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Kremlin to Protect Venezuelan Interests Even If Opposition Wins

By Alexander Bratersky

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Hugo Chavez

Correction appended

Russian ties with Venezuela will not remain as close as under the late President Hugo Chavez, but the Kremlin will be able to protect its interests even if the opposition wins, analysts and government officials said.

Russia raised the profile of its delegation sent for Chavez's funeral, signaling that it wants to maintain strong ties with the country's new leadership.

Federation Council Speaker Valentina Matviyenko, who was the most senior Russian representative, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov were included in the delegation at the last minute, Russian media reported, citing government sources.

The members also included Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin, who was previously expected to head

the delegation, Russian Technologies CEO Sergei Chemezov and Industry and Trade Minister Denis Manturov.

Matviyenko, a former Young Communist League official, said in a televised speech Friday that Chavez had been "fighting for the bright future of his country," a popular Soviet-era phrase featured in the obituaries of foreign communist leaders.

Local officials also contributed to this mood, comparing Chavez to Vladimir Lenin, the founder of Soviet Russia. In a fashion similar to communist leaders and Egyptian pharaohs, Chavez will be embalmed and preserved in a special tomb, acting President Nicolas Maduro said last week.

Analysts said Russian embalming experts might advise Venezuelan medics on the issue, because the country has vast experience in the matter.

Chavez's body will remain on display for over a week before the embalming procedures begin.

Emotions ran high as thousands of mourners flooded the streets of Caracas, echoing the 1953 funeral of Josef Stalin, who died on the same day as the Venezuelan president. Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko, who arrived to the ceremony with his teenage son Nikolai, even shed some tears.

But as Venezuelans bid farewell to the president, senior members of the Russian delegation were likely concerned about the future of bilateral economic relations.

"I hope that Chavez's heritage will further strengthen our relationship," Lavrov said Saturday in an interview with television channel Rossia.

"We will work even more actively [with Venezuela]," said Sechin, who was shown with a badge featuring the late Venezuelan president. He called Chavez a "great person."

Sechin, seen as a key promoter of a strategic partnership with Venezuela, has a lot to lose if the Latin American nation drastically changes its foreign policy after the next presidential election, scheduled for April 14.

Sechin's Rosneft is engaged in a long-term partnership with Venezuela's state-owned oil giant PDVSA, with the two companies developing the Junin-6 heavy oil field jointly with Russian oil major LUKoil. Rosneft has pledged to invest $10 billion in the field's development.

LUKoil vice president Andrei Kuzyayev said Friday that the company would increase its oil production in Venezuela if the situation in the country was stable and investment friendly, Reuters reported.

Russian authorities hope that Maduro will win the election. But some experts said that even if opposition candidate Henrique Capriles Radonski wins, Russia will be able to retain its oil contracts, despite facing competition from foreign companies. Capriles, some of whose ancestors were born in the Russian Empire, was officially named a presidential candidate, RIA-Novosti reported Sunday.

"I think Russia has taken a very pragmatic approach and tried to secure its contracts, making

sure that at least formally it covered all the legal formalities, like going through tenders, getting approval from [Venezuela's] Congress, etc.," said Rostislav Ordovsky-Tanaevsky Blanco, a Moscow-based Venezuelan businessman and the founder and chairman of the restaurant chain Rosinter.

"But, of course, when this regime changes, because inevitably all autocratic regimes change, the relationship between Russia and Venezuela will be very deeply scrutinized, and I hope that Russia will take the necessary actions to develop good relations with whomever comes after Chavez," Ordovsky-Tanaevsky said.

Opposition hopeful Capriles said earlier that Venezuela will not buy any more Russian weapons. However, since the country has already purchased Russian arms worth $7 billion, it will have to buy Russian spare parts in the future, analysts said.

As a result of the president's death, the "special character of Russian-Venezuelan relations pursued by Chavez" will fade away, Fyodor Lukyanov, head of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy, told the Kommersant FM radio station Saturday.

Ordovsky-Tanaevsky said the ball is now in Russia's court .

"At this stage there is still a good possibility for this cooperation to continue, but this will entirely depend on how Russia will proceed, especially in terms of broadening its contacts, as well as making sure that it does a review of all the different cooperation agreements and that it keeps only those that make sense commercially for both countries," Ordovsky-Tanaevsky said.

Due to an editing error, the original version of this article said "corporation agreements" instead of "cooperation agreements" in the last paragraph.

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