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'Putin's Italian Architect' Granted Russian Citizenship

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Exterior of Putin's Palace by Lanfranco Cirillo under construction in 2011

President Vladimir Putin has issued a presidential order granting Russian citizenship to Italian architect Lanfranco Cirillo, who earlier confirmed he designed a palace on the Black Sea that was allegedly built for Putin.

The order was published Wednesday on the government's official website, and said that the president had accepted Cirillo's application for Russian citizenship.

According to a Reuters investigative report published in May, Cirillo confirmed that he had designed a palatial complex near the city of Novorossiysk on the Black Sea.

A Russian company "assigned me the work," he told Reuters in a brief statement. He identified the Russian company as Stroigazconsulting, which was at the time owned by Russian billionaire Ziyad Al Manasir and was closely involved in building large-scale

pipelines for Gazprom.

Stroigazconsulting denied to Reuters it had done any work on the Black Sea estate, but confirmed it had had a joint company with Cirillo "many years ago."

Sergei Kolesnikov, a Russian businessman from St. Petersburg now living in self-exile in Estonia, published an open letter to then-President Dmitry Medvedev in 2010 urging him to look into the construction of an opulent Black Sea estate built for "the personal use of the prime minister of Russia," referring to Putin. Kolesnikov said the estate had been designed by Cirillo.

Cirillo, according to an investigation by The New Times magazine, has a large architectural practice in Moscow called Masterskaya that employs 120 specialists. The firm designs lavish mansions for members of the Russian elite, the magazine said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has repeatedly denied that Putin has any connection with the Black Sea property.

The estate comprises a 2,000-square-meter palace, sports center, tea house, three helipads, a three-story wine cellar and a 90-meter elevator down to the marina and tunnel to the sea, and cost more than $1 billion, according to Kolesnikov.

Kolesnikov said that his former associates Nikolai Shamalov and Dmitry Gorelov were involved in the project. The two businessman owned stakes in Bank Rossiya, which was recently sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury as "the personal bank for senior officials in Russian Federation," whose stakeholders include "members of Putin's inner circle."

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