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Case Against Yaroslavl Mayor Looks Legitimate, Rights Activists Say

By Natalya Krainova

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Urlashov, who is suspected of bribing a city contractor, being escorted by police in Yaroslavl on Wednesday. **Anna Solovyova**

Investigators officially charged Yaroslavl Mayor Yevgeny Urlashov and a group of his subordinates with attempted bribery Thursday as members of the Kremlin human rights council met to discuss the case, which Urlashov's supporters say they suspect has been fabricated by his political enemies.

But members of the council, generally considered an independent body composed of respected activists, said they did not detect evidence of a political motive in the case materials.

Urlashov became a nationally known figure after winning the Yaroslavl mayoral race last year, defeating a member of United Russia, the party he quit in 2011 in a high-profile move.

He is now a member of Civil Platform, the fledgling party founded by billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, who offered Urlashov support Thursday, saying he would pay his bail. Prokhorov did not say how much he would pay, apparently expecting investigators to name a sum, although authorities had not commented on Prokhorov's offer as of late Thursday.

Urlashov says he believes the charges are part of an attempt to ruin his party's chances in regional legislative elections set for Sept. 8, when he was slated to head the Civil Platform electoral list.

Two members of the Kremlin human rights council who examined some of the case materials and met with investigators said Thursday that they saw no political motives or falsifications in the case.

"Absolutely all political forces will play upon this situation, but we, after studying some documents, are not ready to declare that the case was ordered," council member Kirill Kabanov told a news conference in Yaroslavl, Interfax reported.

Kabanov said he saw no signs of falsifications in the case because the mayor's office, in a conversation with him, did not deny that a voice in an allegedly incriminating audio recording published by police was Urlashov's.

Authorities seem to have a strong chance of attaining a conviction on the charge of extorting 14 million rubles ($480,000) from a unidentified private firm. In addition to material evidence, Urlashov's four alleged accomplices have confessed to colluding with the Yaroslavl mayor to commit the crime and have implicated him as the organizer, Kommersant reported Thursday, citing sources close to the investigation.

Investigators have also confiscated a total of 35 million rubles ($1.1 million) in searches conducted as part of the inquiry. All the money allegedly belongs to Urlashov, investigators said.

New episodes may be added to the criminal case since citizens have started to report other incidents of bribery by Urlashov after investigators called on them to do so, Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin said in a statement.

Senior United Russia lawmaker Sergei Neverov said Thursday that the grounds for Urlashov's detention published by investigators were "rather convincing," Interfax reported.

Analysts and Urlashov's supporters have said they suspect the case was ordered by regional political rivals, but the investigation is quickly becoming national. Urlashov's lawyer Mikhail Pisarets told Interfax on Thursday that his client would likely be transported to a detention center in the capital, and on Wednesday regional investigators transferred the criminal case to the Investigative Committee's Moscow office.

Update:

RIA Novosti

A court in Yaroslavl ruled early on Friday to arrest an opposition politician who won a rare landslide victory against the ruling United Russia party in a mayoral election last year.

Yaroslavl Mayor Yevgeny Urlashov was charged along with four of his colleagues on Thursday with extorting a 14 million ruble ($420,000) bribe, investigators said. The official, who was detained in the early hours of Wednesday morning, denies the charges, describing them as "political games."

Speaking on Thursday at a court hearing to determine immediate legal measures against him, Urlashov maintained his innocence.

"The court decided to arrest Urlashov until September 2 as a measure of pre-trial restraint," Judge Lyudmila Kolygina said.

The judge earlier ruled to arrest Deputy Mayor Dmitry Donskov, also charged with extorting a large bribe, and local resident Andrei Zakharov, charged with attempting to act as a middle-man for a corruption scheme.

The defense teams of Urlashov and Donskov said they would appeal the arrest.

Later on Friday, the court will decide on whether to arrest the head of municipal contracts, Maxim Poikalainen and mayoral adviser Alexei Lopatin.

The five men are alleged to have attempted to force the director of a company to pay a series of kickbacks after his firm was hired by the city to provide cleaning services. Urlashov, Donskov, Lopatin and Poikalainen each face sentences of up to 15 years in prison.

Investigators, who said that in ongoing property searches they have confiscated 35 million rubles ($1 million) apparently belonging to Urlashov, also warned that more criminal charges were likely to emerge.

Contact the author at n.krainova@imedia.ru

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