

Microsoft, Cisco Look Beyond Sunday's Vote

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Betting that the Kremlin will foster economic stability after next weekend's election, senior executives of the world's leading technology companies on Wednesday pulled the wraps off an independent advisory board aimed at pushing forward their modernization initiatives.

The board is represented by the top managers of the 19 companies, including Nokia, Intel, IBM, Sistema and Microsoft, that have agreed to establish research and development centers in the Skolkovo innovation hub, a pet project of outgoing President Dmitry Medvedev.

Some foreign investors are watching Russia warily amid large street protests against Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who is widely expected to win the presidential election on Sunday.

Russia's post-election modernization prospects are also causing "a certain amount of tension" among investors, said Skolkovo Foundation chairman Viktor Vekselberg.

But, he said, Skolkovo will continue to develop regardless of who becomes the next president. He said he realized during meetings with Medvedev and Putin that "Skolkovo is not a one-time project, but part of a big strategic modernization program."

Medvedev, an avid supporter of the development of new technologies and a frequent user of Twitter, initiated Skolkovo in 2010 as Russia's answer to California's Silicon Valley. The innovation hub is located in the Moscow region.

Putin has agreed to switch jobs with Medvedev if he wins the election. But the two appear to view modernization in different ways. Medvedev said last year that Russia has "chances and energy to conduct modernization at a faster pace," while Putin sees it as "a calm, gradual process."

Nikolai Pryanishnikov, chief executive of Microsoft in Russia, said he believes that Skolkovo, which already "has gotten its shape," will contribute toward diversifying the country's economy away from the oil and gas industry.

"I'm confident that regardless of any appointments the project will continue, and I hope that there will be a continuing focus on ... similar projects, which will help create an innovative economy," he told The Moscow Times after the inaugural meeting of the advisory board.

His counterpart at Cisco, Andrei Zyuzin, said the modernization program is "irrevocable" regardless of who sits in the Kremlin. He said this is because Russia lags behind developed countries by labor productivity, which could be increased with the introduction of new technologies and by increasing the computer literacy of employees.

Speaking in an interview after the meeting, Zyuzin also praised the new board as a way to accumulate the expertise of the world's leading innovation companies. It will also be able to closely cooperate with the authorities and coordinate the companies' suggestions, which could result in new legislative initiatives and government decisions, he said.

The board, which is independent of the Skolkovo Foundation, will meet three to four times a year, and its major task will be to track obstacles hampering R&D activity in Russia and propose measures "to overcome them and develop the companies' business in Russia," the Skolkovo Foundation said in a statement.

The board chairman, Nokia executive vice president Esko Aho, said the board's role would be to provide ideas on how Russia could create "the best possible environment" for the companies to grow locally.

The Skolkovo Foundation, the innovation hub's governing body, will ask resident companies to provide suggestions on how to improve the Skolkovo project and the country's overall regulatory base for developing innovations, said Roman Romanovsky, the foundation's liaison with the key partners.

The companies should provide the feedback by the time of the next board meeting in June, he said.

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