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How State-Sponsored Blackmail Works in Russia

The art of *kompromat*, a practice that seems to have migrated across the Atlantic



Chris Wattie / Reuters

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In January 1999, Prosecutor General Yury Skuratov was summoned to the Kremlin by then-President Boris Yeltsin’s chief of staff, who showed him a videotape of “a man who looked like” Skuratov frolicking in bed with two prostitutes. Then he asked Skuratov to resign, even though the prosecutor was in the middle of investigating Yeltsin’s administration for taking bribes from a

Swiss firm trying to secure lucrative contracts for Kremlin renovations. It was a grainy tape and Skuratov would later say it was fake, but he submitted his resignation nonetheless.

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What happened next was one of the most decisive battles in determining who would replace Yeltsin when his second presidential term expired in 2000. Skuratov's resignation had to be confirmed by the Federation Council, the upper chamber of the Russian parliament—back when it had not yet become a Kremlin rubber stamp. The Federation Council balked and asked Skuratov to testify, but the day before he appeared on the floor, RTR TV ran the tape on its evening news, calling the segment “Three in a Bed.” When the Federation Council continued to resist the Kremlin, and Skuratov tried to go back to work as if nothing happened, the tape was played on TV again, this time on the program of the notorious media hit man Sergei Dorenko. Allowing children to see the tape, Dorenko [said](#), would make it harder for parents to raise them patriotically; this was, after all, the prosecutor general of the Russian Federation, “not Mick Jagger, who can run around the beach with a naked behind.”

The tape is [rumored](#) to have been delivered personally to the head of RTR by “a man who looked like the head of the FSB,” who at the time was none other than Vladimir Putin.

Soon afterward, on April 7, 1999, Putin went on TV himself to claim the tape authentic—that the “man who looked like” Skuratov was indeed Skuratov—and called not only for Skuratov's resignation, but for a more robust criminal investigation.

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All this is noteworthy not only because this was one of Putin's key steps toward the presidential throne, but because this dark and convoluted chapter of contemporary Russian history is also, however amazingly, now relevant reading for understanding contemporary American history. Now that *Buzzfeed* has released a dossier compiled by a private intelligence company, with unverified allegations that the FSB has a video of Donald Trump with prostitutes in the Moscow Ritz Carlton in 2013, America has entered uniquely Russian territory. (I should add that I, like many other journalists, was approached over the summer with the story of the prostitutes and could not verify it.)

In any case, welcome to the world of *kompromat*, America.

After years of covering and reporting from Russia, it is beyond bizarre to me that this term has crossed the Atlantic and is now a word Americans should know, but here we are. *Kompromat* is a Russian squishing together of two words: “compromising material,” which Americans refer to as “blackmail.” But *kompromat* is different in that it is often coupled with what is called “black PR”—for example, Dorenko showing the video on his popular television show, artfully stringing it out, and bashing his viewers over the head with questions like, “Is lying something inherent to prosecutors or is it something unusual?” Or using Wikileaks and Kremlin-owned news sites to pound Hillary Clinton using the hacked contents of the DNC servers or John Podesta's emails.

In Skuratov's case, the *kompromat*-black PR combination proved a killer one-two punch, one that helped change the political trajectory of post-Soviet Russia and helped make Putin president in 2000. In April 1999, Skuratov was fired by Yeltsin's presidential fiat, and Skuratov's political patron, Yevgeni Primakov—who had pushed for the Swiss bribery investigation, but was also often and openly referred to by Yeltsin as his successor—was knocked out of the running by Putin and *his* political patrons. It also allowed Putin to show loyalty to the deeply corrupt Yeltsin family, and eventually resulted in the agreement at the foundation of the transfer of power to Putin: don't investigate The Family, as Yeltsin and his daughter and son-in-law were known.

Between then and whatever tape the FSB may or may not have of a man who may or may not look like Donald Trump, Putin and the FSB have perfected the

art of *kompromat*. And they haven't hesitated to use it.

In the spring of 2010, a Kremlin youth group called Nashi was [apparently behind the release](#) of a [greatest hits sex reel](#). In it, various prominent members of the already sidelined, utterly irrelevant Russian opposition were seen cavorting with a prostitute nicknamed Moomoo, who had lured each of them into the same apartment, which was bugged to the hilt. One of them, a prominent (married) journalist, did a few lines of coke with Moomoo before they retired to the bedroom; another, a Russian nationalist, twirls a fedora as he prepares to have his way with Moomoo. Still another, a Russian comedian named Viktor Shenderovich, who had been targeted by Putin in 2002 for his satirical show “Kukly” (“Dolls”) that skewered Putin and earned his ire, is seen timidly expressing his gratitude to Moomoo for finding an old man like him attractive. The video dropped two days before Shenderovich's daughter's wedding.

That tape, while somewhat embarrassing, was largely pointless, however. It seemed to have been the FSB just doing what it does, and helping Nashi flex its political muscle by kicking people who lacked it (but who might still, in the Kremlin's view, start a fearsome “color revolution”). The opposition men took it as a badge of honor. “It's a reason for impeachment in America,” opposition activist Ilya Yashin, also caught with Moomoo, [told me at the time](#). “Here it's ‘big props.’ Even when they see Shenderovich in this tape, they say, ‘Not bad! The guy's already 70 and he's so energetic!’” He added, “What would be political murder is if they published someone with boys,” he said (Russians, as evidenced by the 2013 laws banning “homosexual propaganda,” have somewhat retrograde views on homosexuality.) “And they didn't find any gays among the opposition in two years [of trolling for dirt].”

In the fall of 2016, though, the FSB delivered a more direct hit. As the squabbling Russian opposition was trying to consolidate into a coalition that might give it a chance in the parliamentary election in September—the opposition had but a single seat in the Duma—another videotape dropped. This one was of Mikhail Kasyanov, former prime minister and a controversial member of the opposition, in bed with another activist, trash talking everyone else they worked with. It wasn't long before the coalition descended into

recriminations and gossip, and, predictably, bombed in the parliamentary election. Now they have zero seats.

The FSB also doesn't hesitate to use *kompromat* against foreigners, both in Russia and abroad. Take, for example, the case of the American diplomat Kyle Hatcher. In August 2009, videos purporting to be of Hatcher, who worked in the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, appeared online. It showed him making calls, allegedly to prostitutes, then him in a hotel room, checking for bugs—at one point even staring into one of them, blinking at it without recognition—before beginning a romp with a woman of ill repute. After its release, allegedly by the FSB, the State Department protested vociferously that it was a doctored, unproven tape, but it nevertheless transferred Hatcher quietly to a posting in the Caribbean, and the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, which had wanted to be a beacon of democracy and morality on the dark banks of Putin's Russia, had dulled its light.

And it revealed a key FSB tactic: Those purported shots of Hatcher and the prostitutes had been gathered *before* he began work at the Embassy. The Skuratov tape *seems* to have been made nearly a year before it was shown to him, and months before he launched the corruption investigation that got him in trouble with Yeltsin and Putin. Moreover, according to the investigation conducted by Skuratov's deputy, it seems the prostitutes were gifts, but from whom? In other words, the FSB *kompromat* operation is akin to a trawler, gathering anything and everything in its path, just in case anything good is down there. Or it puts chum in the water, and gathers the baited fish, too. It then stores it away for when the Kremlin needs just a slightly more forceful argument. I have no doubt that most every journalist and diplomat who has worked in Russia has such a file in his or her name, just waiting to be put to good use.

Aside from the substance of the allegations in the document *Buzzfeed* released, it would not be surprising or uncharacteristic for the FSB to have at least tried something similar with a foreign man so rich, so vulnerable, and so shameless. It is in Trump's DNA to go big, and in the FSB's to record any and all proceedings, just in case. And even if there is no tape at all, the episode has brought what is a distinctly Russian term to American shores. They have hacked not just the election, but even the terms of America's political discourse.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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