

Hermitage Capital: Tax Officials Stole \$33M

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Hermitage Capital Management on Thursday released a new exposé about officials implicated in the death of its lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, accusing them of siphoning off 1 billion rubles (\$33 million) of state money through illegal tax refunds.

The complaint, filed with the Investigative Committee, says a Moscow district tax inspection office, headed at the time by Olga Stepanova, authorized the refunds in seven tranches to a small company called TekhProm in 2007 and 2008.

This is the same tax inspection office that Magnitsky accused of separately embezzling 5.4 billion rubles in a similar scheme in 2006 and 2007.

Hermitage said in an e-mailed statement that the TekhProm case confirms Magnitsky's allegations about rampant corruption at the tax office covered up by law enforcement officials.

The Investigative Committee did not comment on the complaint Thursday, and neither did the officials accused in the case.

Magnitsky was detained after going public with his accusations and kept in pretrial detention for nearly a year despite his failing health. He died in November 2009. Officials blamed his death on health problems, but the Kremlin human rights council said in July that he was severely beaten shortly before his death.

Magnitsky's supporters call his case a fabrication and his arrest punishment for his exposes.

President Dmitry Medvedev and Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev have pledged to punish anyone found responsible for Magnitsky's death, but no investigators or tax officials have faced charges, even though previous exposes by Hermitage accused Stepanova and others of owning assets worth millions of dollars while officially earning small salaries.

The Investigative Committee reopened last month a tax evasion case against Magnitsky, using new legislation that allows investigations into dead people if their relatives demand it.

Magnitsky's mother, who was summoned for an interview by investigators along with his widow but refused to go, called the request an intimidation campaign and filed a lawsuit Wednesday, saying she never requested that the case against her son be reopened, Interfax reported.

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