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Neither Pro-Kremlin Pundits Nor Opposition Safe From Hackers

By Eva Hartog

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It was 2:25 a.m. on Friday when the SMS function on Oleg Kozlovsky's mobile phone was silently disabled. Fifteen minutes later, an unknown device requested access to Kozlovsky's account on Telegram, the messaging service with a claim to airtight security. Telegram sent Kozlovsky's mobile number a verification code by SMS. That would've alerted him to the intrusion. But, of course, the text message never arrived.

Instead, a third party intercepted the code. It was then used to log into Kozlovsky's Telegram account with another device. Elsewhere in the Russian capital, opposition activist Georgy Alburov fell victim to a similar scam.

It would have been the perfect crime had the intruder not left behind two trails. First, Telegram had sent the men another notification message through its own app, which they saw later that morning. And when Kozlovsky and Alburov checked their Telegram accounts, they could see a spook second user was still logged in. "It was like coming home to your apartment only to find the door open and your clothes scattered across the floor," Kozlovsky,

a civic activist, told The Moscow Times.

When the men asked MTS, one of Russia's largest mobile operators, to explain how Telegram's text messages could have disappeared into thin air, employees initially admitted the men's phone settings had been tampered with by its "security department." Since then, in statements to Russian media, the MTS spokesman has denied any "deliberate attempts" of interference. He has blamed external hackers or technical failure.

But Pavel Durov, the Russian founder of Telegram who has been in exile following his own clashes with the Russian authorities over user privacy several years ago, cried foul play. "It looks like Russia's security services have started pressuring mobile operators," he told the liberal Ekho Moskvy radio station. "Such interference is typical for cannibalistic regimes that don't care about their reputation, in Central Asia, sometimes the Middle East," he said. "Now it's happened in Russia."

A political motive looks plausible. Alburov is an active member of opposition politician Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Fund, which regularly pesters Russia's elite with their investigations into corruption. Kozlovsky mostly works with charities and he describes his work as "civic, not political." But he has also organized several trips for journalists and activists to Ukraine to mend ties between the two countries. Now, he thinks that might have drawn unwanted attention.

The past week's events have united Alburov and Kozlovsky in a crusade to find those responsible for the security breaches. They've threatened to sue MTS and have launched a social media campaign calling upon Russians to switch operators.

Local Moscow deputy Maxim Katz has responded to that call. In 2014, while he was participating in local elections, two years' worth of his private text messages were leaked to the press. At that time, MTS also blamed hackers and investigators never followed up on his complaint, he said. "There are too many coincidences, it's becoming a pattern," he says. "Probably all Russian operators are somehow controlled [by the authorities] but at least my new operator doesn't have such precedents yet."

MTS had not responded to a request for comment from The Moscow Times at the time of publication.

Turning the Tables

While spooks were reportedly digging through the private correspondence of opposition-minded activists, Anonymous International, also known as Shaltai-Boltai, was waging its own war. In a blog post on April 29, the group claimed to have broken into the Whatsapp messaging account of propagandist Dmitry Kiselyov. All 11 gigabytes of private correspondence — including data from two email accounts, one of which reportedly belongs to Kiselyov's wife — will be sold at a Bitcoin auction in mid-May, with bids starting at the virtual currency's equivalent of about $33,000, the group said.

The hackers did not explain why they targeted Kiselyov and they did not respond to a request for comment. But Kiselyov is a central figure in Russia's state-dominated media landscape and the group is clearly aiming to embarrass him. Previews of the leaked correspondence

allegedly show Kiselyov employed a legal team to contest the inclusion of his name on a blacklist of figures close to Putin in response to Russia's role in the Ukraine conflict. Such actions contradict Kiselyov's rabidly anti-Western public persona. He famously once said Russia could reduce the United States to "radioactive ash."

Other leaks show that Kiselyov reportedly bought a $4.6-million home in central Moscow in 2014. Navalny has confirmed the purchase in a blog post, citing previously publicly available records, but added he did not know whether the other claims were real. Meanwhile, Shaltai-Boltai's website has been blocked in Russia.

Ring, Ring

The use of technology as an instrument in the political standoff between pro-Kremlin forces and opposition activists has become widespread, says prominent media and security analyst Andrei Soldatov. But that doesn't make the fight a fair one.

In Russia, where the abuse of power by the authorities largely goes unpunished, there are simpler ways to people's private data than through complicated technology hacks. Under the law on System for Operative Investigative Activities, or SORM, authorities can freely access Russians' phone and online communication.

And when that law fails, or is seen as too time-consuming, there's always the tried and tested method of applying personal pressure on company employees to cast aside their clients' privacy.

"One phone call [from the FSB] is all it takes," says Soldatov. "Nothing more."

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