

Senator Accused of Arranging Jail Term

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September 13, 2010

The  Moscow Times

A renowned journalist on Monday accused outgoing Federation Council Senator Vladimir Slutsker of organizing the jailing of her husband, who incidentally has turned into a celebrity blogger while in prison.

Olga Romanova, a journalism professor at the Higher School of Economics who formerly worked as a news anchor on Ren-TV, filed a complaint with Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika on Monday in which she accuses Slutsker of having her husband, Alexei Kozlov, jailed over a dispute at Finvest, an investment company controlled by Slutsker and formerly headed by Kozlov. Slutsker denied wrongdoing.

"I don't have any hope, but if they tell me that my husband's constitutional rights have been violated, then I will have some hope," Romanova said by telephone.

Romanova's complaint is well-timed. As a senator representing the republic of Chuvashia, Slutsker enjoys immunity from prosecution. But Chuvashia's new leader, Mikhail Ignatyev, decided last week to replace Slutsker with former Chuvashia leader Nikolai Fyodorov.

Romanova alleged in her complaint that Slutsker had forged the documents that led to charges being filed against her husband and that a middleman acting on Slutsker's behalf had demanded a \$3 million bribe for the charges to be dropped.

"For many years, I have publicly stated in the media that a bribe was demanded from me, but until this time, no one has been interested," Romanova wrote in the letter to the prosecutor.

Slutsker's office released a statement Monday that accused Romanova of bribing investigators.

"It is beneath our dignity to comment on the words of a person who has publicly stated that she gave \$1 million to the investigators who were investigating her husband's case," the statement said.

Romanova said she gave \$1.5 million to a middleman who was acting on behalf of the investigators in her husband's case in August 2008. After she spoke about this payment in the media, the investigators returned the money, she said.

Romanova said her husband was jailed after Slutsker turned against him for unspecified reasons and demanded that he relinquish a minor stake that he owned in Finvest.

Kozlov, 36, is serving a seven-year prison sentence in the Tambov region after being jailed in 2008 on charges of illegally obtaining shares in the Iskoz company, which is co-owned by Finvest.

But with Romanova's assistance, Kozlov has turned into a popular online figure as the host of Butyrka Blog, an award-winning blog named after the infamous Moscow detention center.

Slutsker's problems could spell a new turn in politics, where business leaders will no longer be welcome to hold public office for the sake of immunity from prosecution, said Alexei Mukhin, an analyst with the Center for Political Information. He noted that President Dmitry Medvedev has discouraged business leaders from seeking public office just for the perk of immunity. Last year, Medvedev even proposed to amend the Criminal Code to allow investigators to open cases against lawmakers who failed to inform law enforcement officials about their status.

"It is getting out of fashion to be a senator just for the sake of it," Mukhin said.

Lawmakers in the Federation Council and the State Duma are not supposed to engage in business while in office, but prominent businessmen have held seats in both houses of parliament.

Slutsker, a former president of the Russian Jewish Congress, has fought court battles before. Last year, he won a lawsuit against reporter Oleg Lurie, who was jailed for eight years on charges of demanding \$50,000 from Slutsker's representatives to withhold articles implicating Slutsker of criminal wrongdoing in his business activities.

Slutsker also won a lawsuit against his ex-wife Olga Slutsker, head of the World Class chain of gyms, this month, and the court awarded him a large amount of her property and custody of their two children, Mikhail, 11, and Anna, 6.

Romanova has said in numerous interviews to journalists that Slutsker was uncomfortable with her comments as a Ren-TV anchor, which often targeted the Kremlin-friendly business elite. Romanova lost her job in 2005 when new owners took over the channel.

Romanova helped her husband start the blog on Slon.ru in May 2009 by editing and publishing his writings from a Butyrskaya cell.

“During sunny weather, the sunlight does not come into the cell, and vitamins are prohibited!” Kozlov wrote in his first entry. “The water is cold. And showers are only once a week. Personal parcels are handed out a day late at best. It turns out that the cell where I am sitting was used to keep death row inmates during Stalin’s times.”

Kozlov is a grandson of well-known Soviet intelligence officer Naum Eitingon, who organized the killing of Leon Trotsky in Mexico in 1940 and later fell victim to Stalin’s purges.

Kozlov’s involvement in the blog was long kept secret. The Butyrka Blog won a prize in April at Germany’s Best of the Blogs competition, organized by German broadcaster Deutsche Welle.

Since that time, the blog, now carried by Forbes Russian edition, has turned into a platform for other bloggers jailed for various white-collar crimes.

“These are not abstract writings but first-person accounts from people who have suffered because of the current system,” said Alexei Kamensky, managing editor of Forbes.ru.

He said the blog’s most popular entry was written by Sergei Bobylev, the jailed former owner of the Sunrise supermarket chain, whose story has been read by 80,000 people. The second most-popular entry, Kamensky said, was an August posting by Romanova in which she accuses a judge in the Moscow City Court of not pulling her husband’s case from its archives despite the Supreme Court having ordered a review.

Romanova said Monday that she hoped the case would now be taken out of the archives.

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