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Putin Friend's Son Named Head Coach of Richest Russian Hockey Team

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Roman Rotenberg (L) and former coach Valery Bragin (R). **Stanislav Krasilnikov / TASS**

The son of Russian President Vladimir Putin's close ally has been named the head coach of Russia's richest hockey team, SKA St. Petersburg, drawing criticism from sports commentators for his lack of coaching experience.

Roman Rotenberg, 40, is the son of Boris Rotenberg — who is Putin's childhood friend, former judo sparring partner and recreational hockey teammate. Roman Rotenberg was already deputy chairman of the Kontinental Hockey League (KHL) and its SKA St. Petersburg team, which is run by another Putin ally, Gennady Timchenko, and owned by the state-run gas giant Gazprom.

SKA said in an official announcement that Rotenberg has replaced Valery Bragin as head coach, who was also sidelined as head coach of the Russian men's national hockey team last fall, to "improve the management of the team."

Bragin himself described Rotenberg's appointment as "formalizing" his de-facto position

over the course of the past month.

“Everything worked, we have achieved positive results,” Bragin said in SKA’s statement.

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Rotenberg compared his new appointment to the career of veteran football manager José Mourinho, who he said had “absorbed all his techniques” from his predecessors “and became a very successful coach.”

“There are a lot of such coaches in history,” the sports.ru news website quoted him as saying. “This is my life, it gives me the opportunity to develop and be better than yesterday.”

Sports commentators were quick to question Rotenberg’s credentials.

“In an ideal world, a coach would start with children or young men, take his hits and get valuable experience,” said sport-express.ru. “But a person of his status doesn’t have time to go through all the levels.”

“This is his first job as a head coach, he has never played at a professional level,” the Russian edition of the U.S.-funded RFE/RL news organization said in its report on Rotenberg’s appointment.

Rotenberg himself defended his expertise, telling the Match TV broadcaster last fall that he had watched 800 KHL and national team games since 2014.

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