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Shoigu Promotes Transparency, Elections Coverage

By Rachel Nielsen

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Shoigu says he wants honest and transparent elections without populism. **M. Novikov**

With the Moscow region struggling to make land transactions less opaque and attract more corporate investment, Governor Sergei Shoigu has been ramping up rhetoric about transparency.

He presided over the launch of an online news portal for the region at a Tuesday news conference, where he said the website will cover political campaigns and elections at the municipal and regional levels, RIA-Novosti reported.

A day earlier, the magazine Itogi published an interview with Shoigu in which he said the region "needs honest, transparent elections without underhanded methods, without dirt and without empty populist promises."

Shoigu backed the legislative changes required for direct elections in the region. "We are

trying to change the situation and introduce direct elections everywhere in the region," he said. "Of course, here we're really hoping for the support of our lawmakers."

Some cities in the Moscow region do not have direct mayoral elections, and the mayor's functions are carried out by a city manager elected by the city legislature.

His statements came less than a week after Vladimir Strelchenko stepped down from his post as mayor of Khimki, a suburb north of Moscow. Strelchenko had been beset by allegations of abuse of power. Activists endured sometimes violent attacks during their campaign to keep a highway project out of the Khimki forest.

In a telling statement, the new official Moscow region website posted an RBK article on Strelchenko's resignation that mentioned the mayor's multiple scandals.

A popular election is scheduled for Oct. 14. Opposition leader and Khimki forest defender Yevgenia Chirikova has already announced that she will run for mayor, while various political parties also might put forward candidates.

At Tuesday's news conference to unveil the portal, Shoigu said the website should cover the Khimki mayoral elections, RIA-Novosti reported.

RIA-Novosti operates the new website for Moscow region news, called V Podmoskovye, or In the Moscow region.

In addition to straightening out crooked land transfers and attracting investors, Shoigu also needs to address the region's transportation jams and housing shortages, said Alexei Titkov, a professor at the Moscow Higher School of Sociological and Economic Sciences.

Interacting with constituents "is really important" for Shoigu, Titkov said.

Shoigu might have an edge in changing the political and business climates of the region, as he is a popular political figure. In a poll conducted by the independent Levada Center earlier this month and released Monday, respondents who said they view President Vladimir Putin as partially or totally replaceable named Shoigu among the top five people they could foresee taking Putin's place as the country's leader.

Shoigu tied with billionaire presidential candidate Mikhail Prokhorov and right-wing State Duma Deputy Vladimir Zhirinovsky at 6 percent. The overall survey of about 1,600 people had a 3.4 percent margin of error.

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