

Serdyukov's Sad State of Affairs

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After filing criminal charges against opposition figures, the Investigative Committee announced that it would open an embezzlement case against top officials in the Defense Ministry. The main focus of the investigation is against Yevgenia Vasilyeva, the ministry's former property department head. Meanwhile, Lifenews.ru — the same news site on which the authorities published videos taken from hidden cameras of opposition figures having sex — reported that when investigators came to Vasilyeva's apartment at 6 a.m., they also discovered Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov there.

Serdyukov's enemies rushed to speculate that the criminal case was the prelude to his dismissal.

My prediction, however, is that Serdyukov will not be fired. I say this because President Vladimir Putin never uses criminal cases as a pretext for firing subordinates. In fact, he is more likely to give them awards and promotions for breaking the law than he is to fire them. Criminal charges are a typical weapon that members of political clans use against each other to settle disputes.

Although Serdyukov is one of the most capable officials in Putin's regime, he owes much

of his career success to his family connections. Serdyukov's father-in-law is former First Deputy Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov, who is a Putin protege and was instrumental in creating the Ozero dacha cooperative.

Putin may not want to fire Serdyukov, but apparently he cannot turn down personal requests from Zubkov to publicly embarrass Serdyukov by sanctioning the morning police raid. After all, Serdyukov reportedly crossed the line by humiliating Zubkov and his daughter.

It is difficult to say why Vasilyeva is being targeted, but it could be because she is actually living in an apartment below Serdyukov's and that Zubkov thought the affair had gone too far. A raid on Vasilyeva's apartment at the crack of dawn is a clear signal to everyone about exactly what crime Serdyukov is accused of committing. Putin's suggestion to Serdyukov that he should "cooperate with the investigation" really means that he should reach some sort of agreement with his father-in-law.

Before Serdyukov took over as defense minister, the army had accumulated huge military and nonmilitary assets. The army owned everything from fighting machines to cement factories, from bombs to construction companies, from barracks to expensive Moscow real estate. As a result, the army was caught between the mutually exclusive goals of either managing its properties or ensuring that troops were fit for combat.

Serdyukov was the first defense minister who dared sell off some of these assets, thus provoking the anger of generals who had been profiting from these ventures. Knowing Serdyukov and taking into account the nature of Russia's kleptocracy, there is little doubt that he turned a nice profit for himself when he sold off these assets.

I don't think Serdyukov will lose his job. Putin simply has too few officials who are capable of actually doing anything. But the really detestable part is that Vasilyeva will probably go to jail — not because she is a thief, but because of her purported relationship with Serdyukov. All of these embarrassing, soap-opera intrigues are an accurate reflection of Putin's inner circle and the Investigative Committee.

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