

HIS MANSION

Last updated at 23:37pm on 23.03.08

An international manhunt was launched last night for a Russian-born British media magnate whose mysterious disappearance has possible links to the murder of former KGB spy Alexander Litvinenko.

Jet-setting billionaire Leonid Rozhetskin, an outspoken critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin, vanished from his £1 million home just outside the Latvian capital Riga a week ago.

Last night, Latvian authorities expressed fears that Mr Rozhetskin, one of the co-founders and major shareholders in British business newspaper City AM, may have been murdered.

Latvian police say they have approached Scotland Yard for help in the light of Litvinenko's death from radiation poisoning from polonium-210 in London in November 2006.

The move prompted fears that 41-year-old Mr Rozhetskin, who was a regular visitor to London for board meetings, may have been the victim of a political murder plot.

A Latvian police spokesman added that Mr Rozhetskin had disappeared in "extremely worrying circumstances".

Traces of his blood were found in the main sitting room of his home in the upmarket resort of Jurmala, where furniture was upturned and windows smashed.

More blood was later found in his 4x4 car.

The Latvian authorities indicated it was possible that KGB agents who had been operating in London could have returned to Moscow before carrying out a mission in Latvia.



A Latvian police spokesman said: "Agents have been operating freely on the streets of London, and it is for this reason that we have approached the Metropolitan Police.

"If they have entered Latvia and approached this missing person in some way, then it is up to us to try to find out what is going on.

"We require all the information we can get hold of, and this is the reason that speaking to foreign police – including the British – is essential."

Mr Rozhetskin's six-bedroom mansion, in the most expensive residential area of Latvia, is set in its own gardens and surrounded by thick woods.

It enjoys views of Riga Bay which, at 25 miles long, boasts the longest white sand beach in the Baltic states.

The beach is surrounded by tall pine trees and sand dunes, which specialist police search officers with tracker dogs were yesterday combing for clues.

Mr Rozhetskin owns one third of a Dutch firm which, in turn, owns 50 per cent of the London-based business newspaper City AM. He is also a director and founding shareholder of the newspaper.

He was last in London just days before his disappearance, when he stayed at The Dorchester hotel.

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High life: Mr Rozhetskin with wife Natalya, left, and model Victoria Silvstedt at a French Riviera party in 2006



Missing: City AM backer Leonid Rozhetskin, pictured with his wife, former model Natalya Belova

Mr Rozhetskin disappeared early last Sunday morning, after his private plane flew into Latvia.

It is believed that a number of men arrived at his holiday house on the so-called Latvian "Riviera" in the early hours.

Mr Rozhetskin's car was seen driving out of the gates and was later found abandoned near a market place in a suburb of Riga.

His private jet also went missing for 48 hours, before it arrived in Zurich with no passengers on board.

Detectives are focusing on events in Mr Rozhetskin's home between 12.15am and 7.30am last Sunday.

State police chief Aldis Lieljuškis said: "We are examining blood stains in the house, and there are also traces of blood in the car. Forensics experts are currently combing the entire area."

Latvian Interior Minister Mareks Seglins added that there was evidence to suggest murder. He said: "If there's no body, then there's no factual proof of that."

"However, there is a clear line of evidence that suggests a potential homicide."

As well as his Latvian hideaway, Mr Rozhetskin also owns homes in the South of France, Los Angeles and Moscow. He had been due to return to LA last Tuesday.

Bizarrely, he is also registered on the British electoral roll – in an area of Kilmarnock called Moscow.

The address is a nondescript semi-detached bungalow that appears abandoned, with barely a stick of furniture inside and sheets covering the windows.

The missing oligarch is married to former model Natalya Belova, with whom he has a three-year-old son, but he has also been the subject of rumours that he was gay.

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Last dance: Mr Rozhetskin and two friends visited Riga's XXL gay nightclub before he disappeared

On the night he went missing, Mr Rozhetskin – who has dyed blond hair – was said by local sources to have taken a taxi from his home to the centre of Riga with two men.

The three were dropped outside the XXL gay nightclub, which bills itself as "a modern club of European glamour" and has rooms in which gay films are screened.

Its website claims: "In XXL club, everything is possible."

Mr Rozhetskin – who often mixed with fellow jetsetters such as Domenico Dolce, founder of the fashion label Dolce & Gabbana, and model Victoria Silvstedt – disappeared soon after visiting the club.

But suggestions of a sexual motive for the billionaire's disappearance were being dismissed last night, because his removal would have required a high degree of military-style planning, not least to have flown his jet out of Latvia with air traffic clearance.

The murky affair is further complicated by a continuing row involving Britain, Russia and Latvia.

Moscow has accused MI6 of orchestrating a spy scandal in Latvia after three Russian diplomats were sent home for allegedly trying to buy Nato secrets.

Russia claims the affair is part of an ongoing dispute over the fact that Latvia's spy chief Janis Kazocins is a retired British Army General.

He was born the son of Latvian refugees in Peterborough, Cambridgeshire, 56 years ago and was trained at Sandhurst.

The twice-married General, who has two grown-up children living in the Midlands, helped plan the first Gulf War in 1991 and was later seconded to the Latvian Army after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Relations between London and Moscow also remain sour after Scotland Yard unsuccessfully tried to extradite Andrei Lugovoy, the prime suspect in the Litvinenko poisoning murder.

Mr Rozhetskin was born in St Petersburg but moved to America in 1980 and is now a US citizen.

He amassed his fortune in the mobile phone industry during the privatisation of Russian telecom companies.

He is also the joint owner of a Los Angeles-based movie company, L+E Productions, along with Eric Eisner, the son of former Disney chief executive Michael Eisner, one of the richest men in Hollywood.

Their first movie, Hamlet 2, an American high school comedy starring Steve Coogan, is due for release in August.

Mr Rozhetskin was also due to produce a movie about the Russian mafia, called Three Wolves.

He has been a fierce critic of the current regime in Russia. In 2006, Russian prosecutors placed him on an international wanted list for his role in an alleged £20million fraud.

Mr Rozhetskin was alleged to have sold a stake in a mobile-phone company to one firm when he had already promised first refusal to another, IPOC, which has been linked to Leonid Reiman, the Russian Communications Minister and a friend of Vladimir Putin.

A tribunal in Zurich two years ago ruled that Mr Reiman was IPOC's owner and had abused his government position.

Mr Reiman has denied the allegations and the Moscow arrest warrant for Mr Rozhetskin remained in force.

Mr Rozhetskin's spokesman Andrei Fomin last night denied rumours circulating among Moscow business chiefs that his client's disappearance may be a publicity stunt to attract attention to his first movie.

Mr Fomin said: "I have no idea where he might be. No suggestions at all.

"Last time I saw him was in Los Angeles in February, then later we talked on the phone when he was in London.

"I think the idea that he staged the kidnapping to promote his new movie is absolutely stupid. To pour human blood for some sort of PR trick would be completely sick.

"I can't imagine he would do that. I think this is all extremely serious and I desperately hope there is a happy ending to it."

Jens Torpe, managing director of City AM, said last night he had "no idea" where Mr Rozhetskin was or how he had disappeared.

He said: "Obviously, we all hope he is found safe and well."

A Scotland Yard spokesman said Latvian police were taking the lead in the investigation and that it was "natural" for them to have made contact with the Met.



Bone of contention: Relations between London and Moscow have soured since Scotland Yard tried to extradite Andrei Lugovoi, prime suspect over the murder of Alexander Litvinenko, below



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