

Russian Tycoon and Activist Fetisov in Poor Health Before Trial

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Gleb Fetisov

The health of billionaire and political activist Gleb Fetisov, the wealthiest man behind bars in Russia, is deteriorating as he enters his second year in pretrial detention.

Fetisov, a former senator in Russia's upper house of parliament, told The Moscow Times from the notorious Lefortovo prison, where he is being held on fraud charges, that he was going blind, suffering from kidney pain and at risk of a heart attack.

A longtime environmentalist, Fetisov, 48, sold all his assets to enter politics full time in 2013. A few weeks after he founded a new political party, the Alliance of Greens and Social Democrats, he was arrested by elite police units at a Moscow airport.

Investigators have said that he defrauded depositors and shareholders of My Bank, an organization he no longer owned when he was detained. His supporters maintain he is

a political prisoner.

"After a year in prison I have become a cripple," Fetisov said in written answers to questions passed to him through his lawyer. "I have no doubts left that I was arrested for my political convictions."

The New Magnitsky?

Friends and lawyers for Fetisov said that the health of the businessman, who made an estimated \$1.23 billion fortune in telecoms and banking investments, has deteriorated during his incarceration.

"He could be the new Magnitsky," said ally Gennady Gudkov, referring to lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, who died in prison in 2009 after allegedly exposing tax embezzlement by officials.

Gudkov, an ex-KGB officer whose political party, the Social Democrats of Russia, merged with Fetisov's Green Alliance in 2014, said he was baffled by the treatment of his colleague.

"I don't understand why they are using such cruelty," Gudkov said.

Fetisov said he was deprived of daylight because the small window in his cell was painted over and his eyesight was failing. He added that he had been experiencing kidney pain for five months and that he had heart problems.

"There's no qualified medical help. Just before New Year's it was so bad that I thought it was the end," he said. "In pretrial detention I have had two hypertensive crises and I am seriously afraid that it could all end in a heart attack."

Fetisov's lawyer said Wednesday that his client, currently on painkillers, had undergone one round of medical checks and was due for another. "He is ill," lawyer Igor Dunaev told The Moscow Times.

Accused and Victim

The fraud charges against Fetisov center on his ownership of My Bank, which investigators allege he helped strip of its assets before he sold out in November 2013.

"As a result of illegal activity relating to the removal of assets from My Bank, obligations to depositors were not honored and the responsibility for honoring them to a sum of more than 6 billion rubles has been passed to the Deposit Insurance Agency," Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin said shortly after Fetisov's arrest, the Kommersant newspaper reported.

Fetisov vigorously denies the charges, but last month he made Russian legal history when he paid 14.2 billion rubles (\$231 million) to buy up all the debts of My Bank from their current owner, the state-owned Deposit Insurance Agency, which had compensated depositors who lost money.

The move creates a bizarre legal situation whereby Fetisov is both the accused and the victim.

"I have formally become the only victim of the My Bank case," Fetisov said. "This was done to preserve my political reputation. In this way I have shown that I do not intend to make any shady agreements with investigators in return for my freedom."

My Bank

The Central Bank withdrew Moscow-based My Bank's license two months after Fetisov sold his stake to a group of investors in November 2013.

While a relatively small lender in the top 200 Russian banks by size, My Bank reportedly held money for several influential depositors.

Film director and outspoken President Vladimir Putin supporter Nikita Mikhalkov, and hawkish Kremlin economic aide Sergei Glazyev had accounts with My Bank, business daily Vedomosti reported in Jan. 2014. Other depositors included Russian volleyball star Yekaterina Gamova and movie producer and cinematographer Mikhail Mukasei, Kommersant reported last month.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said last year that he had a "huge number" of friends who had "lost everything" in My Bank, news agency Bloomberg reported. He declined to give any names when contacted by The Moscow Times on Wednesday.

Financial officials said at the time of the bank's collapse that 90 percent of its assets had disappeared.

Fetisov, who has blamed the bank's problems on the new owners, said that he exited the bank's management structure in the summer of 2012 and always treated it as an investment rather than a quick-cash opportunity. He said he sold My Bank for "tens of millions" of dollars.

Airport Arrest

Fetisov was detained in 2014 late one Friday evening by 13 riot police, security service officers and investigators as he disembarked from a plane at a Moscow airport.

"It was a real demonstration of force with the aim of frightening ... the leader of an officially registered party was tied up on the stairs of a plane on its arrival in Moscow. Like an international terrorist," Fetisov said. He was arrested at 2:50 a.m. the following morning, Feb. 29 2014.

Since then, he has been in pretrial detention, denied bail because he is considered a flight risk.

"I don't know what danger I represent. I served two terms in the Federation Council, I have a Ph.D. and for two years I was in charge of a department at Moscow State University," Fetisov told a court hearing on Feb. 24, Interfax news agency reported. The court extended his arrest to May 22.

Both Fetisov and his lawyers said they feared investigators are trying to drag out his case and note that they have not been given access to all the case materials, which run to over 70 volumes. Fetisov's spokesman Igor Pylayev said that a trial could get under way in the

summer.

Financial Clout

Fetisov and his supporters claim he has been targeted because of his large personal wealth — even now Forbes magazine ranks him as the 67th richest person in Russia — and declarations that he was prepared to finance opposition activity.

Tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russia's richest prisoner until he was released in December 2013 after 10 years in jail, was widely understood to have been imprisoned because he dared to challenge President Vladimir Putin.

"Gleb is a victim of a political reprisal ... [because] he dared to announce that he will finance an opposition party," said ally Gudkov.

Less than two months before his arrest, Fetisov announced that he had sold all his investments, including Chinese retail investment vehicle My Decker Capital and a minority holding in Altimo, the telecommunications arm of tycoon Mikhail Fridman's Alfa Group where he worked in the 1990s.

Political Persecution?

Putin's spokesman Peskov declined to comment Wednesday on allegations that Fetisov had been imprisoned for his political convictions.

Fetisov links his arrest with two main events: the founding congress of the Alliance of Greens and Social Democrats as part of an attempt to unify disparate opposition groups, and the 2014 street protests in Ukraine that overthrew Russia-backed President Viktor Yanukovich.

"The events in Kiev were the trigger for the political reprisal against me," said Fetisov.

The Kremlin is known to be fearful of semi-permanent street demonstrations, similar to those in Kiev, that have toppled governments in several former Soviet countries. "Ukraine happened because of the total corruption of the political elite, harrying of the opposition, and falsification of elections," said Fetisov. "In this sense, the Russian authorities are no different from the Ukrainian."

The charges against him carry a sentence of up to 10 years and Fetisov said he has few hopes of being freed soon. He predicts he will be behind bars at least until State Duma elections scheduled for Dec. 2016.

"Investigators don't even try to hide that that they want to get a confession from me at almost any price. So I rot in prison or, God forbid, the cemetery," he said.

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