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Khimki's Controversial Mayor Quits

By Alexander Bratersky

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Former Mayor Vladimir Strelchenko **Igor Tabakov**

Former Khimki Mayor Vladimir Strelchenko, accused of organizing attacks on protesters of a pricey highway set to cut through Moscow region forestland, resigned on Wednesday.

Oleg Shakhov, a former deputy mayor of Tula who once served as head of Dorogi Rossii, a federal road construction company responsible for building the Khimki highway, will serve as mayor until a popular election on Oct. 14.

Strelchenko, a former Afghan war veteran and close associate of former Governor Boris Gromov, had been accused by opponents of ordering attacks against naysayers to the $8 billion toll road's construction.

Pavel Salin, an analyst with the Center for Current Politics, said Strelchenko could have cut a deal with Governor Sergei Shoigu to resign in order to escape criminal charges.

"Even if he is implicated, he is unlikely to get a real jail term," Salin said.

In 2008, Mikhail Beketov, an editor of a local independent newspaper that accused Strelchenko of corruption, lost a leg and suffered brain damage after unidentified thugs beat him up in the street. He never fully regained his speech and can only move around in a wheelchair.

Sergei Mitrokhin, a Yabloko party leader who took an active role in defending the Khimki forest, said Shoigu likely forced Strelchenko out.

"I can understand such a decision because it is impossible to rule a territory presided over by criminals," Mitrokhin said.

In 2010, opposition activist Konstantin Fetisov had his skull fractured after being beaten near his home. Investigators have implicated Khimki administration official Andrei Chernishov in that attack.

Vladimir Samodelov, now ex-mayor of Balashikha, resigned on Monday. Speaking to reporters, Shoigu called him and Strelchenko "experienced officials."

"But it is time to take new steps," Shoigu said. "Our task is to have clean elections."

With new mayoral elections in a couple months, opposition activists have already called on prominent Khimki forest defender Yevgenia Chirikova to run.

Chirikova, who ran against Strelchenko in 2009 and got 15 percent of the vote, said she is not planning to run this time around.

Yabloko's Mitrokhin said Igor Belousov, a former Khimki deputy mayor-turned-Strelchenko opponent, would represent the party in the Khimki election.

But Salin from the Center for Current Politics said the opposition is unlikely to win, because the road construction issue involves high-profile businesspeople connected with President Vladimir Putin.

"The project involves clan interests," Salin said.

Arkady Rottenberg, a longtime friend of Putin, is a stakeholder in the North-West Concession Company, which is working on the Moscow-to-St. Petersburg road.

Khimki has a population of 208,563. The Moscow suburb contains Sheremetyevo International Airport and popular outlets of big-box foreign retailers Ikea, Auchan and Leroy Merlin.

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