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Expert Doubted in Child Abuse Case

By Alexander Bratersky

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Bloggers have challenged the credentials of a child psychologist who testified in a high-profile pedophile case after photographs surfaced that suggested she might have participated in erotic shows.

The twist complicates an already murky story and highlights both the problems of Russia's sometimes clumsy courts and its ineffective efforts to prevent child abuse.

Testimony by child psychologist Leila Sokolova was key for the prosecution in a criminal case that ended with Transportation Ministry official Vladimir Makarov jailed last month on charges of sexually assaulting his 7-year-old daughter.

The case was opened last year after officials found "dead spermatozoids" in the urine of the girl during a routine checkup.

Makarov pleaded not guilty, saying hospital officials had not properly cleaned the specimen container from earlier patients — indeed, a regular occurrence at underfunded

and understaffed hospitals.

A second test found no spermatozoids, and the girl denied abuse. Nevertheless, the case proceeded, based on, in particular, an examination of the girl's drawings by the psychologist. The pictures included drawings of a cat with a fat tail, which Sokolova called a "phallic motif." She said this, combined with the girl's "unusual" attention to gender distinctions seen in other pictures, implied she had been abused. In the end, a Moscow district court sentenced Makarov to 13 years in prison for child abuse.

With Makarov's appeal pending in the Moscow City Court, several bloggers, including Erika Ever, accused Sokolova of participating in public erotic shows. As proof, the bloggers cited photographs of a woman in latex outfits who resembled Sokolova, and web advertisements looking for partners for the shows that listed Sokolova's phone number.

It was unclear Monday whether the woman in the pictures was Sokolova or whether the shows were paid events. The psychiatrist, who works for Ozon psychological rehab for abused children, declined to comment to the media.

Prominent psychologist Alexander Shadura told The Moscow Times that Sokolova's personal life — whatever it might be — should not have any influence on her expertise. "I don't think it plays a role. She should just be a professional," he said by telephone.

But Sokolova admitted earlier to being unsure about her own conclusions. "I have told an investigator that a more elaborate check is in order," she told Bolshoi Gorod magazine in August, adding that a follow-up never took place.

She also acknowledged in the interview that she should have been less decisive about her findings. "This is the first time that I have screwed up so seriously," she said, the magazine reported.

Makarov's wife, Tatyana, said investigators told her during the trial that they had realized their mistake, journalist and prisoner rights campaigner Olga Romanova reported on Radio Liberty in July.

But they said they could not acknowledge the mistake because that would be seen as a failure in a state campaign against pedophiles, initiated by the Kremlin earlier this year, she said.

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