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Mayor: Low Turnout To Help Ruling Party

By Alexander Bratersky

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Mayor Sergei Sobyanin has vowed that United Russia will get 50 percent of the vote in Moscow in the State Duma elections this Sunday.

Speaking in a rare live-broadcasted interview, Sobyanin made his bold prediction Friday despite the fact that polls show the ruling party has less than 30 percent support in the capital — but he pinned his bet on a low turnout for the other parties.

He insisted that he was not aware of any campaign violations in the city and promised to restrict pro-Kremlin youth groups — which plan to lead tens of thousands into the streets on election day — from stifling opposition protests.

Sobyanin also said his government has canceled real estate development contracts worth $50 billion inherited from his predecessor Yury Luzhkov, and that he has no plans to start commuting to work by metro.

Defying his image as a taciturn, secretive bureaucrat, Sobyanin appeared relaxed and well-

spoken in a video recording of the interview by several journalists from the liberal Ekho Moskvy radio, cracking jokes and skillfully dodging sharp questions.

"I'm not demanding percentages from anyone," Sobyanin said when asked about allegations that city officials are pressuring Muscovites into voting for United Russia.

He promised to have all reports of violations investigated.

Sobyanin, who heads United Russia's party list in Moscow, also defended the party's move to send campaign leaflets in his name to some 3.5 million city residents.

All leaflets were printed legally with party money, and he endorsed the party as a politician, not the mayor, he said, pointing out that the ads were signed simply "yours, Sergei Sobyanin."

But he also admitted that he does not plan to go to the Duma if elected, thereby conceding that he is running as a "locomotive," or vote booster, for the ruling party.

Sobyanin denied he is "giving the city" to the pro-Kremlin Nashi movement, which intends to bring in 30,000 members to camp out in downtown squares for three days starting on election day Dec. 4.

"We won't let them just rally or take to the squares. If they want to stroll on sidewalks, let them," Sobyanin said in reference to the legislative nuance by which rallying on sidewalks and not roadways is not considered a public event and therefore requires no sanction from the authorities.

He also insisted that Moscow holds twice as many rallies and street events as "European cities," without elaborating.

Nevertheless, he said there would be no gay pride rallies because most Muscovites are against them.

Speaking about his nonpolitical initiatives, Sobyanin said City Hall stopped real estate projects worth a combined $50 billion — most of them in the city center.

Most were "barbaric" office building or shopping mall projects poised to ruin Moscow's historical outlook, he said.

He did not comment on a number of similar projects greenlighted by his office despite protests from preservationists, such as the September demolition of the city's century-old main mosque by the Prospekt Mira metro station, to be replaced by a new building.

Sobyanin also defended his controversial plan to introduce bus lanes on existing roads in a bid to force some of the 500,000 to 700,000 motorists who traverse the city daily to switch to public transportation.

The traffic is worse now than it was before the introduction of bus lanes, Sobyanin conceded. But he blamed it on the overall dismal traffic situation, which he said "left no time for argument."

Still, he shot down a proposal from Ekho Moskvy editor-in-chief Alexei Venediktov to give up his own car and commute to work by metro, dismissing it as "cheap populism."

"There would be nobody to run the city" if the mayor were to travel by metro, Sobyanin said.

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