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Britain Investigates Mysterious Death of Russian Whistleblower

By The Moscow Times

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LONDON — British police have carried out toxicology tests on the body of a Russian anti-corruption whistleblower whose mysterious death has put a new spotlight on Russian criminal groups entrenched in Europe.

Alexander Perepilichny, 44, moved to Britain three years ago and had been helping Swiss prosecutors uncover a shady Russian criminal group suspected of being involved in large-scale, cross-border tax fraud violations.

Police have struggled to establish the cause of his death since he suddenly collapsed and died near his home on an upmarket, heavily protected estate in Surrey, south of London, on Nov. 10.

Following an inconclusive postmortem on Nov. 14, investigators conducted another examination of Perepilichny's body as well as toxicology tests.

"Toxicology tests are being carried out as part of the investigation," a Surrey police spokeswoman said Friday, adding that it could take months to get the results. "The death is being treated as unexplained and remains under investigation."

Although toxicology tests are often standard practice following inconclusive post-mortem examinations, the move has evoked memories of the 2006 death of former Federal Security Service officer Alexander Litvinenko, who died in London after drinking tea poisoned with radioactive polonium-210.

Perepilichny's case has shed new light on a multimillion-dollar tax fraud scheme that was originally uncovered by lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, who died in a Moscow jail in 2009 while awaiting trial on charges his colleagues say were fabricated.

Perepilichny in 2010 came forward with information linking Russian government officials to a tax fraud scheme involving a Swiss bank, a move that helped Swiss prosecutors open a far-reaching criminal investigation in 2011.

But Russian officials played down Perepilichny's link to the Magnitsky affair.

"We cannot see any connection between the death of Mr. Alexander Perepilichny, the causes of which are yet to be established, and the so-called 'Magnitsky case,'" the Russian Embassy in London said in a statement.

Britain's Independent newspaper reported Friday that Perepilichny received a warning a year ago that his name was on a hit list in Russia.

"It was like an order book," a source described as an acquaintance of Perepilichny told the paper.

"His name was in it."

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