The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Daching: How to Get Beaten Up in the Russian Countryside

By Alexey Eremenko

August 10, 2014



Latest round of daching took place by the village of Akulinino outside Moscow, best known for a mansion linked to state monopoly Russian Railways' president, Vladimir Yakunin.

Many extreme sports, from snowboarding to air racing, are known health hazards. But only one can lead to indiscriminate beating, allegations of terrorism, jail and even self-imposed exile — and all you need to do is take a stroll through supposedly public land.

Dozens of Russian officials, from President Vladimir Putin on down the totem pole, are accused of possessing posh "dachas" — countryside mansions that are often built on public land and would be impossible to afford on an official's salary.

The new Russian pastime of "daching" is defined by activists as the touring of the public land that holds such mansions in an attempt to attract attention to the dubious real estate.

Proponents insist that daching is lawful and innocent — but more often than not, they face

harassment by police on questionable pretexts and attacks by thugs, sometimes in plain view of the guardians of order.

"This is public enlightenment," said daching devotee Georgy Alburov. "We're trying to shed light on the lifestyles of the people controlling financial flows in the country."

"They're incredibly irritated," Alburov, a known opposition figure and anti-corruption campaigner, said by telephone Wednesday.

Someone definitely is irritated, judging by the latest round of daching last weekend, which ended in several dozen brief detentions and another 10 or so alleged beatings.

The clash took place by the village of Akulinino outside Moscow, best known for a mansion linked to state monopoly Russian Railways' president, Vladimir Yakunin, an estate that reportedly boasts a fur storage area and a climate-controlled prayer room decorated with a collection of rare Christian icons.

Most activists, including Alburov, were detained when they queued up for train tickets — which, police said, amounted to an unsanctioned rally.

Some 15 drove to Akulinino, only to be attacked at the gates by thugs with brass knuckles and air pistols, Alburov said.

He claimed that police officers stood by during the beatings and then detained the activists, leaving the thugs be.

Local police made no official comment. A very grumpy police spokesman told The Moscow Times by telephone Wednesday that they were looking into the incident.

From St. Pete to the Black Sea

The first round of daching in recent history took place in 2010, when activists from anti-corruption movement The White Ribbon broke down a fence they said had been installed illegally around the dacha cooperative Ozero outside St. Petersburg.

The cooperative was established in the mid-1990s by Putin and seven others whose careers skyrocketed after he came to power in 2000. Its name became a byword for cronyism among the Russian opposition.

The 2010 raid generated little stir and no backlash against the perpetrators.

But things worked out differently when activists with the Environmental Watch on North Caucasus movement tried their hand at daching on the Black Sea coast.

The activists attempted in 2011 to expose mansions allegedly linked to Putin and local Governor Alexander Tkachyov that they said were built on protected land.

This resulted in criminal charges that the activists claimed were a form of retribution for their daching.

One of them, Suren Gazaryan, fled Russia in 2012 after being placed on the national wanted

list, while another, Yevgeny Vitishko, was jailed for three years ahead of the Sochi Olympics in February.

"We wanted to prevent new illegal construction on the Black Sea, and that, at least, worked," Gazaryan told The Moscow Times in a Skype interview.

He said plans for a dacha linked to current Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev were mothballed after their stunt.

Alburov took the baton in May, when he first staged a round of daching by the village of Sosny in the Moscow region.

Whistleblower Alexei Navalny claimed last November that Sosny hosts mansions linked to the Vyacheslav Volodin, a man seen widely as the Kremlin's new propaganda chief, and leading functionaries of the ruling United Russia party, one of whom successfully sued him over the reports.

That time, police stopped the busload of activists to check whether they were terrorists. Alburov's house was later searched by police in a case he claimed was fabricated.

Gazaryan was unimpressed: "It smacks of hopelessness," he said of contemporary daching.

Peaceful = Ineffective?

Russia has taken a gradual dive in corruption ratings since Putin came to power in 2000.

The nation ranked a disappointing 127th of 175 countries in Transparency International's latest Corruption Perceptions Index, released last year.

Among the main problems, anti-corruption campaigners commonly name the government's reluctance to punish officials who own assets beyond what they can officially afford.

Article 20 of the UN Convention Against Corruption provides for the seizure of such assets unless their provenance can be explained. But Russia made a reservation excluding that article when it ratified the treaty in 2006.

Dissent against the corrupt government has been slowly mounting in recent years, especially among the middle class.

But it has mostly been manifesting through peaceful protest and acts of civil disobedience, which have failed to effect much change.

An early example was 2010's campaign to save the Khimki forest outside Moscow from state-endorsed demolition. Protesters were beaten up by what Gazaryan said were likely the same thugs as in Akulinino, and the Kremlin proceeded to green-light the deforestation.

Tens of thousands rallied in protests staged between 2011 and 2012 to challenge Putin's return to the Kremlin in May 2012, but the movement fizzled after the government's sole response was to tighten the political screws, introducing repressive political legislation and allegedly harassing opposition activists.

Whistleblowers produce a steady stream of exposOs of officials possessing castle-like dachas and real estate from Miami to the French Riviera, or illegally controlling business empires. But no high-profile case has ever been investigated or resulted in a firing of a senior pro-Kremlin official.

"Our society is too tolerant of corruption, land grabs and things like that," said Gazaryan. "Everyone knows it's wrong, but most people don't do anything about it."

Gazaryan, who received asylum in the EU and found a job with a UN conservancy in Germany, said at this point he's not sure he wants to return to Russia.

"There's nowhere to apply myself in the present political climate," he said.

But elsewhere, enthusiasm perseveres: Alburov said another round of daching was already being planned for late August.

"Next time, we'll come in the hundreds," he promised.

See also:

Anti-Corruption Activists Detained Over Opulent-Dacha Protest in Moscow Region

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Original url:
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