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The financial crime branch of France’s public prosecution services has widened the remit of a judicial investigation into suspected corruption in a sale of French helicopters to Kazakhstan to include the suspected involvement of France’s intelligence services in a plan to protect a businessman close to the Kazakh president from prosecution in Belgium. The move follows revelations by Mediapart and Belgian daily Le Soir of evidence suggesting the intelligence services were manipulated by officials of the French presidency under Nicolas Sarkozy in order to seal the deal worth a total of 2 billion euros. Yann Philippin reports in collaboration with Mediapart’s Belgian press partners in this investigation, Alain Lallemand (Le Soir), Thierry Denoel (Le Vif) and Mark Eeckhaut (De Standaard).

Mediapart has learnt that the French prosecution services have widened an investigation into suspected corruption, notably bribery of foreign officials and a system of secret kick-back payments made in France, in connection with a 2-billion-euro contract for the sale of French helicopters and trains to Kazakhstan under the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy, to include probing the possible involvement of the French intelligence services in helping to secure the deal.

The prosecution services’ financial crime branch, the Parquet national financier, or PNF, made the move on April 25th this year, six days after the publication by Mediapart and Belgian daily Le Soir of evidence suggesting the manipulation of the French domestic

intelligence agency and its Belgian counterpart in a plan hatched by French officials to help a key intermediary in the lucrative deal escape prosecution in Belgium.

The terms of the public prosecutors' brief for supplementary investigations, seen by Mediapart and its Belgian press partners in this joint investigation, with *Le Soir*, *Le Vif* and *De Standaard*, also recommends the examining magistrates study the information collected by the hearings earlier this year of a Belgian parliamentary commission of enquiry into the so-called "Kazakhgate" scandal, in which it is suspected that apart of Belgium's criminal law was modified expressly to protect three Central Asian businessmen close to the Kazakh regime from prosecution on corruption charges.

The PNF also recommends that the magistrates question a number of individuals implicated in the suspected plot, including Claude Gueant, the former chief of staff of the Elysee Palace, the French presidential office, and later interior minister, and the former French national intelligence services coordinator Ange Mancini, both of whom served under the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy.

The so-called "Kazakhgate" affair centres on the sale by France to Kazakhstan of 45 helicopters built by Eurocopter (now Airbus Helicopters) and also trains in a deal worth a total of about 2 billion euros, which was announced by Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev during a visit to Paris in 2010 when Nicolas Sarkozy was president.

A judicial investigation into the circumstances of the deal was initially opened in France in early 2012, citing suspected "bribery of foreign public officials" and "money laundering", prompted by a mysterious payment of 300,000 euros to a former prefect and advisor to Sarkozy, Jean-Francois Etienne des Rosaies. But the case soon widened to include alleged interference by French officials to help an Uzbek businessman with close ties to the Kazakh government, Patokh Chodiev, and two of his business associates, escape criminal proceedings against them for corruption in Belgium. It is suspected that Nazarbayev had made securing Chodiev's protection from criminal prosecution a condition for the completion of the 2010 deal.

It is alleged that Chodiev acted as a key intermediary in sealing the contract, which would include the payment by Eurocopter (then part of EADS, now Airbus), of a bung of 12 million euros for the then Kazakh prime minister Karim Massimov, with a further 5 million euros from the deal to be secretly returned in kickbacks paid in France.



Chodiev, Mashkevich and Ibragimov

Chodiev and his associates, Kazakh nationals Alexander Mashkevich and Alijan Ibragimov, nicknamed “the Trio”, faced prosecution in Belgium for moneylaundering. The three, who made their fortune from acquisitions in Central Asia following the fall of the Soviet Union, own vast mining resources around the world and have close political ties with the Nazarbayev regime. It is alleged that the then vice-president of the Belgian senate, Armand De Decker, was helped with the plan for the three to escape prosecution in Belgium through a reform of that country’s criminal law, pushed through by the upper house and enacted in April 2011 , which allowed individuals accused of financial crimes to negotiate an out-of- court settlement.

In the case of Chodiev, Mashkevich and Ibragimov, who were until then facing prosecution for conspiring with criminals and money laundering in connection with property deals in the country, they settled the case before it went to court with a payment of 23 million euros.



Claude Guéant, Elysée Palace chief of staff, and later interior minister, under the 2007–2012 presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy. © Reuters

On February 27th 2011, Claude Gueant, who until then was Sarkozy 's chief-of-staff at the Elysee Palace, was appointed as French interior minister. He took up his new post the following day, when he also hosted a lunch with several people who were key to the deal with Kazakhstan; Damien Loras, Sarkozy's advisor on Central Asian affairs, Jean-Francois Etienne des Rosaies, a former prefect and advisor to Sarkozy, a French lawyer and counsel for Chodiev, Catherine Degoul, and Armand De Decker, who besides being vice-president of the Belgian senate (after twice serving as its president) was also a lawyer and lobbyist for Chodiev in Belgium.

Questioned in May this year by a Belgian parliamentary commission of enquiry into the affair, Gueant admitted that during the February 28th 2011 lunch meeting, the legal proceedings in Belgium which he said "interested Mr Chodiev and his friends" were discussed, but added that his memory of the discussions was hazy. However, in an email dated March 17th 2011, and revealed since by Belgian weekly magazine *Le Vif*, Etienne des Rosaies detailed: "President [sic] De Decker came to lunch in Paris with Claude Gueant. He handed over, on behalf of the Belgian Surete d'Etat [State security services] a note concerning the person 'V' [and] wishing to establish the collaboration of the DCRI [the then French internal intelligence agency, now the DGSI]." The email ended with the observation: "The affair is underway between the French and Belgian services."

In fact, 'V' was a Belgian businessman and lobbyist Eric Van de Weghe, well known to intelligence circles. At the time he had advised one of Chodiev's associates to change the lawyer representing him in the corruption case and to distance himself from the team set up by the French presidency — several of whom were present at the February 28th 2011 lunch with Gueant. It is suspected that a decision was taken to discredit Van de Weghe, although who was behind the move is unclear.



Armand De Decker, former president and later vice-president of the Belgian Senate, who was also a lawyer for Patokh Chodiev. © D.R.

The subsequent developments were detailed in a report by the Belgian parliament's "R" committee whose brief is to monitor the actions of the country's intelligence services. The report was presented to parliament in a closed-door session.

In an internal email correspondence within the Belgian state security service, the Surete d'Etat, also known as the VSSE, it is reported that "in the first days of the month of March" 2011, following the February 28th lunch hosted by Gueant, Armand De Decker visited the offices of France's national intelligence services coordinator Ange Mancini. According to the email account, Mancini, who is directly answerable to the French president, was absent, and De Decker was met by one of his close collaborators. "The message from the senator was that the VSSE would like to collaborate with the DCRI concerning Eric Van de Weghe," the email read.

Contacted by Mediapart, Mancini, who now works in the private sector for the Bollore group, said he was "in no way concerned by this affair". Meanwhile, a Belgian state security service document reports that following De Decker's visit to Mancini's office, the French internal intelligence service, the DCRI, received a message "from the CNR" — a reference to Mancini's department — "to which it must now reply".

The DCRI went about researching information about Van de Weghe, in concert with its Belgian counterpart, trawling back through its archives to 1997, but reported it had found no recent results of interest. Records show that, shortly after, a Belgian state security officer announced his intention of passing on a verbal message to the French about De Decker's initiative, "so that the DCRI can reassure the Elysee, because there was in fact something embarrassing about this move". The officer added: "If the information that the DCRI has given us is reliable, then the intervention in Paris into the 'V' file suggests a conflict of interest." A separate report written by a Belgian state security officer observed:

“The note about the intervention in Paris by the Senate president [sic] suggests an attempted manipulation of State Security via the DCRI, the Elysee (CNR) or De Decker himself.”

In 2016, the legal services of the Belgian state security agency carried out a detailed study of De Decker’s intervention in Paris. The resulting report noted that if the information from the DCRI was exact, De Decker could be prosecuted, notably for corruption, for acting “without any mandate”, and also faced disciplinary measures from the Belgian bar.

The question remains that if De Decker did hand Claude Gueant a report on Van de Weghe who had given it to him? To all appearances, the document was confidential and should not have been in De Decker’s possession.

During a hearing by the Belgian parliamentary commission of enquiry it emerged that between January 1st 2011 and April 19th 2011 the file on Van de Weghe had been consulted 23 times by 15 different people between, including the head of the Belgian state security services, Alain Winants, who was a close contact of De Decker’s. Winants consulted the file five times in all, four of which were between February 23rd and 24th 2011, just days before the attack in Paris hosted by Gueant.

Meanwhile, the Belgian justice system has shown little enthusiasm in pursuing the matter. On October 14th 2014, the state security services completed a report on the case, and which the then Belgian justice minister was informed of, but no subsequent action was taken. In 2016, following the state security legal affairs department’s appraisal of the case, the agency passed on its conclusions to the Brussels public prosecutor’s office, but again no action was taken. It is unclear whether the three magistrates in charge of the case in France — Judges Aude Buresi, Serge Tournaire and Claire Thepaut — have begun enquiries into the events surrounding De Decker. What is established is that they have not yet submitted a request to the Belgian parliament’s commission of enquiry to receive the details of its findings.

[The French version of this report can be found here](#)

BY YANN PHILIPPIN AND ALAIN LALLEMAND (LE SOIR), THIERRY DENOËL (LE VIF) ET
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