

Luzhkov Applies for Residency in Latvia

By [Nikolaus von Twickel](#)

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Former Mayor Yury Luzhkov said Monday that he has applied for a residency permit in Latvia to move freely within Europe. But Luzhkov stressed that he had no plans to emigrate.

"If my country does not abandon me, I won't abandon it either," he told Interfax.

Speculation has been rife that the former mayor might flee the country ever since President Dmitry Medvedev fired him for loss of confidence in September.

State-controlled media have published numerous reports accusing Luzhkov and his billionaire wife, Yelena Baturina, of massive corruption. No criminal charges have been filed, and the couple have denied wrongdoing.

Latvia's immigration agency confirmed Monday that it had received a request from Luzhkov for a residency permit. Agency spokesman Andrei Ryabtsev said a decision must be made within 30 days, or, if the country's security services raise questions, within four months, RIA-Novosti reported.

Luzhkov filed the request with the Latvian Embassy in Moscow late last year, Riga-based TV3 television reported late Sunday. The embassy refused to comment on the report.

But Luzhkov's nationalist stance and his habit of meddling in foreign policy as mayor evoked unusually strong statements from Latvian Cabinet members Monday.

Interior Minister Linda Murniece predicted that Luzhkov will be unlikely to secure the residency permit.

"He does not deserve this because of [his] negative attitude toward our country," Murniece said, RIA-Novosti reported.

Before his ouster last fall, Luzhkov regularly denounced the three Baltic states' policies toward Russia and ethnic Russians living on their territories. Last year, he promised to cover the legal fees of Vasily Kononov, a Soviet partisan found guilty of ordering the deaths of civilians in Nazi-occupied Latvia in 1944.

But Latvian Defense Minister Artis Pabriks said that granting Luzhkov's request would not hurt national security.

"He was a very influential politician who made investments [in Latvia] and may legally obtain residency. There is no reason to believe that

Luzhkov is a swindler," Pabriks was quoted as saying by the Diena newspaper.

Local media reported that Luzhkov invested 200,000 lat (\$379,000) in a Riga bank, which under Latvian law makes him eligible for a residency for up to five years if the money is not withdrawn during that period.

Luzhkov also owns property in the Jurmala beach resort outside Riga, popular with Russians, the Delfi.lv news site reported.

Luzhkov was adamant Monday that he had chosen Latvia solely because of its friendly laws and that he had no plans to enter the country's politics.

He added that if Latvian authorities denied his request, he would seek residency in another European country.

Earlier media reports have said Luzhkov might move to Britain or Austria, where Baturina's real estate company Inteko has bundled its foreign operations and where she owns a chalet.

Austrian Embassy spokesman Robert Gerschner said a residency permit from any country in Europe's Schengen border-free zone gives a Russian citizen the right to live in Austria for 90 days every six months. Latvia joined the zone in December 2007.

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