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Medvedev Raps 'Potemkin Village'

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President Dmitry Medvedev looking at his reflection Wednesday at the Lytkarino Optical Glass Factory in the town of Lytkarino near Moscow. He criticized the tradition of touching up towns before visit **Natalia Kolesnikova**

LYTKARINO, Moscow Region — President Dmitry Medvedev criticized the tradition of touching up towns before visits by leaders, accusing authorities outside Moscow on Wednesday of hiding shabby homes with hastily erected fences.

Medvedev, who promised at a recent meeting to regularly examine residential neighborhoods nationwide, used a visit to Lytkarino to bolster his image as an Internet-savvy advocate of change.

"It would be better for Lytkarino to become a major industrial center than to paint fences and prepare for the president's visit," he said at a vocational college. "You've erected fences all over instead of doing something useful."

Medvedev said he learned about the fences from the Internet because several web sites reported on decorations set up by officials before the visit to the town of 52,000 about 10 kilometers southeast of Moscow.

Several residents said in interviews that green fences shielding buildings, some dating back to a 1950s construction boom under Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, were erected several days before Medvedev's trip.

"I'm strictly against covering up old buildings with fences," Medvedev said.

He said the practice reminded him of Potemkin villages, referring to mock-up villages that, according to legend, were erected by a prince, Grigory Potemkin, to please Catherine the Great and show his loyalty.

Last year, a doctor in Ivanovo told Prime Minister Vladimir Putin that new equipment had been temporarily installed at a hospital for a visit by Putin and that doctors had pretended to be patients to ensure Putin heard no complaints.

Putin has not directly challenged the tradition of cosmetic touchups.

The mayor of Lytkarino told journalists after the meeting that he had spent less than a year in his post and could not be held responsible for the poor state of housing. He said homes behind fences had been vacated and would be razed soon.

Also Wednesday, Medvedev ordered officials to prevent a repeat of last year's devastating wildfires, even as Greenpeace Russia warned of another catastrophe.

"Consider this a final warning. ... If you don't handle it, then you'll all go to put out the peat fires — both the Moscow region government and the Russian government," Medvedev told officials.

Early fires have spread to thousands of acres in southern Siberia and other regions, but the country is even more poorly prepared than it was last year, Greenpeace Russia's forest program chief Alexei Yaroshenko said.

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