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Jailed Ex-Mayor Runs for Duma Seat

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A former Siberian mayor accused of extorting a half million-dollar bribe is running for a State Duma seat from behind bars, a Communist deputy said Monday.

Former Bratsk Mayor Alexander Serov received the paperwork confirming his candidacy from Duma Deputy Sergei Levchenko, who visited him in a pretrial detention center in Irkutsk on Friday.

Serov was detained in February after obtaining what investigators said was a bribe of 15 million rubles ($510,000) from an Irkutsk businessman.

Serov, who later resigned as mayor, faces up to 12 years in prison if convicted.

He maintains his innocence.

Duma Deputy Sergei Obukhov said his colleagues in the Communist Party witnessed Serov's detention and "how the evidence was falsified."

"It is evident for us that this is a provocation," Obukhov said by telephone.

He also said Serov enjoys "enormous" public support, and his backers have organized rallies attended by thousands of people.

The 2005 federal law on Duma elections doesn't ban candidates under criminal investigation and even convicts from running, but it requires candidates to reveal this information to election officials.

The Communist Party has asked election officials, the Investigative Committee and prosecutors to assist Serov in running his election campaign, including meetings with journalists and the public, from behind bars, Interfax reported.

If Serov wins a Duma seat, he would qualify for immunity from prosecution, a right afforded all deputies.

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