

PM's support gives hope to Vancouver businessman jailed in Bulgaria

Michael Kapoustin 'very hopeful' that he may be freed after 12 years behind bars

Last Updated: Monday, December 3, 2007 | 3:58 PM ET

CBC News

The prime minister has appointed an envoy to try to free a Vancouver businessman who has been locked up in Bulgaria for 12 years — drawing praise from those who say he was falsely imprisoned.

Michael Kapoustin has spent the past 12 years in jail in Bulgaria, accused of fraud and embezzlement — accusations that he and his family insist were trumped up.

Dean Peroff, a human rights lawyer who is representing Kapoustin, told CBC News that Prime Minister Stephen Harper has appointed his former parliamentary secretary, Jason Kenney, to fight for Kapoustin's return to Canada.

"It's an extraordinary measure for the Prime Minister's Office to be involved in a consular affair issue on an individual level, and I think that is the kind of policy the Canadian government should have in any situation like this," Peroff, who is Toronto-based, said on Friday.

The federal government is applying pressure on Bulgaria through the European Union and the Council of Europe, said Peroff, and he hopes that pressure will result in Kapoustin returning home to his family within the year.



Michael Kapoustin has spent 12 years in a Bulgarian prison, convicted of a crime his supporters say he did not commit. (Tracy Kapoustin)

Wife blames secret service, organized crime

Kapoustin's wife, Tracy, told CBC News her husband was imprisoned on false charges of embezzlement and fraud, and tortured when he refused to confess.

She said after 12 years in prison, she has only seen her husband twice, but he continues to survive on food parcels his mother sends him every week from Canada.

The family originally moved to Bulgaria in the early 90s after decades of Communist rule ended, and Kapoustin set up several businesses, his wife said. But they eventually ran into trouble with local officials and organized criminals, and the family started to receive death threats, she said.

"The government there is mostly KGB. They didn't want him there. I think the Mafia wanted him out of town," she said.



Michael Kapoustin appears in a undated photo at his trial in Bulgaria. (Tracy Kapoustin)

Previous government abandoned Kapoustin, lawyer says

Michael Kapoustin was eventually arrested and convicted on one charge of fraud, and then charged with a second of embezzlement when the first charge was dismissed.

While awaiting trial, he was held for two years in solitary confinement where he was beaten by guards in black masks with rubber hoses, his wife alleged.

Eventually, his wife said she convinced Kapoustin to plead guilty to the second charge, because Canadian officials were under the belief he would receive a short sentence and could be transferred to a prison in Canada under an extradition treaty.

But that never happened. Instead, Kapoustin was sentenced to 17 years behind bars, and Peroff said, the federal government then refused to have anything more to do with the case.

"We felt strongly this abandonment by the Canadian government was a travesty," he said.

Peroff said he is now representing Michael Kapoustin free of charge because he was horrified by the way Kapoustin's case was handled by Foreign Affairs under the former Liberal government.

"We had to try to get the new government involved in a committed way. We're very hopeful because it's a fresh initiative the prime minister and Mr. Kenney implemented, so I think we're in a very constructive situation."