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Putin's Ambitious 'Wine City'

Russian President Oversees Construction of World's Most Expensive Wine Complex

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Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, has long been known for his meticulous attention to his personal interests, even amidst the ongoing war in Ukraine. Despite the international focus on the conflict, Putin has not shied away from channeling resources towards an ambitious and extravagant project in the wine industry. Reports from the Russian publication Agentstvo reveal that Putin is overseeing the construction of one of the world's most expensive wine complexes in Gelendzhik, a resort town on the Black Sea coast.

The project, dubbed "Wine City," is a sprawling development that is poised to become a significant landmark in Russia's wine industry. The complex will feature the country's largest wine shop, an interactive wine museum, tasting rooms, a school for sommeliers and oenologists, an exhibition center, and even a boardwalk with a private beach. This endeavor highlights Putin's growing interest in the wine sector, reflecting his broader ambitions beyond the political and military spheres.

Gelendzhik is no stranger to opulent developments associated with Putin. The town is already home to the infamous "Putin's Palace," a $1.4 billion estate that has attracted considerable media attention over the years. The palace complex is a symbol of the immense wealth and power concentrated around the Russian leader. It includes a 17,700-square-meter mansion, a helipad, an ice palace, a church, an amphitheater, and a tunnel equipped with a private tasting room. The estate's grandeur is underscored by its no-fly zone status, which is hardly surprising given its proximity to the Ukrainian border, a mere 300 kilometers away.

In conjunction with the Wine City, two additional wineries are being constructed near the palace. These projects are equally extravagant, designed with the assistance of Italian and French consultants, and carry an estimated value of $176 million. The opulence of these ventures is staggering; according to The Insider, a Russian publication operating abroad, the sum spent on these two wineries could have financed the construction of 42 state-of-the-art, world-class wineries. The contrast is stark, especially when compared to a nearby winery owned by Roman Abramovich, a close ally of Putin, which is valued at a relatively modest $4 million.

The lavish spending on these wineries, especially the absurdity of $700 toilet brushes reportedly found in the French-style winery, reveals a broader narrative of excess that has come to define Putin's inner circle. The Insider has pointed out that the annual financial losses of the companies managing these wineries are on par with the entire budget of Gelendzhik, a city with 80,000 residents.

The construction of Wine City is being spearheaded by Velesstroy, a company with deep connections to the Russian elite. Velesstroy's primary owner, Croatian businessman Krešimir Filipovic, has been referred to as "Putin's wallet" in some Russian

media outlets. The company has previously been implicated in money-laundering activities linked to the Russian state-owned pipeline company Transneft, according to the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). Another contractor involved, Politekhstroy-Svargo, is one of Russia's top construction firms, frequently engaged in government projects, including the ongoing development in Mariupol, a city Russia seized from Ukraine in 2022.

Despite the transparency surrounding many aspects of the Wine City project, the true ownership of this extravagant undertaking remains shrouded in secrecy. Official documents have yet to reveal who exactly is behind the project, though speculation is rife.

Putin's affinity for wine is well-documented. In 2013, a Greek Orthodox monastery on a women-prohibited island crafted a special wine blend exclusively for him. After two years of sending samples to Russia, the final blend was agreed upon: a potent 70% Cabernet Sauvignon and 30% Limnio, a native Greek variety. Putin's preference for robust, tannic red wines is well-known among those familiar with his tastes.

Further evidence of his wine passion is found in Moldova. According to Forbes, in 2020, it was revealed that Putin possesses a gold-plated golf cart in a vast underground wine cellar in Cricova, a facility built during Stalin's era. This cellar, inaugurated in 1952, remains a popular destination for global leaders. Putin's personal collection of wines has been stored there since 2002. However, given the current geopolitical situation, it remains uncertain when or if he will have the opportunity to enjoy this collection again.

The development of Wine City in Gelendzhik is a testament to Putin's enduring legacy of grandeur and control, extending even into the realms of wine. Amidst the backdrop of war and international sanctions, this project stands as a monument to the fusion of power, wealth, and personal indulgence that characterizes Putin's reign. The narrative of Wine City, with its extravagant ambitions and concealed ownership, encapsulates the complex web of privilege and secrecy that surrounds the Russian President and his inner circle.