

Leaks Target Nemtsov Before Rally

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Nemtsov making a call before apologizing on Dozhd TV. **Grigory Dukor**

Days before a Moscow opposition protest that is expected to attract tens of thousands of people, a pro-Kremlin tabloid has leaked the private phone conversations of one of the rally's main organizers, Boris Nemtsov, who happened to mince no words in describing other protest leaders.

The Lifenews.ru publication, which went viral, appeared to be an attempt to sow discord ahead of Saturday's rally. But analysts said it was likely to backfire because the blatant invasion of privacy and apparent attempt to manipulate the opposition might only inflame anti-Kremlin sentiment.

Nemtsov vowed to sue Lifenews.ru over the News of the World-style [leaks](#), but it was unclear whether the scandal would bring down the tabloid given that the country's courts are notoriously loath to side with the Kremlin's enemies.

Lifenews.ru — a sensationalist news web site that is part of the media empire of Yury

Kovalchuk, a banker with close ties to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin — released about an hour's worth of snippets of Nemtsov's conversations late Monday and another batch on Tuesday evening.

In the [leaks](#), the 52-year-old politician talks to fellow opposition activists like Ilya Yashin and Sergei Parkhomenko, as well as human rights activist Lev Ponomaryov. He is heard disparaging a wide range of people, including environmental activist Yevgenia Chirikova, Ekho Moskvyy editor-in-chief Alexei Venediktov and socialite Bozhena Rynska. Among the softest of his epithets is "scum," applied to Chirikova.

Although Nemtsov is heard freely criticizing his allies for their policies and personal shortcomings, nothing in his conversations indicates that he is playing any kind of double game against them or is working for the U.S. State Department, as the authorities have repeatedly accused opposition activists of doing.

Nemtsov confirmed the partial authenticity of the recordings on his LiveJournal [blog](#) on Tuesday. But he said that "some are doctored and some are just fake."

He also offered apologies to those he mentioned during the phone calls. "I did wrong. You have to control your emotions and watch every word, even in telephone conversations with friends and your close ones," Nemtsov said.

Some people were still left disgruntled, such as journalist and prisoner rights activist Olga Romanova, who said Nemtsov's career has been "ruined" by the leaks.

But Chirikova [appeared](#) together with Nemtsov on Dozhd television on Tuesday and accepted his apology on air. "This is not the time [to argue], I think," she said.

The conversations were apparently recorded shortly before a Dec. 10 rally on Moscow's Bolotnaya Ploshchad where a record 30,000 to 60,000 people protested alleged violations during the recent State Duma elections.

Nemtsov, Chirikova and many of the other people he mentions or talks to in the recordings were involved with preparing the Dec. 10 rally and its follow-up, to be held Saturday on Prospekt Akademika Sakharova.

More than 31,000 people had signed up for the upcoming rally on Facebook late Tuesday. New comments on the event's Facebook [page](#) indicated that attendees were ready to ignore Nemtsov's foul mouth but not the apparent attempt to pit the rally organizers against each other.

Political analyst and opposition activist Mark Feigin also downplayed the impact of the leaks.

All that the leaks show is "people call each other names during private conversations," Feigin said, speaking by telephone.

"But while the authorities accuse the opposition of receiving money from the U.S. State Department, there is nothing of the kind" in Nemtsov's calls, he said.

Alexei Mukhin, analyst with the Center for Political Information, cautioned that more

incriminating materials against Nemtsov might be leaked. These kinds of leaks "are often made to tease the person who knows about the full context" of the taped conversations, he said.

However, the second portion of the leaks released late Tuesday contained more of the same, with Nemtsov targeting, among others, radical opposition activist Eduard Limonov and noted ultranationalist Dmitry Dyomushkin. But he never went beyond the usual acerbic criticism.

Nemtsov said he would sue Lifenews over the leaks, which he said might be punishable with up to five years in prison. He added that he would file a complaint with the Investigative Committee on Wednesday.

But Lifenews' head, mogul Ashot Gabrelyanov, was unperturbed, telling state-owned RIA-Novosti that he had committed no wrongdoing. "I have answers to give to any questions. I'm cool and ready to take responsibility," Gabrelyanov said. He added, though, that he would not disclose his sources.

No law enforcement agency has commented on the scandal, but security analyst Andrei Soldatov said Gabrelyanov would be hard-pressed to prove his innocence.

"I don't understand what Gabryalyanov is talking about because it is illegal [to release taped conversations] regardless of how they were obtained," said Soldatov, who heads Agentura.ru, a think tank.

Gabrelyanov also told Kommersant FM radio that Lifenews.ru had published the leaks for "purely commercial reasons."

Lifenews.ru, however, previously joined in a pre-elections attack by state media on Golos, the country's only independent electoral watchdog, by publishing the personal e-mails of Golos employees.

The leaks bring to mind the scandal with Rupert Murdoch's News of the World tabloid, which was closed in October after it became known that its journalists had illegally tapped into a dead girl's cell phone.

But analysts said Lifenews.ru is unlikely to repeat that fate because Nemtsov's leaks most likely stem from law enforcement agencies and were authorized by top government officials.

Similar attacks on the opposition in the past also suggest that the people behind the leaks won't face punishment.

In 2010, a set of videos appeared on YouTube showing opposition activists, including Limonov and nationalist Alexander Belov, indulging in incriminating activities such as drug abuse, petty bribery and extramarital sex.

In October, pro-Kremlin hackers released online the personal e-mails of Alexei Navalny, the anti-corruption blogger and a leader of the current grassroots protests.

On Sunday, hackers deleted the LiveJournal blog of novelist Boris Akunin, who addressed the Bolotnaya Ploshchad protesters and is a co-organizer of the Saturday rally.

In all of the cases, no criminal punishment followed.

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