

Saratov Governor Mum on Italian Yacht Raid

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Ipatov

When Italian police raided a luxury yacht earlier this month, they were searching for Russian criminals. But instead they found several senior Russian officials, including a man who in leaked video footage closely resembles Saratov Governor Pavel Ipatov.

Ipatov has been dodging uncomfortable questions all week about whether he was in fact on the 47-meter Axioma yacht when Italian police forced it to dock at a port on Stromboli Island on July 9.

On the day of the raid, the governor's office released a statement saying Ipatov was meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov in Moscow to discuss a drought that is scorching his Volga River region.

But his office backtracked when [video footage of the raid](#) surfaced on YouTube and local

journalists identified Ipatov on the yacht.

Ipatov's spokeswoman said Thursday that the governor had met with Zubkov a day earlier than previously announced, on July 8, and had taken off July 9, a Friday, as part of a long weekend.

"He had a vacation planned for that period," the spokeswoman said by telephone. "There is no scandal behind it."

She did not confirm or deny Ipatov's presence on the yacht.

When asked about the video at a news conference Tuesday, Ipatov simply replied, "I had a day off Friday," the local news web site Vzglyad.info reported.

The image of the 60-year-old governor living it up on the Mediterranean while impoverished farmers in his region are suffering in a record heat wave is something that Ipatov would rather avoid. He was just reappointed to a second term as governor in March.

Italian police are keeping tightlipped about the raid, which they conducted after a tip that turned out to be wrong, and have not identified any of the people aboard the charter yacht.

Video footage shows the sleek, white yacht being escorted by three small vessels, an armed patrol boat and a helicopter into the port of Lipari. Armed carabinieri are later shown leading a half-dozen men and women off the boat and seating them in cars.

Saratov journalists have identified Ipatov as a tall, lean man with a shock of wavy white hair seen walking off the boat. The man, who is wearing dark sunglasses, is clad in striped black and white shorts, a purple T-shirt and flip-flops.

Some of the Russians on the yacht had diplomatic passports, and they included a State Duma deputy and a senior Russian diplomat, according to the yacht industry web site Eyachtreport.com, which cited the port's Italian-language portal Lipari.biz.

The police, who were acting on a tip that one or two Russian gangsters were on board, released the Russians after five hours and without an apology, the report said.

Komsomolskaya Pravda reported that the yacht group had included 20 Russians and they had demanded an apology.

While Ipatov has not explained his whereabouts for that weekend, he was present the following Monday at a Cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to discuss the drought and agriculture. Saratov is one of 23 regions where the government has declared a state of emergency because of the drought.

Ipatov is not finding much sympathy. The yacht affair escalated this week when former Saratov Governor Dmitry Ayatskov, now a Kremlin aide, suggested that the man in the video was Ipatov and questioned whether Ipatov had received permission from the Kremlin to travel abroad.

"There are regulations for officials going abroad under which the head of state or

[presidential] administration must provide permission," Ayatskov said, Vzglyad.info reported.

He added that an official who left the country for any reason without the slip could be dismissed.

Ayatskov said it was unclear whether Ipatov had notified the presidential administration about a trip to Italy.

Ipatov's spokeswoman did not say whether the governor had sought permission.

The regulations were imposed by President Dmitry Medvedev after the Kremlin was left red-faced last year when tabloids showed former Russian Olympics Committee chief Leonid Tyagachov, Office of Presidential Affairs director Vladimir Kozhin and Federal Guard Service head Yevgeny Murov partying during a New Year's vacation in France's Courchevel ski resort.

In 2006, then-President Putin scolded then-Karelia leader Sergei Katanandov after failing to reach him by telephone amid ethnic riots between Russians and Chechens in the town of Kondopoga.

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