

Serdyukov Faces 'Suspect' Status in Fraud Case

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Former Defense Minister Serdyukov, center, driving away after the Investigative Committee meeting Friday.

Former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, who at an inquiry Friday into allegedly illicit property sales gave investigators "a few sheets of paper with explanations" then refused further questions, faces being considered a suspect, the Investigative Committee said.

"If the former defense minister believes he is free of any guilt with regard to the cases, it would be quite logical for him to respond to the specific questions posed by the investigators," Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin said in a video statement posted on the agency's website.

"Serdyukov's position does not guarantee that his status as a witness will remain unchanged. It is quite probable that it will be altered," Markin said.

The scandal, purportedly involving the sale of Defense Ministry real estate at less than half of what it was worth, is widely attributed to Serdyukov's dismissal as minister late last year.

Sources involved in the investigation told Kommersant that even if it were impossible to establish guilt in the fraud allegations, Serdyukov could still be charged with abuse of office. A decision about the opening of another criminal case is expected this week.

Kommersant reported that investigators acknowledged that it would be impossible to prove Serdyukov was involved in embezzling Defense Ministry property. Nevertheless, investigators decided to look into all his activities during his tenure in office.

During the inquiry, it was revealed that the ministry had been actively involved in the business activities of Serdyukov's brother-in-law Valery Puzikov.

In 2010, the ministry built an 8-kilometer road for 20 million rubles in the Astrakhan region. The road led to the elite Zhitnoye resort, which is partially owned by Puzikov.

In 2011, the resort was visited by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev, who went fishing for zander.

Apart from that, Puzikov was allegedly involved in the construction of upscale housing at the Bolshoi Utrish resort on the shore of the Black Sea.

The Defense Ministry had acquired the land to construct radar facilities for the Black Sea fleet. Instead, elite residences were built, and one of them was designated in construction documents as the "minister's dacha."

Investigators involved in the case told Kommersant that the results of the inquiry give them grounds to suspect that Seryukov abused his office, an offense punishable by up to four years in prison.

Putin dismissed Serdyukov in early November after the scandal broke. Serdyukov's subordinate, Yevgenia Vasilyeva, has been accused of fraud.

The nature of her relationship with him has been the subject of much speculation since news outlets reported that he was present when she was arrested in her elite Moscow apartment.

Serdyukov was considered one of Putin's closest allies. He was the son-in-law of former Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov, believed to have mentored the current president.

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