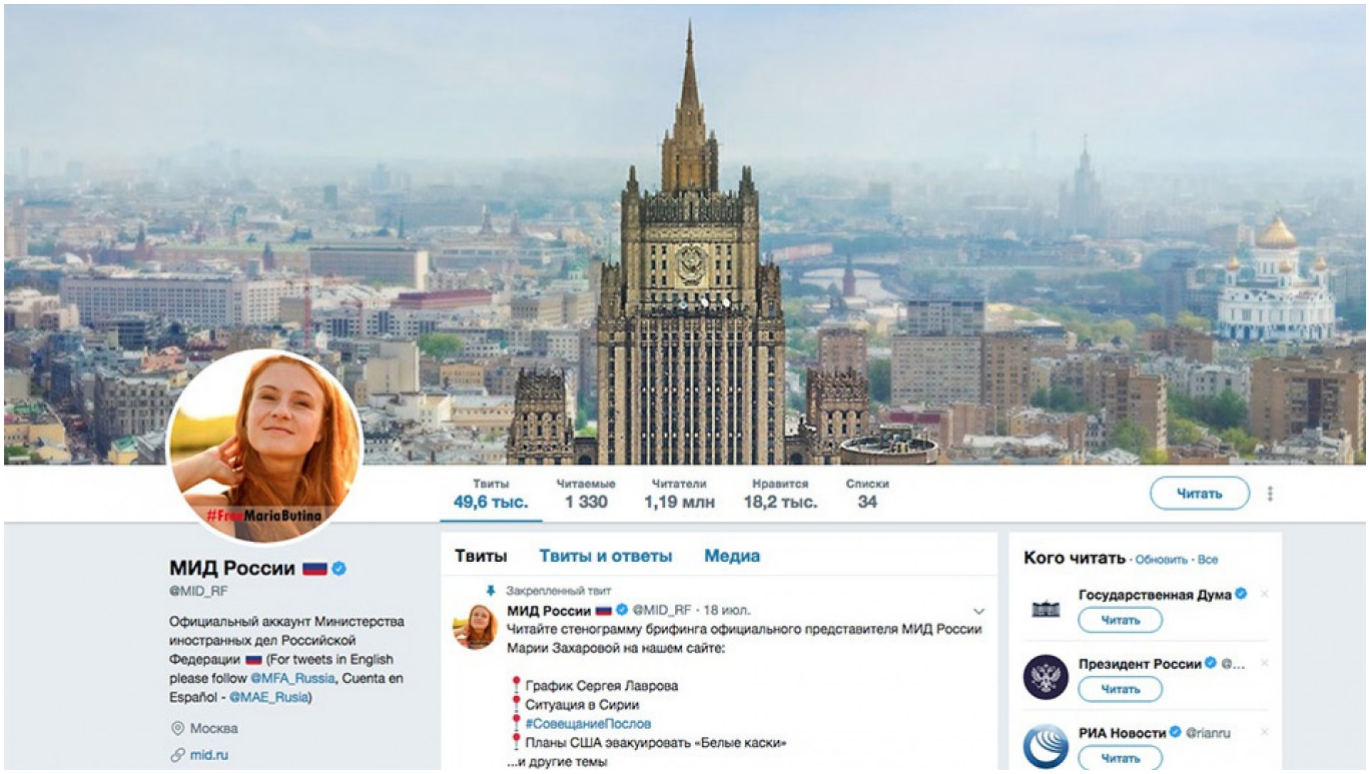
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Russia's Foreign Ministry Launches #FreeMariaButina Campaign

July 20, 2018



Russia’s Foreign Ministry has launched an online campaign in support of accused Russian agent Maria Butina, drawing a mixed bag of public support and snark.

Butina, 29, was arrested last Sunday in the United States and charged with conspiracy to act as an agent of the Russian government. A judge ordered Butina, a recent graduate of American University in Washington D.C. and founder of a pro-gun Russian advocacy group, to be detained until her trial after U.S. prosecutors argued she was a flight risk.

The Russian Foreign Ministry launched a Twitter flashmob on Thursday calling for followers to change their profile pictures to an image of Butina with the hashtag #FreeMariaButina.

The ministry’s English-language accounts shared Butina’s photograph with another hashtag saying #NewProfilePic.

Embed:

> В связи с арестом в #США гражданки России Марии Бутиной мы начинаем флешмоб в ее поддержку. #FreeMariaButina. Ставьте себе на аватарки фото Марии. pic.twitter.com/ekhh9ayvGA
>
> — МИД России ⊠⊠ (@MID_RF) 19 июля 2018 г.

Online responses to the flashmob ranged from supportive to incredulous, with a heavy dose of trolling.

On the snarky side, Twitter users reinterpreted the wording of the hashtag to read as an ad campaign offering a free Maria Butina.

The Twitter curation website Twitchy compiled an extensive list of #FreeMariaButina hashtags with photos of redhead pop culture figures, including singer Ed Sheeran, actress Scarlett Johansson and standup comic Carrot Top. The inspiration, it wrote, came after a U.S. National Security Council staffer photographed at a White House meeting with Russian officials was confused for Butina because of her red hair.

The #FreeMariaButina hashtag's popularity surged in the United States, but had little traction in Moscow, where it originated, as of Friday afternoon.

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