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Skolkovo Office Searched in Corruption Probe

By Ivan Nechepurenko

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The Skolkovo Foundation, a brainchild of then-President Dmitry Medvedev, was established in 2012 to create a scientific and technological center in Moscow for the development and commercialization of advanced technologies.

The downtown office of the Skolkovo Foundation was searched Thursday as part of an ongoing corruption scandal involving two former executives whom the Investigative Committee accused of using a fraudulent tender to steal 23.8 million rubles ($789,000).

A spokesman for Skolkovo — Russia's high profile project to diversify its oil-dependent economy through high-tech investments— told Interfax that representatives of the Federal Security Service arrived at the office Thursday morning, asked all staff members to surrender their mobile phones and began questioning several senior managers.

The foundation's president and billionaire businessman Viktor Vekselberg was personally presented with the search warrant and was then questioned by investigators.

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The foundation is run under the auspices of specifically adopted law, which allowed it to enjoy special tax and customs regimes.

The Investigative Committee said late Thursday in an online statement that a number of financial documents that will be used in the corruption probe were collected at Skolkovo's office .

The search follows a meeting Wednesday between Vekselberg and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, in which they discussed the project's progress and future. Vekselberg said that the foundation would conduct its next meeting of the Board of Trustees on May 17.

Earlier in February, Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin said his organization was looking into the possible embezzlement of $115 million, allocated to Skolkovo by the Russian government.

Ivan Ninenko, deputy head of Transparency International Russia, said in a phone interview that he was not surprised about the scandal, since the project was initially established as "a huge fund with significant resources, but very little control."

"The Skolkovo setup is a very corruption-encouraging environment," he added.

But Ninenko does not believe that the current investigation is a sign of a genuine effort to battle graft.

"There is no fight against corruption in Russia, it is rather a fight against particular corrupt officials," he said, pointing out that investigations are used during political struggles by various clans against each other.

Skolkovo's spokesman was not available to comment.

In February, the investigative committee accused Kirill Lugovtsev, the financial director of the Skolkovo Foundation, and Vladimir Khokhlov, head of a subsidiary that handled customs and finances, of being part of a group that arranged for a contract to be awarded to a company owned by Lugovtsev's parents.

Under the contract, which stipulated three years' advanced payments and prohibited refunds, the finance company agreed to lease office space from Lugovtsev's family business. But Khokhlov and Lugovtsev instead used the money to renovate the building, investigators said.

The Skolkovo School of Management, which is located on the same site as the innovation center under investigation, issued a request to media outlets on Thursday asking that they not confuse the two organizations since they "are not connected with each other."

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