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Luzhkov Considers Political Comeback

By Natalya Krainova

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Luzhkov became a department head at Moscow International University after President Dmitry Medvedev ousted him as mayor in September. **Igor Tabakov**

Former Mayor Yury Luzhkov has reiterated his interest in returning to politics but said it would not be on United Russia's ticket for the State Duma because he didn't want a "pointless" job.

Luzhkov may be entitled to the seat of Duma Deputy Vladimir Gruzdev, who may trade his mandate for the post of Tula governor, Vedomosti reported Monday.

But Luzhkov denied this in a rare interview with Moskovsky Komsomolets published Tuesday, saying he had cut his ties with United Russia on purpose.

"I have my own considerations, but it is premature to go public about them," the 74-year-old Luzhkov said when asked about his political ambitions.

Luzhkov became a department head at Moscow International University after President

Dmitry Medvedev ousted him as mayor in September.

Luzhkov, one of United Russia founders, quit the party shortly after his dismissal, denouncing it as a "servant" of the Kremlin. He said at the time that he might continue his political career by campaigning for the return of gubernatorial elections, but gave no details.

Reports about Gruzdev's possible move to Tula surfaced last week. Vedomosti reported, citing a Kremlin insider, that Medvedev had offered him the job during a one-on-one meeting Friday. But Gruzdev called the report "nonsense," Itar-Tass said.

Incumbent Governor Vyacheslav Dudka has been implicated in a corruption case, and Tula media reported his looming departure last week. Dudka has insisted that he will stay in office.

By law, a vacated Duma mandate must be handed over to the leader of the regional branch to which the outgoing lawmaker belonged. In this case it was Luzhkov, who headed United Russia's list in Moscow in the 2007 elections but gave up the seat.

However, United Russia could instead offer the seat to other members of the Moscow branch who did not get Duma seats. There are nine people eligible for the offer, Vedomosti reported, without elaborating. The party has not commented.

The liberal Party of People's Freedom expressed concern Tuesday that the Justice Ministry was preparing to reject its application to register as a party for the Duma elections.

Nezavisimaya Gazeta, citing sources close to the ministry, reported Tuesday that the ministry was preparing to reject the application over faulty paperwork.

A party official, who asked for anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter, said the news might have been "leaked" to the newspaper as a trial balloon on orders from the Kremlin to check the reaction of the party's four co-founders, Mikhail Kasyanov, Boris Nemtsov, Vladimir Ryzhkov and Vladimir Milov. The four leaders made no official comment on the news.

Party spokeswoman Yelena Dikun, meanwhile, denied knowledge about any mistakes in the application forms and said she expected the party to be registered.

At the same time, she said ministry officials were asking party members "questions they weren't supposed to ask" about the party's record.

In Khabarovsk, Federal Security Service officers were exercising psychological pressure on activists, she said, without elaborating.

Nezavisimaya Gazeta said ministry officials have flooded party members with telephone calls asking about the party's establishment and operations, ostensibly to make sure that they are really members. Several of the party's deaf and mute members have even been called, and their inability to answer questions has been cited as evidence of that the party's membership claims are false, party official Irina Klimova told the newspaper.

The ministry, which has until June 23 to review the party's application, has registered only

two parties since 2004, rejecting all other requests on technicalities.

Repeated calls and an e-mailed request to the Justice Ministry's press office went unanswered Tuesday.

Staff writer Alexander Bratersky contributed to this report.

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