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Former Minister Ulyukayev In Court Over Rosneft Bribe: Day One

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Alexei Ulyukaev **Vedyaskin Sergei / Moskva News Agency**

Alexei Ulyukayev, the first serving Russian minister to be arrested since the fall of the Soviet Union, appeared in a Moscow court on Wednesday in what was the first hearing into accusations he solicited 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 allegedly demanding $2 million to approve oil giant Rosneft's purchase of Bashneft. He faces up to 15 years in prison.

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

Following a closed preliminary hearing at Moscow's Zamoskvorechye court Aug. 8, his house arrest was extended until Jan. 27. Ulyukayev was visibly thinner, telling journalist he had lost 14 kilograms "thanks to the Russian justice system."

He called the case "a vile provocation," meant to serve the interests of "the corrupted part of the management and corrupted part of the security services."

On the same day, Igor Sechin, the head of Rosneft who allegedly played a leading role in the sting operation against the former minister, was added to the case's witness list.

Here are the main highlights from today's hearing:

Before the Hearing

Ulyukayev entered the courtroom holding an e-book. He told journalists he was reading "The Murder" by Russian literary giant Anton Chekhov.

Asked by journalists how he ended up in his current situation he said: "That's a long story. I lack the talent to describe it."

When the judge ordered several photographers and a reporter to leave the courtroom, Ulyukayev drily commented: "Expulsion from paradise."

Asked whether he thought his case would end well, Ulyukayev cryptically replied: "It will end well, from a historical point of view."

The Prosecutor's version: Bribe in Goa

According to prosecutors, Ulyukayev exacted a $2 million bribe from Rosneft head Igor Sechin during a BRICS summit in October 2016 in Goa, India, to rubber-stamp Rosneft's purchase of a more than 50-percent stake in Bashneft.

Sechin agreed, after which he notified law enforcement. On the day of Ulyukayev's detention, Sechin invited Ulyukayev to his office at 5 p.m. to hand over the cash. Ulyukayev took the suitcase and stepped into the car, after which he was detained by the FSB.

The Defense

Ulyukayev denied the accusation describing it as a "set-up" by Sechin and Oleg Feoktistov, an FSB general and Rosneft's former head of security.

Ulyukayev said the bag in which he supposedly received the cash was planted by Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB). "Sechin called me on the pretext of discussing important matters and proposed we meet. That's when the bag was given to me," he said.

The defense also claimed there was a new accusation that Ulyukayev had opposed the privatisation of Bashneft in writing — a charge that has not been made before.

The next hearing will be held on Sept. 1 at 10 a.m.

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