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Tycoon Lebedev Likens Trial to Political Witch-Hunt

By The Moscow Times

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Banker and media tycoon Alexander Lebedev, center, arriving at Moscow's Ostankino District Court on Thursday. **Alexander Zemlianichenko**

Banker and media magnate Alexander Lebedev likened his trial for throwing a punch during a television chat show to a political witch hunt and said the charge of hooliganism leveled against him was baseless.

The backer of Britain's Independent and London Evening Standard newspapers was seen lunging at property developer Sergei Polonsky during a broadcast in 2011.

Lebedev was charged in September with hooliganism motivated by religious, political, racial, ethnic or ideological hatred and could be jailed for up to five years if convicted.

He told reporters outside Moscow's Ostankino District Court that Thursday's pretrial hearing had been moved to Feb. 7 because one of his lawyers was abroad and another was taking part

in a separate case.

“So there was nothing heard. … The only question raised by the judge was whether Polonsky will be participating,” Lebedev said.

Polonsky was detained in Cambodia this month, accused of assault and illegal detention after a separate incident on a boat. He could face up to three years in prison if convicted.

Lebedev said he had offered to cover Polonsky’s bail in Cambodia but was refused.

In an interview Wednesday, Lebedev likened his trial to a witch hunt and said the charge of hooliganism was baseless, as the incident did not amount to a premeditated gross violation of public order.

Lebedev, whose fortune was put at $1.1 billion by Forbes magazine last year, has said he is being made a scapegoat for criticizing President Vladimir Putin.

“We have people like McCarthy at various echelons of the establishment, including law enforcement agencies,” he said. “This is the case where they fabricated an accusation built completely not on law.”

U.S. Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy became infamous for launching investigations into claims that communists had infiltrated the government. He held extensive hearings in 1953 and 1954 attempting to uncover communist sympathizers.

“The hooliganism accusation … is based on nothing, on air, because how on earth could I have prepared a gross violation of public order based on political hatred to a person I’d never seen in my life?” Lebedev said in a telephone interview.

“It is completely baseless from a legal point of view. The accusation, it’s empty.”

Russian authorities have arrested or charged a number of people critical of the Kremlin, including several opposition leaders such as anti-corruption blogger and protest leader Alexei Navalny.

Lebedev’s business interests in Russia include a bank, real estate assets, a stake in airline Aeroflot and a potato farm. He has said he is looking to sell his Russian assets because of pressure from the Kremlin.

Putin’s spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, has denied that the Kremlin has attempted to put pressure on Lebedev or other wealthy Russians over their business interests.

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