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Kremlin Turns to Supercomputer for Advice

By Nabi Abdullaev

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Medvedev visiting the garage where HP's founders started out in 1938.

The Kremlin has ordered the creation of a supercomputer that will provide the next president with policy recommendations based on an analysis of what bloggers write about the government, insiders involved in the $220 million project said.

The future supercomputer — dubbed the Dmitry Mendeleyev — is expected to have the power of 18 petaflops, or 18 quadrillion operations per second, the equivalent of 1.8 million regular laptops, and will be developed jointly by the Palo Alto, California-based HP and an IT-taskforce created within the Skolkovo innovation hub.

"The Mendel, as we call it here, will be almost as powerful as the IBM's Sequoia, but the unique operating system being developed by our Russian colleagues will allow the supercomputer to perform tougher tasks than other supercomputers," HP spokesman Sameer Jaieen said by telephone.

He put the cost at $220 million and said the computer would be capable of analyzing all social network entries made by Russian users in near real-time and boil them down to a coherent text of several sentences.

"It's kind of a brief digest of what Runet was about on a given day," he said.

Medvedev's representatives contacted HP shortly after his visit to Silicon Valley last June, Jaieen said. HP ruled out working with Skolkovo earlier this year but had a change of heart in regards to the supercomputer, he said.

A Skolkovo spokeswoman confirmed that specialists were working on IT projects aimed at helping the Kremlin improve governance. She declined further comment, saying she was not authorized to disclose details.

Supercomputers are a pet subject of President Dmitry Medvedev, an active blogger who likes positioning himself as an Internet-savvy leader.

Last January, he ordered the government to examine the possibility of doubling the power of the Mikhailo Lomonosov supercomputer based at Moscow State

University. Lomonosov boosts the power of 450 teraflops and is the 12th most powerful in the world. Doubling its power would demand $65 million, according to expert estimates.

Pundits were puzzled by Medvedev's order at that time, saying they didn't see how the increased power would be used.

A senior presidential administration official told The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity that whoever won the presidential election would use Dmitry Mendeleyev as the main feedback tool to assess and analyze public moods and expectations.

He said no one in the Kremlin regarded the State Duma, the Public Chamber or the VTsIOM pollster as reliable sources of feedback about society.

"Well, Medvedev learns many things because he logs in every morning and evening, but how many blogs he can read through each time? Five? Ten? Russian society is bigger than this," the official said.

HP said the computer would undergo initial tests April 1 and was expected to be completed by December, three months before the presidential election.

Vladimir Pribylovsky, a political analyst with the Panorama think tank, was skeptical about whether Medvedev could rely on a supercomputer to help govern Russia. "What would stop Putin from getting access to this monster first? The first thing he would do would be to ask the supercomputer whether he should back Medvedev for a second term — and I am sure what the outcome would be," Pribylovsky said. He refused to elaborate.

Anton Nosik, a top Russian blogger, called the Dmitry Mendeleyev project a waste of government money and promised to raise the issue with Alexei Navalny, Runet's most active corruption whistleblower. Navalny was not immediately available for comment Thursday.

"I can analyze daily Runet messages for a sum way smaller than $220 million," said Nosik, adding, half-jokingly, that the analysis would most likely boil down to a string of expletives.

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