

Kommersant Deletes Report About Putin's Reluctance to Say Navalny's Name

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Kommersant has removed a report from its website in which President Vladimir Putin's press secretary supposedly said the president would not utter Alexei Navalny's name because he did not want his popularity to rub off on the opposition leader.

The comment by Dmitry Peskov was supposedly made at an off-the-record lecture to students of the Kommersant academy, which is run by Kommersant columnist Andrei Kolesnikov, the long-time chronicler of Putin at the prestigious newspaper.

The report containing the comment was published at 8:17 p.m. Monday on Kommersant.ru but was scrubbed from the newspaper's website, although it remained available in a web cache.

"Putin in this country does not have any rivals on a political plane; if he says Navalny's name,

he gives him a part of his popularity," the report quoted Peskov as saying.

Kolesnikov, who was present at the lecture, told Kommersant-FM radio that the quote was inaccurate, although he did not elaborate on what Peskov had actually said. Kolesnikov also implied that the two journalists responsible for it and two other reports based on Peskov's comments had been fired from the website.

"They understood perfectly well that it was a closed meeting, but they did it anyway [published the news reports], moreover with major errors. Those quotes were not authentic," Kolesnikov said.

Putin recently denied that he has a rule against saying Navalny's name.

American journalist Alec Luhn wrote on his Twitter account last month that when he asked the president at a reception at the Valdai forum whether he had a policy against saying Navalny's name, Putin replied "No, why? Alexei Navalny is one of the leaders of the opposition movement."

Peskov himself told Slon.ru on Sept. 12 that Putin does not strategically avoid using the words "Alexei" and "Navalny" in the same breath and that such accusations were "far-fetched."

After Monday's Kommersant report was deleted, Navalny responded in typically sarcastic fashion.

"Now we can expect news about Putin kissing a sturgeon in order to transfer part of his majesty to the tsar of the fishes," he wrote Tuesday on his LiveJournal page.

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