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Russian Customs Chief Remains in Post Despite Smuggling Probe

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The head of Russia's Federal Customs Service Andrey Belyaninov **Sergei Porter / Vedomosti**

The head of Russia's Federal Customs Service (FCS) is to remain in his post despite being implicated in a smuggling case, the Kremlin announced Wednesday.

Police searched Andrey Belyaninov's office on Tuesday, as well as two properties belonging to the customs chief. Officials uncovered money in various currencies worth around 60 million rubles ($900,000), as well as a host of expensive paintings and antiques at Belyaninov's luxurious suburban home. Belyaninov claims that the money was part of his family's savings.

The raids are part of a criminal investigation against St. Petersburg businessman Dmitry Mikhalchenko, who was arrested on smuggling charges in March. Mikhalchenko, who is worth 18 billion rubles ($270 million), is alleged to have smuggled containers of vintage

cognac⊠worth $30,000 through a Baltic sea port disguised as building sealant.⊠The arrest of Deputy culture Minister Grigory Pirumov on suspicion of⊠corruption and theft is also reportedly linked to the Mikhalchenko⊠case.

Belyaninov⊠has been classified a witness in the case and has not been charged⊠with any crime.

Larissa⊠Cherkesova, the head of the FCS legal department, denied rumors that⊠Belyaninov had resigned. She told journalists that Belyaninov was instead on⊠"a planned holiday."

"Keep⊠listening [to the rumors]." she said. "This [rumored⊠resignation] can't be true, because it can't ever be true."

Kremlin⊠spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday that he couldn't comment on⊠the ongoing Mikhalchenko case, but that he had no information of⊠Belyaninov's reported resignation.

"Belyaninov⊠is not currently accused of anything, he has witness status,"⊠Peskov said.

The⊠FCS chief reportedly resigned as head of the Customs service six⊠months ago, but had remained in the post until a "dignified new⊠position" could be found, the Dozhd TV channel reported yesterday,⊠citing government sources.

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