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Cocaine Gang Busted on Banana Ship

By Natalya Krainova

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Suspect Artyom Novakovsky seen with seized cocaine in a ministry photo.

Investigators have broken up an international drug-trafficking ring that smuggled bricks of cocaine among crates of bananas being shipped from Ecuador to St. Petersburg.

Nine Russians, two Latvians and the suspected Ukrainian ringleader have been arrested in connection with the four-year investigation by the Interior Ministry, the Federal Customs Service and the Federal Security Service, officials said Thursday.

Investigators confiscated 130 kilograms of cocaine in total: 70 kilograms, with a street value of $85 million, from a banana-laden ship headed for St. Petersburg's harbor in 2010, and the rest from a series of operations against the ring since 2007, Sergei Borodulin, deputy head of the Interior Ministry's investigative department, said at a news conference.

"We had identified the members by the end of 2009, but nevertheless we wanted to catch them red-handed in order to conduct the confiscation with style," senior Interior Ministry official Sergei Tikhonenko said, smiling radiantly at several dozen reporters.

The lucky break came in December 2010, when investigators learned that a ship arriving from Ecuador would pause in the dead of night before reaching St. Petersburg so the drugs could be unloaded onto the iced-over Gulf of Finland. Associates would walk over from the shore to pick up the drugs.

“The rest was a matter of technique, professional skills and our professional pride,” Tikhonenko said.

Investigators boarded the ship several hours before the cocaine was to be unloaded and found the drugs in the captain’s cabin packed in plastic bags shaped like bricks.

Then investigators unloaded dummy bricks of cocaine onto the ice for the associates to pick up. It took the associates nine hours to walk, waist-deep in snow, the several kilometers from the ship to the shore — where investigators were waiting to detain them.

The associates led the investigators to a rented cottage in the Leningrad region that served as their hideout, where two Latvian nationals were detained.

The suspected leader of the gang, Ukrainian national Valentin Voinovsky, was extradited to Russia from Belarus, while eight Russian suspects were arrested in Russia.

A ninth was arrested in the Netherlands and is awaiting extradition to Russia, Borodulin said. The two Latvians are in custody.

If convicted of drug-trafficking and related charges, the suspects face a maximum of 20 years in prison.

The investigative department that is formally handling the case will pass it to the Prosecutor General’s Office in the next few days, Borodulin said.

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