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Secrecy Surrounds Ukrainian President's Home

By The Moscow Times

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Yanukovych, right, showing journalists a fireplace in his residence that he said a family of owls had settled in. **Mykhailo Markiv**

KIEV — When Ukraine's president opened up his home to TV cameras, he presented a cozy place with a small office just big enough for his grandchildren to play in.

But his critics point to strong evidence that he actually lives in very different digs: a luxurious, marble-columned mansion with a golf course, a helipad and even an ostrich enclosure.

The reported grandeur is becoming a campaign issue in a country quickly getting fed up with widespread corruption.

Critics call Viktor Yanukovych's home an emblem of the secrecy and arrogance that defines his presidency, painting him as a leader who basks in splendor while his main political opponent, former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, is locked up in prison on charges

the West has called politically motivated.

Yanukovych has refused to answer questions about the house or the vast park where it sits, once darkly suggesting that an investigative journalist back off.

An opposition activist looking for answers broke in to the property James Bond-style, scaling the walls with a tow rope. She was detained but managed to salvage photographs of a golf course and glitzy buildings, describing an opulent palace guarded by heavy security.

Political commentator Vitaly Portnikov, who has compared Yanukovych's government to a "mafia" jeopardizing Ukraine's desire for greater integration with the European Union, cited Yanukovych's clandestine residence as an example of the corruption and lack of transparency unacceptable in the West.

"Viktor Yanukovych's main goal is not to be the president of Ukraine but to be the No. 1 oligarch in Ukraine," Portnikov said. "He fought for power ... specifically to consolidate in his hands a huge amount of resources and property to make his family the first family in the country."

The two main opposition parties are likely to gain ground in Sunday's parliamentary election. But with the pro-Western opposition's charismatic leader in jail and a lack of unity among government critics, the president's Party of Regions is expected to retain its majority in Parliament.

Yanukovych, who returned to power in 2010 after a period out of office, maintains a strong core of support, especially in the Russian-leaning east and south of the country, claiming credit for bringing stability after years of paralyzing political infighting and economic free-fall.

But his record of democracy and reform is poor.

TV channels, the main source of information for Ukrainians, are controlled by tycoons loyal to the government, and they give little airtime to the opposition. Investors complain of being stripped of their companies through unfair legal action brought by government-friendly businessmen.

And Ukrainians are angry over perks and unfair treatment for VIPs. Officials and their friends routinely run red lights or avoid traffic by driving the wrong way. In one case that sparked national protests, two of three suspects in the brutal gang-rape and murder of a teenage girl were initially released because of their connections to local officials, activists say.

Yanukovych's home is in Mezhygirya Park, 140 hectares of forested hills along the Dnepr River, some 25 kilometers north of Kiev. Founded decades ago on the ashes of an Orthodox Christian monastery, the park included a government residence for top Communist Party bosses like Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, and it is off-limits to the public.

Through a series of controversial government acts, Yanukovych privatized a modest house on a 1.8-hectare plot of land inside the park. After that, two firms were allowed to lease the park from the government for 49 years.

They demolished most of the Soviet-era buildings, including the government residence, and began construction of new houses and sports clubs.

Yanukovych has refused to say who is behind the two firms, but his critics have no doubts.

Mezhygirya is "a symbol of the president's inappropriate desire for luxury, the unknown source of his wealth and the desire to hide it all behind dummy firms," said Serhiy Leshchenko, a journalist for the Ukrainska Pravda news site, whose investigation has linked the two firms to Yanukovych and his family.

Seeking to counter criticism, Yanukovych invited six trusted journalists to Mezhygirya in the summer of 2011 and gave them a tour of his official house.

He led the men into his bedroom, where an Orthodox Christian icon stood on a bedside table, and then his small office, where he lets his grandchildren play while he works. He also showed them a fireplace in the living room he said he had to abandon because a family of owls had settled inside.

But ownership documents for the two firms uncovered by Leshchenko link them to Yanukovych and his allies and bolster claims that he controls the entire estate.

Aerial photos taken by the weekly magazine Korrespondent show that the property appears to be one entity, complete with a giant mansion, fruit and vegetable greenhouses and an array of sports facilities.

Journalists who have tried to get into the park or even a nearby village have been stopped by government security agents.

Investigative journalist Tetyana Chernovil scaled the 5-meter-high fence with a rope and a wooden plank, spending about three hours inside before getting caught by security guards with barking dogs. She saw the ostriches and photographed the golf club, a large structure made of rare wood and plated with gold, and other buildings before being released after several hours of questioning.

Chernovil, who is running for parliament on the opposition ticket, questions the source of all this luxury, given that Yanukovych's official annual salary is about $115,000 a year. She is infuriated at the lavish spending in a country where some rural schools still have no indoor plumbing.

When "little kids are forced to run to the toilet outside in the winter, how can a president allow himself to build these helicopter pads, which only he needs, which no one else uses?" she asked.

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