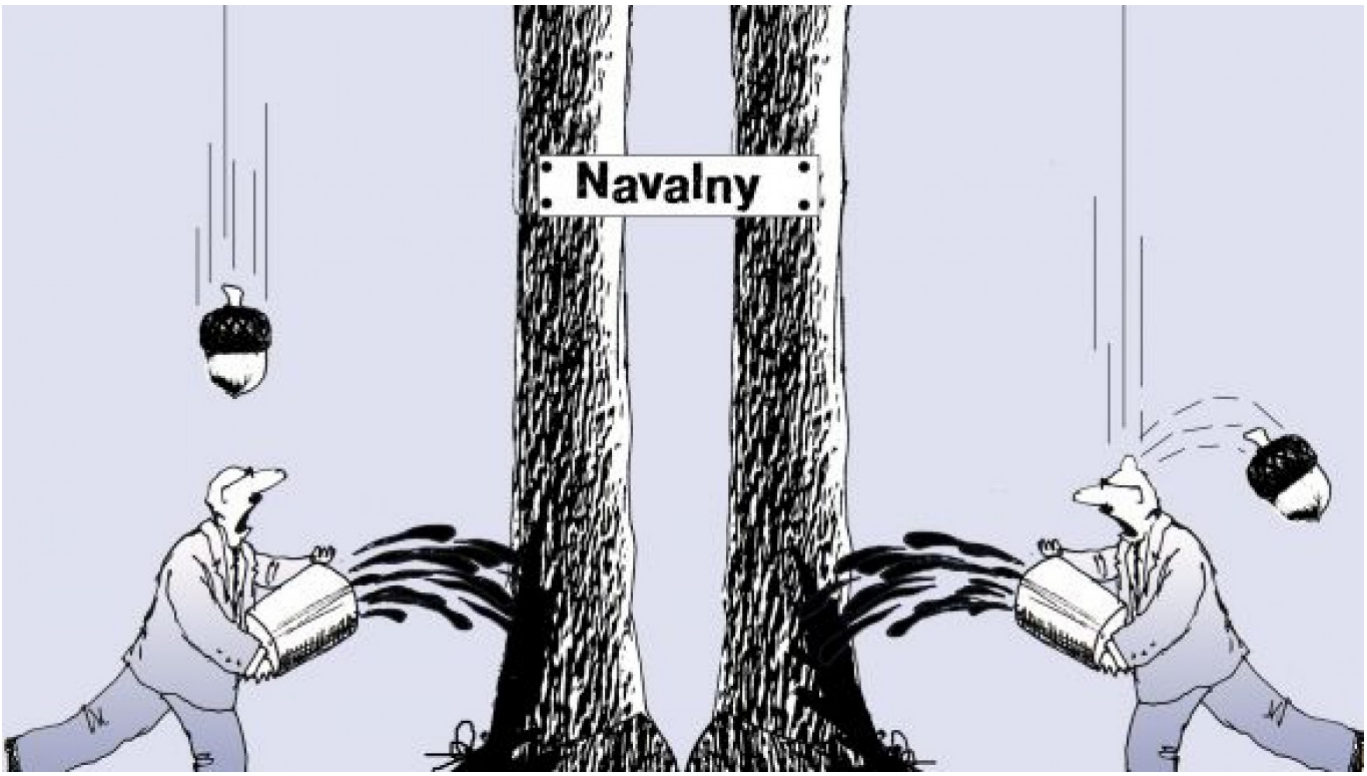
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The NavalnyLeaks Smear Campaign

By Victor Davidoff

November 06, 2011



Alexei Navalny is one of the most popular writers on the Russian Internet. His blog is regularly among the top 10 most-read sites. Last year in a virtual election of the mayor of Moscow, Navalny came in first place, way ahead of the political heavyweights.

Navalny is a lawyer who has an economics degree from the Finance University in Moscow and also was a World Fellow at Yale University. Both his degrees help him in his work, but he doesn't work as a lawyer or an economist.

His real job is making people angry.

First, he enraged the top management at a number of state corporations, including VTB and Transneft, with accusations of lack of transparency. Navalny believes that opaque bookkeeping hides corruption and unacceptable levels of wasteful spending. Navalny fought them in court, using his minority shareholder rights to see documents that could reveal what was really going on in these companies.

His next step was setting up the site called Rospil, which in Russian is slang for kickbacks.

Using open-source information on the state procurement site, Rospil looks for tenders with conditions that point to corruption. For example, Rospil found a request for bids from the Education and Science Ministry for an Internet project worth 12 million rubles (nearly $400,000) to be completed in only 20 days.

After Rospil publicized the tender, it was canceled. That wasn't the only success of the whistleblower site. According to the Rospil site, it has been able to close down highly suspicious tenders worth more than 40 billion rubles ($1.3 billion).

His work has already drawn the ire of people in the top echelons of power. Now Navalny is under fire in a scandal that has already been dubbed "NavalnyLeaks" on the Russian Internet. At the end of October, Navalny's personal electronic mailbox was hacked along with his account on LiveJournal, Facebook and his wife's personal mailbox. All their personal correspondence was posted on an anonymous site registered in Kazakhstan.

Navalny has confirmed that about "90 percent" of the published texts are his. And he doesn't disown the most "compromising" material — his correspondence with foreign officials. Navalny doesn't see what all of the fuss is about.

"My letter to a representative of the U.S. Justice Department was sent several times," Navalny wrote in his LiveJournal blog. "In the letter, I request that they provide documents on the so-called Daimler affair for our investigation here. What's the big deal? I've written that we've been requesting these documents hundreds of times on LiveJournal."

The question is: Who gains by breaking into Navalny's mailbox? The most popular version on the Internet is that the culprits are in one of the organizations affiliated with United Russia, forcing a party representative to categorically deny the rumors.

Others blame the attack on the "Hell Brigade." According to Vladimir Pribylovsky, head of the Panorama think tank who also suffered from a hack-attack, this is a group of Russian hackers spread all over the world who sometimes take on Kremlin contracts. This might explain why more than half of the blogs and sites hacked by the brigade have belonged to members of the opposition. Navalny was just the latest in a long line of hacked oppositional leaders.

So far Navalny's blog hasn't suffered at all from the publication of "compromising materials." In fact, his rating has only increased. Journalist Oleg Kashin explained the seeming paradox in an article on Snob.ru: "The only compromising material that could harm Navalny would be correspondence with someone in the top management of United Russia. ... But there weren't any letters like that, and the rest doesn't matter."

Writer Leonid Kaganov wrote in his blog: "The only thing that would compromise Navalny would be facts showing that what he published about bureaucrats were lies. Instead, for two years an army of state-funded robots has been trying to dig up some kind of personal dirt on Navalny."

This is the typical Kremlin PR modus operandi. For example, the television channel RT (originally Russia Today) had the stated mission of improving Russia's image in the world, but instead most of its programming seems designed to smear the image of Russia's "enemies" along a massive front line that stretches from Georgia to the United States.

Documents published from the archives of the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee revealed the exact same kind of campaigns to blacken the reputations of dissidents during the Soviet era. Everyone knows how well that worked out.

But perhaps not everyone knows. Someone ought to tell the guys fighting against the modern-day dissidents that it's time to consider a truce.

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/11/06/the-navalnyleaks-smear-campaign-a10619