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# Ex-Official Detained in France on Charges of Stealing Millions

By Natalya Krainova

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Investigators on Monday said they had seized property of former senior Moscow region official Alexei Kuznetsov, who was arrested by French police over the weekend at Russia's request on charges of embezzling over $100 million from the Moscow region budget.

The Prosecutor General's Office is preparing to send an extradition request to France regarding Kuznetsov, who holds U.S. citizenship and is the husband of well-known New York socialite and developer Janna Bullock, RIA Novosti reported, citing a statement by the agency.

Kuznetsov is suspected of heading a criminal group that allegedly acquired the rights of 16 utility companies in the Moscow region between 2005 and 2008 to claim debt totaling over 3.5 billion rubles ($110 million) from authorities in over a half-dozen municipal districts, investigators said last month. He faces up to ten years in prison on charges of large-scale fraud and legalizing criminal property.

Kuznetsov left Russia in 2008 and was supposedly put on an international wanted list in 2010, so it was unclear why he was not located by French authorities sooner. But investigators said Monday that search efforts were significantly improved after Investigative Committee head Alexander Bastrykin met with French police chief Claude Baland in January.

Pundits said the Kuznetsov case could have been pushed by authorities for political reasons, allowing the Kremlin to tout its anti-corruption credentials and giving acting Moscow region Governor Andrei Vorobyov an opportunity to direct public discontent away from his own team ahead of a gubernatorial vote on September 8.

“The subject is of current interest to Vorobyov because he doesn't want to take personal charge of the sins of previous leaders and stresses that the scope of work to be done is big,” said Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information think tank.

On Saturday, Vorobyov, a strong Kremlin ally and the favorite in the governor's race, told journalists that the government was working to return to the budget the money allegedly stolen by Kuznetsov, who served in the administration of former regional head Boris Gromov and his associates.

“This is the money of our residents, of our Moscow region factories,” Vorobyov said in comments carried by Interfax.

Amid growing pressure to crack down on official corruption, federal investigators last year began opening corruption cases involving high-profile officials, including former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, who President Vladimir Putin fired over a case of alleged fraud at a ministry-owned military supplier.

For federal authorities, the Kuznetsov case is another “opportunity to support the issue of fighting corruption,” said Rostislav Turovsky, an expert in regional politics at the Higher School of Economics.

Kuznetsov has denied wrongdoing, telling Vedomosti in 2009 that the case was fabricated by business enemies whom he did not name. He said he left the country for fear of being denied a fair trial.

After years of allegedly frequenting fashionable circles in Paris despite being on a wanted list, Kuznetsov was detained over the weekend by French police in the Mediterranean coastal town of St. Tropez.

Russia and France signed a bilateral extradition deal in 2003 that allows France to keep

Kuznetsov in pretrial detention based on a July 2011 ruling by a Moscow court, Kommersant reported.

It was not immediately clear how many of Russia's previous extradition requests to France were granted. The Prosecutor General's Office could not provide the information Monday and asked for an inquiry to be submitted by fax. Emailed inquiries to the National Central Bureau of Interpol with the Interior Ministry, Interpol's head office in Lyon and Europol's office at the Hague went unanswered Monday.

Rossiiskaya Gazeta reported last year that in 2011, 1,100 criminal suspects were extradited to Russia and assets they owned worth more than 10 billion rubles ($301 million) were seized abroad.

The Investigative Committee said Monday that as part of a civil suit against Kuznetsov, it had seized property of his in Russia, including eight land plots in the Moscow region, two Moscow apartments and two cars.

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