

At Putin's Frown, Saratov Auditors Get Busy

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August 30, 2011

The  **Moscow Times**

Saratov Governor Pavel Ipatov's administration was accused of misusing state funds Tuesday, just days after Prime Minister Vladimir Putin singled out the governor in a rant against regional authorities.

Saratov authorities spent 10.5 million rubles (\$363,000) earmarked for the construction of a prenatal clinic on banquets, restaurant meals and boat trips, the Volga region's audit chamber said in a statement carried by Interfax on Tuesday.

The chamber's chairman, Andrei Saukhin, hit out at Ipatov, accusing the governor of incompetence.

"This once more confirms the inability of the regional government under Pavel Ipatov to make effective use of state money and property," Saukhin said, according to the Regnum.ru news site.

Saratov prosecutors said they had asked the regional investigative committee to reopen an investigation into the case. An earlier decision by the committee not to open a criminal case was deemed illegal, they said in a statement.

Putin, speaking last week during a health policy convention in Smolensk, named Saratov as an example of regional governments failing to construct modern clinics in a timely manner.

When the governor, speaking by video link, defended himself by blaming the clinic's developer for missing deadlines and revealed that sanitation and electricity lines were currently being installed, he drew more anger from Putin, who asked how the clinic could have opened by the original deadline last December without utilities.

Analysts have mentioned Ipatov, who was reappointed to a second five-year term in spring 2010, among the unpopular governors who the Kremlin might want to replace before State Duma elections in December.

Last summer, he made headlines when a man resembling him surfaced in video footage of a raid by Italian police on a luxury yacht docked at Stromboli Island. The raid was directed against Russian criminals, and Ipatov did not comment on the incident at the time.

Putin has been lobbying for prenatal centers in the run-up to the Dec. 4 Duma elections, saying the federal and regional governments have spent 34 billion rubles (\$1.17 billion) on their construction.

Some 300 million rubles (\$10 million) have been misappropriated from a Communications and Press Ministry contract, the Prosecutor General's Office said Tuesday.

The money was funneled off via overpriced soft- and hardware purchases as part of a contract with the Rostelekom long-distance monopoly, prosecutors said in a statement.

The 2 billion ruble contract is part of Electronic Russia, a 77 billion ruble federal program to boost e-government services.

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