

Media Magnate Lebedev Likely to Stay Out of Jail

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The trial between two eccentric Russian entrepreneurs over a televised punch-up that almost sent one to prison may end more peacefully than expected, with plaintiff Sergei Polonsky sending a letter to the court asking the judge not to put his opponent, Alexander Lebedev, behind bars.

"In this crazy world, 35 percent of people, according to official data, are mentally disturbed. We see that Alexander Lebedev behaves well during court hearings and does not throw his fists at anybody," said Polonsky, an outlandish businessman, known for his unrealized ambition to build the tallest building in Europe.

Polonsky is currently awaiting trial in Cambodia for allegedly assaulting local sailors. But even if he was cleared of that charge, he would have to face justice at home, where he is wanted in connection with the embezzlement of \$200 million.

The brawl between Polonsky and Lebedev occurred during the recording of a television show about the financial crisis in September 2011. Lebedev jumped out of his chair and attempted to punch Polonsky, only to knock him off the studio podium after the latter said he would like to hit other discussion participants in the face.

Lebedev was consequentially accused of "hooliganism motivated by political hatred" and could face up to five years in prison.

But the prosecution later dropped the hooliganism charge and left it at battery, which can lead to up to 22 months of restricted movement. In that case, Lebedev would be unable to leave the region he is registered in.

Lebedev, who along with former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev owns Russia's main liberal opposition newspaper, Novaya Gazeta, attributed the charges against him to President Vladimir Putin's revenge for his criticism of the government.

"It is the government that's against me," he told reporters at one of the court hearings.

Putin called the incident's participants "hooligans," slamming their inability to solve issues peacefully.

Despite Lebedev's claims of a politically motivated prosecution, analysts have suggested that the incident was actually a business conflict.

"Lebedev is not a political figure, and therefore this case is not politically driven," said Stanislav Belkovsky, a former Kremlin insider and now a prominent political observer.

"The situation does not deserve political analysis; these are just a bunch of clowns. Whoever pays more money to the court will win, and we should pay less attention to the situation," he said.

Lebedev, who is also the owner of the British newspapers London Evening Standard and The Independent, enjoys wide appeal among famous actors and singers in Russia and the West.

Such notable figures as Keira Knightley, Elton John, Bono and Hugh Grant wrote letters in his support.

"I formed a very favorable impression of [Mr. Lebedev] as a man of great decency, integrity and generosity," wrote British playwright and screenwriter Tom Stoppard.

The court is expected to declare its verdict on July 2. Lebedev denied the charges against him and said they were fabricated.

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