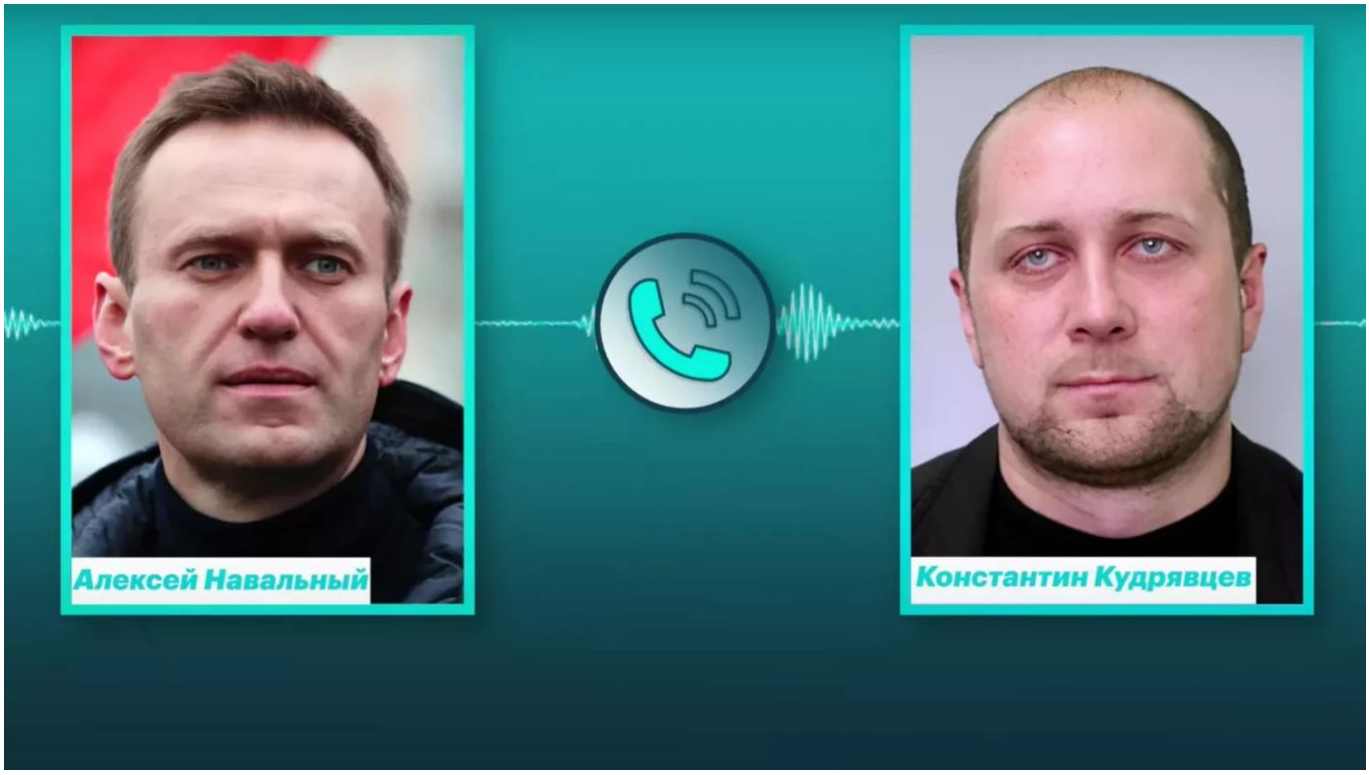
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The Spy Who Took Out the Dirty Laundry

A prank call reveals the ugly new face of international espionage.

By Anna Arutunyan

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Navalny LIVE / Youtube

It is truly a shame that in addition to the apocalypse flick that 2020 has become, we've also lost John Le Carré, the chronicler of the kind of spy we want to believe in: intelligent, competent, brooding.

Just think of those wan faces, and terse, unrevealing words. The gray, romantic backdrops of Budapest or Prague and the unbearable weightiness of knowing too much. The awareness of danger and moral compromise lurking just around the corner.

Because now that Le Carré isn't around anymore to provide us with a more aesthetically pleasing kind more spy, we have the real one. Konstantin Borisovich Kudryavtsev.

Who, after specifically asking an incognito Alexey Navalny on at least two occasions whether it was okay to discuss the top-secret details of an assassination attempt over an unsecured

line, described how exactly military-grade poison was rubbed on the crotch area of Navalny's underwear and how he, Kudryavtsev, cleaned the trousers afterwards.

"There is no problem," he asked again at the end, "that we are discussing it over an unsecured line, you are sure of it?"

But before we join others reveling in the spectacular incompetence of the FSB that this prank call gone so right reveals, consider that Kudryavtsev, an FSB officer, understands something that the rest of us observers often forget.

"You see," he said, "unforeseen circumstances are the worst factor in our profession."

Related article: How Navalny's Mock FSB Call Laid Bare a Country of Yes Men

Just think: not only is it 7 in the morning, but you're battling COVID, probably febrile and barely coherent. Suddenly your phone lights up with the number of the FSB, your bosses.

Except it's not your boss, but rather an aide to one of your boss's bosses, who needs your report yesterday, because the chief of the Security Council, Nikolai Platonovich Patrushev, cannot be kept waiting. What do you do? You double check it's okay to talk over an unsecure line and then you spill the beans.

Does that reveal glaring incompetence? Of course it does, and as bad as a lot of us have it this year, I'd wager that Kudryavtsev has it a lot worse as a result.

Does it suggest that both in their operations abroad and domestically Russia's security services have stopped caring about getting exposed? Probably.

But I think that one of the scariest aspects of this story is just how *human* all these people are.

And if in the past security services had the luxury of shrouding themselves in the mystique of secrecy and power, the speed at which citizen journalists can access information has rendered that all but meaningless.

Even with Le Carré's characters, we often forget how conflicted, flawed, and human they actually were when he offered us a peek behind that shroud. We fell for the gloss, when it was the humanness that made his work meaningful.

These days, it's not only that private, independent and much better motivated investigators can do the work of intelligence agents faster and better. It's that they are also puncturing that illusory competence, omniscience and omnipotence that we ascribe to the people who are supposed to govern us and keep us safe, but instead are chasing opposition activists and poisoning their underwear.

Related article: Navalny Call With Suspected Agent a 'Provocation': FSB

Nowhere is the power of this myth — and its flimsiness — more apparent than in the man at the apex of the mess of human ambitions and foibles that is the Russian security state:

Vladimir Putin.

Notice the way he answered a question about Bellingcat's exposés during his press conference: he rambled and deflected up until the point where he started telling the truth, as he saw it. And the truth, as he believed it, was that since the CIA was following Russia's security services, then of course the FSB was going follow Navalny.

What Putin was saying was not a denial but an excuse. The excuse of a frustrated leader who knows people are screwing up, and that he has to cover for it and does it by grasping at that other myth he has convinced himself of — the all-powerful CIA.

Will this be some kind of turning point? It's a huge embarrassment, but it's not likely to radically transform how the FSB operates, and it's not even clear that heads will roll.

After all, the Kremlin has become adept at implausible deniability — they will continue to deny, of course, but it no longer seems relevant whether their versions are believable. In some ways, the Russian government is quite good at working with unforeseen circumstances precisely because it knows just how powerful they can be. Instead of trying to eradicate them, the Kremlin has embraced them.

For the last five years, it has increasingly come to rely on initiative from below, outsourcing to freelancers, and having some of its agents make up for in ambition what they lack in training.

The system has an advantage in that it is highly flexible and utterly deniable. But there's a downside: operations run by poorly-trained, poorly coordinated adventurers are tough to control, and much harder to account for.

And that, perhaps, will be the most baffling legacy of this most spectacular snafu: who, exactly, is in charge, and most of all, how can they be held accountable?

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