

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TRUMP-FIRING- MASHA RECORDING

Yesterday morning, ABC and then Daily Beast revealed that there was a recording of the April 2018 meeting where Lev Parnas got Trump to say he would fire Marie “Masha” Yovanovitch simply by suggesting she was bad-mouthing Trump. Then, last night, Parnas’ lawyer Joseph Bondy appeared on Rachel Maddow’s show again, and provided more details of the recording.

It is about 1:40 hours long, and the firing reference comes after 40 minutes.

Bondy’s interview made two things clear:

- By April 2018 – when Trump’s administration made Javelin missiles available to Ukraine provided that they not use them against Russia, reportedly in exchange for Ukraine’s halt to any cooperation with the Mueller inquiry – Trump was interested in how vulnerable Ukraine could be made by withdrawing US support. Half an hour, Parnas told Trump Ukraine could resist the Russian incursion without US help, based on what, we don’t know.
- Lev Parnas probably did not fully comply with the HPSCI subpoena.

I’m as interested in the claimed story about how

the recording came about.

Igor Fruman – the guy whose deep connections in Ukraine, including with some mobbed up businessmen, Parnas claims to have networked through – made the recording. That led most people to assume that Fruman released it, and therefore is cooperating, something for which there is no support.

There are at least three other possible sources for the recording.

First, SDNY seem to be suggesting that Parnas and Fruman were working for an as-yet unnamed Ukrainian to get Masha fired. That makes all the smiling pictures that the men posted with Trump and other powerful Republicans feel like a kind of reporting system, perhaps the same one Maria Butina was using. Such social media posting would be a good way to make it clear to whoever is footing the bill for such an operation that the grifters are obtaining the meetings promised. If so, the recording (and other similar ones) might serve a three-fold purpose:

- It can serve as blackmail against Trump and others, just as it's being used now
- It collects intelligence about the security around Trump (Fruman reportedly took a video of the two of them entering the meeting)
- It assures the paymaster of this operation that he's getting what he paid for

Remarkably, we don't yet know what Ukrainian was allegedly paying the grifters. It could be Dmitro Firtash (who last fall gave Parnas' wife "a loan" that she could use to buy a house that, because it'd be in Florida, could not be seized as forfeiture). Given that Kevin Downing was involved in Parnas and Fruman's defense, it

could be any of Ukrainians who paid Paul Manafort after he entertained a plan to carve up Ukraine on August 2, 2016, which include Serhiy Lyovochkin and Rinat Akmetov, the former of whom used a straw donation to attend Trump's inauguration. Or it could be one of the dodgy businessmen around Fruman. All had and have an incentive to try to reverse Ukraine's efforts to combat corruption, and so would value the removal of Masha. [Update: I'm missing two other obvious candidates – Yuriy Lutsenko and Viktor Shokin – though much of the reporting on their interest in taking her out focuses on 2019 efforts that are more closely tied to dirt on the Bidens. Update: Fixed where the allegation that a Ukrainian was directing their efforts.]

Any of those people might have reason to release the recording. In the same way that Oleg Deripaska was pushing FBI to investigate Paul Manafort even as he was using Manafort's desperation to try to coerce him to become his asset again, including to carve up Ukraine, anyone trying to compromise Trump can use his efforts to beat impeachment to make him more reliant on Ukrainian discretion about any deals they've made. Plus, by making Trump's corruption and compromise clear even as Republican Senators vote against doing anything about it, it ensures that every single federally elected Republican has been implicated in this operation. So it's possible the recording came from the paymaster.

It's also possible it came from SDNY's notoriously leaky FBI. The ABC reporters who first released it include DOJ beat journalists, so it would make sense that they'd have FBI sources. But I doubt it, not least because an FBI source would have had reason to leak it before yesterday.

But there is another possibility: that Parnas was the source, but he and Bondy lied about it early in the day (and okayed its release while Bondy was on MSNBC's set, with a natural alibi he expressly noted), to create a cover story for releasing the recording without admitting that

Parnas had not fully complied with the HPSCI subpoena but was belatedly, just yesterday, providing a copy of the recording to HPSCI. Bondy claimed it had been on Parnas' iCloud all the time, but he had forgotten he had it.

Bondy was more aggressively questioned last night, in part by Chuck Rosenberg and Maya Wiley. But neither confronted Bondy on reports that, in discussions with SDNY last month, he had maintained Parnas' claim that he was innocent of the existing charges against him: that he was paid and directed by the still-unnamed Ukrainian to get Masha fired. Neither raised that prosecutors have repeatedly said they expect to file more charges against the grifters, likely including (because FBI likely obtained a FISA order against one of them) foreign agent charges, which undercuts Bondy's claim that Parnas is not seeking a cooperation deal because the existing charges against him don't have that serious a sentencing range.

Bondy offered some explanation for why Parnas had not searched his iCloud because he had to make sure SDNY had gotten their evidence first. That sounds like a load of baloney. After all, SDNY would have been able to obtain Parnas' iCloud account with a warrant to Apple (given that Apple decided not to encrypt iCloud after previously considering it, that means some really damning information on Trump is just sitting on a server in Cupertino or somewhere). The recording was over 18 months old when Parnas was arrested. So SDNY had had it, likely, for some time. Moreover, SDNY had told Parnas they had their discovery collected on December 3, which means Bondy could have provided this record – and anything else that was always available to Parnas – even before the phone records. Bondy now is claiming that Parnas was injured with a delay in discovery, because it delayed his ability to cooperate with HPSCI, which is totally undermined by any admission that Parnas had never even searched his iCloud (and still may not have) for information related to the HPSCI subpoena.

All of which suggests Parnas is trying to carefully manage what he's sharing with HPSCI, presumably focusing on the latter period of his work to get Masha fired, when he could claim to be doing Rudy Giuliani's bidding, and not the earlier part, when prosecutors claim he was working for some Ukrainian. For better and worse, that likely means that Rudy is at least partly a victim of Parnas, someone who was desperate and weak and easily manipulated into doing really stupid things – just like Trump – who could then be claimed as the real actor behind this operation.

In a sane world, both parties would take a step back and agree that our quisling President and his fawning lackeys were an easy mark. We'd talk about how to unwind whatever damage Trump has done to himself and the country.

But we don't live in a sane world and Republicans are about to defend Trump's right to be manipulated by grifters and spies as his Constitutional prerogative.