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Fradkov Under Fire for Spy Defection

By Alexander Bratersky

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Fradkov attending an economic forum in St. Petersburg in 2007, the year that he was appointed to head the SVR. **Yevgeny Stetsko**

State Duma deputies demanded the ouster of spymaster Mikhail Fradkov on Thursday for failing to expose a double agent in his Foreign Intelligence Service who purportedly betrayed 11 Russian agents to the United States in June.

Kommersant, which broke the story Thursday, said the intelligence officer, a Colonel Shcherbakov, had fled to the United States three days before President Dmitry Medvedev met with U.S. President Barack Obama in Washington on June 24.

U.S. authorities arrested 10 Russian sleeper agents three days later, on June 27, while an 11th suspect disappeared in Cyprus.

Shcherbakov headed a department at the Foreign Intelligence Service, or SVR, that worked with U.S.-based illegals — deepcover agents who lived as ordinary people — and handed over the personal file of the FBI's biggest catch, Mikhail Vasenkov, known as Juan Lazaro, to his

U.S. intelligence handlers, Kommersant said, citing unidentified Russian intelligence officials.

“This is not just a betrayal. To bring an illegal's personal file to the enemies is [expletive]. Things like this never happen,” the newspaper quoted an intelligence officer as saying.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who headed the Federal Security Service in the late 1990s, has said the Russian spies were betrayed and he knows who is responsible.

"Traitors always end badly. As a rule, they end up in the gutter as drunks or drug addicts,” he told reporters on July 24.

Communist and A Just Russia deputies in the Duma seized upon the Kommersant report Thursday to demand Fradkov's dismissal.

“The service is headed by a man who has nothing to do with it, and the word 'trade' is repeated on his resume several times,” senior Communist Deputy Ivan Melnikov said in a statement. He was referring to Fradkov's background as a Soviet trade official.

Gennady Gudkov, deputy head of the Duma's Security Committee and a member of A Just Russia, called for the creation of a Duma commission to investigate the damage caused by Shcherbakov's betrayal.

Fradkov, a former prime minister whom Putin appointed as the SVR's chief in 2007, played a key role in negotiations that led to the July 9 spy swap in which the United States handed over the 10 Russian illegals in exchange for four Russians convicted of spying.

Just a day after the illegals were arrested, the CIA contacted the SVR to float the idea of the exchange, paving the way for three phone calls between CIA Director Leon Panetta and Fradkov, U.S. media reported in July, citing unidentified U.S. officials.

The exposure of a double agent within the SVR could bode badly for Fradkov. Kommersant said the development puts his leadership in doubt and speculated that he might be replaced by Kremlin chief of staff Sergei Naryshkin.

An SVR spokesman, contacted by telephone, declined to comment on the Kommersant report Thursday.

A former senior intelligence officer said in an interview that he suspected a campaign was under way to replace Fradkov and the Kommersant report was only a pretext.

“If these rumors have started circulating, and knowing Fradkov's business skills, I think there are grounds to fire him," the former officer said, asking for anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter. "Betrayal is just a pretext."

Only President Dmitry Medvedev has the authority to dismiss Fradkov.

But Fradkov is unlikely to be dismissed before the end of the year because the SVR will celebrate its 90th anniversary on Dec. 20, said Igor Korotchenko, editor-in-chief of National Security, a journal about the intelligence community. “But after the celebrations are over, the search for scapegoats will begin,” Korotchenko said.

Kommersant shed more light on Vasenkov, who, it said, held the rank of general and was awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union medal for his work in the United States in the 1980s. Vasenkov's true identity apparently even surprised his longtime wife, Vicky Pelaez, a left-wing Peruvian journalist.

Shcherbakov drew suspicions at the SVR some time before his disappearance in June, at one point turning down a promotion that would have required him to take a lie detector test, Kommersant said, citing intelligence sources.

He has a daughter who has lived in the United States for some time, and his son, who worked at the Federal Drug Control Service, left Russia in June, the report said.

A spokesman for the Federal Drug Control Service said Thursday that the agency had no record of a Shcherbakov related to an SVR official among its staff, Interfax reported.

Several analysts said they saw possible problems in the Kommersant account. For one, the report says Vasenkov managed to obtain a schedule of a U.S. president's foreign visits for the year ahead, a document that Andrei Soldatov, head of the Agentura.ru research center, declared had little intelligence value.

The report also says FBI investigators tortured Vasenkov during questioning, breaking a leg and three ribs.

“While the FBI like any intelligence agency can pressure people psychologically, it is not the gestapo,” Korotchenko said.

Kommersant said the Shcherbakov scandal might lead the SVR to be put under the Federal Security Service, an idea previously proposed by former FSB head Nikolai Patrushev, who heads the Security Council.

During Soviet times, the KGB had both the domestic counterintelligence and foreign intelligence directorates under its wing. Foreign intelligence became a separate agency during Boris Yeltsin's presidency.

But Soldatov expressed doubt that such a merger was possible, noting that the FSB was now building its own foreign intelligence arm.

The former intelligence officer said any merger would be “dangerous.”

“This would be a path toward dictatorship,” he said.

Editor's note: An earlier version of this article said Mikhail Vasenkov obtained a schedule of foreign visits to be made by U.S. President Barack Obama. However, it isn't known which U.S. president was in question.

Also, the article referred variously to Mikhail Vasenkov and Mikhail Vlasenkov. The correct last name is Vasenkov.

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