

Authorities Question Vasilyeva's Quick Release on Parole

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Yevgeniya Vasilyeva, former head of the Russian Defence Ministry's Property Relations Department.

The flash-like release on parole of Yevgenia Vasilyeva, former Defense Ministry property manager convicted to five years in prison for mass embezzlement in May, has sparked outrage within Russian officialdom.

Lawmakers and civil rights advocates demand further investigation into the matter, as well as changes to the parole granting procedure.

Two Levels of Justice //

Russia's human rights ombudsman Ella Pamfilova issued a statement Tuesday, saying she would urge President Vladimir Putin to instruct the Security Council to investigate the details of Vasilyeva's release and all the decisions made in her case.

“I can't agree that the whole procedure [of granting Vasilyeva parole] was carried out perfectly from the point of view of the law. But even if it was, it is impossible to hide moral expenses and legal unscrupulousness behind the 'perfect' law casuistry,” the statement, published on the ombudsman's website, read.

Vasilyeva's case demonstrated that there were two levels of justice in Russia — one for the “elite” and one “for common people,” Pamfilova claimed, mentioning cases when convicts, though legally entitled to parole, were denied it, sometimes due to prison officials refusing to give references to those who spent less than a year there.

“But Vasilyeva was given a reference immediately, [the penal colony administration] concluded she deserved to be released,” she wrote.

Vasilyeva played the role of scapegoat, while high-ranking offenders escaped punishment, Pamfilova said, adding that former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov — who was also investigated for misusing army funds, but received amnesty — “stayed in the shadow of a woman.”

Lawmakers Indignant

There are two possible follow-up investigations into Vasliyeva and Serdyukov: one by the Prosecutor's Office and the other by the State Duma, both initiated by the Communist Party.

“What they [Serdyukov and Vasilyeva] did to the [Russian] army — destroying the staff education system, military camps, infrastructure, communications, management — is a rare precedent. That is why criminal activities by Serdyukov's team require further investigating,” Gennady Zyuganov, chair of the party, was cited as saying by the party's website Tuesday.

Vasilyeva was charged with fraud, embezzlement, and exceeding her authority. The prosecution claimed that she was responsible, among other things, for selling real estate belonging to the Defense Ministry and personally pocketing 5 percent of each deal.

“We will ask the Prosecutor's Office and those responsible for [releasing Vasilyeva on parole] to explain [her release],” Zyuganov said. “Almost 100 deputies have signed a demand to start a parliamentary investigation into all Serdyukov's 'shenanigans,'” he added.

State Duma lawmakers from the United Russia faction and members of A Just Russia party shared Zyuganov's indignation over Vasilyeva's release.

“It's insulting to the authorities, the law enforcement system and all the rest,” Frants Klintsevich, the first deputy head of the United Russia faction in the State Duma, told TASS news agency on Wednesday. “To me she is a criminal, and will be a criminal, and I will never — as a man and an officer — agree with this ruling,” he said.

Mikhail Emelyanov, the first deputy had of the State Duma's A Just Russia faction, agreed with him, calling Vasilyeva's parole “a severe impact on the fight against corruption,” TASS reported.

Changing the Procedure

Vasilyeva's release inspired two bills to change the procedure for granting parole to convicts. One, written by A Just Russia deputy Oleg Nilov, suggested that convicts sentenced for corruption crimes should not be eligible for parole — and amnesty, for that matter — at all.

“[We suggested] canceling parole and amnesty for those convicted of crimes, equated with high-level crimes — they bring billions of rubles of damages to the country,” Nilov was cited by Izvestia newspaper as saying.

Nilov's bill was introduced to the Duma in May — a week after Vasilyeva's sentence, the Ridus news website reported Tuesday. But the lawmaker, according to Izvestia, did not deny it was inspired by Vasilyeva's case.

“We need to think about protecting our country from these people — they are ravaging our country more than sanctions, economic crisis and external enemies,” Nilov said.

Senators from the Federation Council, the upper chamber of Russian parliament, introduced a second bill that proposes differentiating the conditions of parole for varying categories of convicts, Kommersant newspaper reported Wednesday.

“The current procedure of granting parole needs improvement,” Konstantin Dobrynin, one of the senators who wrote the bill, was cited by Kommersant as saying.

The document suggests differentiating the amount of time a convict needs to spend under lock and key to be eligible for parole. The sentence served should be longer for offenders convicted of high-level crimes — for instance, sex offenders of minors, criminals involved in drug trafficking and such, Dobrynin said.

The bill also proposes granting parole for men older than 65 years and women older than 60 years, along with those who have dependent children.

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