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Open Secrets Turn Engineer Into 'Spy'

By Alexander Bratersky

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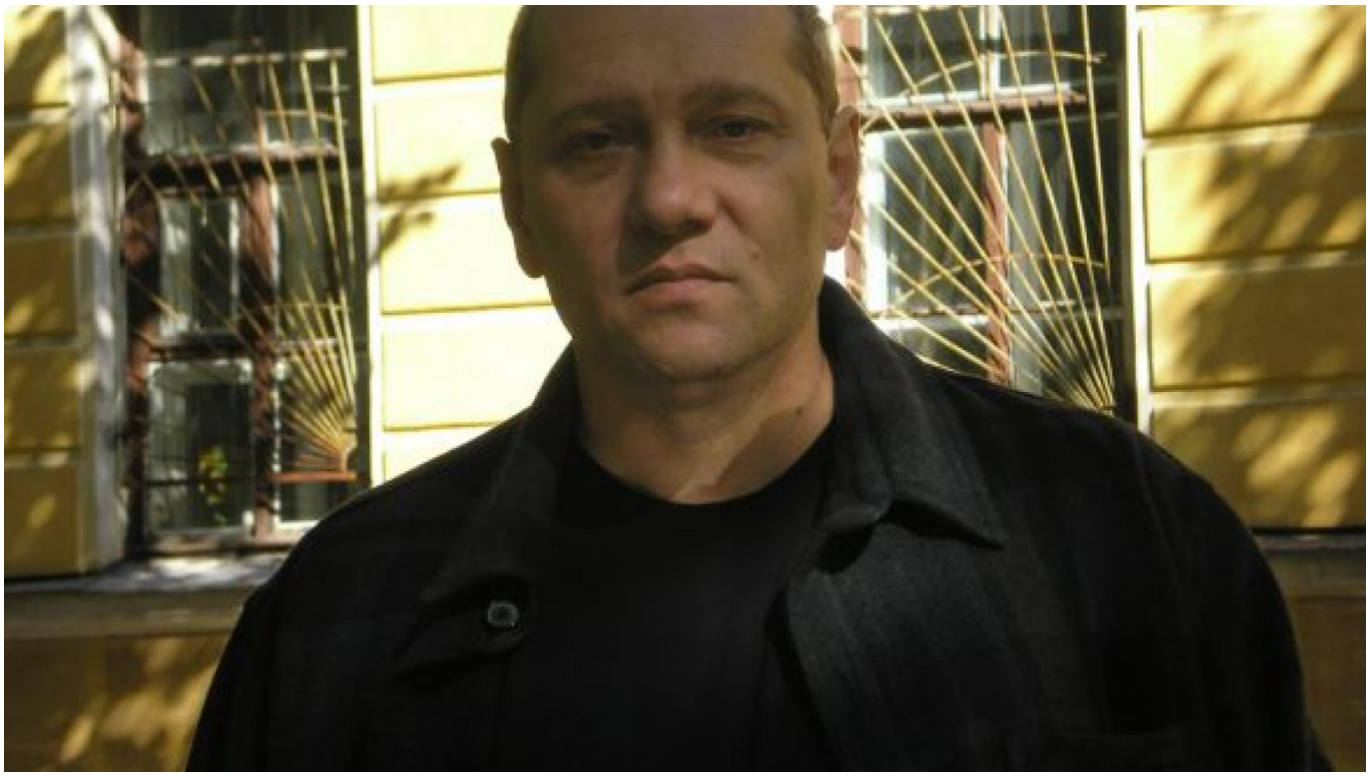

Stepanyants

Ask any official in Moscow's White House or Kiev's Budinok Uryadu and you will be told that relations between the two countries have been nothing but amiable since the ascension of President Viktor Yanukovych last year.

But the restoration of warm ties has done little good to Artur Stepanyants, a Russian defense engineer charged with espionage under Yanukovych's predecessor in an ongoing trial that Moscow appears to not care about.

In an interview from his prison cell, Stepanyants said he was set up by Ukrainian intelligence agents for his work with Russia's Black Sea Fleet, a perpetual thorn in Kiev's side.

“I have become the victim of a provocation after I refused to cooperate with Ukrainian security officials,” said Stepanyants, 53.

He spoke on a cell phone someone illegally smuggled into his pretrial detention cell in Simferopol, which he said was crowded with hardened criminals. Hearings in Stepanyants' closed-door trial, which may land him in prison for 15 years, started this month and are scheduled to continue in June.

Stepanyants, a deputy technical director at Elektropribor, a state-owned defense company based in Moscow, was arrested in the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol in January 2010 while buying radio jamming station equipment.

The sellers turned out to be agents of the SBU, the Ukrainian secret service. They said the equipment was classified — even though Russia knows all about it because it was designed and built in the former Russian republic during Soviet times.

Stepanyants, who was detained with his Ukrainian partner Valery Taranukha, 53, a fellow ex-naval officer, said he wanted to use the equipment to make repairs on naval equipment. He said his company was contracted to work with the Sevastopol-based Black Sea Fleet, whose vessels and radio equipment largely date back to Soviet times.

Yanukovych last year approved an extension of the fleet's lease on the Russian naval base on the Crimean Peninsula until 2042, much to the anger of Ukrainian nationalists.

Stepanyants acknowledged that the purchase was his own idea, not the fleet's, and said he paid a $2,000 advance payment out of his own pocket.

He said he expected the money to be reimbursed by the Navy because the parts were bound to find demand, and added somewhat testily, "I feel sorry now because no good deed goes unpunished."

Stepanyants' lawyer Vladimir Kolibidenko wrote in an appeal to investigators in November that the equipment did not qualify as classified. "The parts were manufactured on Russian territory during Soviet times, and disclosing data on them couldn't pose a threat to the Ukrainian side," he wrote.

Even Ukrainian officials cannot completely agree on whether the equipment was really classified. An official inquiry by Deputy Defense Minister Vladimir Omelyanchuk found in September that disclosing data on this type of radio jamming station could pose a threat to national security but the individual parts purchased by Stepanyants did not.

Kolibidenko said Ukrainian authorities struggled for some time on whether to classify the equipment and finally decided to do so shortly before Stepanyants bought it from a Ukrainian Navy warehouse in Sevastopol.

"Generally speaking, this is classified equipment, but it doesn't have any intelligence value for the Russian side," said Mikhail Barabanov, editor of the Moscow Defense Brief journal.

Interestingly, Viktor Nikonorov, a longtime Ukrainian business associate of Simonyants who allegedly helped the intelligence service with the setup, was charged with treason in

September, but his case was later dismissed.

Stepanyants' partner Taranukha, who has also been charged in connection with the case but is not in custody, has refused to plead guilty but has told investigators that his partner intended to smuggle the equipment to Russia.

Stepanyants, who denies smuggling plans, said Taranukha spoke under duress after investigators threatened to lock him up in a pretrial detention center, leaving him unable to provide for his gravely ill wife.

Stepanyants said he understands Taranukha's plight and still considers him a friend.

Taranukha could not be reached to comment for this article.

Beneath the Surface

What Ukrainian officials really wanted from Stepanyants was to use him as a pawn in the 2010 presidential race, his lawyer Kolibidenko said. The espionage case was fabricated by security officials who sought to boost the popularity of Yanukovych's predecessor, Viktor Yushchenko, he said.

Yushchenko, who made a name for himself by antagonizing Moscow, saw his popularity hit rock-bottom before the election. Kolibidenko said supporters hoped Yushchenko would benefit by a crackdown against Russian agents, real or imaginary.

If that was the plan, it failed, with Yushchenko losing in the first round of the vote. But Kolibidenko said several officials involved in the case against Stepanyants received awards from Yushchenko after opening the investigation.

The SBU did not respond to a written request for comment submitted in December.

A Russian consulate official said Stepanyants was not the only Russian citizen to be accused of espionage during Yushchenko's tenure. “We have several cases like that one,” he said by telephone from Kiev, speaking on customary condition of anonymity.

The official did not elaborate, but one incident saw five Federal Security Service officers detained in Odessa in January 2010, just before the election. Four of the officers, allegedly betrayed by a double agent, were returned to Russia under Yanukovych, while the fifth, Vladimir Alexandrov, was jailed in May. Ukrainian officials have not elaborated on his verdict or jail term, while the FSB has only said it was acting in response to Kiev's own espionage attempts.

With Yanukovych's victory and the extension of the Black Sea Fleet's lease, the Stepanyants case has lost its political relevance, but intelligence officials are still pressing ahead with it “to defend their professional honor,” lawyer Kolibidenko said.

His belief was echoed by Valentina Gaidenko, an analyst on Russian-Ukrainian relations at the

Moscow-based Institute of the Commonwealth States, who said that while there might be a political thaw, “processes that started before it have kept on rolling.”

Yanukovych fired intelligence chief Valentin Nalivaichenko after the election but kept most of the agency's staff, allowing the people who targeted Stepanyants to proceed with the case, Gaidenko said by telephone.

'Help for Spies Only'

Russia has made a show for caring for its intelligence officers in the past, most notably last summer when it released four Russians convicted of spying for the West in exchange for 10 busted agents in the United States.

But not every citizen linked to spy cases gets the same treatment. In an incident reminiscent of Stepanyants’, retired Russian officer Yury Korepanov was detained in Uzbekistan last year and jailed for 16 years on murky treason charges. The case was not by the Kremlin, and the Foreign Ministry resorted itself to sending out diplomatic notes that the Uzbek side did not reply to.

Russia’s consul in Crimea, Vladimir Andreyev, defended the government’s treatment of Stepanyants, saying in a letter to The Moscow Times dated March 10 that his staff had visited the engineer in custody and were cooperating with his lawyer.

But Stepanyants described the sole visit of a consulate official as a “formality.” “He acted like an accounting clerk,” he said.

Elektropribor representatives have declined to speak publicly about the Stepanyants case, but a company official said on condition of anonymity that the company was standing by him and keeping in touch with his wife, Nelly.

Nelly Stepanyants said consulate officials could not be bothered to look into her husband’s case until she peppered the Foreign Ministry with requests. She also said that in personal conversations, Russian officials had expressed no interest in helping him out.

“A consulate official told me that after reading the charges that he believed my husband was guilty,” she said.

But both she and her husband denied the spying charges — and the lack of official reaction from the Kremlin and Russian intelligence services seems to add weight to their claims.

“I wish my husband were a spy,” Nelly said. “Then he would get help from authorities.”

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