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Putin Mourns Judo Coach He Considered 'Mentor'

By The Moscow Times

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ST. PETERSBURG — President Vladimir Putin attended a service Friday in memory of his former judo coach, a man he has credited as his "mentor" during his youth.

Anatoly Rakhlin, who once said he was Putin's "second father," died Wednesday at the age of 75, reportedly after a long illness.

In a telegram of condolence posted on the presidential website Wednesday, Putin said he was deeply saddened by Rakhlin's death, and that it represented "a big, irreplaceable loss for all of us."

Rakhlin was greatly respected and loved by his colleagues, friends and students. He was a "real teacher and attentive mentor both in sports and in life," Putin said.

Putin laid flowers at Rakhlin's grave in St. Petersburg and spent some time standing next

to his former coach's coffin with his head bowed. He also spoke to Rakhlin's widow and with his former sparring partners.

A monument could be erected in St. Petersburg in Rakhlin's memory, a Putin ally who was another of the coach's former students told RIA Novosti on Friday.

"We're now thinking about how to immortalize his memory. Maybe there'll be a monument or something else," said federal lawmaker Vasily Shestakov, who as a young man sparred with Putin under Rakhlin's tutelage.

Rakhlin trained Putin for 15 years, beginning when the future KGB colonel and Russian leader was 13. Their bond was so tight, according to a profile of Putin in Vanity Fair in 2000, that Rakhlin was called by the Kremlin for a private lunch with the president the day after inauguration.

In a 50-year-career, Rakhlin trained several leading figures in the Russian elite, including billionaire businessman Arkady Rotenberg and Putin's political ally Shestakov, both of whom were sparring partners of the president. At the time of his death, Rakhlin ran a youth sports academy in St. Petersburg.

Putin presented Rakhlin with a "medal of honor" for his achievements in Russian judo on the coach's 75th birthday last May.

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