



## The United States Department of Justice

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### **U.S. Citizens Convicted of Conspiring to Act as Illegal Agents of the Russian Government**

WASHINGTON – A jury today convicted Omali Yeshitela, 82, Penny Hess, 78, Jesse Nevel, 34, all of St. Louis, and Augustus C. Romain Jr., 38, of Atlanta, of conspiracy to act as agents of a foreign government. The defendants were charged in a superseding indictment on April 13, 2023.

According to evidence presented at trial, from at least May 2015 until July 2022, Yeshitela, Hess and Nevel agreed to act on behalf of the Russian government within the United States. Aleksandr Viktorovich Ionov, a resident of Moscow, was the founder and president of the Anti-Globalization Movement of Russia (AGMR), an organization headquartered in Moscow, Russia, and funded by the Russian government. Omali Yeshitela, Penny Hess and Jesse Nevel were leaders of the African People’s Socialist Party (APSP) or components thereof. Augustus C. Romain was a high-level leader of the APSP who, in November 2018, left and formed a Georgia-based group called the Black Hammer. Ionov’s influence efforts were directed and supervised by Moscow-based Federal Security Service (FSB) officers, including indicted defendants Aleksey Borisovich Sukhodolov and Yegor Sergeevich Popov.

In May 2015, Ionov invited Yeshitela to Russia for an all-expenses paid trip to “communicate on future cooperation.” Prior to this trip, Hess relayed a request to Ionov to ensure that Yeshitela would be able to meet with an “official representative of the Russian government.” According to subsequent email communications, which were shared with Hess, Nevel and Romain, Yeshitela explained that it was “clear” that Ionov was an instrument of the Russian government. In these same communications,

Yeshitela further explained that Ionov represented “a method by which the Russian government is engaging the U.S. and Europe in serious struggle” by utilizing “forces inside of the U.S. to s[o]w division inside the U.S.” In a subsequent meeting, at which Hess and Nevel were present, Yeshitela explained that Ionov would only provide resources for actions that would support Russia’s efforts to “undermin[e] the U.S.”

Acting under Ionov’s direction, the defendants took several actions within the United States. For example, in August 2015, Ionov requested that Yeshitela, Hess and Nevel draft and publish a petition to the United Nations charging the United States with actively committing genocide against African people. When Hess resisted, Ionov insisted that the APSP had to publish the petition because Ionov and his Russian backers were “not exactly Black to demand it for ourselves.” Hess subsequently drafted and published the requested petition, which Ionov promoted in Russian media.

In January 2016, Ionov provided a \$12,000 guarantee letter to fund a four-city tour to promote the genocide petition that the APSP had published at his direction. Yeshitela and Hess oversaw the tour and reported information about the tour to Ionov. After the tour, Yeshitela explained in an APSP meeting that the APSP had “developed a relationship with forces in Russia who are involved in their own struggle with the US.”

In 2017, and again in 2019, Ionov attempted to influence local elections in St. Petersburg, Florida, on behalf of the FSB, although there is no evidence that he succeeded in doing so. For example, in July 2017, Ionov reached out to Nevel—who was a candidate for Mayor in St. Petersburg—to offer support, including “campaign finance.” In 2019, Ionov regularly reported to the FSB concerning an election for local office in St. Petersburg, referring to one candidate as the candidate “whom we supervise.” And, in January 2020, FSB Officer Popov directed Ionov that the United States’ 2020 Presidential election was the FSB’s “main topic of the year.”

In April 2020, Ionov invited Nevel and Yeshitela to speak at a conference to promote the right of self-determination for Russian-backed secessionist movements in eastern Ukraine. Shortly thereafter, Yeshitela provided a video-recorded statement of support for the Russian-backed secessionist group. Ionov reported to the FSB concerning these activities.

In late February 2022, after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Ionov complained to FSB Officer Sukhodolov concerning Russia’s failure in the information war surrounding the invasion. Sukhodolov directed Ionov to “join in” in the information war. Ionov then directed Yeshitela and Romain to engage in demonstrations at a social media company headquarters in California to demonstrate against suppression of pro-Russian viewpoints. Ionov paid for Romain and three other members of Black Hammer to fly to

California to conduct the demonstration, and Yeshitela directed members of the APSP located in California to conduct a similar protest a few days later. After the Black Hammer demonstration, Romain messaged Ionov: “This is great! That was fun! Who we attacking next? With more time I can get a bigger crowd.”

In May 2022, at Ionov’s direction, Romain demonstrated at a media company in Atlanta, Georgia, to celebrate Russia’s “Victory Day.” In June 2022, at Ionov’s direction, Ionov demonstrated at the Georgia state capitol in support of Russia. During the demonstration, Romain stated that he was “not ashamed to say that the Black Hammer Party has relationships with the Kremlin,” in reference to Ionov. Each defendant faces a maximum penalty of five years in prison. A sentencing date has not yet been set.

Assistant Attorney General Matthew G. Olsen of the Justice Department’s National Security Division and Executive Assistant Director Robert Wells of the FBI National Security Branch made the announcement.

The FBI is investigating the case.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Daniel J. Marcet and Risha Asokan for the Middle District of Florida and Trial Attorney Menno Goedman of the National Security Division’s Counterintelligence and Export Control Section are prosecuting the case.

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