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Book on Graft in Moscow Region Seized

By Alexander Bratersky

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Moscow regional police have seized the bulk of the print run of a book written by a Forbes Russia investigative reporter about the regions authorities' purported links to corruption.

The confiscation took place after Deputy Governor Igor Parkhomenko filed a libel complaint with the local police over the book, titled, "Corporation 'Moscow Region': How Russia's Richest Region Was Bankrupted."

Police seized some 3,500 copies of the book, written by Anna Sokolova, at a printing office located in the Moscow region on Thursday, said Leonid Bershidsky, editorial director at Eksmo, the book's publisher.

The other 1,500 copies of the book's print run of 5,000 were shipped to bookstores, Bershidsky said Friday on his Facebook page.

The confiscated books were not delivered to stores after an obscure company asked Eksmo to hold off on the shipments because it wanted to purchase them all, he said. The request

came two days before the confiscation, but the company, Konsard, never picked the order.

Only several hours passed between Parkhomenko filing his libel complaint and police officers seizing the books, a turnaround time that is unusually fast, anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny said on his blog. He said similar requests that he has filed usually take weeks to process.

Navalny said the few hours before the confiscation were simply not enough time for police experts to read the book to decide whether its contents were libelous.

No one was immediately available for comment at the Moscow regional police's office or the governor's. Neither agency has commented on the matter publicly.

The book was listed as "unavailable" by online retailer Ozon.ru over the weekend. Forbes has released a sample chapter on its web site.

"Corporation 'Moscow Region'" rehashes corruption allegations that have plagued the administration of Governor Boris Gromov in the years since he was elected in 2000. Among them are reports that officials stalled and harassed IKEA's local business in attempts to obtain kickbacks and accusations that companies linked to regional authorities purchased agriculture land for illegal real estate developments. The book also includes the story of Alexei Kuznetsov, the region's former top financial official who has been implicated in a 30 billion ruble ($1 billion) embezzlement scheme that brought the region to the brink of default in 2008. Kuznetsov moved to the United States in 2008, while his former deputy Valery Nosov was arrested last year and remains in pretrial detention pending trial on fraud charges.

No repercussions have followed for Gromov, one of the few veteran governors to remain in office after Kremlin-orchestrated shuffles over the past year. But media reports have speculated that he has fallen out of favor with the Kremlin and faces removal.

The book claims that Gromov, a veteran of the Afghan War, is aware of many wrongdoings outlined in its chapters because he appointed fellow war veterans to many posts in his administration.

Sokolova said the book is largely based on her coverage of Moscow regional affairs for Forbes. Many allegations in its chapters, however, have been reported by the media before.

"I knew that the Moscow region had many tricky problems, so I tried to write about them in plain language," Sokolova said by telephone Friday.

She said Moscow regional officials ignored all her requests for interviews so she wrote the book based on their public statements.

Eksmo stands behind Sokolova and her book, Bershidsky said.

But Sokolova said she felt nervous, noting that a handful of other journalists who have written about alleged corruption by regional authorities have been hospitalized after vicious — and unsolved — attacks.

"I have written about people who face police abuse, and I don't want to get into such

a situation myself," she said.

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