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Sidelined Putin Associate Viktor Cherkesov Dies at 72

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Viktor Cherkesov and Vladimir Putin in 2005. **Dmitry Azarov / Kommersant**

Viktor Cherkesov, a longtime associate of Russian President Vladimir Putin who fell foul of the Kremlin for publicly discussing a rift within Russia's security elites, has died in St. Petersburg at age 72.

Cherkesov's death, which followed "a severe illness," was announced late Tuesday by the Rosbalt news website. He is survived by his wife, Natalia Cherkesova.

Cherkesov began his KGB career in 1975, the same year as Putin joined the agency. After rising in the ranks, he continued to work for KGB's successor, the Federal Security Service (FSB), after the collapse of the Soviet Union and served as head of the FSB's St. Petersburg branch between 1992-98.

When Putin was appointed as the head of the FSB in 1997, Cherkesov served as his deputy. Following Putin's elevation to the presidency in 2000, Cherkesov became his presidential envoy to Russia's Northwestern Federal District.

Cherkesov later headed Russia's Federal Drug Control Service from 2003 until his dismissal in 2008.

Cherkesov's firing by Putin was widely seen as punishment for his public discussing of infighting within Putin's ranks in a 2007 newspaper article.

Publicly chastizing Cherkesov for the piece, Putin said: "one who makes claims about the secret service war must first themselves be blameless."

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