

Two Russian-Australians arrested on vague charges of “preparing for espionage”

Mike Head
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The heads of the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and the domestic spy agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), held a dramatic media conference last Friday to announce the arrest of two dual Australian-Russian citizens on charges of “preparing for an espionage offence.”

From what has been reported, this is a threadbare and politically manufactured case. The purpose appears to be to cultivate a wartime atmosphere against Russia. The arrests were evidently timed to coincide with last week’s NATO summit in Washington, which further escalated the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

To add drama to the affair, the AFP provided the media with videos of the Russian-born couple, Kira Korolev, 40, and Igor Korolev, 62, being arrested last Thursday at their apartment in the Brisbane suburb of Everton Park. The corporate media dutifully described the couple as “alleged spies” involved in a “sleeper agent plot.”

Many questions remain unanswered. For a start, the Korolevs were hardly hiding themselves. Kira was active on social media, broadcasting a Russian-language travelogue of her many travels across Australia and back to Russia. Both had used Facebook to share details of their lives in Australia for more than a decade.

What is alleged is that Kira, a low-ranking Army “information systems technician,” travelled to Russia where she asked her husband, said to be a self-employed labourer, to access undisclosed “specific information” from her official Army account and send it to her personal email address.

As an Army private, Kira Korolev was required to report any overseas travel. AFP Commissioner Reece Kershaw said police would allege some of those declarations were “misleading.”

Given that Korolev reported to the Army she was out of the country, however, her email activity would have been a trigger. If they were spies, the activities of the Korolevs were obvious, amateurish and bound to be detected.

A Brisbane magistrate remanded the couple in custody to appear again on September 20. The charge sheet alleges that Kira Korolev unlawfully accessed, copied and disseminated information from Defence computer systems concerning “national security” and maintained a relationship with members or affiliates of Russian intelligence services for the purpose of

providing that information.

The charges carry a maximum 15-year prison term but could be upgraded to offences carrying up to life imprisonment if any direct link to a foreign entity is alleged.

Commissioner Kershaw said: “We allege they [the Korolevs] sought that information with the intention of providing it to Russian authorities.” But neither he nor ASIO director-general Mike Burgess would say if any sensitive information had been handed over, or even if the couple had been in contact with Russian authorities.

They said investigators had not identified any other people involved and insisted that no damage had been done to “national security.” Burgess said once the alleged espionage preparation was detected, “we were able to control this.”

Among the questions raised is the delayed timing of the arrests. ASIO agents had gained access, via a caretaker, to the Korolevs’ unit at least three months earlier and the alleged espionage preparations dated back at least 18 months. The offences are alleged to have occurred in Brisbane and the Russian Federation between December 6, 2022, and July 11, 2024.

The arrests came as the Labor government stepped up its commitment to the war against Russia. At the NATO summit, Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles announced the country’s largest single military support package to Ukraine.

He said Australia would send an extra \$250 million worth of weapons, including air defence missiles and anti-tank weapons, taking Canberra’s total military assistance in Ukraine to more than \$1.1 billion, plus \$200 million in non-military aid.

Burgess and Kershaw said they had briefed their “Five Eyes” intelligence network counterparts on the Korolev case, assuring them they could be confident in Australia’s security settings. This points to efforts by the agencies and the Labor government to further demonstrate their worth to the US-led global spy network.

For all the accusations of Russian spying, the “Five Eyes” is a massive joint surveillance operation by the US, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. It is on the front line of Washington’s aggressive war operations, from Gaza to Ukraine and the Indo-Pacific, against what US imperialism regards as the primary threats to its global hegemony—Iran, Russia and

China.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese quickly sent a similar message of assurance to the “Five Eyes,” boasting he had been “briefed extensively by our security agencies.” He declared: “I have every confidence in our agencies doing their job ... I’m very proud of them, and every Australian should be.”

These same agencies have been involved in promoting lies and pro-war propaganda for decades, including the fabrications of “weapons of mass destruction” that became the pretext for the US-led invasion and pulverisation of Iraq in 2003.

Albanese’s remarks prejudiced any chance of the Korolevs receiving a fair trial. “If you engage in action that is against Australia’s national interest, you will be caught by our security agencies,” he declared.

Yet even ex-Defence Department deputy secretary Peter Jennings, who has close military and intelligence connections, told the *Australian Financial Review* that the Korolevs’ alleged spy mission seemed a “pretty amateur job.”

Writing in the *Australian*, former senior Defence Intelligence Organisation analyst Paul Monk described the Korolevs as “small beer” who “don’t appear to have even got away with what police allege is their first intelligence heist.”

Russia’s embassy in Canberra issued a statement on Friday saying the joint AFP-ASIO media conference “was clearly intended to launch another wave of anti-Russian paranoia in Australia.” It added: “Theatrical tricks were used like talking to imaginary ‘Russian spies’ presumed to be all around.”

On Saturday, Albanese responded belligerently. “Russia can get the message: Back off,” he said. “This is a country that has no respect for international law and they should be regarded with contempt, which is what I have for them.”

This is from a prime minister who has fully backed the US-armed Israeli genocide in Gaza, which has repeatedly violated international law.

At the AFP-ASIO media conference, Burgess tried to beef up the wartime-style scare campaign against China and Russia. “Espionage is not some quaint Cold War notion,” he insisted. “Espionage damages our economy and degrades our strategic advantage. It has catastrophic real-world consequences.”

Burgess sought to compare the arrests to the 1954 defection in Australia of Soviet diplomat and KGB agent Vladimir Petrov and his wife Evdokia during the Cold War by the US and its allies against the Soviet Union. “This year marks the 70th anniversary of the Petrov defections,” he said. “Two Russian spies gave ASIO and our closest allies the name of Russian assets in western countries.”

The Petrov affair, while of far greater substance, was politically orchestrated by the then ASIO chief Charles Spry and Liberal Prime Minister Robert Menzies to whip up an anti-communist witch-hunt that helped Menzies win the 1954 election and provoked a split in the Labor Party.

Today, confronted by rapidly declining public support, the Albanese government is escalating its claims of pervasive

“foreign interference” to drum up an anti-Russia and anti-China campaign. Just a week before the Korolev arrests, Home Affairs Minister Clare O’Neil announced that the ASIO-AFP Counter Foreign Intelligence Taskforce would be expanded and made permanent.

The arrests are also an attempt to finally secure convictions under Australia’s espionage laws, which were revamped in 2018 by the previous Liberal-National government with Labor’s support, as part of a barrage of unprecedented “foreign interference” legislation.

The charges against the Korolevs are the first under the vastly-expanded espionage sections of the legislation. In fact, no stand alone offence of “preparing for espionage” existed before 2018.

The 2018 legislation widened the definition of espionage to go beyond providing military and security information to a foreign entity to providing any information whatsoever—secret or not.

Plus, the espionage offences were extended to being “reckless” or even having no intention to harm “national security”—the definition of which was also expanded to include “the country’s political, military or economic relations with another country or other countries.”

This is only the third time the AFP has charged individuals with either espionage or foreign interference offences since the laws came into effect.

In February, Melbourne businessman and Vietnamese-Chinese community figure Di Sanh Duong was declared guilty of “preparing for or planning an act of foreign interference,” supposedly on behalf of China, even though his conduct, which consisted of handing a novelty charity cheque to a government minister, took place in the full glare of publicity.

Late last month, Alexander Csergo, a Sydney businessman charged with “reckless foreign interference,” was granted bail after a judge said the case against him was “arguable.” Csergo’s only “crime” appears to be working in China as a corporate consultant.

As the WSWS has documented, the “foreign interference” laws not only target China and Russia and their alleged local sympathisers. The legislation is a far-reaching attack on basic democratic rights. It can be used to outlaw political opposition, anti-war dissent and social protests by alleging that these activities are connected to “foreign” or international campaigns.



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