

Butina Case: Neo-McCarthyism Engulfs America

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*The United States Department of Justice would apparently have you believe that the Kremlin sought to subvert the five-million-member strong National Rifle Association (NRA) by having two Russian citizens take out life memberships in the organization with the intention of corrupting it and turning it into a mouthpiece for **President Vladimir Putin**. Both of the Russians – **Maria Butina** and **Alexander Torshin** – have, by the way, long well documented histories as advocates for gun ownership and were founders of Right to Bear Arms, which is not an intelligence front organization of some kind and is rather a genuine lobbying group with an active membership and agenda. Contrary to what has been reported in the mainstream media, Russians can own guns but the licensing and registration procedures are long and complicated, which Right to Bear Arms, modeling itself on the NRA, is seeking to change.*

Maria Butina, a graduate student at American University, is now in solitary confinement in a federal prison, having been charged with collusion with Torshin and failure to register as an agent of the Russian Federation. It is unusual to arrest and confine someone who has failed to register under the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, but she has not been granted bail because, as a Russian citizen, she is considered to be a “flight risk,” likely to try to flee the US and return home. It is to be presumed that she is being pressured to identify others involved in her alleged scheme to overthrow American democracy through NRA membership.

Indeed, in any event, it would be difficult to imagine why anyone would consider the NRA to be a legitimate intelligence target. It only flexes its admitted powerful legislative muscles over issues relating to gun ownership, not regarding policy on Russia. In short, Butina and by extension Torshin appear to have done nothing wrong. Both are energetic advocates for their country and guns rights, which they appear to believe in, and Butina’s aggressive networking has broken no law except not registering, which in itself assumes that she is a Russian government agent, something that has not been demonstrated. To put the shoe on the other foot, will every American who now travels to Russia and engages in political conversations with local people be suspected of acting as an agent of the US government? Once you open the door, it swings both ways.

One might dismiss the entire Affair Butina as little more than a reflection of the anti-Russia hysteria that has been sweeping the United States since Hillary Clinton lost the 2016 election, but that would be unfair to those remaining honest FBI agents who may have investigated Butina and Torshin and come up with what they believed to be a plausible case for an indictment. There were possibly suspicious money transfers as well as email

intercepts that might be interpreted as incriminating.

But two important elements are clearly missing. The first is motive. Did the Kremlin seriously believe that it could get anything substantial out of having a gun totin' attractive young Russian woman as a life member in the NRA? What did the presumed puppet masters in Moscow expect to obtain apart from the sorts of group photos including Butina that one gets while posing with politicians at the annual NRA convention? Sure, the photo might even evolve into a cup of coffee together, but what is the end game?

Second is the lack of any of the hallmarks of an intelligence operation, which is referred to in the business as tradecraft. Spies meet secretly or at least outside the public eye with prospective agents whereas Maria operated completely in the open and she made no effort to conceal her love for her country and her desire that Washington and Moscow normalize relations. Spies also communicate securely, which means that they use encrypted systems or various cut-outs, i.e. mis-directions, when maintaining contact with those who are running them. Again, Maria did none of that, which is why the FBI has her emails. Also spies work under what is referred to as an "operating directive" in CIA-speak where they have very specific information that they seek to obtain from their contacts. There is no indication that Maria Butina in any way sought classified information or intelligence that would relate either to the security of the United States or to America's political system. And finally, Maria made no attempt to recruit anyone and turn them into an actual controlled Russian agent, which is what spies eventually seek to do.

It has come down to this: if you are a Russian and you are caught talking to anyone in any way influential, there is potentially hell to pay because the FBI will be watching you. You are automatically assumed to be part of a conspiracy. Once "evidence" is collected, you will be indicted and sent to prison, mostly to send a message to Moscow. It is the ultimate irony that how the old Soviet Union's judiciary used to function is now becoming standing operating procedure in the United States.

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