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Yegiazaryan Speaks About Death Threats

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WASHINGTON — A wealthy lawmaker has fled with his family to the United States, saying he fears assassination over accusations that some of Russia's richest and most influential people swindled him in a real estate deal. Back home, he's been charged with financial crimes.

Ashot Yegiazaryan said he is considering seeking asylum in the United States. But after suing a Russian billionaire and several former business partners — including a close friend of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Moscow's former mayor — he said he doesn't feel safe even in this country.

"I do think it's possible that an assassination attempt can be mounted against me here," he said flanked by lawyers in a conference room a few blocks from the White House.

For two years, Yegiazaryan said, he was subjected to groundless police raids, personal smears and anonymous death threats as he struggled to hang on to his $2 billion stake in a project to tear down the Moskva Hotel, an old Soviet-era hotel a few dozen steps from the Kremlin, and reconstruct it as a five-star luxury establishment.

He said he was forced to hand over his share in the hotel in June 2009 after a campaign of intimidation that included raids by armed police on some of his partners and businesses and threats of criminal prosecution. He said he was the target of anonymous threats, including threats to behead his children.

Last September, shortly after Yegiazaryan arrived in the United States, his lawyers filed a civil suit in a court in Cyprus charging the billionaire Russian investor Suleiman Kerimov with leading a hostile takeover of the Moskva Hotel project.

The court ordered a freeze on about $6 billion of Kerimov's assets as well as the assets of several of Yegiazaryan 's former partners in the project. They include Moscow's canny and colorful former mayor, Yury Luzhkov, and Arkady Rotenberg, Putin's longtime judo partner.

Within weeks of the suit, Yegiazaryan was stripped of his legislative immunity by his fellow deputies in parliament, charged with fraud by Russian prosecutors and put on his country's wanted list. Several of his Russian properties have been seized.

A New York lawyer representing Kerimov in this country, Eliot Lauer, denied the allegations. "They are total fabrications," he said.

Lauer said Yegiazaryan transferred his interest in the Moskva Hotel as part of a legitimate business deal. "He was overextended," Lauer said. "He was deep in debt, and he was facing financial ruin." A year later, Lauer said, Yegiazaryan "concocted this scheme" to regain control.

In coming weeks, the judge in Cyprus is expected to rule on a defense challenge to the asset freeze.

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