

Criticism of Moscow's mayor is growing

On 10-12 September, the three biggest Russian TV stations broadcast programs embarrassing to the mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov. The attack on the mayor by state-controlled television may demonstrate that a part of the ruling elite is determined to force him to step down early. This is certainly an element of the struggle inside the ruling elite for succession to the post.

The public conflict between the Presidential Administration and Luzhkov, who has ruled Moscow since 1992, has lasted for several weeks. The pretext was the plan to run a transit road through the Khimki area near Moscow. The mayor was criticised by officials of the Presidential Administration; in response he suggested that "powers" interested in antagonising President Dmitri Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin have been attacking him (Luzhkov has declared himself as an ally of Putin). Immediately thereafter, the NTV, Rossiya and 1-Kanal television stations broadcast a peak-time series of programmes presenting Luzhkov as a corrupt politician, neglectful of the residents of Moscow, who promotes the interests of the construction empire owned by his wife (Yelena Baturina, the richest woman in Russia, whose fortune is estimated by Forbes at nearly US\$3bn). An additional element of the pressure on Luzhkov was the publication of a list of his potential successors.

Luzhkov is a phenomenon in Russian politics; despite the Kremlin's efforts to centralise government, and attempts to force a member of Putin's team through to the leadership of the richest city in Russia, he has managed to hold onto his position. He has also been used by the Kremlin for foreign missions (including to Crimea and Abkhazia), and has ensured good electoral results for government candidates. A full-on attack on Luzhkov on state-controlled TV stations suggests that this is an attempt to force his resignation in such a way that a new mayor of the Russian capital could take over for one year before the next important electoral cycle (parliamentary elections will take place in December 2011, and presidential elections in March 2012). <JR>