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Austria Says 2 Russians Purchased Citizenship

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Austria is putting two Russian-born businessmen on trial on accusations that they paid the country's flamboyant right-wing politician Jörg Haider more than $1 million in bribes to obtain citizenship, prosecutors said Tuesday.

"The case against two former Russian citizens accused of bribery and two other individuals will begin this fall," Eva Habicher, a spokeswoman for the prosecution, said by telephone.

Habicher refused to name the defendants, but Vedomosti, which first reported the case Tuesday, identified the two businessmen as Artyom Bikov and Alexei Bobrov.

Bikov is a former general director of Tyumenenergo, one of the largest regional energy companies, and served as an adviser to Rusnano chief Anatoly Chubais when he headed Unified Energy System. In 2007, he headed Intertekelektro, a company engaged in constructing the country's only privately funded power plant in the oil-rich Tyumen

region.

Earlier this year, his personal fortune was valued at $190 million by Finans magazine, which also said he is a co-owner of Agropromkreditbank.

He and Bobrov, who does not appear on any rich list but was identified by Vedomosti as Bikov's business partner, could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

Prosecutors said that in 2007 the two paid 450,000 euros ($640,000) each to Haider, then-governor of Carinthia and leader of the far-right Freedom Party, to obtain Austrian passports. Haider died in a car crash in 2008, but investigators have charged his former chief of protocol, Franz Koloini, and a Vienna-based lawyer with facilitating the deal, Austrian media reported.

The reports said the money was paid to "speed up" the citizenship process after the two had already invested some $2 million in a 2005 sponsorship deal for local Formula One racer Patrick Friesacher.

The allegations are part of a string of similar cases in which wealthy Russians are hoping to benefit from a clause in Austria's immigration law that empowers the federal government to give citizenship to foreigners it deems able to do the country "extraordinary services."

The Austrian Interior Ministry receives more than 100 applications under this clause each year, but less than half of them are successful, ministry spokesman Rudolf Gollia said by telephone from Vienna. He could not specify how many of the applications come from Russian citizens.

Prosecutors uncovered the case involving Bikov and Bobrov during an investigation into Uwe Scheuch, a former minister in Haider's regional government who became deputy governor of Carinthia after his death.

Last week, Scheuch was given an 18-month suspended sentence after a court found him guilty of abuse of office on charges of telling an unidentified Russian investor that he could obtain citizenship if 5 percent to 10 percent of a 5 million euro investment went to his party.

Scheuch, who denied wrongdoing, immediately appealed the verdict, which was based on a wiretapped telephone conversation in which he allegedly told an intermediary that obtaining citizenship was "part of the game."

Habicher, the prosecutors' spokeswoman, said that in this case even investigators did not know the Russian investor's identity.

A fourth Russian who has been accused of attempting to buy his way into Austria is Igor Vidyayev, a co-founder of the Pyatyorochka supermarket chain.

Austrian media reported earlier this year that Vidyayev asked Gabriele Burgstaller, governor of Salzburg, for a passport and offered to give 2.5 million euros to the annual Salzburg music festival.

Habicher confirmed on Tuesday that prosecutors were investigating at the request of the local government but added that this was the third inquiry. "We already investigated twice

and found no evidence of wrongdoing," she said.

Vidyayev could not be immediately located for comment. His request was not granted, according to media reports.

Austria is a favorite destination for wealthy Russians, most prominently billionaire Inteko founder Yelena Baturina, who is said to spend most of her time at her chalet near Kitzbühel, a skiing resort popular with the world's rich and famous, since her husband, Yury Luzhkov, was fired as Moscow's mayor last fall. Baturina has lavishly sponsored a local jazz festival and tennis tournament but toned down her commitments during the last two years.

Austrian media reported earlier this year that the country denied Luzhkov a residency permit because it did not want to jeopardize relations with the Kremlin by favoring a disgraced official.

Austria is ranked 15th, along with Germany, on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, much better than Russia, which is closer to the bottom at 154.

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