

Sobyanin's Goal: A 'Comfortable' City

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Mayor Sergei Sobyanin says he can solve Moscow's problems and make it a global financial center, despite widespread concerns over corruption, red tape and growing traffic congestion.

Seven months after his appointment by President Dmitry Medvedev, Sobyanin said improving public transportation and reducing corruption were among his priorities as he tries to make the city a more attractive place to live and invest in.

"Moscow's biggest plus is that it is the capital of Russia," he said in an interview. "The biggest financial flows are here, the headquarters of the biggest financial companies are here.

"If you are talking about the possible income from investments in Russia, in Moscow, then I think the return on the investment is significant," he said. "There are, of course, more significant risks of making losses, but that's a question of management and professional decision making."

Moscow attracts more investment than other Russian cities and accounts for about a quarter of the country's \$1.5 trillion economy.

But many foreigners are put off by the high cost of living, long winters, traffic, pollution and concerns over the rule of law and safety following several bomb attacks.

Even so, Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin want the city of 11.5 million people to become one of the world's main centers of global finance by 2020.

"We must create conditions to make him [the investor] comfortable," said Sobyenin, who will turn 53 on June 21. "The mayor's main task is to create comfortable living conditions for Muscovites, and of course for foreigners. If we make Moscow comfortable for our own people then it will resolve the problems for creating an international financial center."

Top of his priorities, Sobyenin said, is improving public transportation, rather than developing the road network, to encourage commuters to use their cars less and reduce the traffic jams that bring the city almost to a halt during rush hour.

He is also fighting bureaucracy and corruption, cited by investors as reasons to stay out of Russia.

"Transparent procedures for starting up business, for benefiting from state services and the openness of the authorities are key to reducing corruption," he said, adding that efforts to reduce bureaucracy and corruption were discussed frequently and systematically by the city authorities.

Sobyenin also wants to ensure that Moscow is considered safe before Russia hosts the World Cup football finals in 2018.

A suicide bombing killed 37 people at Moscow's Domodedovo Airport in January, less than a year after suicide attacks on the Moscow metro killed 40 people in March 2010.

"Moscow is probably not alone in having such tragedies," Sobyenin said. He added, without giving details: "We are working on a full program called 'Safe City' in the case of an act of terrorism."

Sobyenin said he planned to open special schools in Moscow to help immigrant children learn Russian, hoping this would help break down divisions in the multi-ethnic city.

He made clear that he would be more tolerant than his predecessor, Yury Luzhkov, of opposition rallies if they did not block streets or disrupt public order. But he indicated that he would follow a similar line to Luzhkov in banning gay parades, despite international criticism.

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