

Former Defense Minister Serdyukov Questioned in Embezzlement Case

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Former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov faced his first round of questioning as a suspect Tuesday, Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin said in a statement.

Serdyukov refused to testify and invoked the right against self-incrimination granted by the Russian Constitution, but his silence will not impede the investigation, Markin said.

Markin added that the committee has enough evidence against the former minister to lead to an indictment "in the near future."

Serdyukov has been barred from leaving his residence and compelled to comply with the investigation and appear promptly when summoned.

President Vladimir Putin fired the former minister in November of last year following allegations of mass embezzlement schemes in the Defense Ministry.

The Investigative Committee opened a case against Serdyukov last week, claiming that he used state funds to finance construction of a road in the Astrakhan region at an estimated cost to the government of 56 million rubles (\$1.7 million).

If convicted, he could face a fine of up to 120,000 rubles (\$3,600), community service of up to a year or a prison sentence of up to 3 months.

The charges are notably mild relative to the scale of embezzlement that reportedly went on in and around the Defense Ministry that has come to light as part of the ongoing "Oboronservis case" investigation into the sale of ministry land at below market prices. Some analysts view Serdyukov's charges as a PR stunt on the part of the Kremlin, while others expect more serious charges to follow.

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