

After Waffling, Matviyenko Agrees to Lead Senate

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President Dmitry Medvedev meeting with St. Petersburg Governor Valentina Matviyenko at the Kremlin on Tuesday.

Three days weren't enough for St. Petersburg Governor Valentina Matviyenko to make up her mind.

But a closed-door Kremlin meeting with President Dmitry Medvedev did the trick Tuesday, and his spokeswoman announced afterward that Matviyenko had accepted the speaker's seat in the Federation Council.

"Valentina Matviyenko will hold all necessary consultations with the governing body of the Federation Council and will proceed with election to the upper chamber," spokeswoman Natalya Timakova said, Interfax reported.

Matviyenko made no public comments after the Kremlin announcement, but St. Petersburg

blogs and Internet forums buzzed with excitement that the "iron lady," as she has been nicknamed, was on her way out after eight years as governor.

But at a first, regular meeting with Medvedev earlier Tuesday, Matviyenko left the president hanging when he officially offered her the speaker's seat. She told him that she would think about it.

"I'm in an ambivalent state of mind," Matviyenko said. "On one hand, I feel responsibility before the city, on the other hand, I consider the Federation Council post as a huge responsibility."

"I think that it would be good for the state if you headed the upper chamber of parliament," Medvedev replied, according to a Kremlin transcript.

Medvedev said he would leave the final decision up to Matviyenko and backed a proposal by her to consult with Federation Council senators and other regional governors first.

He then called her into the closed-door meeting.

The idea to appoint Matviyenko as Federation Council speaker was first raised at a meeting between Medvedev and a group of governors Friday. Matviyenko, who did not attend the meeting, said the same day that she would only comment on the proposal this week.

Her comments to Medvedev on Tuesday were her first on the issue.

Medvedev, who praised Matviyenko's work Friday, reiterated his satisfaction with her leadership at the first meeting Tuesday. The Kremlin spokeswoman did not elaborate on what was said during the closed meeting.

Matviyenko said at the first meeting that she had come to Medvedev to seek his advice about her career.

Medvedev's job offer signaled that the Kremlin wanted Matviyenko out as governor, and her apparently flustered reply indicated that she hadn't been prepared for the decision.

Politicians and analysts have said the Kremlin wants to replace the increasingly unpopular governor ahead of State Duma elections in December, and the speaker appointment would allow her to save face. While the speaker's post would leave Matviyenko second in line for the presidency, the governor's office wields more influence.

The speaker's post has been held by an interim speaker since the St. Petersburg city legislature ousted Sergei Mironov last month amid his critical rhetoric as a founder of the Just Russia party. Mironov has accused Matviyenko of orchestrating his ouster.

The St. Petersburg legislature will have to elect Matviyenko to the Federation Council for her to become speaker. It made no immediate announcement Tuesday on when it might elect her. But she won't face election earlier than the fall, because the legislature adjourns for a two-month summer recess starting Thursday, St. Petersburg lawmaker Vitaly Milonov said before the Kremlin announcement.

Nonetheless, Matviyenko, a United Russia member, should not have difficulty winning a majority of votes in the legislature, which is dominated by United Russia.

The Kremlin made no comment on her possible successor in St. Petersburg. Among the possible candidates named by observers are her chief of staff Mikhail Oseyevsky, Justice Minister Alexander Konovalov, Kremlin chief of staff Sergei Naryshkin and his deputy Alexander Beglov.

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