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Minsk Rejects Second Baumgertner Appeal

By The Moscow Times

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MINSK — A Belarussian court on Friday rejected a second appeal by the chief executive of Russian potash producer Uralkali, despite calls by Russia for his release, and ruled he be kept in detention pending investigation into alleged abuse of power, his lawyer said.

Vladislav Baumgertner, CEO of the world's top potash producer, was detained on Aug. 26 while visiting the Belarussian capital, further straining relations in a trade feud between Russia and the ex-Soviet republic after the collapse of a potash sales cartel.

A district court on Sept. 6 refused to release Baumgertner, 41, pending investigation, and a city court in Minsk on Friday rejected a second appeal for him to be freed on bail.

"They turned [the appeal] down. We will appeal further," lawyer Dmitry Goryachko told journalists at the courthouse after the closed hearing.

Baumgertner's arrest, as he visited Minsk at the invitation of the Belarussian prime minister, came after Uralkali in July quit the Belarus Potash Company, or BPC joint venture, the world's largest potash alliance, shaking the $20-billion global market for the vital fertilizer ingredient.

He faces up to 10 years in jail if convicted on charges of abuse of power.

His detention has sparked a diplomatic standoff between Russia and Belarus, a strategic ally of Russia that has been ruled since 1994 by hard-line President Alexander Lukashenko.

Though Lukashenko has a history of maneuvering between Russia and Europe to shore up his isolated leadership and Soviet-style economy, he has acted with affront to Uralkali's withdrawal from the potash alliance, blaming "Russian scoundrels" for the move.

While some Russian officials have reacted indignantly to Baumgertner's arrest, Russian Presiden Vladimir Putin, in a low-key reaction, has called for a resolution of the dispute and said he does not want to "kick up a fuss."

The row between the two allies has fuelled speculation that the company's main shareholder, billionaire Suleiman Kerimov, may have to sell his 21.75 percent stake with his place being taken by an investor more amenable to the Kremlin.

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