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STORIES

Russia arrests Ilya Traber, the Leningrad beer-bar manager who became a Putin-backed oil tycoon among St. Petersburg's crime bosses. Here's his story.

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Ilya Traber — an oil port owner in Ust-Luga with sprawling commercial interests, known by the nickname “the Antique Dealer” — was detained in St. Petersburg on June 17. Russia's Federal Security Service, the FSB, led the operation, and the country's Investigative Committee opened a criminal case in Moscow linked to his alleged role in the murder of Alexander Petrov, a lawmaker. Traber's business partner Vladimir Danilenko was also detained. Investigators also searched the home of Gennady Petrov — no relation to the murder victim, despite the shared surname — in connection with the same case. Journalists have long identified Nikolai Shamalov as one of Traber's business associates; Shamalov's son Kirill was once married to Putin's daughter Katerina Tikhonova. The Traber-Putin relationship dates to the 1990s, when Putin oversaw Traber's activities in his official capacity as deputy mayor of St. Petersburg. Meduza asked Denis Korotkov, a journalist at the Dossier Center who has spent years investigating St. Petersburg's criminal and business networks, what the public needs to know about Traber — and why his detention is such an extraordinary development.

Denis Korotkov, journalist at the Dossier Center

— How would you describe Ilya Traber for people who know absolutely nothing about him?

— Ilya Ilyich Traber is a wildly successful St. Petersburg businessman. He's 75 and has made his money across many sectors: first antiques, then oil. Today he owns the largest oil ports in Ust-Luga and Primorsk, the Leningrad Regional Electric Grid Company (LOESK), and many other highly lucrative businesses.

Traber is a great Russian patriot. He commands enormous authority in both the legitimate and the shadow business worlds in St. Petersburg. Until today, he had never been in legal trouble in Russia — never charged with anything.

— Officially, anyway. Journalists have long placed Traber at the center of St. Petersburg's criminal turf wars.

— Anyone can pick on a poor businessman! In his day, the man made his first real money managing the Zhiguli bar on Vladimirsky Prospekt — well, those were different times.

If after that he managed to corner St. Petersburg's antiques market — securing a business in which city and federal agencies held minority stakes — what can you say? A talented businessman, I suppose.

If he then secured his company a monopoly on refueling planes at Pulkovo Airport — well, St. Petersburg's deputy mayor, Mr. Putin, must have signed that order because he thought so highly of Traber's business acumen.

And if Mr. [Maxim] [Freidzson] is slandering him by claiming Putin wanted 15 percent for that deal and only got 4 percent — well, I don't know. Putin never admitted to it.

If Mr. Traber later acquired a stake in the St. Petersburg Oil Terminal alongside the notorious [crime bosses] the [Vasilyev brothers] and [Dmitry] [Skigin], and went on [to work] with [Vladimir] [Kumarin] — well, what can you do? Those were his business partners.

And that's not even getting into a similar story involving the city of Vyborg, the Vyborg district, and [Alexander Petrov](#) (not to be confused with [Gennady Petrov](#)!) — well, that's just how things turned out.

And if, even in the 2020s, Mr. Traber personally turned to Mr. Putin to request state financing to build his terminals in Primorsk, and Mr. Putin approved — well, what can you do? Why shouldn't the president support domestic business?

— How did Ilya Traber go from managing the Zhiguli bar to all this?

— He's a naval officer. He graduated from the Sevastopol Higher Naval Engineering School — known as "Gollandiya" [Holland] — joined the Communist Party there, as officers did, and served on a nuclear submarine.

At 30, he left the navy as a senior lieutenant — and you'd have to work at it to remain a senior lieutenant on a submarine at that age. By then, everyone around you is already a lieutenant commander, or more likely a captain third rank. He was, in short, a lousy officer.

He himself says he comes from a line of Georgian princes and Russian Imperial Army officers of German descent. But because of his surname, people took him for a Jew and held it against him in his career.

According to his own account, in 1980 he turned in his party card and left the navy. I can't say that never happens, but it's very hard to imagine. For a Soviet officer, resigning voluntarily was all but impossible. And that's to say nothing of handing in his party card — almost unheard of. Acts of that kind were extremely rare. Why he was really forced out of the navy, we can't say for certain. Too much time has passed, and we don't have the information.

Freshly discharged at 30, the former officer took a job as a barman — at a beer hall. By most measures, he was a man of some means but low standing — money, yes; respect, no.

He stayed at the Zhiguli on Vladimirsky [Prospekt] right up until the Perestroika era. I used to go there when I was 17. You were officially supposed to be 21 to get into beer bars — which meant you had to slip someone something at the door. By the late 1980s, Traber was probably no longer working the door himself but managing the place. He probably wasn't bringing me my beer. Though I can't rule it out.

He put away some money there, and in 1989 he made the leap from beer bar manager — on an official salary of next to nothing but a tidy income in reality — to legitimate businessman.

At the time, there was exactly one antique consignment shop in all of Leningrad. Traber established a joint venture with the city: he held the majority stake, the city the

minority. This shop — or really, Traber himself — received a monopoly on the antiques trade in Leningrad, meaning everything made before 1945.

It's understood that a significant portion of the antiques trade went through various consignment shops under the table. But a legal consignment shop with a monopoly right was still very serious money.

He then opened additional salons, restoration workshops, and a gallery — all with some city involvement — and very decent returns. Under one arrangement, profits went to Traber and losses to the city.

What's interesting about Mr. Traber is that he doesn't lock himself into one business — he shifts sectors quite easily. Suddenly he all but walks away from antiques for something more lucrative: oil. He becomes a partner to figures from what was — forgive the cliché — Gangster St. Petersburg, working with Kumarin, [Gennady] Petrov, and the Vasilyevs.

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— How did Traber get these connections?

— He was just as respected a businessman as any of them. But throughout all of this, we never saw a single charge [against Traber]. Not even a single criminal case [opened against him]. And I don't have a single fact tying Traber to a specific crime. Still, as malicious gossips would have it, Traber carried very serious weight — and dealt with the likes of Kumarin or Petrov as equals.

When they started carving up the Port of St. Petersburg, he simply became chairman of the board of the Association of Banks Investing in the Port (OBIP). They then proceeded to pick the port apart.

During that carve-up, a staggering number of people ended up dead: the port's captain was killed; his security deputy was killed; the director of the shipping company was killed, along with his deputy for personnel; the owner of the Northwest Customs

Terminal was killed; and on and on. The number of people who ended up in the grave while Mr. Traber ran the company overseeing the port runs into the dozens.

— How does a man who built his business trading antiques suddenly move into oil? The relationship between the two industries isn't exactly obvious.

— The honest answer is: I don't know. I'd guess that at the time it was one of the most profitable businesses in St. Petersburg — and in the country as a whole. And of course that business immediately attracted criminal attention, from people who brought in money, muscle, and connections.

The signature on many documents belonged to Vladimir V. Putin, deputy mayor of St. Petersburg. And when we look at that oil business in St. Petersburg, we see the same names I've mentioned — people who carved up much of that market among themselves into near-monopolies.

— At what point did Traber first cross paths with Putin?

— His first antiques venture dates to December 1991, approved by the mayor's office. Soveks, his Pulkovo enterprise, came in 1995. Mr. Putin signed the decision [establishing the company]. That one's straightforward.

The division of the St. Petersburg port also took place while Mr. Putin oversaw such matters. It was a genuinely violent redistribution, and the peak of it was, of course, the murder of Mikhail Manevich — chairman of St. Petersburg's Committee for City Property Management — on August 18, 1997.

Manevich was on the verge of converting the city's port shares into voting shares — something that would have greatly complicated things for those dividing up the port. His murder served the interests of everyone with a stake in the port. After his death, the question [of converting the shares from non-voting to voting] was never raised again. By the 2000s, there was nothing left to save: the port had been stripped clean, no longer a single entity.

But there are no convictions, no criminal cases. There are accounts — for example, from Vyacheslav Shevchenko, a former State Duma deputy and himself a murky figure, who said that when he tried to intervene in the port, Traber's people came to him and threatened to kill him. But he's not the most credible of witnesses. From there, Mr. Traber extended his reach to the Vyborg district of the Leningrad region.

The master of Vyborg and its district throughout the 1990s, right up until his death in 2020, was Alexander Petrov. In their partnership, my impression is that Traber was the senior figure. The Vyborg Shipbuilding Plant, the Vyborg Fuel Company — the whole city and district, really — all of it answered to Petrov, or Petrovich, as people called him. But behind him, or beside him, there was always Traber's shadow.

This continued until about 1999, when Traber turned up in Europe as a Greek citizen. How he got Greek citizenship, nobody knows. His overseas adventures are, again, hard to trace.

In Monaco, he was a partner in Sotrama, which ran a subsidiary that did business with Russian oil companies — an arrangement that pointed to possible money laundering and other financial crimes. There, I'm told, he was even declared persona non grata. The designation barely registered: he bought an estate in Switzerland, the Château de Souilly, acquired a helicopter, and settled into European life until Operation Troika reached Spain in 2008.

He seemed to skirt the edges of that case and was not arrested. The central figure was Gennady Petrov. His [Petrov's] wiretaps were published, with much of interest about [head of Russia's Investigative Committee, Alexander] Bastrykin and other senior figures. Even so, Spanish prosecutors' documents named him [Traber] as one of the leaders of an informal Russian consortium for laundering criminal proceeds worldwide.

Since then, Traber has not, to my knowledge, visited Europe — though he isn't formally on any wanted list. He even produced some Interpol document to that effect.

In Russia, everything was going well for him: he was building the largest oil terminal in Primorsk. We started by noting that in 1995 Mr. Putin signed a document granting Traber's company a de facto monopoly on refueling planes at Pulkovo — and so it comes full circle.

In 2021, the CEO of one of Traber's companies wrote directly to none other than the president of Russia, requesting 220 billion rubles in financing. Putin wrote to the chairman of Vnesheconombank: "Consider it."

And when such people ask — well, how could you not consider it? What other CEO of a limited liability company can write to Putin and ask him for 220 billion? Yet the CEO of a company answerable to Mr. Traber does exactly that. And Putin considers it.



Russia's FSB detains Ilya Traber, a St. Petersburg port tycoon with long-standing Putin ties, for his suspected role in organizing a contract killing

2 months ago

— In recent years, have the authorities or any particularly influential figures had grievances against Traber?

— No, there was no word of any grievances against Mr. Traber. No word even of conflicts with other powerful figures. Though that doesn't mean those conflicts didn't exist. So: why did [today's detention] happen, and to what end?

They say the charges may be connected to the murder of [Alexander] Petrov in 2020. Does that seem plausible? Yes, sure, why not. Mr. Traber had apparently stepped back from his business in Vyborg — publicly, at least. But he didn't just walk away for nothing. Some financial arrangement was surely involved — perhaps a stake set aside for him.

And the terminal going up in Primorsk stood on land controlled by Mr. Petrov. So there were any number of possible conflicts — the kind settled with a rifle shot. But I don't know what the investigators have.

Vladimir Danilenko, Traber's business partner, has been detained alongside him. He's not a public figure, not someone anyone would go to the mat over, and he's unlikely to be of independent interest. But there's already a theory going around that Gennady Petrov is implicated in the same case, that his home has been searched, and that he has allegedly even been detained.

I have no confirmation of this, and I don't consider reports of Petrov's detention credible. But if I'm wrong, and Gennady Petrov does end up a defendant, the irony would be something. Bastrykin would oversee the investigation — a man whose appointment as head of the Investigative Committee Petrov lobbied for, whom he called "Sasha," and whom he helped with various matters: arranging an introduction to Defense Minister [Anatoly] Serdyukov, say, or providing office space for the agency in St. Petersburg.

I won't venture a guess about whose interests lie behind this. But it's very hard for me to imagine that anyone — whatever their position — would move against Traber without the approval, or at least the acquiescence, of Vladimir Putin. Unless, of course, Mr. Putin ordered it himself.

Traber was directly connected to Putin — and specifically during the years whose secrets Mr. Putin fears most. What he did as St. Petersburg's deputy mayor — let's call it what it was: what he stole, and how — could still catch up with him.

On the one hand, the Salye documents have long since established how Putin and his associates looted vast commodities meant to be exchanged for food for Leningrad — a city facing critical shortages at the time. Yet Mr. Putin, it seems, dislikes being reminded of this — least of all of his ties to such odious figures.

And Traber is one of those who knows all this very well. He never lost that connection either — he holds enormous assets, and just a few years ago was getting hundreds of billions of rubles from Putin. That anyone would dare to detain a figure of this size, this influence, this knowledge — to search his home — without at least informing Vladimir Putin: that is impossible to imagine. Because political games of that kind are already far too dangerous in Russia.

— What are the facts of the case against Traber in the murder of Alexander Petrov?

— Petrov was at his estate [in the Vyborg area], stepped out of the bathhouse down to the lakeshore, and was shot from a considerable distance with a sniper rifle. And that, really, is the whole story.

There were no known suspects, let alone charges. Law enforcement said almost nothing. How Mr. Petrov's assets were redistributed — honestly, I haven't tracked that. But I doubt Traber's name appears there directly. These things are usually done with more finesse.

— Is it possible that the Petrov murder case is just a pretext to go after Traber, and that the real grievances against him lie elsewhere entirely?

— I don't know. In any case, Mr. Traber controlled enormous assets. Entirely legitimate ones, at that: he effectively owned the crown jewels of Primorsk and Ust-Luga, plus

LOESK and other smaller holdings. It's hard for me to put a value on those enterprises, to say nothing of their strategic significance.

Of course, there are plenty of interested parties — including the state treasury itself — who would like to get their hands on them, whether through ownership or management. Because this is huge money and huge influence. We'll see who ends up owning or managing them. It's not certain everything will go to plan, because things in the country are changing fast.

If this isn't Mr. Putin's direct order, it's at least his nod of approval. And if arrests like this are happening without his knowledge, then we are surely on the verge of major changes in the years ahead.

Not because Mr. Traber's arrest will in itself bring down Russia. Simply because if people this close to the president are being thrown in a cell without clearing it with him, then something has gone wrong with the power vertical. But I think they did ask.



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