The Moscow Times
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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Israeli Leader Praised by Putin Jailed

March 22, 2011



Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who was rapped by the Kremlin on Libya this week, received more indirect embarrassment on Tuesday, when an Israeli court convicted former President Moshe Katsav, whom Putin semi-ironically praised for sexual prowess.

Katsav, 65, was handed a maximum seven-year sentence for raping and harassing female employees as tourism minister in the 1990s and during his 2000-07 presidential tenure, as well as obstruction of justice. He refused to plead guilty, voiding his chance of a suspended sentence.

The case made an apparent impression on Putin, who commented about it at a meeting with then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in Moscow in 2006. "Say hello to your president! What a mighty dude he turned out to be! Raping 10 women! Why, I'd never expected that from him! He's surprised us all, we're all envious," Putin, then the president, said at the end of the meeting, apparently believing the microphones were switched off, Kommersant reported at the time. The words were probably intended as a gesture of support for Katsav, the report said. Putin made no comment on Katsav's verdict on Tuesday.

On Monday, President Dmitry Medvedev indirectly criticized Putin for calling the Western

military operation in strife-torn Libya a “crusade,” saying the term is “unacceptable.”

Putin’s spokesman played down the notion of any split between the two leaders Tuesday, saying Putin had just expressed his personal opinion and Medvedev had offered Russia’s official position.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/03/22/israeli-leader-praised-by-putin-jailed-a5785