

Campaign Mudslinging Taken to New Lows

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If politics is a dirty business, then Russia is no exception.

But the spread of the Internet and smartphones, a close relationship between certain media outlets and politics, and the deepening political crisis resulting from mass anti-government protests are producing unprecedented heaps of mud in the ongoing presidential campaign.

Methods include leaked audio and video recordings of private conversations, a tested practice to discredit politicians.

Leaked e-mail is also proving to be a popular tool. Lastly, camera crews have started appearing outside embassies just when opposition leaders meet with Western diplomats.

Prominent victims are Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Ryzhkov of the unregistered Party of People's Freedom, who co-organized the recent mass anti-government protests.

In December, Nemtsov was forced to apologize to ecology activist Yevgenia Chirikova, after the Kremlin-friendly Lifeneews.ru tabloid portal published telephone conversations in which he called her a bitch.

One month later, a video surfaced on YouTube showing Ryzhkov talking to State Duma deputy Gennady Gudkov in a restaurant.

The conversation is barely audible, but state-run Channel One TV [said](#) both were plotting to take over Gudkov's A Just Russia party, which has gradually moved from being Kremlin-friendly to an openly critical stance.

Party leader and presidential candidate Sergei Mironov told the station that he had summoned Gudkov for "disloyalty."

Things got uglier last week when a YouTube video appeared showing Ryzhkov having sex with a prostitute.

No one has claimed responsibility for the recordings, and Nemtsov said last month that he was suing Lifeneews.ru for slander after the portal ran a report claiming he spent his New Year's vacation in a Dubai hotel with a prostitute.

The announcement came in a furious exchange of blog posts with Lifeneews.ru editor Ashot Gabrelyanov, who justified the [publication](#) by arguing that since Nemtsov regularly demands democracy and transparency, he also had to bear the consequences.

Late last year also saw the leaking of thousands of private e-mails from opposition blogger Alexei Navalny and Lilia Shibanova, the head of the Golos election monitoring group.

Shibanova's e-mails appeared on Lifeneews.ru shortly after her laptop was confiscated by customs agents at Sheremetyevo Airport.

But in a sign that some opposition activists have no qualms about using their opponents' methods, a [recording](#) went online last month in which Lifeneews publisher Aram Gabrelyanov, the editor's father, holds a -minute rant overflowing with foul language.

Last week, hackers published private e-mails suggesting embarrassingly lavish spending by Federal Agency for Youth Affairs chief Vasily Yakemenko, widely despised by the opposition for founding Kremlin-friendly youth movements.

Another peculiar strategy in this bitter campaign has been to discredit opposition members as being in cahoots with foreign governments allegedly interested in overthrowing the government.

When human rights activists and opposition representatives arrived at the U.S. Embassy for talks with Deputy Secretary of State William Burns and new U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul on Jan. 17, they were met by a film crew that asked them why they had come.

The crew's footage later appeared [online](#) and on state television, portraying the attendees as being directed from abroad. "Getting instructions in the U.S. Embassy" runs the [video's headline](#) on YouTube, where it has garnered more than 950,000 views.

The production triggered a heated debate in the State Duma, where pro-Kremlin lawmakers accused Just Russia deputies, who had attended the embassy talks, of treason.

"Why do Duma deputies meet the American ambassador behind closed doors? What are you hiding from Russian voters?" Andrei Isayev, a senior United Russia deputy, asked in the Jan. 27 debate, according to a [report](#) on the party's website.

Isayev's party colleague Alexander Khinshtein even sent a formal request to the Federal Security Service to check if any of the opposition members had [links](#) to foreign intelligence.

United Russia's activism was topped by flamboyant nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky, who demanded that lawmakers be stripped of their seats for visiting the embassy of a country "that is preparing a war against" Russia.

Zhirinovsky, a presidential candidate, argued that by dispatching a new ambassador to Moscow, Washington created "a smell" of Ukraine's pro-democracy Orange Revolution, according to a [report](#) on his Liberal Democratic Party's website.

McFaul, a distinguished Russia expert, has strongly denied accusations by state media that he is part of a subversion strategy. His accusers base their charges on the fact that he studied democratic revolutions during his academic career.

The anti-American spin was introduced by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin himself, who in December accused the State Department and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of financing nongovernmental organizations that were aiding the protesters.

Putin is running for president in the March 4 election, and few doubt that he will win a third term in office because opinion polls show his four rivals trailing far behind him.

He has also suggested restricting or banning foreign financing of NGOs, raising fears of a renewed crackdown on them.

The main victim so far has been the Golos elections watchdog, which never denied receiving U.S. government grants. Currently, the association faces an order of eviction from its Moscow office.

Last week, Putin's campaign manager, Stanislav Govorukhin, said three prominent Washington-based NGOs were among the biggest threats to Putin's re-election.

"The Henry M. Jackson Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the National Endowment for Democracy are all revived and give grants to any human rights or ecological organization and sponsor all sorts of Navalnys," he [told](#) Izvestia, referring to anti-corruption blogger and protest co-leader Alexei Navalny.

Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov added fuel to the fire last week by saying Moscow has evidence that Washington had a hand in the current protests.

The United States has played an important role by sending money "to provoke the situation," Peskov [told](#) The New York Times, citing information by Russian intelligence services.

Opposition members interviewed for this article said attempts to discredit them by portraying them as traitors are laughable and bound to fail.

State Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov said that while "state propaganda" has been saying for years that Russians are "surrounded by enemies," most citizens no longer fear foreign agents.

"Such arguments will only convince marginal circles of society who see the world in black and white," he told *The Moscow Times*.

He added that it was "telling that the government has to rely on these people, while it has obviously lost interest in convincing those who are more educated."

Yabloko chairman Sergei Mitrokhin argued that smear campaigns had little effect because most Russians have grown accustomed to such non-noble politics.

"We have been used to this happening since the 1990s," he said by telephone.

However, the embassy incidents have affected some foreign contacts. When Helga Schmid, the European Union's deputy secretary general for political affairs, visited Moscow last week, she had trouble setting up talks with opposition activists.

Several of those invited declined, citing fears that such a meeting will be publicized and used against them in the presidential election campaign, which is becoming increasingly heated by mass anti-government rallies.

"They certainly sense that they are extremely scrutinized and that all their contacts are being watched," a European Union source said on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

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