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HIV Patient Reports Major Police Database Leak

By Alexander Bratersky

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An HIV-positive Muscovite whose life turned upside down after his friends learned about his condition from an illegally sold police database has lodged a complaint with authorities, rights activists said Thursday.

The case is the latest illustration of the dismal state of privacy rights in the country, where classified government databases can be freely purchased online or at illegal computer markets.

The Muscovite, whose name was withheld, claimed that the leak about his condition came through a police database of people with criminal records that one of his friends purchased at the Savyolovsky electronics market, said Pavel Chikov of Agora rights group, which has offered the man legal assistance.

The Savyolovsky market, located just outside the Third Transport Ring, was labeled by the

U.S. government in March as one of the worst piracy havens in the world.

The database in question listed 317 HIV-positive Muscovites, Gazeta.ru said, citing Agora.

The rights group posted a YouTube video documenting a purchase. The video, shot with a hidden camera, shows a salesman who says with a Caucasus accent that he can guarantee the authenticity of his databases by the fact that he has never had to refund a customer in nine years.

The Muscovite filed a complaint with the Investigative Committee, which opened a check and will decide within 10 days whether to open a criminal case, Chikov said by telephone.

Privacy infringement carries a punishment of up to four years in prison, but Chikov said "this article of the Criminal Code is rarely used."

Indeed, it remains unclear whether it will be applied in the database case, with city police spokesman Viktor Biryukov saying Thursday that no police database contains information on HIV-positive people.

"Information by the so-called rights defenders has not been confirmed," Biryukov said, according to RIA-Novosti.

He did not comment on whether other official databases are available on the black market — which appears to be the case.

A police database was offered for sale for 17,000 rubles ($600) at one of the city's online stores contacted Thursday by a Moscow Times reporter posing as a customer. The authenticity of the offer could not be verified, with a store representative saying the earliest that the disc with the information could be delivered was next week.

Neither Agora nor the Investigative Committee commented on Biryukov's statement Thursday. A spokesman for the Interior Ministry's anti-cybercrime department said tracking officials who leaked databases is the job of the Federal Security Service, which was unavailable for comment.

Security analyst Andrei Soldatov said stolen databases are in demand, with criminals and honest entrepreneurs looking to conduct background checks on business partners.

"This problem is linked with the general problem of police corruption," Soldatov, co-founder of the Agentura.ru think tank, said by telephone.

Chikov said the situation may become even more urgent if the authorities implement a Kremlin proposal voiced earlier this week to introduce mandatory drug tests for grade schoolers — with the results also stored by the government. "Who can guarantee that it won't be sold on the market?" he said.

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