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BREAKING: Austrian Court Approves Ukrainian Oligarch's Extradition to U.S.

February 21, 2017



Ukrainian oligarch Dmitri Firtash arrives for the start of his trial at the courts of justice in Vienna, Austria, Feb. 21, 2017. **Ronald Zak / AP**

A Vienna court has granted Washington's request to extradite Ukrainian oligarch Dmitri Firtash to the United States to stand trial on racketeering charges.

Previously, in 2015, an Austrian judge refused the U.S. extradition request. At the time, the judge sided with Firtash's defense attorneys, deeming the charges against the oligarch — a close associate and supporter of Ukraine's ousted President Viktor Yanukovych — politically motivated.

Now, the dramatic new ruling and Firtash's future trial in the United States promise to shed light on the oligarch's role in Ukraine. There he is regarded as a prominent pro-Russian force.

Firtash stands accused in Chicago of conspiring to pay $18.5 million dollars in bribes to the Indian government in order to gain access to a local titanium mining project. One of the destinations for the titanium was Illinois, leading to Firtash and five business partners facing

charges in the U.S.

In March 2014, Firtash was detained in Austria at the request of the FBI, and subsequently released on a $172 million bail. Despite charges against the oligarch, some analysts viewed his arrest as a U.S. attempt to ratchet up pressure on Russia over its annexation of Crimea.

As a businessman, Firtash has enjoyed extensive financial benefits from his ties to Russia's leadership. He earned much of his wealth from a 45 percent ownership share of RosUkrEnergo, a company that served as the exclusive middleman between Russia's Gazprom and Ukraine's Naftogaz gas company.

A 2014 special report by Reuters showed that Gazprom sold gas to Firtash at excessively low prices. The oligarch's company subsequently sold the gas to Ukraine at a markup, pocketing over $3 billion in the process. Bankers close to Russian President Vladimir Putin also provided Firtash with generous credit lines, allowing him make extensive purchases in the Ukrainian chemical and fertilizer industries, the report concluded.

If found guilty in Chicago, Firtash could face up to 20 years in prison.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/02/21/firtash-a57230