

Pro-Kremlin Media Share Fake Image of U.S. Ambassador at Opposition Rally

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U.S. Ambassador to Russia John Tefft

Several pro-Kremlin media, including the website of the sensationalist TV channel Ren-TV, incorrectly reported Sunday that U.S. Ambassador John Tefft had attended an opposition rally in a Moscow suburb that day and used a photoshopped image of him to illustrate the claim.

“The meeting of the opposition in [the district of] Marino was memorable not only for the small number of people who came to support the opposition, but also for the appearance of the U.S. Ambassador in Russia, John F. Tefft,” said a news report on the Ren-TV website that was later altered but remained available in Google's cache.

The story was illustrated by a photo of Tefft standing in front of reporters and TV cameras, with the opposition rally apparently taking place behind him.

Ren-TV quoted the U.S. ambassador as telling the media at the rally that he had “come to look

at the development of democracy in Russia and evaluate its caliber.”

But bloggers and other media including the RBC news agency were quick to point out that the picture of Tefft attending the rally had been photoshopped — claims confirmed to The Moscow Times by U.S. Embassy spokesman Will Stevens.

“Ambassador Tefft spent Sunday ... at home enjoying a well-deserved day off. These reports of his visit to a meeting in Marino are 100-percent false. They are based on a clearly doctored photo,” he said in written comments.

The original photo that was used as a basis for the doctored one was taken on Feb. 28 near the Kremlin, as Tefft paid his respects to opposition leader Boris Nemtsov at the site of his murder, Stevens said.

Ren-TV later changed its report to say it was “unclear whether they [the photos] are real or rigged,” and removed its earlier claim that Tefft had “tried to melt into the crowd,” though it did not issue a correction and left in the alleged quote from Tefft, while now saying he had “supposedly” said it.

Tefft was appointed U.S. ambassador in Russia in 2014. His previous postings to embassies in Georgia and Ukraine elicited speculation in pro-Kremlin media that he was an expert in so-called color revolutions.

His predecessor in Moscow, Michael McFaul, was attacked by Russian media for meeting with opposition leaders in 2012. Russian opposition figures are often accused of having links to or being sponsored by the U.S.

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