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Russian Emergencies Minister Dies in Arctic Drills

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Russian Emergency Situations Minister Yevgeny Zinichev **Alexei Nikolsky / TASS**

Russian Emergency Situations Minister Yevgeny Zinichev, an ally and former bodyguard of President Vladimir Putin, has died at age 55 while trying to save a prominent filmmaker during strategic drills in the Arctic, the ministry said Wednesday.

“We regret to inform you that Zinichev tragically died while performing official duties saving someone's life during interdepartmental exercises to protect the Arctic zone from emergencies in Norilsk,” the ministry said in a statement carried by news agencies.

In an unusually personal note to Zinichev's family published by the Kremlin, Putin said he was "shocked by the tragic news" of his death and called it “an immeasurable personal loss.”

“We have lost a true military officer, a comrade, a person of great inner strength and courage and bravery close to all of us. ... We have been connected by many years of joint work. And I always knew that you can rely on Yevgeny Nikolaevich in any highly difficult situation — as a reliable, loyal friend and a professional of the highest level,” Putin's telegram of condolence

read.

The ministry said that Zinichev died while trying to save award-winning director Alexander Melnik, who was at the exercises in Norilsk to scout locations for a new documentary on Russia's development of the Arctic and the Northern Sea Route. Melnik, 63, also died in the incident, the ministry said.

“Without a moment's hesitation, he acted not as a minister, but as a rescuer. He performed a heroic deed; this is how he lived all his life,” deputy emergencies minister Andrei Gurovich said of Zinichev in televised remarks.

Putin awarded the Hero of Russia posthumously to Zinichev “for heroism, courage and bravery shown in the performance of official duties,” according to an early Thursday statement on the Kremlin’s website.

Margarita Simonyan, chief editor of the state-funded RT news broadcaster, said that Zinichev had fallen to his death trying to save the man later identified as Melnik.

“There were plenty of witnesses, but no one even had time to figure out what happened as Zinichev jumped into the water after the fallen person and crashed against a protruding stone,” Simonyan tweeted.

Zinichev was appointed Emergency Situations Minister in May 2018 following Putin’s re-election. He was also a member of the Security Council.

He began his career as a KGB officer in the late 1980s and continued to serve in the Federal Security Service (FSB) in the post-Soviet period.

According to RBC, Zinichev was part of Putin’s personal security detail and his “aide-de-camp” from 2006-2015.

As head of the emergencies ministry, Zinichev held one of the highest-profile cabinet jobs, dealing with natural and man-made disasters and other rapid-response situations across the vast country.

Condolences poured in from top officials, with Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin praising Zinichev as a “true Russian officer” and Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov saying the minister “died like a hero.”

“I knew him personally. We worked together closely and fruitfully. So unfortunate,” the head of the Russian space agency Roscosmos, Dmitry Rogozin, said on Telegram.

Zinichev’s first deputy Alexander Chupriyan is expected to step in as acting minister, RBC reported, citing an unnamed source.

The two-day drills he was participating in across several Arctic cities including Norilsk, kicked off on Tuesday and involved over 6,000 people.

AFP contributed reporting.

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