

Billionaire Lebedev Charged With Hooliganism

By [Nikolaus von Twickel](#)

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Lebedev, who has an estimated fortune of \$1.1 billion, called investigators' accusations "completely invented." **Maxim Stulov**

Kremlin critic and billionaire Alexander Lebedev has been charged with hooliganism over a fistfight on a television show last year, the Investigative Committee said Wednesday.

The charge, which carries a five-year prison sentence, is for "hooliganism motivated by political, ideological, racial, ethnic or religious hatred or enmity," the same charge brought against the three Pussy Riot rockers given prison sentences last month for their performance denouncing President Vladimir Putin in a Moscow cathedral.

Lebedev was asked to sign a document preventing him from leaving the country, the Investigative Committee said in a [statement](#) on its website.

The billionaire rejected the charges through his lawyer, calling them trumped-up, and his

spokesman said Lebedev refused to sign the document that would force him to stay in Russia.

“This is completely invented and nothing but political punishment,” Lebedev's lawyer, Genri Reznik, told The Moscow Times.

Reznik has said the Kremlin is seeking to punish his client for his exposure of government corruption, for publishing the critical newspaper Novaya Gazeta, and for his support of opposition leader and anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny.

The hooliganism case stems from a televised brawl between Lebedev and former real estate mogul Sergei Polonsky on Sept. 16, 2011. Lebedev punched Polonsky several times in the face over a perceived slight on the talk show NTVshniki, shown on state-controlled NTV (see video below).

Lebedev's spokesman Artyom Artyomov ridiculed the fact that the charges are based on the adversaries' alleged “deep political differences.” “Where are the politics? Where is the inciting of hatred?” he asked.

Notably, the criminal investigation into the brawl was initiated last fall, after Vladimir Putin, then prime minister, labelled the incident as hooliganism at a meeting of his All-Russian People's Front movement.

"We have a front, but we do not attack anyone. They do not have a front, but they punch each other in the ear. Hooliganism," Putin said at the meeting held on Sept. 21 of last year.

Shortly after the charges were made public Wednesday, Lebedev [published](#) the official criminal complaint on his LiveJournal blog.

Lebedev quipped on Wednesday about how long it had taken investigators to file charges in the case.

“Our skilled investigators took a whole year to conscientiously investigate the incident, and now I am finally told that I am a defendant in a criminal case," he told Interfax.

The Investigative Committee opened a criminal investigation in connection with the fight between Lebedev and Polonsky on Oct. 14.

Artyomov said Lebedev did not sign the Investigative Committee document limiting his travel because Lebedev considers it an excessive measure given his cooperation with investigators during the past 12 months. “He has always shown up for questioning,” Artyomov said by telephone.

The charges add greatly to the troubles of the businessman, who has already been facing pressure from the authorities.

Police have made multiple raids on the offices of his National Reserve Bank, and Lebedev, a former KGB spy, says his companies and family have faced systematic harassment from the Federal Security Service.

After a video surfaced online this summer showing Lebedev with prostitutes in a hotel in Kiev,

he said he was selling all his Russian business holdings.

On Tuesday, he told Reuters in an interview that efforts to sell his assets, which include a potato farming business and a stake in Aeroflot, Russia's largest airline, have failed so far.

He also co-owns Novaya Gazeta with former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, and his son owns British newspapers The Independent and London's Evening Standard.

Lebedev has a fortune worth \$1.1 billion, according to Forbes magazine.

He said buyers were afraid of angering Putin, whose support is widely seen as vital for big business deals.

Asked if he thought he would be jailed, Lebedev told the news agency: "I don't see any reason for anybody fabricating a case like that unless they want to put you into prison."

The Kremlin has repeatedly denied pressuring businessmen over their political activities, but Lebedev insisted that that was exactly what was happening.

"I know the position of the president ... he thinks it is true that I have been funding [the opposition], so I was violating rule No. 1: If you have money you should not interfere [in politics]," he told Reuters.

Most wealthy businessmen have avoided backing anti-Kremlin political movements since the 2003 arrest of former oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who had openly supported opposition parties. He is still in prison.

Yury Korgunyuk, an analyst at the Indem think tank, said Lebedev should view the threat seriously because he had been warned many times already.

"The government is showing that it won't tolerate that sort of activity anymore," he said by telephone.

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