The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Downplays U.S. Spy Scandal

By Jonathan Earle

May 14, 2013



McFaul, foreground, exiting the Foreign Ministry building on Wednesday. **Maxim Shemetov**

Senior Russian officials on Wednesday downplayed the capture and release of an alleged U.S. spy, suggesting that while the incident won't help already battered relations, it also won't derail cooperation on international issues, including a newly launched effort to end Syria's civil war.

"Russia and the United States have serious work to do on Syria, Iran and North Korea. We need to solve these problems and not waste energy on political hysterics stemming from a fairly banal case of espionage," said Alexei Pushkov, head of the State Duma's International Affairs Committee, by telephone on Wednesday.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry sent an equally strong signal that the spy scandal, images of which have lit up state-run TV, would not hinder international cooperation, with Lavrov telling reporters that it hadn't even been worth their time to discuss on the eve of an Arctic Council summit in Sweden.

"We didn't discuss it. Kerry didn't mention it, and I decided that it would have been superfluous to talk about it, because everything is already clear, and everybody understands everything," Lavrov said in a video posted on the Foreign Ministry's website Wednesday.

Back in Moscow, U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul's trip to the Foreign Ministry, which summoned him in the wake of U.S. diplomat Ryan Fogle's detention, seemed a mere formality. The ambassador was presented with a formal letter of complaint, then the two sides discussed legal cooperation and other issues, the ministry said in an online statement.

Video footage of McFaul and his entourage leaving the ministry — he refused to speak to reporters — after the meeting on Wednesday morning could scarcely have been further from the grim images of Fogle's capture and dressing-down that were broadcast the day before.

The Federal Security Service said Tuesday that it had detained Fogle, a third secretary in the political section of the U.S. Embassy, late Monday night as he tried to recruit a member of Russia's secret services. He was carrying technical equipment, instructions for the recruited Russian citizen, disguises and a large sum of money, the FSB said, accusing Fogle of being a CIA spy.

Fogle has been returned to U.S. custody. The Foreign Ministry has declared him "persona non grata" and instructed him to leave Russia as soon as possible.

Prominent Russian hawks, including nationalist lawmaker Vladimir Zhirinovsky and Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, were uncharacteristically silent on the issue, and the ruling United Russia party published an online article featuring a tweet in which Pushkov called it a "passing scandal."

"You'd like us to go into anti-American hysteria? I think Russia reacts more sensibly to many things than the American side. The American press would milk this story for two weeks and go off about how Russia is undermining U.S. security," Pushkov told The Moscow Times.

An acknowledgement that espionage between the former Cold War foes is a fact of life seemed partly to explain officials' muted reaction. "We understand perfectly well that American and other foreign intelligence services operate in Russia. There's no need to pretend that this isn't happening," Pushkov said, adding, "I don't think these kinds of episodes should turn into political crises."

But Fogle's capture was also seen by senior Russian officials as the latest bump in the road for U.S.-Russian relations, which have soured in recent months with Russia's decision to kick out the U.S. Agency for International Development, the passage of the Magnitsky Act, which calls for sanctions against Russian suspected of human rights abuses, and Russia's ban on adoptions by U.S. couples.

"It [the attempted recruitment] does not contribute to the future process of strengthening mutual trust between Russia and the United States and putting our relations on a new level," Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, told Itar-Tass.

But if the Kremlin did not intend to make a scandal out of Fogle's capture, why did it bother

publicizing it in the first place?

Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information, said by telephone on Wednesday that the incident was a show of force carefully timed to follow Kerry's trip to Moscow, where he met with President Vladimir Putin and declared the start of "a good, new relationship" with Russia.

"It's meant to demonstrate that the FSB is no worse than the FBI," Mukhin said, noting that the last U.S.-Russian spy scandal, which involved suspected Russian sleeper agents living in the United States, broke out after President Barack Obama hosted then-President Dmitry Medvedev at the White House in June 2010.

On Wednesday, state-run Channel One TV broadcast an interview with a unnamed man whom it identified as a current FSB officer. The man, whose faced and voice were obscured beyond recognition, said the CIA had been persistently trying to recruit Russian security officers.

The Russians expelled a U.S. diplomat for spying in January, the man said, and with Fogle, the United States "exacerbated our patience."

"We decided to make public what had been happening in Moscow, which went beyond the bounds of etiquette that exists between secret services," he said.

Pushkov indirectly hinted at another possible motive by suggesting that the incident would damage the United States' reputation among Russians.

"This is very important. Ten years ago, when they said that American intelligence was operating in Russia, half the media treated it as ironic. Now you'll find practically nobody who does. In other words, the image of the United States in Russia continues to worsen," he said.

Contact the author at j.earle@imedia.ru

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/05/14/russia-downplays-us-spy-scandal-a24042