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Russia's Sudden Spate of Treason Cases Are Scare Tactic, Analysts Say

By Allison Quinn

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Davydova's case has been the most high-profile one with good reason: She was the first guinea pig for the expanded version of Russia's law on treason.

*Correction appended

As the gulf between Russia and the West continues to deepen over the Ukraine crisis, the list of Russians being charged with treason has suddenly and visibly begun to expand — to include a mother of seven from Smolensk, an employee of the Russian Orthodox Church, a former nuclear scientist and a serviceman from the Black Sea Fleet.

A Moscow court on Monday confirmed the latest arrest, of Navy serviceman Sergei Minakov, who is accused of working for foreign intelligence while serving on a Black Sea tanker, the Interfax news agency reported.

While the rising tide of espionage is nothing new to the diplomatic quagmire that is the

Ukraine crisis, the spike in treason cases is likely a message to ordinary citizens to "be more cautious in their contact with foreigners," Andrei Soldatov, an expert on Russia's security services, told The Moscow Times on Tuesday.

Since all the cases are classified for reasons of national security, details remain few and far between. Gennady Kravtsov, apparently the first to have been charged, was arrested last May on suspicion of divulging state secrets, but his case was only reported last Friday by Russian news agencies. No details about Kravtsov's professional or personal life have been released.

Vladimir Golubev, a former nuclear scientist, has been charged with divulging state secrets for publishing an article in a Czech academic journal that the FSB said contained sensitive information. Golubev was detained last July, but news of his case only broke last week.

Yevgeny Petrin, an employee of the Russian Orthodox Church who allegedly claimed to be working as an FSB operative, also faces charges of high treason for supposedly passing information to the U.S., newspaper Kommersant reported Monday.

The message being sent with such treason cases was made loud and clear on Jan. 21, Soldatov said, when resident of Smolensk region Svetlana Davydova was taken into custody. A housewife with seven kids, still breast-feeding a newborn, Davydova faces up to 20 years behind bars for phoning the Ukrainian Embassy in Moscow last spring to tell them she believed Russian servicemen leaving their barracks near her home had been deployed to eastern Ukraine, where government troops are fighting pro-Russian rebels.

She is accused of jeopardizing Russia's national security by attempting to inform Ukrainian diplomats of Russian troop movements.

"She had no access to anything, she was not in contact with any foreign intelligence service. ... It was enough just to call the Ukrainian Embassy," Soldatov said.

Davydova's case has been the most high-profile one with good reason: She was the first guinea pig for the expanded version of Russia's law on treason, Soldatov said.

"It was all made possible by this new, expanded version of the 2012 law on state secrets. ... These past two to three years they've just been waiting for the first person [to use the law against]. ... Davydova seems to be the first," he said. "You no longer need to spy for a foreign intelligence service, it's enough to say that you passed on some information," he said.

Amendments to the law adopted in 2012 expanded the definition of high treason from divulging confidential government information to include passing on any information that could be deemed a threat to Russia's national security — and it's up to the FSB to decide what constitutes a threat.

"Usually, if someone is arrested in such a [treason] case, it is because they are going to flee the country or because authorities want to send a message. In this case, I think it is to send a message," Soldatov said, noting that the scare tactics seen in the recent treason cases were motivated by the same "desire to get rid of any kind of external control" that prompted the controversial "foreign agents" law in 2012.

That law, which obliged any nongovernmental organizations that accept foreign funding and

conduct vaguely defined "political activity" to register as "foreign agents," sent a message to "stay away from organizations that [the government] thinks might have some outside control," much like the treason cases do, Soldatov said.

The recent spate of treason cases, he said, is likely a combination of two things: "the FSB trying to impress [President Vladimir] Putin, on the one hand, and on the other, some spin doctor in the Kremlin maybe sending a message to the people."

Mark Galeotti, a global affairs professor at New York University who specializes in Russian security services, agreed with Soldatov's interpretation, saying the upsurge in treason cases was meant to convey that "dealing with foreigners, and especially providing them with information, is a dangerous act."

Both Soldatov and Galeotti said there was likely also an element of FSB agents putting on a show for their bosses.

After a brief period of decreased activity, the FSB now wants to "show that they're active, that they have a job to do, that they're also working on the Ukrainian front," Soldatov said.

Yet the treason cases serve another, third purpose, Galeotti said, reflecting "a desire on the part of the state to intensify the sense that Russia is being assailed from the West."

The fact that the arrests were made public also shed light on the real motives, Soldatov said: "If we are talking about real counterintelligence, it's extremely strange that the FSB would even arrest the suspects. Counterintelligence is not about arrests — it's about a game, the long game. For example, you need to expose Ukrainian spies. In this case, you don't arrest your guy, you need to wait, patiently, maybe for months, to see what kind of spy network you can identify."

All five suspects face up to 20 years in prison. It is unclear when the trials are expected to begin.

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An earlier version of this article mistakenly reported that Vladimir Golubev had been charged with treason. He was in fact charged with divulging state secrets.

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