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Purchase of Gudkov's Security Firm Denied

By Jonathan Earle

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Ares, a private security firm in St. Petersburg, has denied buying the Oskord private security company from State Duma Deputy Gennady Gudkov.

"No deal has been concluded as of the present time," Ares said in a statement carried by RIA-Novosti.

"Nobody has bought and nobody has sold Oskord, not for a miserly sum, not for any sum," Ares said.

The statement contradicts a Thursday post on Gudkov's blog that named Ares as the new owner.

Gudkov's business has run into legal trouble in recent weeks, part of what the Just Russia deputy says is Kremlin pressure for being a vocal supporter of the opposition protests that

erupted after disputed Duma elections in December.

Pantan, a subsidiary of Oskord, was stripped of its license in May after inspectors said they discovered improperly stored weapons.

The case has raised new questions about the rule of law and state interference in the economy, and Gudkov has drawn comparisons to billionaire former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, whose jailing in 2003 was widely seen as punishment for his support of opposition politics.

Gudkov said in an interview with Izvestia published Friday that he was not afraid of following in Khodorkovsky's footsteps. He also said he had sold Oskord for 350,000 rubles ($10,800), incurring a personal loss of $10 million.

While denying the purchase, Ares said it has entered negotiations with Oskord clients, which it described as "unguarded" amid Oskord's legal woes.

Oskord's clients include Ikea, Shell and DHL.

Ares, headed by Alexander Khristenko, was founded in 1994 by Yevgeny Ulin, a former KGB foreign intelligence official, and its clients range from international tobacco giant Philip Morris, to state-owned Gazprom Neft and Russian Railways.

Combined with Oskord, Ares would become the largest company of its kind in Russia, with more than 6,500 employees, Gudkov wrote on his blog.

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