

Putin Names Mayor as United Russia's Moscow Chief

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin tapped loyal Mayor Sergei Sobyenin on Tuesday to head his dominant United Russia party's branch in the capital ahead of December parliamentary elections.

United Russia hopes to maintain its huge parliamentary majority in the vote, which precedes a March 2012 presidential election in which Putin is expected to return to the Kremlin or endorse President Dmitry Medvedev for a second term.

The Kremlin and United Russia installed Sobyenin as mayor of Moscow — home to more than 7 million of Russia's 108 million registered voters — after Medvedev dismissed longtime Mayor Yuri Luzhkov in September.

"It seems to me that a leader of the Moscow organization of United Russia has not yet been chosen. It would be right for you to head it," Putin told Sobyenin in televised comments. Sobyenin accepted the job.

The city branch of the party will officially appoint him to the job on March 2, it said on its web site Wednesday.

The appointment will increase the pressure on Sobyenin to bring in votes for United Russia, whose popularity nationwide fell to its lowest point in more than a year last month according to a survey by the independent Levada polling agency.

The poll, released Feb. 2, indicated that 35 percent of Russians would vote for United Russia if the election were held the following weekend — 10 percentage points fewer than in December.

Sobyenin, a member of United Russia's supreme council, became Kremlin chief of staff in 2005, when Putin was president. He stayed with Putin, as government chief of staff, when Putin shifted into the prime minister's post in 2008.

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