



Russia

🕒 This article is more than **1 year** old

European MPs targeted by deepfake video calls imitating Russian opposition

Politicians from the UK, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania tricked by fake meetings with opposition figures

Andrew Roth *in Moscow*

Thu 22 Apr 2021 18.02 BST

A series of senior European MPs have been approached in recent days by individuals who appear to be using deepfake filters to imitate Russian opposition figures during video calls.

Those tricked include Rihards Kols, who chairs the foreign affairs committee of Latvia's parliament, as well as MPs from Estonia and Lithuania. Tom Tugendhat, the chair of the UK foreign affairs select committee, has also said he was targeted.

“Putin’s Kremlin is so weak and frightened of the strength of @navalny they’re conducting fake meetings to discredit the Navalny team,” [Tugendhat posted in a tweet](#), referring to the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. “They got through to me today. They won’t broadcast the bits where I call Putin a murderer and thief, so I’ll put it here.”

Kols uploaded a photograph of Leonid Volkov, an ally of Navalny, and a screenshot of his doppelganger taken from the video call. Volkov said the two looked virtually identical. “Looks like my real face - but how did they manage to put it on the Zoom call? Welcome to the deepfake era ...” he wrote.

Par viltus [@leonidvolkov](#) jeb: kā trīs Baltijas valstis satika viltvārdi un kā vēlāk tāpat “uzķērās” [@ltvzinas](#). Mans skaidrojums šeit: <https://t.co/KClylfJEiV>.

Attēlā - īstais un neīstais [@leonidvolkov](#). Cik viegli vai grūti abi atšķirami - to vērtējiet paši. pic.twitter.com/q6IZf5kVYL

– Rihards Kols (@RihardsKols) [April 22, 2021](#)

Deepfakes are named for the “deep learning” that allows artificial intelligence networks to generate, or imitate, faces and to have them mimic human behaviour.

New smartphone apps allow users to map other faces on to their own or to “animate” an image of any face, almost like a puppet. The poor resolution on video calls would explain in part why the prank wasn’t immediately apparent to the targets.

Kols said he had been approached by email by a person claiming to be Volkov and had held a short video-conference call with him, where they discussed support for Russian political prisoners and the Russian annexation of Crimea. Only later did he realise he may have been the victim of a hi-tech prank, he said.

“Quite a painful lesson, but perhaps we can also say thanks to this fake Volkov for this lesson for us and Lithuanian and Estonian colleagues,” he wrote. “It is clear

that the so-called truth decay or post-truth and post-fact era has the potential to seriously threaten the safety and stability of local and international countries, governments and societies.”

Volkov accused a Russian duo named Vovan and Lexus, who regularly target western officials, of being behind the call.

Reached by Facebook, Alexei Stolyarov, who goes by the pseudonym Lexus, did not deny speaking with Kols, saying he would “keep it a secret”. He did deny using a filter to appear like Volkov, writing: “Probably Volkov has false information.”

He sent a link to a tongue-in-cheek denial on Telegram, where an acquaintance claimed he was “with Leonid in Donetsk right now”, posting a photo of Stolyarov in what appeared to be facial makeup.

“We both strongly condemn the latest disgusting attempt by the Kremlin to discredit protest leaders and Putin’s number two enemy in Russia,” the post read.

... as you’re joining us today from Spain, we have a small favour to ask. Tens of millions have placed their trust in the Guardian’s fearless journalism since we started publishing 200 years ago, turning to us in moments of crisis, uncertainty, solidarity and hope. More than 1.5 million supporters, from 180 countries, now power us financially - keeping us open to all, and fiercely independent.

Unlike many others, the Guardian has no shareholders and no billionaire owner. Just the determination and passion to deliver high-impact global reporting, always free from commercial or political influence. Reporting like this is vital for democracy, for fairness and to demand better from the powerful.

And we provide all this for free, for everyone to read. We do this because we believe in information equality. Greater numbers of people can keep track of the global events shaping our world, understand their impact on people and communities, and become inspired to take meaningful action. Millions can benefit from open access to quality, truthful news, regardless of their ability to pay for it.

If there were ever a time to join us, it is now. Every contribution, however big or small, powers our journalism and sustains our future. **Support the Guardian from as little as €1 - it only takes a minute. If you can, please consider supporting us with a regular amount each month. Thank you.**

Single	Monthly	Annual
€8 per month	€12 per month	Other

Continue →

Remind me in June

