

Spain quietly drops probe into “Russian meddling” in Catalan referendum

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Spain’s National Court has dropped an investigation into alleged “Russian interference” in the 2017 Catalan independence referendum due to lack of evidence.

The investigation had been opened in November 2019 but was secretly closed by the judge presiding over the case only nine months later, in July 2020, on the advice of the prosecution. The collapse of the case was not made public until last month, almost a year later, when it was reported by *Eldiario.es*, with sources from the National Court verifying it to numerous other news sites.

One of the most ludicrous allegations made by the probe was that Russia had offered to send 10,000 troops to Catalonia in support of the now-exiled former President of Catalonia, Carles Puigdemont, under whose tenure the referendum had taken place. Puigdemont allegedly turned down the offer at the eleventh hour.

The case is yet another exposure of this type of propaganda used by NATO powers aiming to create *casus belli* against nuclear armed Russia and China. No lie is too big for the imperialist powers in their bid to whip up nationalism and deflect social tensions outwards.

The main characteristic of this form of propaganda is that it is sensational and fact-free. The sources tend to be either anonymous intelligence officers, government sources or the police. Whatever the target, usually Beijing and Moscow, the aim is to portray the countries as the source of all evil.

The Spanish probe followed other similar smear campaigns, including the lie that Moscow interfered in the US elections in 2016 and 2020 and the story that the Russian military intelligence agency GRU had paid bounties to Taliban fighters in Afghanistan to kill American soldiers.

The latest are that COVID-19 originated in a Chinese laboratory, and that Beijing is carrying out genocide against the Muslim Uyghur minority.

The Spanish campaign centred on claims that Russian intelligence officers had been present in Catalonia in the days leading up to the October 2017 referendum and that Russia had sought to influence the election in favour of the secessionists through funding, disinformation campaigns and potentially even military intervention.

Among those mentioned in the investigation was businessman Oriol Soler, considered one of the top communication strategists of the Catalan secessionist movement. Soler was last year accused of masterminding a “disinformation strategy” with the input of the Kremlin, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and whistleblower Edward Snowden.

The accusations against Soler stem from his November 2017 visit to Assange at the Ecuadorian Embassy in London, where the WikiLeaks founder was at the time effectively imprisoned, after being granted asylum by that country. Soler then reportedly travelled to St Petersburg. But the investigation mentioned no evidence of any “conspiracy” linking Soler, Assange and Russia to the referendum in Catalonia.

The majority of the links cited came from Bellingcat, a “research collective” which has specialised in “uncovering” and disseminating spurious and often falsified anti-Russia propaganda stories since it was founded in 2014.

Calling for the closing of the probe last summer, the assistant prosecutor in the case, Miguel Ángel Carballo, issued a scathing letter, reported by *Eldiario.es*, in which he explained that the only “evidence” provided by the police had been one testimony from an unnamed source and a number of links to online news articles on

the subject.

Pointing to the bogus nature of the case, Carballo's letter stated: "Nothing has been brought by the police that would allow us to keep this investigation open, unless we seek a general case to search for any evidence which would confirm the basic premise. This would be ignoring the fact that in criminal proceedings, with all the safeguards, these sorts of investigations are prohibited."

On the allegations of links between Assange, Russia and the Catalan nationalists, the Prosecutor's Office was forced to admit: "These statements are devoid of any factual basis."

The dropping of the case is further confirmation that the whole investigation was a fraud from the very beginning, carried out with definite political objectives.

The investigation shines a light on the methods employed in such politically motivated and state-promulgated disinformation campaigns. Ludicrous media claims that Russia meddled in the Catalan referendum and even planned to invade the region—likely fed to the press by the police and secret services themselves—are then cited by the very same agencies as evidence of the fabricated crime.

Opposition to these bizarre stories is cited as proof of "misinformation propaganda" made in Moscow. Thus, NATO operative Daniel Iriarte tweeted last year against those who were criticising the case as baseless from the start, saying it 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, it's laughed at, ridiculed and then the WHOLE [story] categorised as absurd."

In contrast to the wall-to-wall coverage given to the initial claims of Russian interference, the cases are dropped with little media comment.

While news sites like *El País* devoted numerous prominent articles and editorials to promoting the lie that there was indisputable evidence of Russian meddling in the referendum, reporting on the collapse of the case quickly disappeared.

Claims of "Russian meddling" were aimed at fabricating a spurious conspiracy involving Madrid's two "evil" enemies, Russia and Catalan nationalists, while dragging in figures hated by the NATO powers for exposing their war crimes, incarcerated journalist

Julian Assange and persecuted whistle blower Edward Snowden.

This served not only as a pretext for stepped-up attacks on the democratic rights of Catalan nationalists and pro-independence protesters but have also been used to further escalate tensions with nuclear-armed Russia, increasing the danger of an all-out war.

A military conflict between the United States and China or Russia—the largest militaries in the world stocked with 12,000 nuclear warheads between them—would have catastrophic consequences for all of humanity.

Opposition is mounting to the criminal "herd immunity" policies pursued by governments in Madrid and the world over in response to the pandemic, which in Spain has already taken over 100,000 lives. Workers and youth in Spain and internationally must respond to the ruling class' moves towards war abroad and repression at home with a programme of international class struggle.



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