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Kremlin Apologises to German Newspaper, Goldman Sachs for Putin's Statement

By Anna Dolgov

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The Kremlin on Friday issued an apology to German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung and U.S. investment bank Goldman Sachs for false comments made by Russian President Vladimir Putin regarding the ownership of the newspaper.

Seeking to accuse the United States of orchestrating the Panama Papers leak that exposed murky offshore dealings, Putin wrongfully claimed that Süddeutsche Zeitung, which played a leading role in the expose, was owned by the bank.

"It is our mistake, my mistake, the mistake of those who prepared the briefing documents," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov explained.

"There was unverified information there that we did not double-check and gave to the president in a section on the owners of Süddeutsche Zeitung. We have apologized [to the

bank] and we will also apologize to the publication," he added.

Following Putin's comments, made in a televised phone-in on Thursday, Süddeutsche Zeitung director Stefan Hilscher was quick to refute the remarks in a statement on his employer's website.

"Süddeutsche Zeitung does not belong to Goldman Sachs, either directly or indirectly," Hilscher said.

Süddeutsche Zeitung is 100 percent a subsidiary company of Süddeutsche Verlag publishing house, which is owned by the Südwestdeutsche Medienholding media holding (81.25 percent) and a Munich publishing family," he said.

The newspaper has "no connection under corporate law with with Goldman Sachs," Hilscher said.

The information in the Panama Papers leak is accurate, Russia's President Vladimir Putin conceded Thursday. His own ensuing attempt to cast doubt on the leak may be less so.

Putin has been claiming that the Panama Papers leak was a U.S. attempt "destabilize" Russia. He made a similar suggestion during his call-in marathon Thursday.

"Who is involved in this, in these provocations?" Putin said. "We know that there are employees of official American agencies there. And the article was written by, it first appeared in — I asked [Dmitry] Peskov, [my] press secretary yesterday — in Süddeutsche Zeitung."

"Süddeutsche Zeitung is part of a media holding, and that media holding belongs to American financial corporation Goldman Sachs," Putin said. "So the ears of the organizers are sticking out everywhere. They are sticking out, but don't even blush."

Süddeutsche Zeitung quoted the remark in an online article Thursday before hitting back: "That statement is false."

The newspaper declined to speculate on whether Putin deliberately misrepresented the ownership information or was misled by his aides, saying the question remained open.

As for the veracity of Panama Papers publications themselves, Putin had no argument on that score — he only said the leak did not amount to much.

"Strange as it might seem, they don't publish inaccurate information about the offshores," Putin said. "The information is valid. One gets the impression that it wasn't even prepared by journalists, but most likely by lawyers, judging by the narrative style and by the facts."

"The thing is, they don't specifically accuse anybody of anything," Putin said. "They are simply muddying waters. Somebody from among my friends is engaged in some kind of business ..."

One of the main revelations in the Panama Papers was that close Putin allies moved $2 billion offshore through accounts registered to Putin's long-time friend Sergei Roldugin, a musician and godfather to the president's daughter. The Kremlin maintains the transactions

constituted no wrongdoing, and none of the publications implicated Putin directly.

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