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Zhukovsky Election to Affect Local Aircraft Industry

By Alexander Bratersky

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A taxi waiting in Zhukovsky, where several aviation businesses are based. **V. Baranov**

ZHUKOVSKY, Moscow region — Sunday's mayoral election in Zhukovsky, known as the birthplace of Russian aviation, will not only become a test for the ruling United Russia party, but will also play a critical role in the future of the aircraft industry.

The election in Zhukovsky, a city of more than 106,000 people, was called to fill the mayoral post left vacant after the previous mayor Alexander Bobovnikov, who was widely believed to be unpopular, stepped down in January.

The city was also chosen in 2007 to become the site of the ambitious National Aviation Center project.

The center is being jointly developed by Russian Technologies, headed by Kremlin-linked chief executive Sergei Chemezov, and United Aircraft Corporation, the company behind

the Sukhoi Superjet.

The center's head Tigran Alexanyan said earlier that it would become an innovation hub similar to Skolkovo.

Representatives of the center said that they planned to move aviation design offices from Moscow to Zhukovsky.

The government strategy that gave birth to the idea for the center forecasts annual sales of Russian-made planes rising to $5.9 billion by 2015 from $4.5 billion in 2010.

Though United Aircraft Corporation is building its headquarters in Zhukovsky, the National Aviation Center's future plans will be uncertain until the outcome of the election is clear, said Alexander Romanovich, a State Duma deputy representing the center-left Just Russia party.

Local aviation specialists are skeptical about the project. Some of them believe that Alexanyan would rather focus on real estate projects than on the development of the aircraft industry. Alexanyan has been involved in property development projects over the past few years.

Local aviation executives also opposed the plans to build the center, saying that the idea had not been studied sufficiently. They spoke on condition of anonymity to express their opinions more freely.

"The construction of the center has been frozen for good," Pavel Vlasov, head of the Gromov Flight Research Institute,

said Wednesday during a meeting with Sergei Mironov, leader of Just Russia.

Mironov was in town to campaign for Sergei Knyshyov, the candidate backed by the party, who made a name as the union leader for Sheremetyevo-based pilots.

"This project is aimed at destroying the country's aviation industry," a gray-haired test pilot who introduced himself as Alexander Viktorovich told Mironov.

Another Gromov Flight Research Institute official said he doubted that professionals from Moscow would move to Zhukovsky and that many remaining local experts are aging.

He also said he intended to vote against the candidate backed by United Russia because he was unhappy with the authorities' treatment of the aviation industry.

"What can you expect when you have all those clowns replacing each other," he said, referring to Kremlin-backed politicians.

Walking through the local museum, which is dedicated to leading aircraft designers Nikolai Polikarpov, Andrei Tupolev and Ivan Sikorsky, aviation experts admitted that the days of glory for the city's aircraft industry are far behind.

But Sergei Chernyshov, the acting CEO of the Zhukovsky-based Central Aerohydrodynamics Institute, said proudly that the institute had managed to attract up to 1,000 young specialists by providing them with mortgage loans.

Although the institute pays from 30,000 ($1,000) to 50,000 ($1,600) to the young specialists — a competitive salary in Zhukovsky — headhunters from foreign giants like Airbus are going to local aviation colleges to hire the best professionals.

"If we don't do anything, the aviation industry will collapse," Anatoly Sashin, a young specialist at the Central Aerohydrodynamics Institute, said when asked why he had decided to stay in Zhukovsky. He said he was also concerned with the fate of the nearby Zhukovsky forest.

Almost 12 hectares of the forest — 8.5 percent of its total size — were destroyed last year during the construction of a road linking Zhukovsky with the venue for the MAKS air show.

The show is among the biggest money generators for the city budget.

The construction of the road has been postponed after a series of protests held by locals and opposition activists who clashed with police.

Mayoral candidate Sergei Knyshov said that he would support the construction of the road but would also take residents' opinions into account.

"The construction of the road has begun, it is possible to continue it with minimum losses for the forest," said Knyshov.

He added that the road would ease traffic in Zhukovsky and attract foreign tourists passing through the city to the MAKS air show.

Other key candidates, United Russia-backed Andrei Voityuk and Igor Novikov, backed by tycoon-turned politician Mikhail Prokhorov, also support the construction of the road but promise to find solutions to minimize damage for the forest.

A local official also admitted that the construction would continue regardless of who won. He said the governor would make sure that the project goes ahead.

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