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Medvedev's Winter Palace

By Andrei Malgin

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To get an idea of just how free the Russian media is, consider the case of Medvedev's villa near Sochi.

In 2010, when Dmitry Medvedev was president, a scandal erupted over the illegal construction of a swanky residence on the territory of the Utrish nature reserve in the Krasnodar region. Rumors spread that it was "Medvedev's palace."

The presidential administration was quick to deny any ties to the project, issuing a statement to the media saying: "We have no connection to the construction in the Utrish nature reserve. A small private foundation is building something there on a small plot of land."

Why is the media
so quiet about
Medvedev's
winter dacha,

which is officially
listed as
a structure that
was built for the
Olympic Games?

Novaya Gazeta was the only newspaper to investigate the case. It published a front-page story on that construction project and included a document with the signature of the official in the presidential administration who had denied any involvement in the criminal project.

At that point, the public learned the name of the "private foundation" that had shown the temerity to encroach on a nature reserve: DAR.

Not long after, the DAR foundation once again surfaced in connection with Medvedev. He once paid a visit to the ancient Russian town of Plyos, a quaint little settlement of 2,340 residents in the Ivanovo region on the banks of Volga River. Medvedev reportedly fell in love with the place and began vacationing there.

It was about this same time that somebody purchased a protected landmark in town — the Milovka mansion. That was odd because individuals are prohibited by law from buying national monuments like this.

Who had bought the mansion?

It was the same DAR foundation. And who moved into the palace following its restoration? Medvedev and his family.

By that time, Medvedev had already stepped down as president and was enjoying life as prime minister. Surrounded by bodyguards, he and his wife strolled about the picturesque environs of this little town, and from time to time Medvedev would pose for photos with the locals.

Bloggers began investigating the connection between DAR and Medvedev and discovered that the head of the foundation was Ilya Yeliseyev, Medvedev's former classmate from their law school days at Leningrad State University. Years ago, the two 25-year-olds had gone into business together, registering a pair of commercial firms and investing 50 rubles each in the endeavor.

By another strange coincidence, one of the administrative divisions of the DAR foundation had exactly the same address as a charitable foundation established by Medvedev's wife, Svetlana. The two organizations even shared a phone number and several employees.

You would expect that these revelations posted on the Internet would attract the attention of investigative journalists hungry for a story. But nearly everybody pretended that nothing had happened. No government officials raised an eyebrow, and no State Duma deputies demanded an explanation. Everybody maintained strict silence — like a herd of lambs.

As everyone knows, the Winter Olympics will begin in Sochi next week. I received an e-mail from someone claiming to be involved in the construction of what he called "Medvedev's winter dacha" in Krasnaya Polyana, the site of the skiing competitions. The e-mail included

hundreds of photos of luxurious rooms and furnishings. The claim struck me as dubious, especially because "Medvedev's dacha" was located on land owned by Gazprom, and all of the documentation for the building listed it is as a house for receiving official guests.

But I dug deeper into the question and discovered that Gazprom does not own the estate. The DAR foundation owns it. What's more, it is not "official guests" who occasionally visit but Prime Minister Medvedev and his family. In fact, Medvedev's college-age son, Ilya, recently celebrated his birthday there.

Although hundreds of blogs and websites often publish the information from my blogs, few responded in this case. Nobody even took note of the fact that Medvedev's winter dacha is officially listed as a structure erected for the Sochi Olympic Games and that it cost a cool 2 billion rubles ($58 million) to build.

If that isn't newsworthy, what is?

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