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Russian businessman accuses Putin

On 29 December, the influential newspaper *Vedomosti* reported corruption allegations brought against Prime Minister Vladimir Putin by Sergei Kolesnikov, a businessman who had business links to Putin's inner circle from the early 1990s. This is the latest in a series of reports in recent months on corrupt practices by Putin's team.

Kolesnikov has published an open letter online addressed to President Medvedev, in which he presents the corrupt practices of the ruling elite and Vladimir Putin himself. He describes a scheme, allegedly developed personnally by Putin, whereby 35% of the value of large contracts carried out by a company set up by Putin's friends and funded by Russian business was transferred to an overseas account. The money was intended to finance the construction of a private mansion for Putin near the Black Sea resort of Gelendzhik, upon which US$1 billion has already supposedly been spent.

This is not the first publication concerning Putin's alleged private property; in 2007, the Russian political analyst Stanislav Belkovsky estimated the Prime Minister's current assets at US$40 billion. This time, though, the source of information is a businessman who has had dealings with Putin and his team for 20 years; Kolesnikov was a business partner of Nikolai Shamalov, a close associate of Putin's. The information Kolesnikov has released is regarded by many journalists and commentators as reliable (it was published by the *Washington Post*, among others). One of Kolesnikov's motives could be his recent business conflicts, including with Shamalov. His information hits hardest at Prime Minister Putin; at the same time, it may also prove damaging to President Medvedev who, despite his earlier declarations of 'war' against corruption, has not reacted to the allegations contained in the letter. <JR>