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Russia Charges Governor, Pharma Exec in Major Bribery Case

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Ivan Belozertsev is accused of accepting over 31 million rubles ($415,245) in exchange for lobbying a pharmaceutical group's interests. **Kremlin.ru**

The governor of Russia's Penza region and a leading pharmaceutical executive have been charged in a large-scale bribery case, Russia's Investigative Committee said Monday.

Ivan Belozertsev, Biotek pharmaceutical group founder Boris Spiegel and suspected accomplices were detained over the weekend on suspicion of exchanging bribes for lobbying Biotek's interests.

Investigators said Belozertsev accepted money and valuables worth over 31 million rubles ($415,245) from Spiegel, his wife Yevgenia Spiegel and Biotek director Anton Koloskov from January to September 2020.

In exchange, Biotek, one of Russia's largest medicine suppliers, allegedly received special preference for government contracts related to the supply of drugs to Penza region healthcare facilities.

Belozertsev was ordered to two months of pre-trial detention Monday.

If found guilty, he faces disqualification from holding public office for up to three years, a fine up to 100 times the amount of the bribe and up to 15 years in prison. Spiegel and his associates face up to 12 years in prison plus a fine 70 times the amount of the bribe.

Belozertsev, a loyal ally of President Vladimir Putin from the pro-Kremlin United Russia party, was re-elected for a second term last year and had received words of support from Putin himself before the gubernatorial race.

Yet Belozertsev's political status had been uncertain until recently, political scientist Rostislav Turovsky told the RBC news website. State-run polls placed him among the regional heads running in last year's race with the lowest popularity ratings.

"He waited the longest for permission to participate in the elections and there was a very powerful negative PR campaign against him," Turovsky said. "Nevertheless, he held out."

Turovsky called Belozertsev's relationship with Spiegel "a convenient pretext that could be used to launch this case."

"Belozertsev strove to maintain relations with all groups of influence, but apparently he wasn't significant enough to be safe from being ousted," he added.

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