

Two Stories From the Propaganda War

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*Two recent stories about Russians have demonstrated how the news is selected and manipulated in the United States. The first is about **Maria Butina**, who apparently sought to overthrow American democracy, such as it is, by obtaining a life membership in the National Rifle Association. Maria, a graduate student at American University, is now in detention in a federal prison, having been charged with collusion and failure to register as an agent of the Russian Federation. She has been in prison since July, for most of the time in solitary confinement, and has not been granted bail because, as a Russian citizen, she is considered to be a “flight risk.”*

Maria, who has pleaded not guilty to all charges, is now seeking donations to help pay for her legal defense as the Russian government renews demands that she be released from jail or be tried on whatever charges the Justice Department can come up with, but her release is unlikely as she is really a political prisoner.

The media has been silent about Maria Butina because the case against her is falling apart. In early September prosecutors admitted that they had misunderstood text messages used to support claims that she had offered to trade sex for access to information. Demands that she consequently be released from prison were, however, rejected. Her lawyer observed that

“The impact of this inflammatory allegation, which painted Ms. Butina as some type of Kremlin-trained seductress, or spy-novel honeypot character, trading sex for access and power, cannot be overstated.”

In an attempt to make the Butina embarrassment disappear from the news, the Justice Department has proposed an unprecedented gag order to prevent her attorney from appearing in the media in a way that could prejudice a jury should her case eventually come to trial. Currently there is no court date and Maria remains in jail indefinitely, but the press could care less – she is just one more Russiagate casualty in an ongoing saga that has long since passed her by.

Given the Maria Butina story and the hysteria over all things Russian it was perhaps inevitable that the tale of Kremlin interference in American elections would be resurrected and repeated. Federal prosecutors are now reporting that another Russian woman has illegally conspired with others to “defraud the United States” and interfere with the U.S. political system, to include plans for conducting “information warfare” to subvert the upcoming 2018 midterm elections.

The complaint was filed on October 19th at a federal court in Virginia which handles most national security cases. According to the [court documents](#), **Elena Alekseevna Khusyainova**, a 44-year-old resident of St. Petersburg in Russia, has worked as the head accountant for “Project Lakhta,” a Russian influence operation backed by an oligarch close to President Vladimir Putin. According to the Justice Department, [the operation](#) “spread misinformation about US political issues including immigration, gun control, the Confederate flag, and protests by NFL players. It also used events including the Las Vegas mass shooting, and the far-Right rally in Charlottesville, to spread discord.”

Khusyainova, who is not likely to be extradited to the United States for trial, allegedly purchased advertising in social networks and also supported dissident groups. The accusation of the American authorities emphasizes the connection between Khusyainova and St. Petersburg businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, who was previously identified by the media as the owner of a ‘Troll Factory’ in St. Petersburg. In the U.S., several charges have already been brought against him and his staff, including interfering in the presidential elections in 2016.

The Maria Butina story reveals how there is a fundamental flaw in the justice system in the United States. When someone is found guilty by the media there is no way to right the wrong when the story shifts and starts to break down. The New York Times or Washington Post is unlikely to leap to the defense of the accused. Maria Butina has been raked over the coals in stories that were partly true but mostly false in terms of any criminal intent. She is still waiting for justice and will likely be doing so for some time.

The case of Elena Khusyainova is Maria Butina redux, only even more idiotic. No actual evidence is presented in the indictment and since Elena is in Russia and not likely to visit the United States, the entire affair is a bit of theater intended to heighten hysteria about the U.S. midterm elections. Is the U.S. electoral system really so fragile and what did Elena actually seek to do? The Justice Department is silent on the issue beyond vague accusations about trolling on the internet by Russians. One wonders who in the federal government ordered the investigation and signed off on the indictment.

Both Maria and Elena are victims of a politicized miscarriage of justice. Maria Butina should be released from prison now and allowed to pay her fine for being an unregistered agent before leaving the country. There is no justification for holding her in prison. And the indictment of Elena Khusyainova is not worth the paper it is written on. It should be torn up and thrown away.

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