

# **RUSSIA'S FLIPPING FOCUS: ALEXANDER SMIRNOV IS NO EXCEPTION**

When I started spinning the Ball of Thread out of which I hoped to explain how Trump trained Republicans to hate rule of law, this post was described, "The FBI keeps getting pwned."

- Trump's narcissism makes him easy to trigger
- Trump released documents that past actors assumed would never be released
- The first time Trump "colluded" with Russia was to help Bibi Netanyahu dodge accountability
- Corruption is a process and a tool
- What is WikiLeaks
- The FBI keeps getting pwned
- My understanding of the Russian attack
- The import of chat rooms
- Rudy Giuliani was never investigated as the possible UNSUB
- John Durham's studied ignorance
- Seth DuCharme's information collection
- The GRU propaganda from the US Attorney for Pittsburgh
- Was Bill Barr even more

## corrupt than we knew?

The bullet point was, perhaps, a misnomer.

What I had *planned* to talk about, two months ago and some forty days before David Weiss accused a 14-year FBI informant of framing Joe Biden in 2020, was the way that Russia has long exploited one-time FBI informants as part of their operations against the US.

Since then, we've learned that a guy who first established contact with Russian spies, way back in 2002, by helping another intelligence service (likely Israel's) flip a low-level Russian spy, and who would therefore have been readily identifiable as an asset of intelligence services throughout that period, attempted to frame Joe Biden in 2020. If you can believe his reporting, Alexander Smirnov has since established contact with four to six high level Russian spies.

Russia's focus on using informants was readily apparent in the results of the Mueller investigation. Key players in the Russian attack who were or had previously been informants include:

- Christopher Steele, whom Oleg Deripaska used to increase Paul Manafort's legal vulnerability
- Sergei Millian, who promised George Papadopoulos a "disruptive technology" to help his political work, inspired frothers to attack a key security research effort, and led John Durham like a puppy before blowing him off in embarrassing fashion
- Hank Greenberg/Henry

Oknyansky, who tested what Roger Stone would be willing to do to get dirt on Hillary Clinton

- Felix Sater, who got Michael Cohen to chase a Trump Tower Moscow deal that would require involvement of a former GRU officer, sanctioned banks, and assistance from Putin
- Konstantin Killimnik, who claims the recycled Bannon dirt he shared with State Department officials amounted to serving as an informant

This was nothing new then. This Emma Best piece describes how a former FBI informant, Maxim Popov, played a key role in Anonymous; they suggest Popov may have been a model for the Guccifer 2.0 persona.

Nor has Russia's focus on informants diminished. In addition to Alexander Smirnov, informants dealing dirt on the Bidens leading up to 2020 include Ukrainians Rollie and The Economist and Peter Schweizer.

Sometimes, Russia's identification of FBI informants may have been facilitated by hacking. In the lead-up to the 2016 operation, the Crackas with Attitude hackers – who got far more attention for hacking John Brennan's AOL account – stole some lists of law enforcement partners and accessed FBI's Joint Automated Booking System, which might provide a way to identify hackers the FBI was in the process of flipping. The Solar Winds hack compromised DOJ six months before the department figured out what was happening; it also targeted PACER, another source of information on sealed plea deals

usually associated with cooperating witnesses. To this day, I'm furious that when DOJ IG discovered what amounts to a backdoor in the system used to archive texts sent on FBI devices – including those on which Peter Strzok and Lisa Page conducted an affair – there wasn't a more focused effort to find out whether anyone had found and used that back door. And the reason US spooks changed their understanding of WikiLeaks is that, after burning State's partners worldwide and DOD's partners in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2010, WikiLeaks went on to make CIA's local assets readily identifiable in 2017.

None of this is surprising or unique to Russia. It's good spycraft.

But the targeting of informants, particularly FBI informants, has been a central part of Russia's recent campaign against the US. There are all sorts of sound operational reasons for Russia to do that. It probably helps to evade certain kinds of counter-surveillance. It's a good way to inject information directly into investigative hands.

Just as importantly, by making it clear how shoddy FBI's management of informants is, it discredits the Bureau more generally.