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Office Politics, Kremlin-Style: Customs Chief Exposed During FSB Raid

Another high-profile government official is under scrutiny as cash and influence continue to be divvied up among Russia's strongmen.

By Daria Litvinova

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Andrei Belyaninov has claimed that the $880,000 stored in shoe boxes was his "family savings." **Vedomosti**

Stacks of cash, security officers, confused victims, compromising photos — these are now the stock images of Russia's new political season. The raids, as usual, came out of the blue. The victim was among the most unexpected. Andrei Belyaninov, the long-time chief of Russia's Federal Customs Service (FTS), could hardly have imagined the turn of events.

And yet, with one short, clinical operation, the full-figured government veteran had become front-page news. As had the snapshots that accompanied his shame: the shoe boxes piled with cash; the red tablecloth with, as was later revealed, 10 million rubles, $400,000 and

300,000 euros; the collection of expensive art; the piano and indoor pool; the private pier overlooking a most Russian-looking of lakes.

The message of corrupt opulence that these photographs intended to show is not new. It is the message Russians regularly receive in investigative reports by opposition activists such as Alexei Navalny. But this time it was Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) sending the message.

Belyaninov is the highest-ranking government official to be included in the authorities' chaotic, selective, but expanding campaign of "anti-corruption" purges.

The raids in the offices and homes of Belyaninov's deputies and advisors are ostensibly connected to a criminal case against St. Petersburg businessman Dmitry Mikhalchenko. Reported to be worth 18 billion rubles ($270 million), Mikhalchenko has been detained since March on charges of smuggling cognac.

What was most strange was how the operation ended, or rather, didn't end. Officials targeted in this way usually end up in jail, but Belyaninov has not yet been detained. The customs chief was instead described as a "witness." The origins of the cash and its legality are yet to be established. Meanwhile, close to $1 million in shoe boxes appears at least suspicious. But instead of being charged with a crime, Belyaninov was exposed in a humiliating and ritualistic manner.

Belyaninov later claimed that the cash was his "family savings." The next day, his spokespeople denied he had any plans to resign. "This can't happen, because this can never happen," said Larisa Cherkesova, head of the Federal Customs Service's legal department. Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov stressed that Belyaninov was "not charged with anything."

Yet Belyaninov is far from being off the hook. "This is serious," says an insider close to the government. Something has clearly gone wrong for the man who has a background in foreign intelligence, a man who is clearly no stranger to the system. Belyaninov is said to know President Vladimir Putin personally, having worked with him in East Germany in the mid 1980s.

According to the Vedomosti newspaper, the Mikhalchenko case that led to the searches at Belyaninov's house and offices started as an operation of the FSB's economic security division. That investigation was apparently not welcomed within the main FSB structures and, as a result, the leadership of the entire division was replaced. The new man in charge, Sergei Korolyov, is reported to be the driving force behind the recent purges.

The purges are unlikely to stop any time soon. "The forthcoming battle for customs, which is a source of large financial flows, will be a matter of tough rivalry, including among governing bodies," says political analyst Yekaterina Schulmann.

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