

Prominent Russians Say Duped Into Speaking in Anti-Navalny Video

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Russian opposition leader and anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny arrives at a court hearing in Moscow, Dec. 19, 2014.

Two prominent Russian cultural figures have taken to social networks and airwaves in anger after video footage they recorded in support of opposition activist Alexei Navalny was clipped and edited to promote a website calling for his imprisonment.

Celebrated actress Liya Akhedzhakova and opposition-minded journalist Leonid Parfyonov said Sunday they had been duped by apparent pro-Kremlin activists posing as Navalny allies into recording videos in his support — only to see brief fragments taken out of context to promote a website demanding a prison term for the activist.

According to the full versions of the videos available on YouTube, Akhedzhakova and Parfyonov urged Russians to sign an online petition for the activist, whose verdict hearing on fraud charges was on Monday rescheduled at the last minute for Tuesday morning.

The website where the petition was supposed to appear, Navalny15.com, appeared to have been under construction at the time of the recording, but the numbers in the domain name suggest a reference to a planned Jan. 15 rally in his support.

In the full version of the video, Akhedzhakova appealed to the judge and prosecutors in Navalny's case.

"You are young, you have or will have children," the 76-year-old actress said. "These current times will pass, and then your children will have a horrible problem — this infamy that their mom has put innocent people in jail."

At the end of the video, she held up a sign with the name of the website and urged viewers to visit it and sign a petition in Navalny's support.

That final segment was the only part that appeared online, and the petition on the website in question turned out to say: "A thief should be in jail. Even if his name is Alexei Navalny."

The Russian government has gone to considerable lengths to mitigate the threat of mass protests when the Navalny verdict is heard. Late in the afternoon on Monday, Navalny announced on his blog that prosecutors had moved his hearing up from Jan. 15 to Dec. 30 — the very next day.

Earlier, the government ordered Facebook to block a page set up by Navalny supporters to promote a rally planned for the day of the verdict. Before the page was blocked within Russia on Dec. 21, more than 12,000 people had signed up to attend.

Navalny, who is under house arrest, said through a blog run by his supporters Sunday that the apparent scam to distort Akhedzhakova's and Parfyonov's words was "absolutely disgusting muck and shame."

"Don't they [the authorities] have enough of their own, paid-for 'cultural figures,' who can be signed up to do anything?" Navalny's blog added.

Scores of Russian actors, directors and other celebrities have praised President Vladimir Putin and Russia's annexation of Crimea, but a few — including Akhedzhakova — have spoken out against Kremlin policies.

"I think we have already slid back to the days of the Soviet Union, when I was a small child and did not understand anything," she told the RFE/RL Russian service in a recent interview. Akhedzhakova grew up under the rule of Soviet dictator Josef Stalin.

After the deception came out, Akhedzhakova received another call from the man who had initially asked her to record the video, the actress told radio station Ekho Moskvy. The caller, who identified himself as Alexei Bozhenov, claimed on the phone that he had made the purpose of the video clear during initial conversations and that his aides had supposedly paid Akhedzhakova \$10,000 for her role — allegations she has denied.

Parfyonov, the journalist whose video was similarly edited, said in his blog on the Ekho Moskvy website that he received the request for his testimony from another man, who identified himself as Lev and also posed as a Navalny supporter.

"He said: 'We are collecting signatures in support of Navalny, so that he doesn't go to prison, and we are asking you to make a video clip so that people can come to our site and vote,'" Parfyonov quoted the caller as saying.

After the anti-Navalny site went online, "I was angry at my incorrigible ... naivete, and at that scam — they shook my hand, looked me in the eye, thanked me, I think even wished me a happy New Year," Parfyonov said on his blog.

Bozhenov, the man who Akhedzhakova said had asked her for the video, identified himself as a "political activist" in an interview Sunday with Ekho Moskvyy, and claimed that the two opposition-minded figures had "essentially contacted us, myself specifically, on their own will."

"They were pleased by the financial component of our deal," he added.

Akhedzhakova told Ekho Moskvyy that the incident was "frightening" and undermined her faith in honest-looking young Russians.

The "boys" who helped her record the video were "very good, with good faces," she said.

It remained unclear, however, whether the young men were aware of the scam, or if they had also been duped and acted in good faith, believing that the video would help Navalny's case.

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