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Putin Mourns 'Dear Friend' Berlusconi's Death

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Aug. 30, 2005: Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) says goodbye to Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi (L) at the end of Berlusconi's three-day visit to Sochi. **ITAR-TASS / Vladimir Rodionov**

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Monday he was saddened by the death of his "dear friend" former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Berlusconi, who dominated Italian public life for decades as a billionaire media mogul, businessman and prime minister, was confirmed to have died at a Milan hospital at age 86. He had been suffering from leukemia "for some time" and had recently developed a lung infection, according to Reuters.

"For me, Silvio was a cherished person, a true friend," Putin wrote in a telegram of condolence to Italian President Sergio Mattarella, lauding Berlusconi's "wisdom" and "balanced, forward-looking decisions."

"During each of our meetings I was literally charged with his incredible life energy, optimism and sense of humor," Putin continued.

“His passing is an irreparable loss and a great sorrow,” Putin said in the telegram released by the Kremlin.

Putin and Berlusconi have long enjoyed friendly personal ties, with frequent visits to each other and lavish gifts.

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Berlusconi, who served as head of the Italian government three times between 1994 and 2011, had often defended Putin from critics who said the Russian leader was not fully committed to democracy.

In April 2022, Berlusconi said he was "deeply disappointed" by Putin's behavior in Ukraine. But in September he was forced to clarify those remarks, suggesting the Russian president had been "pushed" into the invasion by his entourage.

A month later, leaked recordings emerged in which Berlusconi described receiving 20 bottles of vodka from Putin for his birthday, adding that "I responded with bottles of Lambrusco [wine] and an equally sweet letter."

Berlusconi later blamed the war on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Berlusconi became the most prominent Western politician to visit Russian-annexed Crimea in 2015, where he and Putin laid flowers at a monument commemorating soldiers — including troops of the Kingdom of Sardinia, part of modern-day Italy — who fell in a 19th-century war over Crimea.

Memos from the U.S. Embassy in Rome, released in 2010 by WikiLeaks, alleged an uncomfortably close relationship between Berlusconi and Putin. One cable suggested that the friendship between the two was so strong and Italy's dependence on Russian energy so significant that Berlusconi had a "distorted" view of Moscow.

Another memo claimed that Berlusconi and his allies were believed to be personally profiting from Italy's extensive energy contracts with Russia. Berlusconi rejected the allegations.

“In Russia, Silvio Berlusconi will be remembered as a consistent and principled supporter of strengthening friendly relations between our countries,” Putin said in Monday’s telegram.

AFP contributed reporting.

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