

Court Rejects Putin Defamation Case

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Nemtsov walking into the Savyolovsky District Court for his hearing. **Mikhail Metzel**

A Moscow court threw out late Monday a defamation suit filed against Prime Minister Vladimir Putin by political opponents that he accused during a live television show of stealing from the state.

The Savyolovsky District Court judge, Tatyana Adamova, did not immediately explain her reasons for rejecting the case, but said she will expand this week.

Putin's lawyer, Yelena Zabalova, applauded the verdict, and said her client's personal opinion could not possibly be "absolutely neutral."

Although the verdict was expected because of Putin's considerable power, the sheer fact the civil action was admitted is remarkable for the country's Kremlin-loyal courts, where major decisions are thought to be dictated from above.

Putin alleged during the call-in show in December that a trio of opponents took billions from state coffers in the 1990s. He said former Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov, once-Deputy Energy Minister Vladimir Milov and former independent lawmaker Vladimir Ryzhkov

were now penniless and needed power to accrue wealth.

Toward the end of the show, Putin read aloud a question submitted by a viewer: "What do Nemtsov, Ryzhkov, Milov and so on really want?"

"Money and power, what else do they want?" he said. "In their day they wrought havoc, in the 90s, they stole quite a few billion along with the Berezovskys and others who are now in prison," he said, referring to Boris Berezovsky, the London-based tycoon who made his riches in the post-Soviet privatization period and fled in 2000 after falling out with Putin.

"They've been deprived of the hand that feeds them, they've gone broke and now they want to come back and fill their pockets. But I think if we let them do that, they won't stop at a few billion, and they'll sell out the whole of Russia."

Nemtsov, now the country's highest-profile opposition activist, said he did not expect to win, but the fact the suit was even admitted was a victory.

"It is absolutely obvious the decision is not related to justice," he told The Associated Press after the hearing.

"Obviously, we have no independent courts as an institute," Nemtsov said. "Obviously, we will appeal the decision in the European Court for Human Rights because over there Putin has no chance to influence the decision."

Of the three, only Ryzhkov was absent from Monday's session. The plaintiffs demanded that Putin retract the comments and pay 1 million rubles (\$34,000) in compensation.

State broadcaster RTR, also a defendant in the trial, rejected any wrongdoing, saying the company doesn't take responsibility for what goes out live and that it is obliged to give airtime to a state official.

Zabralova dismissed the accusations, saying the defendants were public persons often criticized by individuals.

"One cannot be abstractly, absolutely neutral when expressing a personal opinion," she said. "The limits of criticism of public persons are wide, it is normal to allow critical statements [about them] in democratic countries."

Nemtsov is leading a new political party with Ryzhkov, Milov and a host of other activists, including former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov. In June primaries, the party, which is yet to be registered with the Justice Ministry, is to elect a candidate to run in the 2012 presidential election. Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev have said one of them will run.

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