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Russian Investigators Target Son of Transdnestr President

By Alexander Bratersky

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The Investigative Committee said Monday that it will seek to force the son of the president of Transdnestr to come in for questioning over his alleged role in the theft of 160 million rubles ($5.2 million) of Russian aid money.

Oleg Smirnov and the deputy head of Transdnestr Republican Bank, Oleg Brizitsky, are both accused of pocketing money earmarked for local pensioners and agriculture projects in the breakaway republic.

A criminal case was opened against the men last month, but both have refused to appear before the committee.

"Because Brizitsky and Smirnov have not come to the Investigative Committee for questioning, it is planned to obligate them to appear," committee spokesman Vladimir Markin said Monday, according to RIA-Novosti.

A committee source told RIA-Novosti that both suspects may be in Cyprus. They both face up to 10 years in prison if convicted.

The strong-arm move is seen by some observers as an effort to exert political leverage over Smirnov's father, Igor, to stop him from seeking another term as president of the separatist region, which he has run for 20 years.

Senior Kremlin officials were openly critical after Igor Smirnov announced his intention to run again.

"Smirnov has created an atmosphere of a personality cult that has led the republic into deep social and economic crises," said Sergei Naryshkin, head of the Russian presidential administration.

Oleg Smirnov, who holds the post of presidential envoy, has Russian citizenship and owns multiple properties in Moscow, as well as a cottage in the suburbs. Police say he also owns several companies.

Officials in the tiny self-proclaimed republic sandwiched between Moldova and Romania have denied that Transdnestr Republican Bank had any involvement in the money disappearing.

They say the local parliament was in charge of case, and the state accounting chamber has found no signs of misconduct, Interfax reported.

Russia keeps a small peacekeeping contingent in Transdnestr and has worked with Ukraine and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to forge a peaceful agreement with Moldova, but with little success.

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