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Belgians Dub Medvedeva a 'Nuisance'

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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Medvedeva dining with the president at a Warsaw restaurant last Monday. They flew from Warsaw to Brussels. **Mikhail Klimentyev**

First lady Svetlana Medvedeva was dubbed the "biggest nuisance in years" by annoyed staff and officials in Bruges after behaving capriciously during a lightening visit to the Belgian city last week, a local newspaper reported.

Medvedeva kept city officials waiting for two hours in the city's town hall on Tuesday afternoon, Het Nieuwsblad reported on its web site.

When she finally arrived at 5:30 p.m., they were told by members of the Russian delegation that she had wanted to "have a rest and eat something" before meeting Mayor Patrick Moenaert, the report said.

Medvedeva was in Brussels on Tuesday and Wednesday together with her husband, President Dmitry Medvedev, who attended an EU-Russia summit and held talks with the Belgian government.

During a tour of Bruges' famous gothic town hall, Medvedeva made a tactless remark to Mayor Moenaert, telling him that "the winner takes it all" after he congratulated her on Russia's winning the right to host the 2018 football World Cup, the paper reported.

Belgium had also bid to hold the tournament, together with the Netherlands.

She then tried to haggle with the owner of a traditional lace store after "laying her eyes upon a scarf in the shop's window," only to be told that it was a priceless single item from the 18th century. "I explained that I would never sell it," shopkeeper Magda Boyekens was quoted as saying.

"I understand," Medvedeva said when she finally backed down, the report said.

The Dutch-language reports, published Wednesday and Thursday, triggered several national media reports Friday after being translated into Russian.

But Bruges city spokeswoman Greet Verleye dismissed the reports as exaggerated and partly untrue.

"We were a little shocked when we read that," she told The Moscow Times on Friday.

The spokeswoman explained that Medvedeva was late "simply because she had left late from Brussels."

Verleye said that while Medvedeva's town hall quote about the World Cup was true, it was taken out of context. "The mayor had been bragging a little about the gothic hall before mentioning the [Belgian] World Cup bid and said, 'You cannot win them all,'" she explained.

"Her retort, 'The winner takes it all,' was actually very witty," the spokeswoman said by telephone from Bruges.

The report also said Medvedeva never showed up in De Karmeliet, one of Bruges' most famous restaurants, although tables had been reserved for her delegation.

Restaurant owner Geert van Hecke explained Friday that the Russians had actually booked "an option" for 17 people, but never called to cancel or confirm it.

Instead, Medvedeva chose to dine at the Duc de Bourgogne restaurant, located right on one of the city's famous canals.

Staff there were not amused afterward. The menu was changed six or seven times in advance, and the first dish served was returned immediately. "Mrs. Medvedev wanted something else," the newspaper quoted a staff member as saying, adding that members of her delegation complained about the towels in restroom.

The Kremlin's press service directed all enquiries to Medvedeva's spokesman Renat Abdeyev, who did not answer repeated calls Friday.

No account of Medvedeva's Bruge visit was published on her web site, http://firstlady.kremlin.ru, by late Sunday.

The report comes on the heels of allegations that Medvedeva has been generating tension within the government.

A U.S. Embassy cable dated April 2008 and published by WikiLeaks earlier this month said Medvedeva was the subject of avid gossip and purportedly had drawn up a list of officials who should "suffer" for their betrayal of her husband during the period when he and Sergei Ivanov were competing as first deputy prime ministers to become the next president.

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