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Camp's Challenge Is Also the Kremlin's

By Alexander Bratersky

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Established in 2005 by Putin's Kremlin, the camp was initially a gathering for the pro-Putin youth group Nashi. And although the camp began a rebranding during the halcyon years of Medvedev's presiden **Igor Tabakov**

Eager to shed its reputation of being hostile toward the West and the political opposition, it is aggressively courting international companies and increasing spending to showcase its positive attributes.

But anti-Western, anti-opposition sentiment remains strong, and international companies are still staying away.

And it's all the media's fault.

Some observers might say this describes the situation around President Dmitry Medvedev's attempts to liberalize state policies without dismantling the political legacy of his patron, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. But it actually sums up the government's bid to revamp its annual youth camp at Lake Seliger from a Kremlin propaganda gala into a respectable youth

event. The revamp, initiated under Medvedev, has like the Kremlin policy efforts met with limited success.

The latest blow was dealt to camp organizers this week when Moleskine, the hip Italian notepad maker, refused to donate 30 of its classic, leather-bound notepads to the camp — after the organizers announced that it was a camp sponsor.

The camp, which is receiving record funding this year, earlier raised eyebrows after it declared that the elite Skolkovo business school was a sponsor (Skolkovo said it wasn't) and prominent bloggers Ilya Varlamov and Anton Korobkov would give guest lectures (they said they were never invited).

Critics are already planning an "anti-Seliger" outing in the Khimki forest.

The Tver region camp, organized by the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs, has a budget of 178 million rubles ($6.4 million), compared with 100 million rubles last year, Vedomosti reported in May. About 15,000 campers will attend from July 1 to Aug. 2 in four shifts, participating in programs on modern art, innovation, fitness and, of course, politics.

In addition to lavish government financing, about 50 domestic and international companies have agreed to sponsor the event, the agency said on its web site. The list of sponsors includes Moleskine, Tupperware, IREX and the Moscow School of Management Skolkovo.

Moleskine said it had agreed to donate the after camp organizers offered assurances that the event would be completely apolitical. But it was shocked to find out from a reporter with Kommersant-Vlast magazine that it had been included on the list of camp sponsors — and promptly decided against providing the notepads.

Skolkovo said it was not invited to be a sponsor, the BBC Russian Service reported.

Tupperware, the food container giant, said in an e-mailed statement that it was not participating in the camp this year because it was launching its own youth program. It refused to elaborate.

A spokeswoman for the U.S. nonprofit educational organization IREX said by telephone that the group was not involved with the camp. Former participants of IREX programs might travel to the camp, but only in a private capacity, said another IREX official, who asked to not be identified because he was not authorized to talk to the media.

Other companies confirmed involvement, praising the organizers for their positive efforts but stressing an intent to stay away from politics.

"We had a visit from young people with sparks in their eyes. I had the impression that they wanted to change something," said a spokeswoman with Intersport, a leading international maker of sportswear and sporting equipment.

"We are trying to stay away from politics. What we're interested in is grabbing the attention of the young audience," said a spokeswoman for RMA, a Russian company whose slogan is "innovation in education."

Pavel Chetverkov, a manager at the Russky Produkt food producer, said his company saw "nothing bad" in participating because it gave it a chance to promote a healthy lifestyle. Russky Produkt oatmeal will be on the menu at the "Run After Me" sports marathon at the camp.

The sponsor list has been widely discussed — and questioned — in the media, prompting youth agency spokeswoman Kristina Potupchik to accuse journalists, on her blog, of "imposing moral terror" on sponsors.

Potupchik promised to look into the situation with IREX when contacted by telephone last week, but did not reply or return repeated calls.

If the camp is getting a bad rap, it is not just the media's fault. Established in 2005 by Putin's Kremlin as a wave of "color revolutions" toppled entrenched governments in other former Soviet republics, the camp was initially a gathering for the pro-Putin youth group Nashi, known for its vehement attacks on the political opposition.

The camp began a rebranding during the halcyon years of Medvedev's presidency, which started in 2008, but it has never completely cut ties with the past. Last year, members of Nashi's radical wing Stal offered an exhibit that featured portraits of former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, human rights leader Lyudmila Alexeyeva and opposition leader Boris Nemtsov mounted on stakes and wearing hats with swastikas.

While the organization of the camp has fallen on the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs since 2009, the agency's head is former Nashi leader Vasily Yakemenko. Potupchik works as a spokeswoman for both Yakemenko and Nashi.

The line is so blurred between the agency and Nashi that the Intersport spokeswoman could not say whether her company had accepted the sponsorship offer from Nashi members or federal employees.

Still, much has changed. Seliger makes a point of promoting innovation and modernization, key points of Medvedev's agenda. Last year, billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov dropped in to talk about innovation, and the honors this year will go to U.S. software giant Cisco.

Nashi will only be involved in the political program in this year's camp, Potupchik said by telephone last week. "It will be dedicated to public activism by the young," she said.

She did not elaborate, including on a report in Novaya Gazeta last month that the political program would include, among other topics, a study of "various forms of political dictatorships." A list of other topics, available on the camp's web site, includes: "What if not betrayal? Faces of political opposition in modern Russia." Participants are also required to write an essay on one of three books: Nikolai Starikov's "The Nationalization of the Ruble" or "The War to Save the U.S. Dollar," both full of anti-Western conspiracy theories; or "Nemtsov. The Results," a Nashi publication accusing Nemtsov of ties with gangsters.

In another PR fiasco, a statement by camp organizers said last week that bloggers Varlamov and Korobkov, as well as unidentified people behind the Twitter blog of the news site Lenta.ru, would give lectures, Gazeta.ru reported.

But all of them said later that they had only learned about their participation from media reports.

"They don't allow any booze. What's the point of being there?" a Lenta.ru employee wrote on Twitter.

Some critics took a more serious stance, announcing plans for an "anti-Seliger" forum to be held June 17 to 20 in the Moscow region's Khimki forest, which is slated by the government for partial destruction for a major highway.

"Anti-Seliger is not just for young people. It is for everyone," said co-organizer Yevgenia Chirikova. The Khimki camp will be attended by anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny, among others.

Seliger organizers have not commented on the rival camp. But in an implicit indication of the Kremlin's stance, Medvedev — who will visit Seliger — reiterated Wednesday that the decision to destroy part of the forest was final.

An earlier version of this article incorrectly identified the items that the Italian company Moleskine produces and at one point promised to donate to Seliger. The items are writing pads.

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