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Urlashov Faces More Charges

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Yevgeny Urlashov

Investigators said Wednesday that they were preparing a new criminal case against former Yaroslavl Mayor Yevgeny Urlashov, who was arrested on attempted bribery charges in early July in what his supporters say was a frame-up to ruin his party's chances of winning regional elections.

Urlashov became a nationally known figure after he won the election for Yaroslavl mayor last year, defeating a member of United Russia — the party he left in 2011. The victory was seen as a major turning point for the opposition.

According to the Investigative Committee, Urlashov and his four accomplices extorted 14 million rubles ($480,000) from Sergei Shmelyov, the head of the Radostroi construction firm. Urlashov was also charged with taking a 500,000-ruble bribe from another entrepreneur and with knowingly using falsified documents in an attempt to change the head of the city administration.

"Investigators are looking into one more act of criminal activity, and an appropriate decision about this information will be made in the near future," the committee's statement said.

Urlashov, a member of the Civil Platform party founded by billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, has denied all charges. He said they were fabricated by his political enemies in a bid to ruin his party's chances in the regional elections set for Sept. 8, when he was slated to head the Civil Platform electoral list.

Adding intrigue to the situation, the latest charges come immediately after reports that Natalya Semyonova, the fiscal agent for the Yaroslavl branch of the Civil Platform, was detained before she could submit registration documents to the election committee.

As a result of the detention, the party missed the registration deadline, and supporters say the whole thing was orchestrated to eliminate the party from the campaign.

But a member of the Kremlin's Human Rights Council said earlier that there was no political motive in the case against Urlashov, and Yaroslavl's election committee said the party would probably not have been registered because it had submitted incorrect documents several times.

Yury Korgunyuk, an analyst with the Indem think tank, said by telephone that any further cases opened against Urlashov would be opened to solidify his arrest on the first charge. He added, however, that Urlashov's arrest had nothing to do with the party's participation in regional elections, though it may have stemmed from Urlashov's own personal conflict with regional politicians.

"He challenged the whole [political] system with his victory last year," Korgunyuk said.

Korgunyuk also said the Civil Platform in Yaroslavl was under pressure because the Kremlin still could not decide whether to allow Prokhorov to expand his influence or not, since United Russia was not very popular in the Yaroslavl region.

Urlashov, deputy mayor Dmitry Donskov and Urlashov's adviser Alexei Lopatin, both of whom have also been charged in the extortion case, told investigators that Shmelyov gave them the money voluntarily to support the Civil Platform's campaign.

In Wednesday's statement, however, the Investigative Committee said such an explanation was groundless since two other alleged accomplices, Maxim Pokalainen and Andrei Zakharov, had already pleaded guilty and confirmed Urlashov's participation in the crime. Shmelyov himself said the money was extorted from him.

Earlier, during searches conducted as part of the inquiry, investigators confiscated 35 million rubles ($1.1 million) that they said belonged to Urlashov.

Urlashov was dismissed from the mayor's office and is currently in a detention facility in Moscow. Investigators said Wednesday that they were gathering new evidence to prove his guilt.

If convicted, he faces up to 21 years in prison.

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