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Fresh Corruption Scandal Hits Russian Defense Ministry

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Russia's Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu

A Moscow court has sanctioned the arrest of a high-ranking Defense Ministry official who is suspected of having accepted millions of rubles in bribes, the Interfax news agency reported Tuesday.

Alexander Gorshkolepov, the deputy head of the ministry's property relations department, stands accused of having taken bribes and received kickbacks amounting to some 16 million rubles ($259,000), according to an unnamed source quoted by Interfax.

The incident is the first major corruption scandal at the Defense Ministry since Sergei Shoigu was appointed as its head in late 2012. Shoigu was placed in the position after President Vladimir Putin dismissed then-Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, who had been at the heart of various corruption allegations also related to the ministry's property department.

Alexandra Volkova, spokeswoman for Moscow's Savyolovsky Court, told Interfax that Gorshkolepov's arrest was linked to suspected bribe-taking.

Under Russian law, individuals convicted of taking bribes of an "especially large scale" face up to 12 years in prison, as well as hefty fines.

Earlier Tuesday, the Kommersant business daily cited an unnamed military source as saying that Gorshkolepov stood accused of having accepted bribes on eight separate occasions.

Details surrounding the detention of Gorshkolepov, who is reportedly being held in pretrial detention at Moscow's high-security Lefortovo prison, have yet to be revealed, according to the Kommersant report.

A spokesperson for Russia's main military investigation department told The Moscow Times on Tuesday morning that he could not confirm the information in Kommersant's report, adding that his organization had not made any official statements on the matter.

Gorshkolepov joined the Defense Ministry in late 2012 and had no ties to Serdyukov, Kommersant's report said.

According to Kommersant, law enforcement agencies took an interest in Gorshkolepov when probing Agroprom, a subsidiary of state defense industry firm Oboronservis, which the suspect had supervised. Oboronservis was at the center of the previous corruption scandal that resulted in Serdyukov's firing.

Abuse of power cost the subsidiary 16.6 million rubles ($269,000), Kommersant reported, citing an unnamed source in the Defense Ministry.

The sources cited by Kommersant did not exclude the possibility that Gorshkolepov could be charged with a wide range of crimes linked to his professional responsibilities.

Gorshkolepov's predecessor, Yevgenia Vasilyeva, was indicted in 2013 on 12 counts of fraud, money laundering and abuse of authority. Her high-profile trial is currently ongoing while she remains under house arrest.

Serdyukov was officially charged with negligence in December 2013 after he was accused of having used the ministry's resources to build up infrastructure for a holiday resort.

He was granted amnesty last year.

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