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Lebedev Asks Putin to Intervene After Bank Raid

By Ilya Arkhipov

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Lebedev says he will send 25 letters, including to Putin and Medvedev, after a raid on his bank by armed police. **Igor Tabakov**

Billionaire Alexander Lebedev, owner of Britain's Evening Standard and Independent newspapers, is asking Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to intervene after Moscow police raided his National Reserve Bank last week.

Lebedev said he was targeted because he and Novaya Gazeta, the twice-weekly newspaper he owns, have focused on investigating corruption. He said he plans to send 25 letters to Russian leaders and agencies, including Putin, President Dmitry Medvedev, the Prosecutor General's Office and courts, asking them to stop police from interfering with his businesses.

"Somebody might be thinking there are ways to push me out of the country, because if I am out, there will be fewer headaches," Lebedev, 50, said Monday in an interview. "It could be anybody. All my enemies are self-inflicted."

Lebedev said he would not leave Russia or stop doing business in the country. Russia is the world's most corrupt major economy, according to Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index released Oct. 26. The country was ranked 154th among 178 countries, alongside Tajikistan.

Dozens of armed police surrounded the Moscow offices of National Reserve Bank on Nov. 2, while three men in civilian clothes, their faces covered by balaclavas, entered the building and demanded a meeting with Lebedev, Novaya Gazeta said on its web site. The search was part of an "ongoing criminal investigation," police spokesman Viktor Biryukov told RIA-Novosti.

Lebedev said he owns 85 percent of National Reserve Corporation, a Cyprus-based fund that has invested about $4 billion in Russia. NRC has investments in banking, construction, property, agriculture, airlines, aircraft manufacturing and media, which include a 13.7 percent stake in national carrier Aeroflot.

"I am complaining as a foreign investor," Lebedev said. Russia is seeking international investment to help diversify the economy, including plans to build a technology center outside Moscow and turn the capital into a global financial hub.

Lebedev said that while he does not believe that the investigation is politically motivated, he might change his mind if the government fails to support him.

"If there is no reaction from government offices within two to three weeks to my complaints, it means there are more grounds to consider there is a higher level of powers behind it," he said. "But at the moment I don't believe in this."

A former KGB spy who once worked undercover as an economic attache in London, Lebedev bought into Novaya Gazeta in 2006 with the support of former Soviet President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Mikhail Gorbachev. Forbes magazine estimated Lebedev's net worth at $2 billion this year.

Lebedev said he encouraged Novaya Gazeta journalists to uncover graft, citing a recent investigation into fraud surrounding the import of radiology equipment. He said he personally pursued allegations that officials at a state-controlled corporation embezzled millions of dollars.

While he did not name any person or organization he thinks is behind the bank raid, Lebedev said he has many adversaries and has been the target of dozens of similar probes in recent years because of his fight against corruption.

Lebedev compared the raids to the assault on Oleg Kashin, a political correspondent for Kommersant, who was beaten by two men wielding a metal bar wrapped in flowers outside his apartment building Saturday, according to the newspaper. Doctors induced a coma to help Kashin recover from his injuries, which included a fractured jaw, skull and fingers.

"I am publishing a newspaper; he is a journalist," Lebedev said. "From this point of view, there is no difference. It is more or less the same forces, same attitude, but different methods."

The U.S. government on Tuesday called on Russia to find and punish the people responsible

for the attack on Kashin, saying "journalists around the world must feel free to do their jobs without fear of intimidation or physical violence."

Lebedev suggested that the "gambling mafia" might be behind the raid against National Reserve Bank because he campaigned for a ban on gambling in Russia.

Lebedev said the London-based Mail on Sunday misinterpreted comments that made a comparison to Anna Politkovskaya, a Novaya Gazeta journalist who was shot dead in 2006.

"If you are a journalist who is investigating the mafia, it is clear there are a lot of people who can send you a rotten fish," Lebedev said, referring to a warning sometimes used by organized crime figures. "This is exactly the joke I made," he said. He denied that he ever said he "would be the next Politkovskaya," calling the claim "absolutely absurd."

Lebedev said at least one officer in the Federal Security Service had threatened to open a criminal investigation against him unless he left the country. The last threat was made a year ago, he said, while declining to accuse the security agency targeting him.

Politicians have no reason to be concerned, Lebedev said.

"I'm not a politician; I am not running for president; I'm not running for mayor," he said. "There is nothing one should be afraid of as far as my political ambition is concerned."

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