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Russian Journalists Investigating Top Cop's Wealth Raided, Detained

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Proekt reporter Maria Zholobova. **Anastasia Khodorkovskaya / MBKh Media**

At least one Russian investigative journalist has been detained and police searched the homes of two others early Tuesday after they announced a new report into Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev's alleged hidden wealth.

The Proekt investigative outlet said its deputy editor-in-chief Mikhail Rubin was detained outside the home of the report's author Maria Zholobova, where a police raid was already underway. Police also searched the home of Proekt editor-in-chief Roman Badanin.

Proekt's website briefly went offline Tuesday morning.

Police raided Zholobova and Badanin's homes as part of a criminal libel investigation over their 2017 investigative report linking President Vladimir Putin to Ilya Traber, a businessman suspected of mafia connections, according to independent police-monitoring website OVD-Info.

OVD-Info reported that Zholobova, Badanin and Rubin were released from questioning Tuesday afternoon and all three are witnesses in the criminal libel case.

The statute of limitations on that case expired in 2019, rights lawyer Pavel Chikov wrote on his Telegram channel.

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Zholobova linked the timing of the raids to Proekt's investigation into Kolokoltsev.

“The raid closely coincides with our investigation into Kolokoltsev, which is supposed to come out today. We made the announcement yesterday, perhaps it was some kind of trigger for their arrival,” Zholobova said in a phone interview with the Current Time broadcaster.

Zholobova’s report, citing Moscow’s leaked coronavirus travel pass database, alleged that Kolokoltsev is the real owner of a 200 million ruble ($2.8 million) gated estate in Moscow's wealthiest suburb of Rublyovka that on paper belongs to a distant relative.

Proekt also reported that Kolokoltsev’s son Alexander owns an estimated 1.8 billion rubles ($25 million) of luxury real estate due to alleged ties to Russia’s criminal underworld, which it said had also contributed to the minister’s rise through the ranks.

Proekt said the Interior Ministry’s press office called its queries into Alexander Kolokoltsev’s alleged hidden wealth “unethical.”

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that there were "legal grounds" for such searches even though he was not aware of the reason for them.

Proekt, one of Russia's last remaining independent news outlest, has risen to prominence with its investigations into Putin's alleged extramarital daughter, the elite real estate of newly appointed Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and the alleged illicit wealth of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov.

Includes reporting from AFP.

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