

Volgograd Deputies Defend Easter Weekend Italy Trip

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Volgograd region Governor Sergei Bozhenov

Members of the Volgograd regional assembly have insisted that their 46-person trip to Italy over the weekend on a chartered jet was a business trip, following accusations that they went to celebrate the birthdays of the region's governor and the head of the local legislature, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* reported.

Anti-corruption blogger and opposition leader Alexei Navalny highlighted the story on his LiveJournal blog Friday, attacking the alleged opulence of governor Sergei Bozhenov.

"This is how the servant of the people, Bozhenov, decided to relax after successful fabrications in the presidential elections," he wrote. "It's beautiful to celebrate your birthday. In Italy. In the company of 46 people. Deputies of the regional assembly and the regional government. With their families. Of course, they didn't fly like hicks but beautifully: in a chartered Bombardier CRJ 200 plane."

A spokesperson for the regional assembly said the trip was important for the region's economic development, Komsomolskaya Pravda reported Sunday.

"It is a short business trip. The main goal of the visit is to show the economic potential of the Volgograd region," the spokesperson said. "Our delegation will meet with directors of powerful companies and businesses, in order to share work experience in different spheres."

But Navalny noted that the trip's timing, over Easter weekend in Western Europe, would make such meetings difficult to arrange.

"The time of this official visit was chosen curiously: it is Easter in Europe and even Monday in Italy is a holiday," he wrote.

Regional deputy Irina Gusyeva said she hoped to obtain investment in a number of Russian projects during the trip.

"I came here as a Transvolga deputy with several irrigation projects. You know, we have a lot of problems with this. I hope the Italians will be interested in them and will join as investors," she told Komsomolskaya Pravda.

Navalny questioned how the trip was funded — with taxpayer money or by the participants. Gusyeva insisted that attendees had all paid for the trip "with their own means," RBK reported.

Local Communist Party deputy Nikolai Parshin said Friday that he and other Communist assembly members were offered a chance to attend the trip but they refused. He said he believed the cost was 70,000 rubles (\$2,350) per person, RIA-Novosti reported.

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