



PLAYING TELEPHONE

*Hoax Calls and the Insecurity of
Leader to Leader Communications*

July 2022

Playing Telephone: Hoax Calls and the Insecurity of Leader to Leader Communications was made possible (in part) by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.

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Design: Pledger Designs Ltd

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In 2004, Fidel Castro received a call from Hugo Chavez, who, after exchanging friendly pleasantries with Castro, burst into a diatribe against him. Castro, true to his nature, angrily responded in kind and promptly hung up. This was no dispute between allies, but rather, a phone call made by imposters pretending to be the Venezuelan president. Castro was in fact speaking to Miami based radio DJs, Joe Ferrero and Enrique Santos, who, by pretending to be senior Venezuelan officials, managed to talk their way through several Cuban officials before reaching Castro¹. This prank call came only a few months after they successfully managed to reach Chavez himself by phone, by pretending, in turn, to be Castro.

A decade later national leaders continue to be victims of prank callers who successfully bypass the usual protocols and security measures to talk to leaders one-on-one by pretending to be other leading international figures. Since 2004, the number of successful inauthentic calls to national leaders has increased. In 2020 alone, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau had a colorful conversation with "Greta Thunberg,"² Polish President Andrzej Duda spent ten minutes speaking rather candidly to someone who he thought was UN Secretary General António Guterres,³ and American Senator Lindsey Graham had two separate conversations with someone who he believed to be the Turkish Defense Minister.⁴ These and many other conversations are detailed in the following database.

On the surface, there is something ironic about the ease with which those pretending to be someone they are not are so easily able to gain access to those in power. One could even be amused at the false friendliness between counterparts, compounded with the inability to recognize the real versus the fake counterpart. However, the fact that these prank calls occur at all (and do so fairly often) reveals a clear lack of secure leader to leader communications and suggests the possible non-trivial exploitations of that fact. That there are not more secure mechanisms and procedures in place for these sensitive conversations ought to be of utmost concern.

Aided and Abetted - Or Not

Since 2014, prank calls cataloged to national leaders have come from Vovan and Lexus, a Russian comedy duo who made a name for themselves in prank calls. Vladimir Kuznetsov (Vovan) and Aleksei Stolyarov (Lexus) became popular in Russia after prank calling celebrities and Russian politicians including singer Elton John, Russian politician Vitaly Milonov, and former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachyev. The duo also started calling international politicians, including national leaders, senators, cabinet ministers, secretaries, and other notable individuals. While Vovan and Lexus do not make up all of the following prank call databases, they do make up a majority of the calls.

Vovan and Lexus are unique, not just for the volume of prank calls to prominent individuals that they have made, but for the long running rumors and allegations that they have ties to the Russian intelligence community. Their prank call subjects are, with a few exceptions, not friends of the Kremlin.⁵ The pair have denied those claims and say that they act on their own, choosing their own targets.⁶ There are, however, many that believe that Vovan and Lexus gain access to phone numbers through those alleged Russian intelligence ties. After prank calls to the UK Home and Defence Ministers, the UK Prime Minister's spokesperson said that "The Russian state was responsible for the hoax telephone calls made to UK ministers last week."⁷

The potential ties to Russian intelligence suggest problems in both possibilities. On the one hand, if those ties do exist, and Vovan and Lexus have been given resources that are not readily available to the general public, it indicates that adversaries can somewhat easily initiate false leader to leader phone calls. The consequence of this capability lies in its ability to be strategically employed to the detriment of one's adversaries; if detected it creates distrust, if undetected it allows for deception. On the other hand, if the allegations of connections between Russian state intelligence and Vovan and Lexus are false, then that means that rogue actors, and one can think of more nefarious actors than radio DJ's, can conduct these false conversations. The designs of a rogue actor might range more broadly than that of a state actor; they could wish to simply create confusion, try to attempt extortion and manipulation, or attempt to generate tension and even conflict between allies or adversaries.

However, though Vovan and Lexus have been accused of having ties to the Russian state, the other prank call perpetrators in that database have not faced such accusations. They seem, based on public information, to have acted of their own accord, without aid of a government. This indicates the feasibility of the inauthentic calls, even without the help of intelligence services.

Close and Distant in the 21st Century

The vulnerability of world leaders to these pranks highlights their dependence on twenty-first century communication styles and loss of physical interaction due to the Covid-19 pandemic. World leaders have become accustomed to being able to rapidly communicate, whether that be by phone, by Zoom, or even by Whatsapp.

As these new ways of communicating have proliferated, it is unclear whether proper safety mechanisms are being put in place to ensure authentic communications between world leaders. A prankster, with or without help of a state intelligence apparatus, should not be able to phone an executive or ministerial office and talk through several officials by way of getting to the national leader. This is a question of procedural, as much as technical, security. In some cases prank callers have bypassed simple procedures. In a March 2022 prank call to UK Defence Minister Wallace, “a person claiming to be an aide of the Ukrainian embassy sent an email to a government department which was then forwarded to the UK Ministry of Defence,”⁸ which suggests an easy to bypass protocol for screen calls.

These cases also illustrate the superficial relationships that exist between leaders of states. While leaders may meet at summits and conferences, they may, and indeed probably do, over assume their familiarity with each other, and might not notice a slightly different voice, personality, or language choice. This is all the more prevalent as competition, conflict, and Covid-19 have further isolated world leaders from both peers and adversaries.

Prank calls to world leaders are comical on the surface, but pose real risk to international security, the national security of individual states, and only add to the mass disinformation and inauthentic content and profiles that we deal with today. They can also be used as tools to gather intelligence, degrade trust between allies and adversaries alike, and advance narratives of national interest.

Accelerated Severity

Although the security lapses have been broadly procedural as of yet, the technological capabilities that could eventually make these calls far more convincing, and thus concerning for international security, are rapidly improving. Inauthentic calls to leaders and other similar deception will only become easier in the near future as deep fakes and machine learning text to speech models improve, open source intelligence becomes more accurate, and automated disinformation campaigns become more sophisticated.

Deep fakes are growing increasingly convincing, and it is not difficult to imagine their ability to successfully mimic a person’s mannerism, speech, and appearance for a Zoom call. Add to this, advances in machine learning text to speech models, which are barreling in advancement towards impressive capabilities to mimic voices, cadences, and speaking patterns. It is one

thing to say ludicrous things on the phone to a leader, vaguely sounding like another leader. It is another to say ludicrous things while sounding and looking just like the leader in question. The more convincing the inauthentic calls become, the longer leaders will stay on the line and be fooled, and the more opportunity for the perpetrator to convince the leader of something contrary to their national interest.

Besides the immediate repercussions of the prank calls in confusing and/or humiliating world leaders, there is also the aftermath of the call, which can be exploited. Vovan and Lexus, for example, post most of their prank calls as videos on youtube, where they get large amounts of views and engagement. If a prank caller manages to get a leader to say something politically damaging, in, say, the confidence of an ally, that comment can be spread across social media as a way of undermining the intentions of the leader, and even the relationship with the ally. Of course, with video editing, recordings of leaders can also be edited to change what was actually said and cause international controversy, or at the very least seriously degrade trust.

A third trend, the increasing ease with which open source intelligence can be conducted, means that it will likely become easier to plan and execute these sorts of inauthentic calls.

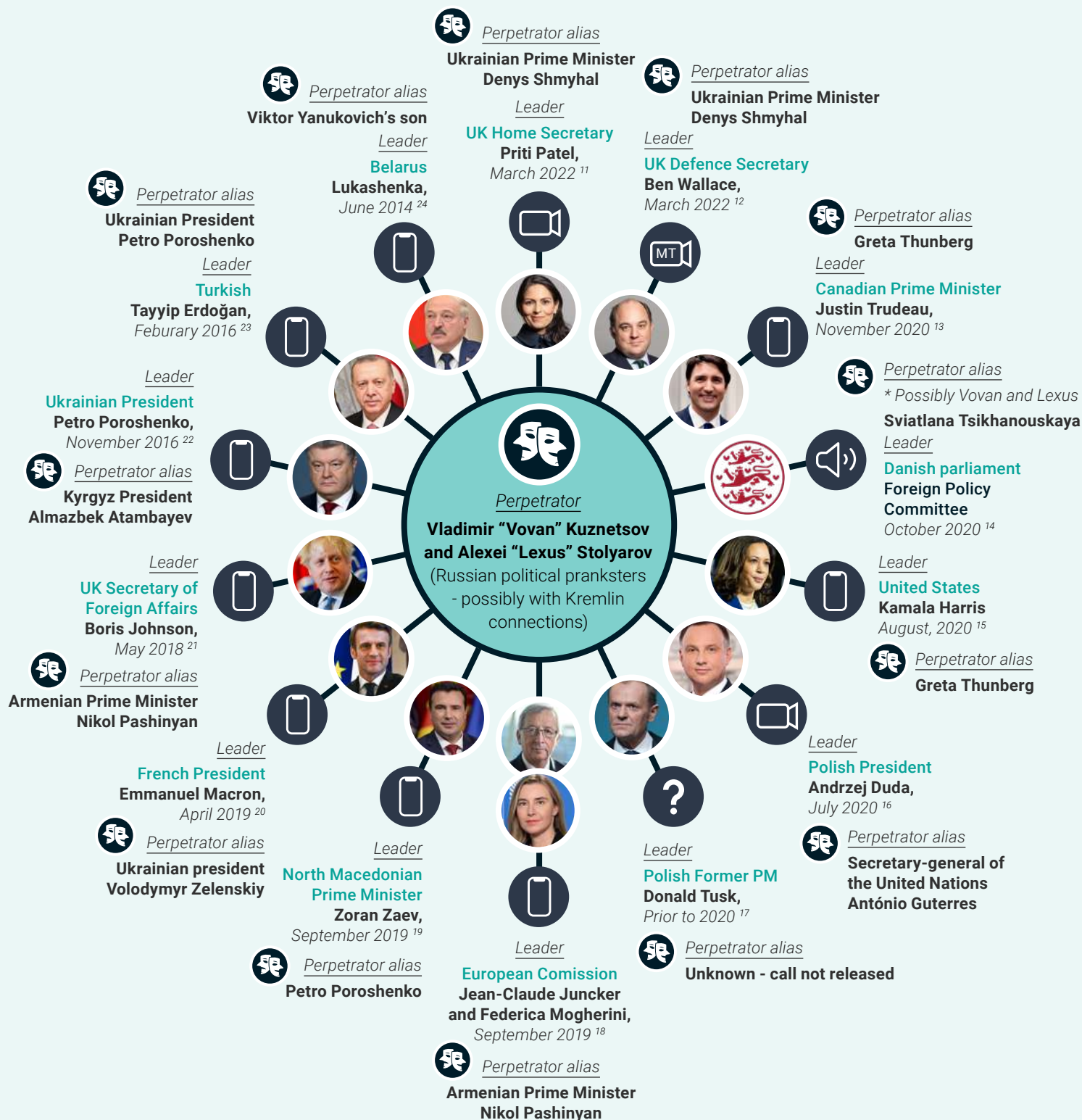
The following database of hoax calls illustrates the need for:

- International leaders and politicians to recognize the numerous parties interested in accessing their communications, the inherent vulnerabilities in the existing leader to leader communication regime, and that casual communication habits like using Whatsapp and even screen phone calls are insufficient.
- The integration of novel and existing secure communication tools into the day to day communications of senior leaders, to potentially include key exchanges for more sophisticated encryption,⁹ better screening protocols, and identification tools like voice recognition software.
- Increased awareness that we are on the cusp of an acceleration of these threats, in quantity and sophistication, as technological progress further enables them.

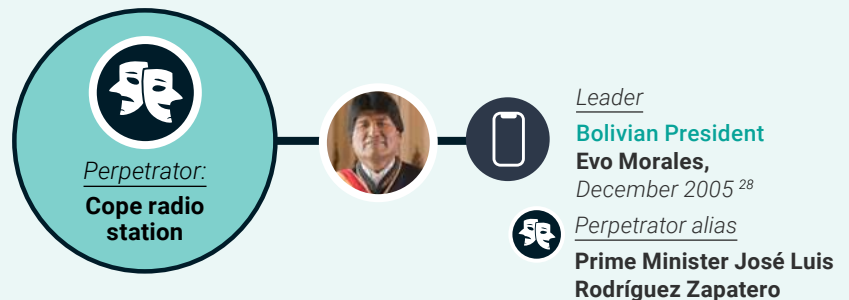
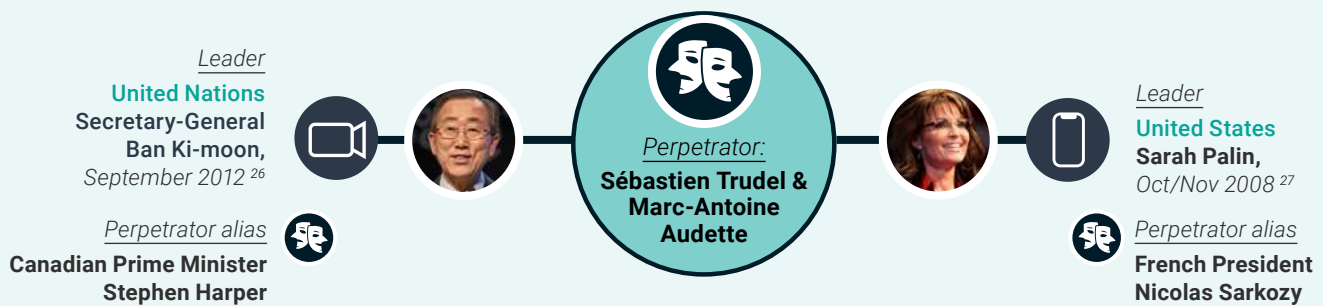
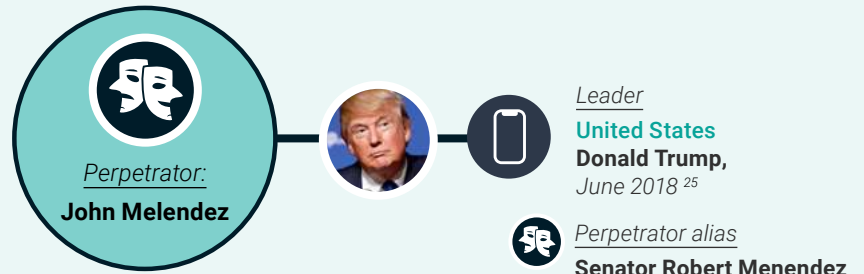


A note: This database represents a subset of calls targeted at those most geopolitically significant members of their respective countries (i.e. leaders of state, vice presidents, defense ministers). Those not included but similarly targeted include former presidents,¹⁰ sitting senators, members of parliament, representatives, cabinet members, and other high profile politicians.

Successful fake calls to leaders



Successful fake calls to leaders



Endnotes



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