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Lebedev Says He's Being Pressured to Sell Assets

By The Moscow Times

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Lebedev being interviewed by Reuters at his Moscow office last week. **Mikhail Voskresensky**

Tycoon Alexander Lebedev, whose holdings include a leading investigative newspaper critical of the Kremlin, said that he wants to sell his Russian assets because of pressure from state security services.

Lebedev, who is worth $1.1 billion, according to Forbes magazine, said the Federal Security Service has targeted him in a series of investigations and inspections to push him out of business.

"For the past three years, my business has been deliberately and continuously destroyed by Division K of the Federal Security Service's economic security department," Lebedev said on his blog Friday. "The haunting and pressure have targeted not only me and workers of my companies but my family members as well."

He said the main reason for the Federal Security Service's pressure on him was corruption investigations by Novaya Gazeta that he has financed.

In the investigations, the newspaper has alleged that some FSB officers were involved in corruption.

Lebedev said on Ekho Moskvy radio that he may hand over some of his assets to Novaya Gazeta so the newspaper can continue operation because he can't keep funding it.

He also said he is prepared to transfer his stake in Novaya Gazeta to its management, Vedomosti reported.

Asked what his long-term plan was, Lebedev said in an interview with Reuters: "roll back my businesses just completely to zero, frankly. Just roll back, try to roll back everything. Just to get out of business."

Lebedev and former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev own a 49 percent stake in Novaya Gazeta, while the remaining shares are controlled by the newspaper's staffers.

Novaya Gazeta's relentless criticism of the Kremlin and its investigations into official corruption have put many of its journalists under fire.

Four of its reporters have been killed since 2000, including Anna Politkovskaya, a fierce critic of the Kremlin and its policies in Chechnya who was gunned down in the elevator of her Moscow apartment building in 2006.

Others have been harassed and attacked.

Commenting on his foreign assets, Lebedev said he would try to keep The Independent and Evening Standard, which he backs but are owned and run by his son Evgeny.

But he denied that he would try to expand his media empire in Britain by buying any of media magnate Rupert Murdoch's newspapers if they were put up for sale, saying they would need someone with "a bigger pocket."

Lebedev also told Reuters that he may now face a fate similar to that of protest leader Alexei Navalny, who was charged with theft last week and barred from leaving the country.

Navalny could face a 10-year prison sentence and says he believes he will go to jail.

"Probably the procedure will be the same as [with] Navalny, which is restriction on [my] travel outside the country," Lebedev said. "According to my lawyers, that will happen either in August or September."

Asked if he expected to go to jail, Lebedev said with a laugh. "Well, if you're facing charges being brought against you ..."

Lebedev believes that the investigation against him — and a separate inquiry conducted into his National Reserve Bank — is motivated by his outspoken views and investigations.

He said that he was concerned the authorities would try to "bulldoze [his] businesses to zero"

and that he would not leave the country for fear of arrest.

Lebedev also made it clear he believed it was time for opposition leaders to form a united front, put aside their differences and speak with one voice on issues such as corruption.

The opposition in the last few months has staged the biggest protests since Putin rose to power in 2000.

Leaders have continued even though fewer people have been turning up and the rallies have been less frequent.

The opposition has not evolved into a more organized political movement and has no single leader, though Navalny has emerged as the most charismatic of them.

Asked whether he could be the person who unites them, Lebedev laughed and said, "I haven't been a practicing politician."

He said that his passion is battling corruption and that he believes an international body is needed to dig out money stashed offshore.

"Chasing the money has become a process that is next to impossible," he said.

(AP, Reuters, Vedomosti)

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