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Investigative Committee, Surkov Trade Barbs Over Skolkovo

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An investigation into the embezzlement of budget funds from state-owned innovation hub Skolkovo has led to a public spat between the agency conducting the investigation and the Cabinet of Ministers, whose head, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, created the institution in 2010.

On Tuesday, pro-Kremlin newspaper Izvestia published a damning article written by Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin in which he slammed Deputy Prime Minister Vladislav Surkov for criticizing the committee's investigation into Skolkovo during his recent trip to London.

"It is a trend now to be a political prisoner, it guarantees you the attention of the BBC and support from Amnesty International," Markin wrote. Calling Surkov one of the "curators of [Skolkovo's] especially effective managers" and his criticism "arias of a Moscow guest in London," Markin said that seeking such international support was the only reason why

Surkov had expressed his dissatisfaction in London — "in front of the target audience."

"This moan they call a song, but one in the walls of the London School of Economics is a very pitiful one," he wrote.

Surkov, who is believed to be one of the most influential politicians in Russia and has thus been dubbed the "gray cardinal," gave his speech at a meeting with students at the London School of Economics and Political Science last week.

"The energy with which the Investigative Committee publishes its allegations [about crimes in Skolkovo] led to a situation where people started to believe that the [alleged] crimes were committed; but ... first investigators need to prove that all those [accused] people are guilty, and we'll see now whether they can do that or not," Surkov told the students.

Markin's article in Izvestia, titled "When Looking From London, Don't Lay the Blame at Someone Else's Door," is full of ironic and sharp barbs addressed to Surkov, and it even features a warning about Surkov's possible dismissal, prompting discussions of whether Markin's position allows him to make such comments.

Opposition leader Alexei Navalny wrote on his blog that the expressions used in the article by Markin — who's in charge of press relations for the Investigative Committee — were unusually reserved for the committee's accusations against opposition activists.

When asked about Markin's article by reporters on Tuesday, Surkov said he would not "comment on graphomania."

A government source told RIA-Novosti on Tuesday that Markin's article was akin to "a political denunciation," referring to Markin's words that Surkov was "in charge of the very same power that he criticizes."

Surkov's London speech is not the first time government officials have blasted the Investigative Committee's work. Last December, Medvedev called investigators "busters" after they showed up at the home of documentary filmmaker Pavel Kostomarov, who had filmed the opposition, to search his apartment very early in the morning.

Markin responded at the time that it was "strange to hear such a comment because it foils the work of the entire law enforcement system."

The investigation into Skolkovo — which Surkov has called one of the cleanest of state institutions — was opened last month, when the Investigative Committee said Skolkovo deputy president Alexei Beltyukov embezzled $750,000 and gave the money to State Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov, who is known for his opposition activity.

Investigators alleged that in order to conceal the embezzlement, Beltyukov concluded a phony contract with Ponomaryov stating that the opposition activist would read lectures at Skolkovo and write a scientific paper, though he did neither.

On Tuesday, it was reported that Beltyukov had been suspended from work since late April for the duration of the investigation.

Ponomaryov, who was questioned by investigators as a witness in the case on Tuesday, said investigators had backed down from their initial complaints about him not giving lectures.

"The next round [of questioning] is scheduled for May 16, I'm sure all the issues will be taken off the table; the conversation is constructive," he wrote on Twitter.

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