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Diplomatic Vehicles Vacate Russia's Long Island Estate

By JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN DEC. 30, 2016



A car with diplomatic license plates left through the front gate of a Russian diplomatic compound on Friday in Upper Brookville, N.Y. Saul Martinez for The New York Times

UPPER BROOKVILLE, N.Y. — Seven miles from here, an old-world mansion known as the Killenworth estate became, briefly, a center of international intrigue on Thursday as reporters began descending on the property, long a weekend retreat for Russian diplomats. President Obama had just announced that he would be closing a “Russian compound” in New York that had been used for intelligence gathering — and several administration officials pointed to Killenworth, which is in Glen Cove, as the target in New York.

But by late Friday morning, it had become clear that the Obama administration had set its retaliatory sights not on Killenworth but on property here in Upper Brookville, home of the less conspicuous of the mansions that the Russian government is known to own on Long Island's exclusive North Shore.

The confusion over which Long Island estate was to be closed had its roots in internal White House meetings in recent days in which senior officials erroneously referred to the targeted retreat as "the Glen Cove location." Early Friday morning, the White House officials continued to insist that the mansion in Glen Cove was the one being closed. They eventually acknowledged their mistake after the mayor of Upper Brookville said it was the estate in his village that was in fact being emptied.

By 11 a.m. Friday, the confusion appeared to have been settled, with just an hour to go before the deadline the federal government had set for the properties to be closed. A few vans and cars, all with diplomatic license plates, began rolling down the driveway of the property in this village, where a mansion, not easily seen from the main road, sits on a 14-acre spread of wooded hills.

The vehicles' occupants, who appeared to be mostly middle-aged men and women, would not lower their windows to speak to the reporters who had gathered along the road. But a few of them waved as they departed.

The caravan was one of the first public signs of Mr. Obama's response to his administration's allegations of Russian hacking and meddling in the presidential election.

But around here, no one seemed to know precisely who was inside the vehicles, least of all the neighbors who were only dimly aware that the estate belonged to Russian diplomats.

And it was not entirely clear what, if any effect — symbolic or practical — closing the Long Island estate would have. This was, after all, not even the primary weekend home of Russian diplomats in New York, but the secondary one.

Not long after the midday deadline, most of the federal agents who had been stationed at the estate drove to a nearby sandwich shop, mission apparently accomplished. The local police officer left behind to guard the driveway said that as far as he knew, the only regular residents of the estate were the groundskeepers. A neighbor across the street said that in an entire year, he had not seen a single car coming or going up that driveway, until Friday.

The estate was purchased by the Soviet diplomatic mission to the United Nations as a weekend retreat in 1952. Known as the Norwich House, the residence had once been the home to Nathan L. Miller, governor of New York from 1921-1922.

In a statement, Mr. Obama said the Russian estate in New York that had been targeted for closure, along with a second one in Maryland, had been "used by Russian personnel for intelligence-related purposes," but he did not elaborate.

Still, one does not have to look beyond Google for evidence that the location has been used by the Russian foreign intelligence agency, known as the S.V.R. A book about a Soviet defector, “Comrade J: The Untold Secrets of Russia’s Master Spy in America After the End of the Cold War,” says that while the ambassador and his top deputies retreated to the more opulent estate in Glen Cove, the smaller one in Upper Brookville “could be used by others, including the S.V.R. resident, who had a suite with a private balcony.”

The mayor of Upper Brookville, Elliot S. Conway, said he was not quite sure who lived there, but they were, he said, “model citizens in the village, as far as we know.”

Only a few neighbors had so much as seen anyone on the estate in recent years. One, Penny Hallman, 68, said that in recent days, a large Russian man whom she knew only by his title — “senior counselor” — came by her home to drop off a holiday gift: vodka and candy, she said. Ms. Hallman, who was a toddler when her family moved next door, said she hoped that President-elect Donald J. Trump would invite them to return when he took office.

“I hope they come back,” Ms. Hallman said. “It’s been a pleasure to have them here.”

Arielle Dollinger contributed reporting from Upper Brookville, N.Y., and Michael S. Schmidt from Honolulu.

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