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Scandal Hits Duma Anti-Graft Chief

By Jonathan Earle

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Irina Yarovaya

Irina Yarovaya, head of the State Duma's powerful Anti-Corruption and Security Committee, on Monday became the latest United Russia deputy to face embarrassing allegations of ethics violations with the publication of a report accusing her of de facto owning a multimillion-dollar apartment.

Despite declared earnings of 2.9 million rubles ($93,000) in 2011, Yarovaya lives with her husband in an elite $2.9 million apartment in downtown Moscow registered to their 23-year-old daughter, The New Times magazine reported in a scathing expose prompted by an anonymous tip.

The 127.6-square-meter apartment in the Tverskaya Plaza apartment complex, near the Novoslobodskaya metro station, was purchased for an estimated 36 million rubles ($1.4 million) in 2006 and registered to Yekaterina Yarovaya, then 17 years old, the report claimed.

While the revelation is unflattering, it's unclear whether Irina Yarovaya, a particularly

outspoken United Russia member and supporter of recent legislation tightening the screws on the protest movement and political NGOs, broke income-disclosure requirements by not listing the apartment in official documents.

Yekaterina was a legal adult when such requirements were stiffened by then-President Dmitry Medvedev in 2008, and the law doesn't cover property owned by adult children, the weekly magazine reported.

Yarovaya dismissed the article as "nothing more than dirty insinuations," and her spokesman accused its authors of spreading "knowingly false information," according to a statement published on the ruling party's website on Monday.

The spokesman, Oleg Zhdanov, took particular issue with the sale figure quoted in the article, arguing that the actual price paid was six times lower, which would amount to 6 million rubles ($231,000).

But Alexander Ziminsky, director of sales at Penny Lane Realty, told The Moscow Times that a square meter at the apartment's address, 3 Veskovsky Tupik, cost between $5,000 and $10,000 in 2006, meaning that the apartment likely cost between $638,000 and $1.3 million at the time, near The New Times' figure.

Based on current market rates provided by Ziminsky, the apartment is probably worth between $1.9 million and $2.9 million. Another realtor, Metrium Group, said the apartment was now worth at least 62.65 million rubles ($2 million).

Reached by telephone, Zhdanov refused to provide further commentary on The New Times' allegations, referring a reporter to the United Russia statement.

Senior United Russia officials did not appear to rush to Yarovaya's defense on Monday.

"The law lays out a procedure for considering such cases, and naturally the Duma will act in strict accordance with the law," Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin said when asked whether the relevant committee would look into the allegations, RIA-Novosti reported.

Political analyst and outspoken Kremlin critic Stanislav Belkovsky said the information was probably leaked by liberal members of the ruling United Russia party, many of whom are unhappy about the ban on U.S. adoptions and other initiatives pushed by Yarovaya's conservative wing.

It's unclear whether Yarovaya would be forced to give up her chairmanship of the Duma's Anti-Corruption and Security Committee or her seat in the lower house of parliament.

"On the one hand, there's an influential lobby that wants her ouster from the State Duma. On the other hand, Volodin supports her, which is a very weighty factor," Belkovsky said, referring to Vyacheslav Volodin, the Kremlin's formidable point man on domestic politics.

Yarovaya, once a senior member of the Western-leaning Yabloko party, defected to United Russia in 2007 and was promptly elected to the Duma, where she represents the Kamchatka region.

She has either authored or co-authored several controversial laws in recent months, including those that raised fines for illegal demonstrations, re-criminalized defamation and required certain nongovernmental organizations that receive foreign financing to register as "foreign agents."

In recent weeks, United Russia lawmakers have faced a flood of accusations from media and opposition-linked bloggers, mostly involving allegations of undeclared foreign property.

Vladimir Pekhtin, a United Russia co-founder who headed the Duma's Credentials and Ethics Commission, renounced his seat in parliament last month amid a scandal that he purportedly owned millions of dollars worth of undeclared real estate in Florida.

The outpouring of such compromising information, known in Russian as "kompromat," has been variously attributed to increased vigilance by opposition sleuths and targeted leaks by ruling party rivals.

The New Times' report, for example, was prompted by an anonymous letter addressed to editor-in-chief Yevgenia Albats containing information about the Yarovaya family apartment. The letter, which arrived in late February, was signed: "An admirer of A. Navalny and Doctor Z."

Opposition leader and blogger Alexei Navalny, who first published the allegations against Pekhtin, said he was tipped off by a Spain-based blogger, Andrei Zayakin, better known as "Doctor Z."

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