

Moscow Faces an Extreme Makeover

By [Irina Filatova](#)

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ST. PETERSBURG — Moscow is on the way to becoming a brand-new city, several times larger and with new districts for the government and big companies built away from the city center.

The proposal to turn Moscow into a new federal district with a radically reshuffled layout was voiced by President Dmitry Medvedev at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum and readily supported by other officials, including Mayor Sergei Sobyenin.

Residents won't have a direct say in the plan, but analysts said the revamp of the city is long overdue and could score good points for Medvedev in next year's presidential election — provided that the project is not botched by the bureaucrats tasked with executing it.

Creating the Capital Federal District, which would stretch beyond the "traditional boundaries of Moscow," would "improve the development of the Moscow megapolis for the purposes of establishing a financial center and simply ease lives of a huge number of people," Medvedev said in his keynote speech at the forum Friday.

The plan includes removing government agencies — which now are mostly jammed into Moscow's Central Administrative District — beyond the Moscow Ring Road, Medvedev said, without elaborating.

Presidential aide Arkady Dvorkovich said after Medvedev's speech that the Capital Federal District — which would be the country's ninth federal district and the second created by Medvedev, after the North Caucasus Federal District last year — would stretch far beyond the MKAD, which now serves as the city limits.

He did not provide exact area estimates, but said, "We're talking not only about Zelenograd, of course, which is located beyond the Moscow Ring Road, and not only Butovo, which is part of Moscow today, but broader boundaries."

Zelenograd, formally a city district, is a satellite town 25 kilometers northwest of Moscow. A number of other densely populated towns in the Moscow region, such as Khimki and Korolyov, are located closer to the capital, which means they might become part of the Capital Federal District.

Removal of government facilities from the city center would also allow redevelopment aimed at making the area "more convenient, comfortable and beautiful" and spare Muscovites "the bother" that stems from officials, Dvorkovich said. "The bother" appeared to be a reference to the ubiquitous car corteges by senior officials that have priority on the roads and cause regular traffic jams downtown.

Mayor Sobyenin said the proposal spells "serious changes" to the city's development plan, which currently extends to 2025. But he added that City Hall and the Moscow region's government would rise to the challenge and decide on a neighborhood to house the government within two weeks.

The plan is not related to an oft-discussed proposal to merge Moscow and the Moscow region, Sobyenin said.

Sberbank head German Gref said at the forum that an international financial district should also be located on the new Moscow territory outside the Moscow Ring Road.

"We already have a suggestion where it could be," he said at a meeting of a council of consultants, including Sobyenin, responsible for establishing the international financial district. He did not elaborate.

The measure will "solve a number of problems with the city infrastructure, lessen the burden on Moscow and, most important, create a super-modern financial infrastructure," Gref said to Sobyenin's approval.

Meanwhile, Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin promised that relocating the federal officials would not cost the federal budget a kopek because of revenues that the freed downtown real estate could bring.

"We'll have to effectively dispose of the buildings, the property and assets that the government owns in the city center now and thus reduce the cost of such relocation to zero in the long term," he told journalists Saturday.

Sobyanin said there would be no referendum on expanding Moscow's territory, but promised that authorities would "ask residents' opinions" instead.

Medvedev's initiative could improve his image ahead of the presidential election provided that residents embrace it, said Mikhail Vinogradov, head of the St. Petersburg Politics Fund, a think tank.

Removing bureaucrats from the city center would improve Moscow traffic and allow the downtown area to be turned into a tourist zone, Vinogradov said.

The initiative also indicates that the replacement of Mayor Yury Luzhkov with Sobyanin was more than just "a reshuffle in the Moscow government" and will result in some "qualitative changes," Vinogradov said by telephone.

What placing the international financial district outside the MKAD means to Moskva-City, the financial district overseen by Luzhkov, was unclear Sunday.

Public disapproval may actually backfire on Medvedev, said Alexander Kynev, a political analyst with the Foundation for Information Policy Development.

He called the idea to expand the city boundaries and build the financial district outside the MKAD "ill-considered" because it could create a lot of trouble for residents of the Moscow region.

"There are municipal districts around Moscow that can't be liquidated without asking residents. The question is what the residents of the municipal districts that are liquidated will get," he said.

A lot of bureaucratic problems might arise "because we understand what any reorganization means," Kynev said.

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