

Suspected Pro-Kremlin 'Hell' Hacker Denies Allegations in German Court

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June 29, 2015



The hacker known as "Hell" shot to fame after leaking information from several e-mail and LiveJournal accounts belonging to public figures in Russia.

Following years of hacking attacks on the online accounts of various Russian opposition figures, a man suspected of being the notorious hacker known as "Hell" — who is believed to have ties to Russian officialdom — is currently standing trial in Germany.

The man in the dock of a Bonn court is Sergei Maximov, 41, a German national of Russian descent.

He is charged with the theft and deletion of data, and faces up to four years in prison, German broadcaster Deutsche Welle reported last Wednesday when the trial began.

On the first day of his trial, Maximov denied he was the hacker, claiming it was all a case of mistaken identity: He had in fact contacted the real "Hell," he said, but his involvement

in the case was the result of a simple coincidence.

According to Maximov, his similarities with the real hacker — his Internet moniker is also "Hell" and he also lives in Germany — led investigators to wrongly believe that he is the hacker.

Kremlin Connection?

The hacker known as "Hell" shot to fame after leaking information from several e-mail and LiveJournal accounts belonging to public figures in Russia at the beginning of the decade.

Among his victims were opposition leader Alexei Navalny, prominent writer and opposition supporter Grigory Chkhartishvili — who writes under the pen name Boris Akunin — and politician and civil rights defender Valeria Novodvorskaya.

Navalny has repeatedly claimed that the hacker was working in cooperation with the Kremlin and Russian law enforcement.

"You might have heard about 'Russia's most notorious hacker.' It's someone known as the 'Hell hacker' — a *murzilka* [person who pretends to be someone else on the Internet] working for the presidential administration, and, in my opinion, hacking those the Kremlin doesn't like with the help of the special services and the Investigative Committee," Navalny wrote on his blog on June 18.

According to Navalny, in the summer of 2012, the hacker known as "Hell" gained access to his e-mail, LiveJournal and Twitter accounts shortly after policemen had searched his apartment and confiscated his computer.

Navalny also claimed that it was e-mails obtained by the hacker that the Investigative Committee later used as the basis for criminal cases against him that the opposition blogger says were fabricated.

Further evidence that "Hell" was connected to the Kremlin, Navalny said, were the numerous interviews the hacker gave to pro-Kremlin media outlets such as the Izvestia newspaper, and his publications on a website associated with the Civic Chamber, a state institution.

Who the Hell?

One of the interviews was given to Konstantin Rykov, an Internet entrepreneur, former State Duma deputy and member of the United Russia ruling party best known as the creator of several pro-Kremlin websites.

In 2011 Rykov became popular on Twitter after his tweets about the opposition movement that included obscene language were retweeted on then-President Dmitry Medvedev's account. The retweet was deleted within minutes, but didn't go unnoticed by bloggers and the media.

In an eight-minute interview with "Hell" posted on YouTube in 2012, Rykov was friendly and agreed with the hacker on several things, such as Navalny being one of the "top five worst people in the world."

Some bloggers speculated that Rykov himself could be the hacker known as "Hell."

Unicorn Defense

Maximov was found and brought to court due to the efforts of Navalny's team and some other bloggers whose accounts were hacked.

"Three years ago we painstakingly (and with much disgust) gathered and structured everything [the hacker ever wrote and posted on the Internet]," Navalny wrote in the same June 18 blog post.

The hacker's blog, according to Navalny, was full of sexually charged and obscene material.

The investigation led Navalny and the other bloggers to believe that the hacker was living in Germany and that his name was Sergei Maximov.

"We sent the materials to German prosecutors. Several months later they launched an investigation," Navalny wrote.

According to the bloggers' investigation, Maximov graduated from the prestigious Russian State Humanities University (RGGU) in Moscow and later moved to Germany with his family. He currently lives alone in Bonn, where he is reportedly unemployed.

Maximov previously worked as an intern for German social services under a program for people who had difficulties in getting a job. He was fired after his supervisor caught him watching porn on his computer, but later got a similar job under the same program, the Meduza.io news website reported.

Mounting Evidence

In 2013, Maximov's home in Bonn was searched. A police officer who took part in the search testified on the first day of the trial last week that it had yielded convincing evidence, Meduza reported Wednesday.

The presence of thousands of e-mails from hacked accounts on his computer, lists of IP addresses, essays signed "Hell" and other clues all pointed to Maximov being the hacker, the police officer told the court.

In conversation with reporters, Maximov offered an explanation for those clues. He claimed to have received the incriminating materials from the real hacker, who he said wanted to help him.

"I wrote to 'Hell' on his blog when the police started asking questions about me, and he sent me some materials so I could properly defend myself," Meduza cited Maximov as saying.

The next court hearing will be held on July 8. Representatives of Navalny, who is a co-plaintiff in this case, are content with what they've heard so far.

"Have you ever seen a fish that had swallowed the bait? He [Maximov] has already swallowed it, but is still trying to get off the hook," Volkhard Schreiber, Navalny's lawyer, was cited as

saying by Meduza.

Navalny himself was due to be present in court, but Russia's Federal Migration Service rejected his application for an international passport. Under Russian law, people who have been convicted of a crime can be refused permission to travel abroad until they have served their sentence.

Navalny is currently serving two suspended sentences for embezzlement charges he says were fabricated by the authorities in revenge for his oppositional activities.

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Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/06/29/suspected-pro-kremlin-hell-hacker-denies-allegations-in-german-court-a47763>