

Yaroslavl Mayor Who Quit United Russia Arrested on Bribery Charges

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The mayor of a Central Russian city who quit pro-Kremlin party United Russia was detained late Tuesday on suspicion of extorting hundreds of thousands of dollars from a local company, in what analysts and his supporters said was likely a political hit job by those sympathetic to his former party.

Yaroslavl Mayor Yevgeny Urlashov said he suspected the charges were masterminded by United Russia in an attempt to remove him as a popular competitor in regional legislative elections scheduled for Sept. 8, when he is set to head the party list of billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov's Civil Platform party.

If convicted on the bribery charges, Urlashov would be barred from running in elections.

Urlashov was detained Tuesday night as he was traveling in a car after work. That day, his work had included meeting with delegates of the Parliamentary Assembly of Europe who were

in Yaroslavl to discuss the political environment in the region and to assess whether Russia was fulfilling its obligations to the Council of Europe, media reports said.

"Unexpectedly, a police car blocked the path of Urlashov's car, after which officers of the economic security department literally dragged him out by the back of the neck and drove [him] away without explaining the reasons," his spokeswoman Svetlana Yefimova told Gazeta.ru.

Urlashov is suspected of receiving a bribe Tuesday night "and this fact was interrupted and he was delivered to an Interior Ministry department to give explanations," Kristina Guzovskaya, spokeswoman for regional investigators, said in comments carried by RIA Novosti.

According to investigators, the mayor and a group of his subordinates solicited a kickback of 14 million rubles (\$480,000) from a private company for hiring it to carry out unidentified work, investigators said on their website. Media reports said the work was related to city cleaning. An unidentified Interior Ministry official told RIA Novosti that Urlashov's alleged associates had in fact been extorting a bribe of 45 million rubles (\$1.4 million) from the company.

Given that Urlashov is not a member of the ruling party, a rarity for a mayor of a regional capital, suspicions were immediately raised that the charges were trumped up by political competitors.

Alexei Titkov, a regions analyst with the Higher School of Economics, said the charges against Urlashov "look more like a political order," although he said that such an order would be "risky and short-sighted" because the behavior of voters could be unpredictable, and the charges "would not necessarily count against Urlashov."

But Titkov remarked that it was most likely the work of local or regional officials as opposed to the Kremlin, since Urlashov is not a politician "of a federal level."

Urlashov was a member of United Russia from 2008 to September 2011, when he quit the party, saying it was pressing him to retract his accusations against officials over the plane crash that killed the Lokomotiv hockey team after takeoff from a Yaroslavl airfield.

When he won the mayor's job in Yaroslavl last year, defeating United Russia candidate Yakov Takushev, it made national headlines.

On Wednesday, the federal Investigative Committee and Interior Ministry denied that the charges against Urlashov were politically motivated.

Urlashov said the person who accused him of bribery was a United Russia member and owned a company that he said failed to properly fulfill its obligations to clean the city.

"This is a political game that is linked to the Sept. 8 elections," Urlashov told Dozhd television.

Prokhorov, the head of the Civil Platform party to which Urlashov belongs, will go to Yaroslavl on Sunday to support him, Interfax reported.

Two members of A Just Russia with links to the region told The Moscow Times that they suspected United Russia was behind the charges against Urlashov since the party, whose popularity is low in the region, sees him as their main competitor in the upcoming elections.

Anatoly Greshnevikov, a State Duma deputy who represents the Yaroslavl region, said it was "evident" to him that there was a "political motive" behind the charges. Greshnevikov pointed out that some time ago, Urlashov refused to become one of the top three candidates on United Russia's party list in the upcoming elections.

"As Sept. 8 approaches, work is underway as part of political orders," said Mikhail Maleyev, a senior member of A Just Russia's regional branch. "United Russia's opponents are being intimidated."

Maleyev suggested that the charges against Urlashov were a "publicity stunt" of United Russia — which Urlashov "called the party of crooks and thieves" at a rally in Yaroslavl last month — to show that "Urlashov is the same crook and thief," Maleyev said.

A criminal case has been opened on charges of attempted bribery against Urlashov, his deputy Dmitry Donskov, his advisor Alexei Lopatin, and Maxim Poikalainen, head of the city's agency for municipal orders, regional investigators said.

Bribery charges carry a maximum sentence of 15 years in prison, but typically those convicted of an "attempted" crime receive lighter sentences.

Another criminal case was opened against an unidentified 34-year-old local resident on charges of acting as a middleman in a bribe, which are punishable by up to 12 years in prison, regional investigators said.

Urlashov has declined to strike a deal with investigators, but another unidentified suspect has asked to confess and cooperate with investigators, RIA Novosti reported.

Investigators will request that a local court arrest Urlashov, whom they have ordered held in detention for two days.

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