

Spanish police make ludicrous claim Russia plotted to invade Catalonia

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Spanish paramilitary police are making ludicrous, baseless allegations linking Russia, imprisoned WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange and the 2017 referendum on Catalan independence from Spain.

In a major operation across Catalonia on Wednesday, the paramilitary Civil Guard arrested 21 people, mostly businessmen and associates linked to the Catalan secessionists. They are accused of misuse of public funds, abuse of office, money laundering and diverting public funds to Belgium, where exiled former regional Catalan premier Carles Puigdemont resides. Most are linked to the pro-secessionist protest platform Tsunami Democràtic.

Tsunami Democràtic's app played an important role in mobilising protesters after a show trial sentenced nine Catalan nationalist politicians to dozens of years in prison over the referendum.

The alleged network supposedly misappropriated funds from the Barcelona provincial body, the Diputació of Barcelona, to finance Tsunami Democràtic, relationships with Russia and an alleged property sale, to the tune of €1 million. Part of these funds allegedly went to two foundations linked to secessionist parties, and from there to finance the Catalan referendum.

The probe then alleges that Russia offered Puigdemont troops in 2017. The only material they cited as proof of this allegation is a transcript conversation between two former officials of Catalan secessionist parties, Víctor Terradellas and Xavier Vendrell. The Civil Guard provided no evidence of Russian involvement whatsoever besides what it alleges that it heard by spying on Terradellas.

Citing this conversation, judge Joaquín Aguirre claims that "Terradellas explained that the chief of the [Russia] group had offered on October 24, 2017 to Carles Puigdemont to deploy 10,000 soldiers and pay all the Catalan debt. [...] The Russian group wanted to make Catalonia a country like Switzerland." According to this account, Puigdemont withdrew from the plan at the last minute.

Judge Aguirre commented: "If he had accepted, the events would probably have been tragic and would have triggered

an armed conflict in the [Spanish] state with an unknown number of fatalities."

Also mentioned are former NSA analyst and whistleblower Edward Snowden and imprisoned WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange. Assange is currently imprisoned in a London jail cell, facing an extradition trial to send him to the US to face life imprisonment in a US supermax prison for exposing the war crimes, coups and sordid intrigues of the imperialist powers.

The probe alleges that Assange met one of those arrested in the operation, Oriol Soler, considered by Madrid as one of the top communication strategists of the Catalan secessionist movement, in November 2017.

According to the Civil Guard, "the Kremlin government", Assange, Snowden, as well as "people close to Vladimir Putin" such as editor Margarita Simonyan and "Kremlin-controlled media like Russia Today and Sputnik" all conspired with the Catalan government "to internationalize the conflict, obtaining the support of third countries willing to recognize Catalonia as a country in case it got to the point of declaring independence."

Assange is one of the most spied-upon people on earth, but the Civil Guard failed to provide any evidence of a conspiracy between Assange and Soler.

The whole case is ludicrous, serving a number of purposes.

It is a further attack on democratic rights of the accused and of the Catalan nationalists, ultimately aiming to intimidate the emerging movement of the working class and create a precedent for far broader victimisations.

The ruling class is terrified at the initial expression of growing working class struggles throughout the continent against its policy of malign neglect in letting COVID-19 spread. In Greece, students have occupied schools. In Spain, Germany and France, nurses have gone on strike, as well as public transport workers. In Madrid, protests against restrictions of mobility in working class districts have emerged.

The operation also aims to serve as a distraction from the Socialist Party-Podemos government's policy of herd

immunity which is provoking a mass health catastrophe. Infection rates are over 20,000 a day, ICUs are collapsing as death rates spiked to over 250 a day last week, the highest number of victims to be reported since May. This brings the official toll to 35,298, although the real figure may be closer to 60,000, according to the Mortality Monitoring System.

Finally, the operations also aim to further escalate tensions with nuclear-armed Russia, in the context of the US elections and widespread expectations in Europe of a victory of Democratic candidate Joe Biden. The Democratic party's opposition to Trump has been centered on attacking Trump, the Republican candidate, for being "soft" on Russia.

On Thursday, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova ridiculed the operation, warning that relations with Spain could become "more complicated" and "may be damaged". She explained that the claims had come from Catalan secessionists, who made up the story to "draw the attention of the world community to their confrontation with the Spanish state."

Zakharova also drew attention to the name of the operation, which the Civil Guard provocatively claimed was named "Operation Volhov." Volhov was the name of a battle in the Soviet Union during World War II between fascist Spain's Blue Division and Soviet forces. This infantry division of fascist volunteers was sent by Spanish dictator General Francisco Franco to support Nazi Germany in its war of extermination against the Soviet Union, which left nearly 27 million dead.

The fact that the Spanish police and judiciary concocted such a ludicrous story, which could be used to provide a case for war against a nuclear-armed state, speaks to the enormous dangers confronting the working class. Moreover, the fact that they received a free pass to promote this story in the media speaks volumes about what is sometimes passed off as the 'left' in Spain, principally the Podemos party.

The Civil Guards knew Podemos would not mobilise any opposition to its operations and that it could not only concoct this story but name it after the fascist Blue Division's battles. They are fully aware that Podemos are tools of the ruling class, including of its re-legitimization of fascist politics and the far-right Vox party. Podemos actively participated in the anti-Catalan campaign, calling for acceptance of the verdict against Catalan officials, and supported police repression of mass protests.

On Friday, Podemos spokesperson in parliament Jaume Asens made empty protests to the Ministry of Interior, saying "it's unacceptable that today we have Francoists in the Civil Guard," apparently alluding to the name of the operation. Asens complained that the name is "improper" for a "democratic state like Spain."

The day before, Asens weakly raised the possibility of a

plot by "sections of the police and the judiciary, that works against the Government," emphasising the timing of the operation, days before the vote on the budget in which the PSOE-Podemos government needs the support of the Catalan secessionists.

The Interior Ministry dismissed his remarks, saying that "there are different versions" of the name of the operation, apparently implying that it was a typo, and told the PSOE and Podemos to respect the judicial probe as a "sign of independence and separation of powers."

While most of the Madrid-based media uncritically reported the operation and cited the judge's probe, and Podemos minimised the significance of the operation, the case became the laughingstock on social media. Twitter was full of mocking comments, memes and Tweets about the case.

The glaring exceptions on Twitter are the NATO operatives of the Integrity Initiative, a network of UK and international military and intelligence operatives, academics and journalists spreading anti-Russia propaganda. In 2018, their campaigns successfully removed a potential military advisor to the PSOE government, considered too "pro-Russian."

The so-called "Spanish cluster" members of Integrity Initiative have been activated to promote the bizarre operation. One of its members, Daniel Iriarte claimed that opposition to these baseless allegations was "a classical example of Russian disinformation technique called 'hahaganda': each time Russia comes out badly from an event, they look at the most extreme or bizarre example, its laughed at, ridiculed and then the WHOLE [story] categorised as absurd."

Iriarte did not tell his Twitter audience which part of the Civil Guards' concocted story the public should believe.



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