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Deputy Communications Minister May Be Prosecuted

By Natalya Krainova

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Correction: An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that Rostelecom refused to comment.

A deputy communications minister may face criminal charges for arranging for state-controlled telecoms operator Rostelecom to cover the bills for foreign trips by his subordinates, Vedomosti reported Thursday.

Deputy Mass Media and Communications Minister Naum Marder sent 20 letters to Rostelecom between 2009 and August 2011, asking for assistance with trips, the Prosecutor General's Office said.

Marder told the daily that he only requested organizational, not financial, help, such as translators for ministry officials.

But the prosecutor's office thinks otherwise. The company shelled out 97 million rubles ($3 million) to send officials to Paris, Havana and the Vancouver Olympics last year, and 71 million rubles for a trip to Ljubljana, Slovenia, prosecutors said.

Prosecutors have asked the Investigative Committee to consider opening a case on abuse-of-power charges, punishable with up to four years in prison. The committee said Thursday that it was waiting for prosecutors to file the necessary paperwork.

Rostelecom's press office said by email that the company "has never paid for expenses of any officials."

Prosecutors and the ministry refused to comment on the issue.

Federal legislation bans officials from accepting gifts worth more than 3,000 rubles ($100). However, officials are rarely punished for accepting nonmonetary gifts.

The Prosecutor General's Office mounted an indirect attack on Rostelecom in August, saying 270 million rubles overseen by the company was embezzled from the government's Electronic Russia program. But the Interior Ministry later dismissed prosecutors' findings.

The prosecutors' actions against corruption may indicate an internal power struggle for positions in the future government, which will be formed after the presidential vote in March, Vedomosti said.

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