

Russian lawmakers, state-controlled TV point finger at tycoon in ex-spy's death

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MOSCOW: Poisoned former spy Alexander Litvinenko's deathbed message may have accused Russian President Vladimir Putin, but pro-Kremlin lawmakers and state-controlled television networks pointed the finger Friday at a prominent Putin enemy in Britain — tycoon Boris Berezovsky.

Legislators seconded a top Putin aide's suggestion that Litvinenko's death in a London hospital Thursday was part of a plot against Russia and claimed that Berezovsky, a major critic whose asylum in Britain has enraged the Kremlin, was involved in the killing.

"The death of Litvinenko — for Russia, for the security services — means nothing," Valery Dyatlenko, said on state-run Channel One television, contending that neither the Kremlin nor Russia's intelligence agencies would have reason to kill him. "I think this is another game of some kind by Berezovsky."

Berezovsky amassed a fortune in dubious privatization deals after the 1991 Soviet collapse and became an influential Kremlin insider under President Boris Yeltsin, but fell out of favor with Putin and fled for Britain in 2000 to avoid a money laundering probe which he said was politically motivated.

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He has been a thorn in Putin's side for years, assailing him for backtracking on democracy and accusing Russian security services of organizing 1999 apartment-building bombings that helped stoke support for the Chechen war.

That claim can be seen as aimed personally against Putin, a former Federal Security Service chief who ascended to the presidency in part on the strength of the popularity of his hard-line stance on Chechnya as prime minister at the time.

Berezovsky provided financing for a book Litvinenko co-authored detailing the alleged bombing conspiracy, but their names have been linked since 1998, when Litvinenko publicly accused his superiors at the Federal Security Service, known by its Russian acronym FSB, of ordering him

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to kill Berezovsky.

Both men lived in Britain and Berezovsky, who spent time by Litvinenko's hospital bedside, has said he suspected Russia's intelligence services were behind the alleged assassination attempt. But in Russia on Friday, pro-Kremlin lawmakers suggested Berezovsky was behind the poisoning.

"Possibly there was a conflict," Nikolai Kovalyov, a lawmaker and former FSB director, said on state-run Channel One television. "In untying this knot called the relationship between Berezovsky and Litvinenko, it was necessary to receive the maximum benefit — and the benefit here for Boris Abramovich (Berezovsky) is ... the accusation of Russia's involvement in the killing."

Litvinenko had close ties with "certain oligarchs, including Mr. Berezovsky, who in recent years have been deprived of the chance to buy corrupt power with stolen money and apparently cannot accept this," said Konstanin Kosachev, head of the foreign affairs committee in the State Duma, the lower parliament house.

"It's clear we may be talking about a targeted action aimed against modern Russia," Kosachev, a member of the dominant Kremlin-controlled United Russia party whose comments often reflect the governments' stance. said on Channel One.

The remarks echoed Sergei Yastrzhembsky, Putin's chief envoy to the European Union, who named no names but suggested to reporters in Helsinki that someone was killing government critics to discredit the Kremlin. "I am far from being a champion of conspiracy theory. But it looks like we are facing a well-orchestrated campaign or a plan to consistently discredit Russia and its leader," he said.

Putin and other top Russian officials have repeatedly hinted of forces in the West that are out to undermine Russia. After the slaying last month of Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, a fierce critic of the war in Chechnya, Putin said that "people who are hiding from Russian law enforcement have been hatching plans to sacrifice someone and create an anti-Russian wave in the world" — a possible reference to Berezovsky.

Russian prosecutors said earlier this year that they had filed a new request for Berezovsky's extradition from Britain after charging him with planning a violent seizure of power.


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