

The Stunning Story of Russian Minister Ulyukayev's Arrest for Bribery, Explained

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Sofia Miroedova

Alexei Ulyukayev, the first serving Russian minister to be arrested since the fall of the Soviet Union, will appear in court on Tuesday, after being accused of soliciting a bribe from the country's largest oil company.

The former Economic Development Minister has been under house arrest since his detention in the dead of night last November after having allegedly demanded \$2 million to approve the purchase by Rosneft of Bashneft, another oil firm. He faces up to 15 years in prison.

The arrest sent shockwaves through the Russian business community. Even Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev seemed to be caught off guard, saying: "It's beyond comprehension."

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State-owned Rosneft and its boss, the powerful Igor Sechin, had bulldozed resistance from liberals within the government to gobble up one of Russia's fastest-growing oil producers.

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“What the hell is going on here?” Ulyukayev asked repeatedly as investigators took him in, according to Life, a pro-Kremlin tabloid. Within 24 hours of his arrest, Ulyukayev was fired. In court, he described himself as the “victim of a provocation.” His lawyers said he had been duped.

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President Vladimir Putin was aware of the case against Ulyukayev “from the start of the investigative operations” and gave his approval, Putin’s spokesman said.

Putin’s message to the elite was clear, said political analyst Gleb Pavlovsky: “The condition of your work and status is that, at any moment, a criminal case can be opened against you. It’s the loyalty of fear: ‘As long as you’re afraid of me, I trust you.’”

Four months later, a source in the Kremlin told The Moscow Times: “The message to the officialdom has been sent ... There is no need for additional sternness anymore.”

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But Ulyukayev’s detention continues and his trial begins with a closed [preliminary hearing](#) at Moscow’s Zamoskvorechye court Tuesday. We may have to wait for the outcome to know what message the Kremlin ultimately wants to send.

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