future."

Luzhkov did make a surprise endorsement of the opposition Yabloko party, saying the country had no democratic parties "with the possible exception of Yabloko."

Under Luzhkov, City Hall routinely refused to sanction opposition rallies, and Yabloko, the country's oldest liberal party, lost all its City Duma seats in elections last fall that it criticized as rigged.

Luzhkov, a founding father of United Russia, quit the party after he lost his job.

Yabloko leader Sergei Mitrokhin on Tuesday welcomed the ex-mayor's remarks, saying his party was prepared to cooperate with him on a case-by-case basis.

But Mitrokhin ruled out the notion that Luzhkov might join Yabloko because both sides have "very different political positions," he said in comments published on the party's [web site](#).

Baturina told the two Russian reporters that talk about her real estate company, Inteko, losing its business after Luzhkov's dismissal was "hysteria" and that she also saw no negative effects for Bank of Moscow, in which City Hall holds a 46.48 percent stake.

Baturina has been accused of amassing a vast fortune and becoming Russia's richest woman

through her marriage, but she said Monday that her work did not play an important role in her life.

"You might find this strange, but business never was the most important thing in my life. Not even the second most important," she said, whereby Luzhkov added, "The children come first and the husband second."

The interview ended here when two teenage girls came running toward them — and the reporters guessed that they were the couple's daughters, Yelena and Olga.

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