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City Hall Accused of Spying on Opposition Deputies

By Oleg Sukhov

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Maxim Kats, with the microphone, at a council meeting in October 2012. **Andrei Makhonin**

Moscow's City Hall was accused Thursday of collecting compromising material on independent municipal deputies, triggering a scandal that some have called a "municipal Watergate" for supposed similarities to the White House spying on the Democratic Party in 1972.

The incident comes as many opposition deputies from Moscow's 146 municipal district assemblies prepare for a tough fight against pro-Kremlin candidates in the City Duma election set for September 2014.

Moscow is divided into 12 administrative districts, which in turn consist of 146 local districts with executive boards appointed by City Hall and elected municipal assemblies.

Municipal district assemblies did not play any major role in decision making until recently,

when they gained prominence following the March 2012 election. In that election, many independent deputies managed to get assembly seats and challenged pro-Kremlin majorities in what some analysts hailed as the birth of civil society from the bottom up. Opposition municipal deputies came into the limelight recently when they played a key role in anti-corruption crusader Alexei Navalny's mayoral campaign. Some of them gave their signatures to Navalny, which was a requirement for all mayoral candidates, while others campaigned for him.

Thursday's scandal erupted after Yelena Lyamova, chief specialist at the Western Administrative District's organizing department, sent an e-mail to local district boards asking them to collect information about independent municipal deputies for City Hall by Nov. 16, according to a scanned copy posted on LiveJournal by Vladimir Garnachuk, a deputy of the Troparyovo-Nikulino district.

Kommersant reported that Alexander Zakondyrin, a deputy of the Voikovsky district assembly, and Zoya Shargatova of the Dorogomilovo assembly had also confirmed that the e-mail was sent.

Lyamova requested information on deputies' businesses, sources of income, property, family members and connections with opposition politicians and instructed district boards to find "compromising materials" on them, according to the copy on LiveJournal. "Upon receipt, please delete this e-mail," the message read.

Lyamova told Kommersant that she "was not authorized to confirm or deny the information" about the e-mail, while Vyacheslav Shulenin, head of City Hall's department for local authorities — which allegedly sought the information — said he had not issued any instructions to collect such information. He said the e-mail was a provocation.

Garnachuk showed no signs of backing down, however, saying he intended to file a complaint with prosecutors over the matter and that authorities had violated the deputies' right to privacy and abused their power.

"This is Watergate, pure and simple," he wrote on his blog. "In the early 1970s, Nixon paid for this and was impeached. But our authorities will either be silent or say it is not true. A lack of reaction to such outrageous violations of the law is a sign of the system's degradation."

He said City Hall's purported spying activities were part of the same crackdown on "dissent" that allegedly led to the beating of Yelena Tkach, a deputy of the Presnensky district assembly, last month.

"These people's smiles conceal an urge to bite into our throats with their glittering fangs," he said. "I feel sorry for a city run by such people."

Garnachuk also urged City Hall to crack down on those whom he called corrupt "crooks" at district boards instead of persecuting deputies who do not get any taxpayers' money.

The Council of Municipal Deputies, an association of opposition-leaning municipal lawmakers, has also prepared a letter for Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin suggesting that Shulenin be fired and the incident be investigated.

Konstantin Yankauskas, a member of the Zyuzino district assembly, said by phone that the e-mail looked authentic. He said authorities had always secretly kept an eye on independent deputies but now were doing it openly.

"They are trying to hold on to their power at any cost and using even the dirtiest methods," he said.

He also said there was indirect evidence proving that his activities were being monitored.

In one such case, the chairman of the Zyuzino municipal assembly had recently printed out photos of him with a U.S. flag and given them to deputies at an assembly meeting in an apparent effort to question his patriotism, Yankauskas said. The photo was apparently taken from a social network, Yankauskas said.

The information is apparently being collected to damage deputies' reputations ahead of the City Duma election, he said, adding that authorities were unlikely to use it to try to open criminal cases against opposition deputies.

Maxim Kats, a deputy of the Shchyukino district assembly, said in a telephone conversation that he did not have any firsthand knowledge of City Hall's monitoring activities and could not comment on the case.

He added, however, that plainclothes officials had once come to his apartment building and asked his neighbors about him, though he assumed they were Federal Security Service agents.

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