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Kadyrov Controversy Turns Into Opposition Phone Tapping Scandal

By Eva Hartog

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Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov

A controversial statement by Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov branding the Russian opposition "enemies of the people" has evolved into a whirlwind of allegations and misinformation, after an opposition lawmaker who criticized Kadyrov for his words was framed as having apologized to the leader.

Konstantin Senchenko, a Krasnoyarsk deputy, was reported Friday by the Grozny television station to have apologized to Kadyrov for a Facebook statement in which he called the Chechen politician "a disgrace to Russia."

The telephone apology, reportedly featuring Senchenko's voice, was broadcast by Grozny TV and the Kremlin-leaning Lifenews, and was quickly picked up by other media outlets, including the Interfax news agency.

"I apologize to the Chechen leader. In my defense, if it can be defended at all, I want to say that I didn't think it would be picked up and taken seriously," he reportedly said.

"I want to say: [the post] was an emotional impulse, in connection to the the tense situation in the country," he was heard saying.

But Senchenko told the liberal radio station Ekho Moskvy in an interview Friday morning that he had made no such public apology and had spoken to neither Lifenews nor Grozny TV.

Senchenko said he had only had a private conversation with "a very honorable person in our city."

"The conversation lasted a long time, and [we discussed] different topics," he said. "That's why I now find myself in a very double situation. On the one hand, I very much respect this person I spoke to. On the other, the situation that [a recording] is now in the hands of LifeNews ..." he told the radio station, insinuating that he had been set up.

Duma deputy and opposition lawmaker Dmitry Gudkov confirmed Senchenko's denial, saying the politician's telephone had been tapped.

"The fact that a recording of a private phone conversation (without warning) was made public cannot be interpreted in any way as a public apology," he said on his Facebook page. "Talking to each other, to weigh up a situation, that is one thing, and making public statements, something completely different."

Gudkov said the set-up was an indication of Kadyrov's "self-love" and inability to accept any challenge to his authority.

"Something has to be contrived and made public, even a fake, just something — anything to show how he controls the entire country," the post said.

Kadyrov's office earlier this week issued a statement describing opposition activists as "enemies of the people and traitors." It also said the liberal opposition was capitalizing on Russia's economic difficulties in an attempt to undermine the regime.

"They should be put on trial, with maximum severity, for sabotage," the statement said.

Kadyrov's denouncement of the opposition as traitors has drawn harsh criticism from rights activists, including Russian ombudswoman Ella Pamfilova.

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