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Putin Not Pictured With Reputed Crime Boss, Spokesman Says

By Alexander Winning

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Bloggers initially took the photo supposedly taken in the 1990s as evidence of the close ties between officials and organized crime.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman denied that a photo widely circulated on the Internet showed Putin together with Aslan Usoyan, the reputed mafia leader who was buried in Moscow on Sunday after being shot dead by an unknown sniper.

"It is obvious that it's not him" in the photo, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told the Dozhd online TV channel late Thursday, referring to Usoyan.

Peskov explained that the man, who is standing next to Putin behind an alcohol-laden dinner table, has different features. "I don't know who this is, but it's not Aslan, who has a different genotype," Peskov said.

Bloggers initially took the photograph, supposedly taken in the 1990s, as evidence of close

ties between officials and organized crime during Putin's time in the St. Petersburg government.

By late Thursday, however, many speculated that the man in the photo was Viktor Usachyov, a former United Russia State Duma deputy from the Rostov region.

Usachyov's spokeswoman subsequently confirmed to Dozhd that her boss had met with Putin in an informal setting at a mutual friend's birthday.

Some bloggers also speculated that the other man whose face is visible in the photo was reputed mobster Boris Sulava, who was killed in Sochi in 2003.

Widely known by his nickname Grandpa ("Ded") Khasan, Usoyan was shot by a sniper in broad daylight as he exited a restaurant on Wednesday afternoon. He died in a hospital soon after.

The sniper also hit a 30-year-old restaurant employee who was standing next to Usoyan. She remained in critical condition in the capital's Sklifosovsky Hospital on Friday, Interfax reported.

Analysts believe that Usoyan was among the last representatives of the so-called "thieves-in-law," a Soviet-era fraternity of convicts. He was 75 at the time of his death.

Observers fear that the killing might trigger a turf war between rival gangs. The sniper fled the scene and has evaded capture.

Thought to be among the country's most influential underworld leaders, Usoyan has been accused of drugs and weapons trafficking and was said to control construction firms vying for contracts for the 2014 Sochi Olympics.

Usoyan hailed from Tbilisi's sizable Yezid community. Yezids are a Kurdish-speaking ethnic group that fled from Turkey to the Caucasus in the 19th century.

Usoyan was to be buried in Tbilisi, but the Georgian government refused to accept his body. The funeral took place in a private ceremony at Khovanskoye Cemetery in Moscow.

A source told Gazeta.ru that Usoyan was to be buried before sunrise Sunday in Tbilisi's Kukiinskoye Cemetery, where Usoyan's relatives and Soviet dictator Josef Stalin's first wife Yekaterina Dzhugashvili are buried.

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