

U.S. Citizens and Russian Intelligence Officers Charged with Conspiring to Use U.S. Citizens as Illegal Agents of the Russian Government

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Defendants Sought to Sow Discord, Spread Pro-Russia Propaganda and Interfere in Elections Within the United States

A federal grand jury in Tampa, Florida, returned a superseding indictment charging four U.S. citizens and three Russian nationals with working on behalf of the Russian government and in conjunction with the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) to conduct a multi-year foreign malign influence campaign in the United States. Among other conduct, the superseding indictment alleges that the Russian defendants recruited, funded and directed U.S. political groups to act as unregistered illegal agents of the Russian government and sow discord and spread pro-Russian propaganda; the indicted intelligence officers, in particular, participated in covertly funding and directing candidates for local office within the United States.

Additionally, in a separate case out of the District of Columbia, a criminal complaint was unsealed charging Russian national Natalia Burlinova with conspiring with an FSB officer to act as an illegal agent of Russia in the United States.

“Russia’s foreign intelligence service allegedly weaponized our First Amendment rights – freedoms Russia denies its own citizens – to divide Americans and interfere in elections in the United States,” said Assistant Attorney General Matthew G. Olsen of the Justice Department’s National Security Division. “The department will not hesitate to expose and prosecute those who sow discord and corrupt U.S. elections in service of hostile foreign interests, regardless of whether the culprits are U.S. citizens or foreign individuals abroad.”

“Efforts by the Russian government to secretly influence U.S. elections will not be tolerated,” said Assistant Attorney General Kenneth A. Polite, Jr. of the Justice Department’s Criminal Division. “As today’s announcement demonstrates, the Criminal Division is committed to eradicating foreign malign influence from the U.S. political system and helping ensure the integrity of our elections.”

“Today’s announcement paints a harrowing picture of Russian government actions and the lengths to which the FSB will go to interfere with our elections, sow discord in our nation and ultimately recruit U.S. citizens to their efforts,” said Acting Assistant Director Kurt Ronnow of the FBI’s Counterintelligence Division. “All Americans should be deeply concerned by the tactics employed by the FSB and remain vigilant to any attempt to undermine our democracy. The FBI remains committed to confronting this egregious behavior and ultimately disrupting our adversaries and those who act on their behalf.”

United States v. Ionov, et al.

According to the superseding indictment returned in the Middle District of Florida, Aleksandr Viktorovich Ionov, a resident of Moscow, was the founder and president of the Anti-Globalization Movement of Russia (AGMR), an organization headquartered in Moscow, Russia, and funded by the Russian government. Ionov allegedly utilized AGMR to carry out Russia’s malign influence campaign. Ionov’s influence efforts were allegedly directed and supervised by Moscow-based FSB officers, including indicted defendants Aleksey Borisovich Sukhodolov and Yegor Sergeyevich Popov.

“The prosecution of this criminal conduct is essential to protecting the American public when foreign governments seek to inject themselves into the American political process,” said U.S. Attorney Roger B. Handberg for the Middle District of Florida. “We thank our partners at the FBI for their tireless investigation of these events and their commitment to ensure justice is done.”

Among other illegal activities, the superseding indictment alleges that Ionov, Sukhodolov and Popov conspired to directly and substantially influence democratic elections in the United States by clandestinely funding and directing the political campaign of a particular candidate for local office in St. Petersburg, Florida, in 2019. For instance, the superseding indictment alleges that Popov expressly referred to this effort on behalf of the FSB as “our election campaign,” and Ionov referring to the candidate as the “candidate whom we supervise.”

Ionov and Popov allegedly intended that this election interference plot would extend beyond the 2019 local election cycle in St. Petersburg, and subsequently discussed that the “USA Presidential election” was the FSB’s “main topic of the year.”

Moreover, from at least November 2014 until July 2022, Ionov allegedly engaged in a years-long foreign malign influence campaign targeting the United States. As a part of the campaign, Ionov allegedly recruited members of political groups within the United States, including the African People’s Socialist Party and the Uhuru Movement (collectively, the APSP) in Florida, Black Hammer in Georgia and a political group in California (referred to in the superseding indictment as U.S. Political Group 3), to participate in the influence campaign and act as agents of Russia in the United States, including the following indicted defendants:

- Omali Yeshitela, a U.S. citizen residing in St. Petersburg, Florida, and St. Louis, Missouri, who served as the chairman and founder of the APSP;
- Penny Joanne Hess, a U.S. citizen residing in St. Petersburg, Florida, and St. Louis, Missouri, who served as the leader of a component of the APSP;
- Jesse Nevel, a U.S. citizen residing in St. Petersburg, Florida, and St. Louis, Missouri, who served as a member of a component of the APSP; and
- Augustus C. Romain Jr., aka Gazi Kodzo, a U.S. citizen residing in St. Petersburg, Florida, and Atlanta, who served as a leader of the APSP and a founder of Black Hammer in Georgia.

One focus of Ionov’s alleged influence operation was to create the appearance of American popular support for Russia’s annexation of territories in Ukraine. For example, in May 2020, Ionov allegedly sent a request he stated was from “Russia, the Donetsk People’s Republic” – an apparent reference to a Russian-occupied region in eastern Ukraine – to Yeshitela and members of other U.S. political groups to make statements in support of the independence of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic, a Russian-backed breakaway state in eastern Ukraine. Ionov later allegedly touted to the FSB that Yeshitela’s video-recorded statement of support was the first time that “American nonprofit organizations congratulated citizens” of the occupied region.

Ionov’s use of the APSP to promote Russian propaganda relating to Ukraine allegedly continued after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. On the day Russia invaded Ukraine, Feb. 24, 2022, Ionov allegedly emailed Nevel an “URGENT MESSAGE” which contained pro-Russian talking points in support of the invasion. Thereafter, throughout March 2022, the APSP repeatedly hosted Ionov via video conference to discuss the war, during which Ionov falsely stated that anyone who supported Ukraine also supported Naziism and white supremacy, and Yeshitela and another APSP member allegedly made statements of solidarity with the Russian government.

Ionov, Sukhodolov, Popov, Yeshitela, Hess, Nevel and Romain are charged with conspiring to have U.S. citizens act as illegal agents of the Russian government within the United States without providing prior notification to the Attorney General, as required by law. If convicted, they each face a maximum penalty of five years in prison. Yeshitela, Hess and Nevel are also charged with acting as agents of Russia within the United States without such prior notification. If convicted, they each face a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison. If convicted, a federal district court judge will determine any sentence after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Daniel J. Marcet and Risha Asokan for the Middle District of Florida, Trial Attorney Menno Goedman of the Justice Department's Counterintelligence and Export Control Section, and Trial Attorney Demetrius Sumner of the Criminal Division's Public Integrity Section are prosecuting the case.

United States v. Burlinova

According to the affidavit in support of the criminal complaint unsealed in the District of Columbia, Russian national Natalia Burlinova, a resident of Moscow, conspired with an FSB officer to recruit U.S. citizens from academic and research institutions to travel to Russia to participate in a public diplomacy program called Meeting Russia. The program was operated by PICREADI, a Russian organization led by Burlinova, funded by the Russian government and devoted to promoting Russian national interests.

"The defendant is accused of subverting our foreign agent notification laws to promote Russian national interests here in the United States, concealing from the public that her recruitment efforts were funded by a Russian security service," said U.S. Attorney Matthew M. Graves for the District of Columbia. "We will continue to expose these serious crimes and hold all who perpetrate them accountable."

The affidavit alleges that the FSB officer provided funding and other support for Burlinova's foreign recruitment and her efforts to advance Russian interests in the United States. In return, Burlinova provided the FSB officer with extensive information about U.S. citizens who were recruited to attend her programs, including their résumés, passport information, photographs and analyses of their views toward Russia. Burlinova further identified for the FSB officer particular U.S. citizens who, in Burlinova's view, had expressed positive attitudes towards Russia and were prepared to continue to collaborate. During a recruitment trip to the United States in fall 2018, Burlinova met with U.S. citizens at various universities and research institutions and provided to photographs of her meetings to the FSB officer. The FSB officer used the information Burlinova provided prepare FSB intelligence reports. Burlinova never notified the Attorney General of these efforts or otherwise disclosed to the public that her recruitment efforts were supported and funded by a Russian security service.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Michael J. Friedman for the District of Columbia and Trial Attorney Emma D. Ellenrieder of the National Security Division's Counterintelligence and Export Control Section are prosecuting the case.

An indictment and a complaint are merely an allegation. All defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.