

Tri Kita Saga Wraps Up in Shabby Courtroom

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Sergei Zuyev attending a court hearing Friday in the town of Naro-Fominsk. **Alexander Bratersky**

NARO-FOMINSK, Moscow Region — A furniture smuggling saga that came to symbolize rampant corruption in the highest circles of law enforcement during Vladimir Putin's first term as president is winding down this week in a small, beat-up courtroom just outside of Moscow.

The Naro-Fominsk court will decide whether Sergei Zuyev, the once-flamboyant owner of the Tri Kita and Grand furniture stores, and eight suspected accomplices should be sentenced to up to nine years in prison.

The court began to read the lengthy verdict Friday, and the trial is expected to end later this week.

But 10 years after it started, the formerly headline-grabbing affair has turned into an almost

routine case of smuggling, with the amount of evaded customs duties dwindling from an initial \$8 million to just \$600,000 spread among all nine defendants.

The cramped Naro-Fominsk courtroom on Friday was packed with television crews, print journalists, friends and relatives of the defendants and a motley group of people who used to work for Zuyev or headed front companies he dealt with.

Zuyev's mother, a 78-year-old retired doctor, told journalists that her son was a real "master of the Russian land."

"He created everything with his own hands," she said.

Speaking to reporters just moments before the hearing started, the bearded Zuyev said his case was "fabricated" by rivals who hoped to strip him of his \$500 million fortune.

"It was a raiders-style hostile takeover," said Zuyev, who was arrested in 2006 and has spent the past four years in pretrial detention.

Speaking through the small window of the defendant's cage encased with bulletproof glass, Zuyev often referred to God and crossed himself.

Zuyev, 55, once a splashy businessman with ties to show business, became a devout Orthodox believer in the late 1990s and is supporting several Russian churches financially, his lawyer Kirill Polishchuk said.

Prosecutors have asked for nine years for Zuyev, who is accused of masterminding a scheme to smuggle expensive designer furniture from Italy to Russia through the use of fake documents and bogus companies. According to prosecutors, Zuyev and his co-defendants illegally lowered the weight of the furniture on paper to avoid the steep customs duties. They are also charged with money laundering.

While Zuyev's case might resemble an ordinary case of white-collar crime today, it sparked a furious battle between the Prosecutor General's Office and the Federal Security Service on one side and customs officials and the Interior Ministry on the other when it erupted in 2000. The Interior Ministry and Federal Customs Service called for a criminal investigation into smuggling, while prosecutors resisted amid media reports that senior FSB officials had been providing cover to Zuyev's businesses.

Zuyev, a former worker at a Soviet state furniture plant, made his fortune by selling popular Romanian furniture on the eve of the collapse of communism. In the mid-1990s, he built two larger-than-life furniture stores, Grand and Tri Kita, near Moscow, selling expensive designer furniture to powerful clients who included government officials and celebrities.

In August 2000, the Tri Kita store was stormed by armored police commandos and customs officials who accused several companies based in the store of importing contraband furniture worth \$2 million.

The customs officials believed that the contraband was only a small part of a much bigger smuggling scheme being carried out by companies controlled by Zuyev. They seized most of the store's furniture and closed it down.

The Interior Ministry's chief investigator in the case, Pavel Zaitsev, was soon relieved of his duties by the Prosecutor General's Office. Zaitsev later was convicted of abuse of office and received a suspended sentence.

Prosecutors also opened an investigation into two customs officials, Alexander Volkov and Marat Faizulin, on suspicion of abuse of office for asking Zuyev to pay \$2.5 million in back duties. In 2003, a Moscow court cleared both customs officials of wrongdoing.

Zuyev then paid the \$2.5 million in an attempt to save his business, said Polishchuk, his lawyer.

“When the customs officials started to return the seized furniture, about 50 containers had disappeared. I believe many of them ended up on

Rublyovka,” Polishchuk told The Moscow Times, referring to the neighborhood of wealthy businesspeople and influential politicians in western Moscow.

Police are investigating what happened to the furniture.

Police are also investigating an attack on Polishchuk by unknown assailants in October, RIA-Novosti reported. Polishchuk said the attackers stole documents related to the Tri Kita case that he had planned to show Zuyev’s foreign business partners during a visit to London. No arrests have been made in the attack, he said.

The Tri Kita case gained national attention in 2002 when Putin, annoyed by the lack of progress in the investigation, ordered a personal friend, St. Petersburg prosecutor Vladimir Loskutov, to oversee the inquiry.

Zuyev, meanwhile, attempted to gain immunity from possible prosecution by winning a seat in the Moscow regional legislature with the populist Pensioners' Party. In 2003, the Supreme Court stripped him of the seat after ruling that he had bribed voters during the pre-election campaign.

Zuyev was arrested in 2006 by Loskutov, who told reporters at that time that the businessman “had connections with law enforcement officials” who were trying to prevent his arrest.

Gennady Gudkov, a State Duma deputy who participated in a parliamentary investigation into the Tri Kita case, said the case clearly reached into the top levels of law enforcement.

“Zuyev couldn’t have been able to act alone. Many powerful officials were involved in this case, and the fact that they haven’t ended up sitting in the defendant's cage indicates that the [Tri Kita] investigators have come under pressure,” said Gudkov, a Just Russia deputy who sits on the Duma's Security Committee.

“It is a pity that the case has turned into much ado about nothing, but in Russia corruption has become part of the government system,” he told The Moscow Times.

In 2003, the Duma's anti-corruption commission named two deputies to Prosecutor General Vladimir Ustinov — Yury Birukov and Vasily Kolmogorov — as people who tried to block Zaitsev in his Tri Kita investigation. Both prosecutors were later dismissed.

It is unclear what kind of sentence the Naro-Fominsk court might hand down this week. But Zaitsev, who currently works as a defense lawyer specializing in economic crime, believes that Zuyev "has suffered enough."

"In my opinion, he has repented," Zaitsev told The Moscow Times. "It would make the most sense to let him go now."

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