



Russian pranksters (L-R) Vladimir "Vovan" Kuznetsov, 30, and Alexei "Lexus" Stolyarov, 28, give an interview to AFP at a bar in Moscow. — AFP

Hi Elton, it's Putin: Duo ruffle feathers with prank calls

Two Russian "pranksters" whose hoax telephone calls have fooled politicians and pop stars laugh uproariously in a Moscow bar as they read the reports about their latest stunt. The pair, 30-year-old Vladimir "Vovan" Kuznetsov and 28-year-old Alexei "Lexus" Stolyarov, regularly pull off high-profile pranks on the famous and powerful-but target mostly Kremlin foes.

Opposition supporters have even suggested they are working on the orders of the Kremlin or the nation's security service, the FSB, but they both deny the claims. In September they convinced Elton John that Russian President Vladimir Putin was on the line-and wanted to meet to discuss gay rights. Delighted, the openly gay British pop star gushed online about the call, only for the Kremlin to deny it ever happened.

Putin then contacted Elton and offered him a genuine meeting, apologizing for the pranksters who he described as "harmless". In their latest headline-grabbing wheeze, they tricked the legal team of Ukrainian military pilot Nadiya Savchenko, who is on trial in Russia over the killings of two Russian journalists in eastern Ukraine. Posing as advisors of Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, they persuaded Savchenko's lawyers to relay a message from the head of state, imploring her to halt her hunger strike, which she did. Savchenko later claimed that "whole departments of Russian special services" were behind the ruse. Kuznetsov mocked her suggestion. "If her lawyer's an idiot, what's the FSB got to do with it?" he said.

Stunts 'in public interest'

Alongside him sat his partner in crime Stolyarov, sporting a Beatles T-shirt and leather jacket. "According to the Internet comments, we became (FSB) colonels or majors long ago," said Kuznetsov, a quietly-spoken man wearing a black overcoat. Yet their detractors have suggested that the pranksters could have only contacted such high-profile individuals with help from Russia's spy agency. Savchenko, who risks a long jail term if convicted, might not seem an obvious target for a light-hearted prank.

But the pair insist that their stunts—which are usually broadcast on state-run national television—are in the public interest. "We consider it benefits our country," said Stolyarov. "We don't have the aim to change anything, but if it works out for the best, we're all for it."

'The essence of politicians'

The pair also claim to have duped Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan pretending to be Poroshenko and his Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk after Ankara shot down a Russian fighter plane on the Turkish border with Syria last year. In a recording aired on Russian television, Erdogan apparently vowed not to apologise to Putin. A source in the Turkish strongman's office denied to RIA Novosti news agency the call was genuine.

"We need to show the essence of such politicians," said Stolyarov. He said that while planning their stings, the pair "definitely always think about what consequences it could have" for the country's image. They even claim to have won plaudits from Russia's powerful Investigative Committee and Natalya Poklonskaya, the chief prosecutor of annexed Crimea. The comedy duo claim that when planning hoaxes, presidents have proved easier to track down than ordinary people.

"They are more simple, they are more trusting," said Stolyarov. "At least you know where to phone first," added Kuznetsov. They say that they personally carry out the calls but have staff to help set them up, trawling Facebook and online journalism resources for contacts.

No good at voices -

Perhaps surprisingly for two men who have attained notoriety for their ability to fool people on the phone, they admit they are no good at impersonations. Instead they rely on their marks not being well enough acquainted with the figures they claim to be.

Their tactics are particularly effective at fooling Russians, they claim. "People are more relaxed about talking about serious matters on the phone. I feel there's more trust in phone calls in Russia," said Stolyarov. Top of the hoaxers' dream hit list are US presidential hopefuls Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump and even leaders of the Islamic State group.

But they are cautious about divulging their immediate plans, saying only that one stunt will centre on the doping scandal currently engulfing Russian athletics. Kuznetsov, who comes from the southern city of Krasnodar, trained as a lawyer before a stint working as a showbiz reporter.—AFP

Street art greats on show in Hong Kong

From Keith Haring and Basquiat to Banksy and Invader, Sotheby's new exhibition of street art legends in Hong Kong, launched yesterday, taps into a growing appetite among young Asian collectors. Although auction houses have taken a knock as the China economy slows, the demand for street art in Asia has grown, with Hong Kong hosting an increasing number of exhibitions, sales and events.

Last year a mosaic of 1970s American cartoon character Hong Kong Phooey by French artist Invader set a world record for that artist at auction, fetching HK\$2 million (\$258,000) at Sotheby's in Hong Kong. The popular piece of street art had been destroyed by the city's authorities, infuriating residents, and was later re-made for sale.

Although that work went to a European collector, Sotheby's Asia director Isaure de Viel Castel says a more adventurous young local market is driving interest in street art in the region. "It's younger collectors (interested in the work)," says Castel. "People here are very adventurous. They've travelled a lot, they live abroad, especially the younger generation. They are craving new art, meeting artists, they absolutely love it."

She added that the economic slowdown in China had so far not affected sales and that there was demand for street art across the region. The new exhibition, entitled "They Would be Kings" is Sotheby's first ever in Asia of street art. It comes ahead of major art show Art Basel, which kicks off in Hong Kong next week, and sees exhibitors and collectors converge on the city.

All the works at the Sotheby's show are available for private sale, but prices fetched will not be disclosed and there are no pre-sale estimates, unlike an auction. Organizers say the exhibition is designed to introduce the works to an audience that may not be familiar with the broad range of street art on the market.

The headline piece is Haring's large-scale abstract take on the classical image of ancient Rome's founders Romulus and Remus suckling a she-wolf. The show is curated by Steve Lazarides, a high-profile London-based art dealer known for his work with British street artist Banksy, whose work "Bomb Middle England" is one of those featured in the new exhibition.

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