

Fisheries Agency Head Faces Forgery Charges

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Andrei Krainy

Investigators on Friday opened a criminal case on forgery charges against Federal Fisheries Agency head Andrei Krainy, the latest high-ranking official to be targeted in an anti-corruption campaign by the government.

The charges relate to a corruption case opened three years ago against a former head of the northwest branch of the fisheries agency, Sergei Muravyev.

The Investigative Committee said Krainy tried to help Muravyev escape a harsher charge for accepting a 5 million ruble (\$165,000) bribe by dismissing him from his post retroactively in May 2011.

Taking a bribe as a government official is punishable by up to 15 years in prison, while the charge for someone not in state service carries a maximum sentence of 10 years behind

bars.

Muravyev was officially fired on May 23, 2011, while investigators say Krainy did not order the firing until May 25, after Muravyev had already been detained on bribery charges.

Krainy's spokesman, Alexander Savelyev, denied the charges and said they were "puzzled" as to why investigators were opening the case now, as the Muravyev case is being heard in court.

Savelyev said "our main defense is the truth, which is on our side."

Krainy himself denied the charges to Interfax, saying he had decided to fire Muravyev in April 2011 and waited a month because Muravyev was on sick leave at the time. Krainy said his agency had conducted an investigation into the northwest branch in connection with alleged violations beginning in late 2010.

Investigators said in a statement that they would question Krainy in connection with the case in the near future.

Alexei Mukhin, head of the Kremlin-connected Center for Political Information, said the case signaled that "against all public expectations, the government is getting serious about corruption."

"The reason is that it wants the overall system to be governable," he said.

At least a dozen mid-level and high-ranking officials have been charged or fired in connection with corruption cases since November, when Anatoly Serdyukov was removed from his post as defense minister after the announcement of a multi-million-dollar fraud case linked to the ministry.

Serdyukov has been questioned multiple times as a witness in the case, and investigators have said he could become a suspect.

Last week, investigators questioned former Agriculture Minister Yelena Skrynnik as a witness in a criminal investigation announced last year into a \$16 million fraud at a state-owned company.

Mukhin said he expects other cases to be opened soon and linked the charges against Krainy with the cases involving Serdyukov and Skrynnik.

When asked why he thought investigators waited several years to open a case against Krainy, Mukhin said they were "probably waiting for a signal."

Russia's fishing industry, the fifth largest in the world with annual production worth hundreds of millions of dollars, is based mainly in the Far East, where over half of all Russian fish is harvested. Most of the country's catch is exported to Japan, South Korea and China.

Krainy has portrayed himself as a tough negotiator with Russia's export partners. In an interview with Komsomolskaya Pravda last year, he said the Japanese ambassador fell ill during talks and asked for an ambulance, to which Krainy responded by telling him to "be strong and exhibit his Japanese character, since Moscow suffers from traffic jams and it will

take a while for the ambulance to come."

In the same interview he said two South Korean deputy ministers once "cried in his office, asking him to give more fish to Korea."

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