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Russian TV Passes Off Corrupt Petersburg Entrepreneur as 'American Journalist'

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Gregory Vinnikov **Gregory Vinnikov / Vkontakte**

Russian talk shows are notorious for relying on a small group of foreign journalists who appear on the airwaves over and over, ostensibly as representatives of the outside world. These token non-Russians are whipping boys for the patriotic media, and often serve as literal punching bags for fellow guests. One of the most frequent foreigners on these programs is even a former editor at The Moscow Times: Michael Bohm.

But if you think this kind of television is absurd, you'd better buckle your seatbelt, because it turns out that Russian talk shows are now inventing their own foreign journalists.

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Meet "Greg Vainer," an "American journalist" who's appeared on the Russian national TV

networks Channel One, NTV, and Channel Five, as well as several local stations in St. Petersburg. Mr. Vainer speaks Russian without an accent, and it's never revealed where exactly he works as a journalist.

That's because Greg Vainer is actually Gregory Vinnikov, a St. Petersburg entrepreneur who reportedly scammed Russian-Americans out of millions of dollars, when he operated "Eastern Tours Consolidated," a travel agency in Brooklyn and Manhattan. In September 2012, Vinnikov allegedly absconded with his clients' money and relocated to Russia, where he's lived ever since.

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On Tuesday, Russian-American journalist and poet Gennady Katsov outed Vinnikov on Facebook, writing that fellow reporter Alexander Grant recently recognized Vinnikov on television. Grant even wrote about Vinnikov in 2012, after the businessman returned to Russia with so much of his customers' money.

In 2003, Vinnikov briefly worked at RTN, a small Russian-language media outlet based in New York. This, as well as a short radio stint the year before, appears to be why Vinnikov now refers to himself as an "American journalist," though it's still unclear what reason he has for identifying himself as "Greg Vainer" on Russian television.

On Wednesday, hours after Katsov revealed Greg Vainer's true identity, Gregory Vinnikov's Facebook page suddenly disappeared.

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