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Putin Ally to Sue U.S. for $50Bln Over 'Wrongful Persecution'

By AFP

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Yevgeny Prigozhin. **Michael Metzel / TASS**

An ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin who says he was "wrongfully persecuted" by the US, which claimed he meddled in 2016 elections, vowed Tuesday to sue Washington for $50 billion in damages.

Yevgeny Prigozhin, the rich Russian businessman dubbed "Putin's chef," made the announcement after the U.S. Justice Department on Monday abruptly dropped charges against his company Concord.

Prosecutors had accused Concord of being behind a campaign to help Donald Trump win the presidency.

This development meant that allegations like "Prigozhin meddled in a U.S. presidential election" or "Russia meddled in a U.S. presidential election" were "lies and fiction", the

secretive businessman said.

Concord was preparing a lawsuit for "wrongful persecution," Prigozhin said in a statement, adding he would seek $50 billion in damages.

The U.S. authorities had dropped the case because they were scared of bad "publicity and a fair trial," he added.

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The U.S. Justice Department announced late on Monday it was withdrawing the eight-count indictment of Concord Management and Consulting, just weeks before the trial was due to begin.

Concord, which funds the St. Petersburg-based troll factory known as the Internet Research Agency, was named in an indictment against 13 Russian individuals and three companies.

It was one of the major outcomes of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's 22-month investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential elections.

The U.S. government concluded that further proceedings against Concord "promotes neither the interests of justice nor the nation's security," said the Justice Department.

The Internet Research Agency, Mueller charged, actively pumped disinformation, memes and fake news into social media via false accounts to influence U.S. voters and tilt the election to help Trump.

Like Mueller, U.S. intelligence chiefs concluded that the Concord-run operation was one half of a sweeping campaign overseen by Putin to help Trump and hurt his rival, Democrat Hillary Clinton.

The other half was hacking by Russian intelligence.

Russia's military intelligence agency GRU figured heavily in the Mueller report on Russian interference in the 2016 presidential campaign, which concluded that Russia hacked the Democratic Party and Hillary Clinton's campaign to help Trump.

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