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Moscow Mayor Promises a Winter Without Snow

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By SIMON SHUSTER / MOSCOW – Sat Oct 17, 9:15 am ET



AFP/File – The Kremlin and a Soviet-era building pictured in the snow. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has ...

Pigs still can't fly, but this winter, the mayor of Moscow promises to keep it from snowing. For just a few million dollars, the mayor's office will hire the Russian Air Force to spray a fine chemical mist over the clouds before they reach the capital, forcing them to dump their snow outside the city. Authorities say this will be a boon for Moscow, which is typically covered with a blanket of snow from November to March. Road crews won't need to constantly clear the streets, and traffic - and quality of life - will undoubtedly improve.

The idea came from Mayor Yury Luzhkov, who is no stranger to playing God. In 2002, he spearheaded a project to reverse the flow of the vast River Ob through Siberia to help irrigate the country's parched Central Asian neighbors. Although that idea hasn't exactly turned out as planned - scientists have said it's not feasible - this time, Luzhkov says, there's no way he can fail. (See TIME's photo-essay "Vladimir Putin: Action Figure.")

Controlling the weather in Moscow is nothing new, he says. Ahead of the two main holidays celebrated in the city each year - Victory Day in May and City Day in September - the often cash-strapped air force is paid to make sure that it doesn't, well, rain on the parades. With a city budget of \$40 billion a year (larger than New York City's budget), Moscow can easily afford the \$2-3 million price tag to keep the skies blue as spectators watch the tanks and rocket launchers roll along Red Square. Now there's a new challenge for the air force: Moscow's notorious blizzards.

"You know how every year on City Day and Victory Day we create the weather?" Luzhkov asked a group of farmers outside Moscow in September, according to Russian media reports. "Well, we should do the same with the snow! Then outside Moscow there will be more moisture, a bigger harvest, while for us it won't snow as much. It will make financial sense." (See pictures of Russia celebrating Victory Day.)

The plan was unsurprisingly rubber-stamped this week by the Moscow City Council, which is dominated by Luzhkov's supporters. Then the city's Department of Housing and Public Works described how it would work. The air force will use cement powder, dry ice or silver iodide to spray the clouds from Nov. 15 to March 15 - and only to prevent "very big and serious snow" from falling on the city, said Andrei Tsybin, the head of the department. This could mean that a few flakes will manage to slip through the cracks. Tsybin estimated that the total cost of keeping the storms at bay would be \$6 million this winter, roughly half the amount Moscow normally spends to clear the streets of snow.

So far the main objection to the plan has come from Moscow's suburbs, which will likely be inundated with snow if the plan goes forward. Alla Kachan, the Moscow region's ecology minister, said the proposal still needs to be assessed by environmental experts and discussed with the people living in the area before Luzhkov can enact it. "The citizens of the region have some concerns. We have received lots of messages," she told the RIA news agency. (Read TIME's 1991 article "The End of the U.S.S.R.")

With only a few weeks left before winter comes, environmentalists will have to work fast to keep Luzhkov from implementing his zaniest plan to date - and to stop the first snowflakes from wafting down to the city streets.

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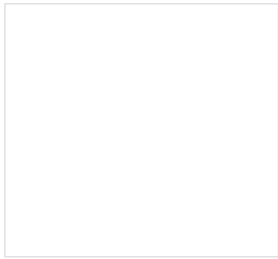
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