

Going From Populist to Puppet

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October 05, 2010

The  **Moscow Times**

The sacking of Yury Luzhkov after 18 years as Moscow mayor was the first major political upheaval since the Russia-Georgia war in August 2008. And it made shockwaves in large part because Luzhkov categorically refused to step down, explaining that he had the strong support and trust of most Muscovites.

Why did Luzhkov put up such a strong fight? For the same reason that former Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev ordered troops to fire into a crowd of demonstrators during the spring demonstrations in Bishkek and other cities. If public office is a politician's only guarantor of his wealth and business holdings, he will do whatever it takes to hold on to it.

Bashkortostan President Murtaza Rakhimov left office quietly after cutting a deal in which he agreed to give up his large holdings in petrochemical companies in return for the guarantee that he could keep the wealth that he amassed while serving as Bashkortostan's leader for 17 years. Unlike Rakhimov, Luzhkov refused the Kremlin's offer to leave quietly. But like Rakhimov, Luzhkov still gets to keep the loot.

It is interesting that another one of the last Mohicans — Kalmykia leader Kirsan Ilyumzhinov — is departing office at the same time as Luzhkov. Their paths are very similar. Ilyumzhinov, an elected president and multimillionaire businessman, also began his political career during a democratic period and served 17 years. In early September, though, he announced that he would not seek a fifth term when his fourth term ends on Oct. 24.

Ilyumzhinov's rule was tainted by corruption allegations and a high poverty rate among Kalmykia residents, as well as the mysterious circumstances of the 1998 murder of Larisa Yudina, publisher of a local opposition newspaper, that pointed to the republic's administration.

Does that mean democracy doesn't work? Not at all. In the 1930s, the mayors of Kansas City and Chicago were no angels either. Everything was the same: corruption, gangsters and ballot stuffing. No doubt we'll manage to overcome the same problems in time. Mistakes also occur in a democracy, but the difference is that they can be corrected peacefully, through elections.

There are really two Luzhkovs — the one who served under President Boris Yeltsin and the one who served under President Vladimir Putin. Under Yeltsin, Luzhkov was a populist who cried: "Down with the oligarchs! I'll turn Moscow into a modern city!" During the Yeltsin years, Luzhkov's wife, Yelena Baturina, was just a modest multimillionaire who sold plastic spoons and forks to the Russkoye Bistro chain — small-time stuff. It was only under Putin's rule that Baturina really hit the jackpot, becoming a serious real estate mogul and the third-wealthiest woman in the world, according to Forbes magazine.

Who will replace Luzhkov? Perhaps it will be Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Sobyenin for the simple reason that he vacationed with Putin in Tuva last weekend. But maybe acting Mayor Vladimir Resin, together with his million-dollar watch, will be retained. After all, nobody is better able to hand over the assets of the former mayor than a defector from his own camp.

One thing is certain, though: The next Moscow mayor will be appointed by the Kremlin and not elected directly by the people. But remember it was Luzhkov — appointed by Putin as mayor in 2007 — who helped transform the Moscow mayoral post into Putin's hand puppet.

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