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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Sobyanin Appoints Tourism Veteran

By Olga Razumovskaya

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Most foreigners don't visit for pleasure, as language and infrastructure challenges outweigh Moscow's charm. **Igor Tabakov**

Mayor Sergei Sobyanin appointed a veteran tourism industry lobbyist, Sergei Shpilko, as the new head of the city's tourism committee, a statement said Thursday, in what may be a bid to attract more tourists.

Shpilko, president of the Tourism Industry Union, is replacing the department's outgoing chief Grigory Antyufeyev after more than a decade of service, the union said in the statement on its web site.

Shpilko said he had ideas for developing the sector but would consult with industry players, such as tour agencies, hotel managers and tour guides, before presenting a plan to Sobyanin.

"Proposals to the city's new authorities must be a collective brainchild of professionals," he said.

Moscow "now" earns $4 billion yearly from tourism, Antyufeyev said in September. A foreign tourist typically spends three to four days in the city — and $1,000, he said.

Shpilko has worked for the Tourism Industry Union as president since 1995. He served as a top federal tourism official — including as chief of the Federal Tourism Committee — before then.

Russian tourism market experts believe that Shpilko will have many challenges in his new post.

"There is a frigging load of problems to deal with in the tourism industry in Russia," said Irina Tyurina, a Tourism Industry Union spokeswoman.

She pointed at the list of top-30 problems that preclude foreigners from coming to Russia, which the union had compiled back in 2005. Most of them, she said, remain largely unresolved.

The list includes, among other things, prohibitive prices for tour packages in Russia, lack of advertising for tourism opportunities and even risk of terrorist attacks.

Two suicide bombers set off explosive devices in the Moscow metro in late March, killing more than 40 people and injuring more than 100.

Tyurina also named migration rules, by which foreign travelers must register in every city they visit, as a continuing issue.

Russia's and Moscow's image as a tourist destination in the eyes of foreigners leaves much to be desired, Tyurina said.

There are about 40 foreign tourism offices in Moscow that represent interests of foreign countries and regions, Tyurina said.

Moscow has no such offices abroad that could improve its image, she said.

Nevertheless, tours to Moscow are increasingly popular. According to the latest data compiled by the Tourism Industry Union, 3 million foreigners visited Moscow in the first nine months of 2010, which is 17 percent more than last year.

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