

Medvedev Backs Matviyenko for Senate

By [Alexandra Odynova](#)

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President Dmitry Medvedev has backed Valentina Matviyenko, the increasingly unpopular St. Petersburg governor, as the new speaker of the Federation Council in what one State Duma deputy called "an exotic but logical" development.

Matviyenko's appointment, which some politicians embraced as a done deal over the weekend, would make her the first female speaker of either house of parliament and put her second in line to the presidency, after the prime minister.

Her departure from St. Petersburg would also allow Medvedev to remove a major irritant with local residents ahead of Duma elections and at the same time fill the vacant Federation Council seat with a Kremlin loyalist.

Bashkortostan leader Rustem Khamitov raised the idea of Matviyenko's appointment during a meeting of regional leaders at Medvedev's Gorki residence on Friday.

"I like this idea," Medvedev said, quickly finding a number of compliments to lavish on her.

He called her "an absolutely successful governor" with political experience and the "capability to solve tasks," according to a Kremlin [transcript](#). He also called attention to her gender.

"After all, if a central post in the state hierarchy is occupied by a woman ... our state will be more modern and develop better," Medvedev said.

Many St. Petersburg residents, however, would take issue with Matviyenko's success as governor, a position she has held since 2003. Over the winter, pollsters tracked a sharp drop in her popularity after her administration failed to tackle common winter problems like snow drifts and dangerous icicles.

In addition, Matviyenko came under fire for backing Gazprom's plans to build the Okhta Center skyscraper, which residents said would ruin the city's historic skyline. UNESCO warned that the city might lose its status as a world heritage site if the tower was raised.

Earlier this month, Gazprom said it would move the construction site of the 400-meter skyscraper to the city outskirts.

St. Petersburg blogs and forums started buzzing with enthusiasm about Matviyenko's possible departure just moments after Medvedev spoke.

The Federation Council post has been held by an interim speaker since the St. Petersburg city legislature ousted longtime Speaker Sergei Mironov last month. Mironov had been elected to the upper house by the United Russia-dominated city legislature, whose lawmakers grew increasingly disenchanted with his critical comments as a founding member and longtime leader of the rival Just Russia party.

Mironov called Matviyenko's possible appointment "an elegant combination," Interfax reported Friday. He stressed that he saw Matviyenko as the main person behind his dismissal last month. Indeed, on the day of his ouster he pledged to remove Matviyenko from St. Petersburg.

The St. Petersburg legislature would have to elect Matviyenko to the Federation Council for her to become speaker. Any vote would likely sail through the legislature, which enjoys friendly relations with the governor, a United Russia member.

Matviyenko was not among the candidates identified in media reports as Mironov's possible successor. Among those named were Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu and Senator Mikhail Margelov.

Matviyenko told reporters Friday that she would respond to her possible candidacy in a few days.

Matviyenko, 62, worked as a city official in St. Petersburg, then known as Leningrad, in the 1980s before being appointed as Russia's ambassador to Malta (1991-1995) and Greece (1997-1998). She joined President Boris Yeltsin's Cabinet as a deputy prime minister for welfare issues, a position she held until becoming St. Petersburg's governor.

Duma Deputy Sergei Markov said it might seem "exotic" to appoint someone as speaker who

is not currently a senator, but added that it looked "like a logical decision."

He and Rostislav Turovsky, a regional analyst with the Center for Political Technologies, said the Kremlin would solve two problems at once with the appointment.

"They had to employ her somewhere and found a position that formally carries respect," Turovsky said, adding that de facto her governor's post wielded more influence.

He said the Kremlin probably wanted to replace Matviyenko ahead of the summer vacation period, even though some analysts had anticipated her dismissal much earlier, in the fall, along with the ouster of Yury Luzhkov as Moscow's mayor.

By moving to the Federation Council, Matviyenko would replenish the ranks of the St. Petersburg elite in senior government posts, a trend started during Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's presidency. Both Putin and Medvedev hail from St. Petersburg.

For the Moscow elite, "it has become impossible to enter a top position because there are St. Petersburg officials everywhere," Markov said. He warned the Kremlin to watch out for the moment when "this inner irritation develops into open discontent."

Medvedev has not named any candidates to replace Matviyenko.

United Russia Deputy Konstantin Rykov [wrote](#) on his blog that Kremlin chief of staff Sergei Naryshkin was a likely choice.

Turovsky, the analyst, agreed that Naryshkin, a St. Petersburg native who has worked with Medvedev and Putin, looks like a possible bet.

"But if that happens it will prompt a new reshuffle" in the Kremlin, he said.

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