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Kremlin Critic Expelled From Russian Regional Legislature

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Lev Shlosberg

A regional legislature in northwest Russia voted Thursday to expel a lawmaker who has criticized the Kremlin and has been investigating the deaths of Russian paratroopers reportedly killed in eastern Ukraine.

The proposal to recall Lev Shlosberg, the leader of the liberal opposition Yabloko party's faction in the Pskov regional legislature, was introduced jointly by lawmakers from Russia's four main political parties: the ruling United Russia party, the Communists, the nationalist LDPR party and A Just Russia, the Gazeta.ru news website reported.

The lawmakers who introduced the motion said Shlosberg had represented a nongovernmental organization in court, which as a deputy they said he did not have the right to do, the report said.

During the hearing, Shlosberg was described by other deputies as "a mouthpiece for the [U.S.] State Department," the BBC Russian Service reported.

Shlosberg himself made a speech before the vote in which he compared modern Russia to the late Soviet Union.

"Anyone who wants to live in a land of freedom and democracy has found themselves in opposition to the Russian state," he was quoted by the BBC as saying.

Forty-one deputies voted to oust Shlosberg, and only three voted against it, the Interfax news agency reported Thursday.

Shlosberg made waves a year ago by publicizing the secret funerals of local paratroopers in Pskov, who are believed to have been among the first Russian military casualties in eastern Ukraine, where Moscow-backed separatists are battling Kiev government troops. Russia denies deploying any soldiers to Ukraine, claiming that all Russians fighting across the border are acting independently.

But the bid to expel Shlosberg from the legislature may have been prompted by more recent publications linking Pskov's regional governor, Andrei Turchak, to a near-fatal attack on prominent journalist Oleg Kashin several years ago.

"Turchak has banned regional media from writing about this unpleasant story, and only the Pskovskaya Gubernia [Pskov Province] newspaper — founded by Lev Shlosberg — dared to disobey the governor," Yabloko leader Sergei Mitrokhin said Wednesday in his blog on the website of Ekho Moskvy radio station.

Kashin said in a statement on his blog earlier this month that two of the suspects in the attack against him five years ago had said the hit was ordered by the head of the Leninets holding company, which is owned by relatives of the Pskov governor.

The journalist had criticized Turchak in his blog two months before the beating, and then dismissed the governor's demands for an apology. Kashin did not accuse Turchak directly of the attack, but Russian activists have been demanding that investigators question the governor.

Shlosberg said he would appeal the parliament's decision to oust him in court.

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