

Complaint by Fidel Narváez to The Guardian

"Revealed: Russia's secret plan to help Julian Assange escape from UK" September 22-23- 2018

STAGE ONE – THE READER’S EDITOR

On 9 October 2018 at 09:19, Fidel Narvaez <[REDACTED]@gmail.com> wrote:

Paul Chadwick

Reader’s Editor, The Guardian

Kings Place

90 York Way

[London N1 9GU](#)

9 October 2018

Dear Mr Chadwick,

The article "**Revealed: Russia's secret plan to help Julian Assange escape from UK**", published online 21-09-18, printed 22-09-18 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/21/julian-assange-russia-ecuador-embassy-london-secret-escape-plan>) misleads readers and defames me. I write to demand a public apology.

The article reports an "escape plan" that "would have seen the Wikileaks founder smuggled out of Ecuador's London embassy...", "devised" by Russian diplomats, naming me as "a point of contact with Moscow." It is based entirely on unnamed "sources".

I am the only identified source, portrayed as "a close confidante of Julian Assange" and yet I explained to The Guardian journalist, Stephanie Kirchgaessner, who contributed to the article, that **'I know of no "escape plan" to "smuggle" Julian Assange out of the Embassy, much less in collaboration with a third country. I have never spoken to a Russian diplomat in London, or anywhere else, about Julian Assange's case, or anything else'.**

The Guardian has not, and cannot, substantiate with solid evidence its following false assertions:

- "Russian diplomats held secret talks in London last year with people close to Julian Assange to assess whether they could help him flee the UK..."
- "A tentative plan was devised that would have seen the Wikileaks founder smuggled out of Ecuador's London embassy..."

The reference to me: " ...**Fidel Narváez**, a close confidante of Assange who until recently served as Ecuador's London consul, **served as a point of contact with Moscow**," is a defamatory untruth and must be proved or retracted with a public apology, in recognition of harm caused me through associating me with Russian plots.

The reach of The Guardian in the UK, and the times the report has been used by media worldwide as the basis for their own inaccurate reporting, has caused irreparable damage to my reputation, career, and untold other aspects.

My life is in the UK, where I have lived for many years with my British wife (an MBE award recipient) and British children, and the employability of all my family will likely be adversely impacted by association. In Ecuador, where I am a public figure, this issue is front-page news and my name is now reviled as a result of The Guardian's false portrayal.

Based on **The Press Complaints Commission Code of Practice, Editor's Code, Clause 1ii (Accuracy)**:

"A significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distortion must be corrected, promptly and with due prominence and – where appropriate – an apology published."

I ask that a public apology be made and the on-line article also corrected with clarification at the head of the article.

By relying on uncorroborated sources in lieu of solid facts, the authors cause harm to me, their own credibility and the reputation of the paper. In times of fake news it is important that serious publications such as the Guardian uphold print accuracy and a commitment to the truth as their first duty.

Yours faithfully

Fidel Narváez

Cambridge - UK

██████████@gmail.com

From: [REDACTED]@guardian.co.uk <[REDACTED]@guardian.co.uk> **On Behalf Of** Readers' editor (Guardian)
Sent: 29 October 2018 17:14
To: Fidel Narvaez <[REDACTED]@gmail.com>
Subject: Re: Complaint by Fidel Narváez "Revealed: Russia's secret plan to help Julian Assange escape from UK" September 22-23- 2018

Dear Mr Narváez,

Thank you for your patience.

I have now had an opportunity to re-read [the article](#) in conjunction with your emailed letter dated 9 October 2018, and to seek details from relevant journalists.

As presently advised, I have concluded that the article should not be amended. The reasons follow.

At the time of first publication, and since, readers of the paragraph that attributes to two sources information that you served as a point of contact with Moscow will have read your clear denial of that in the paragraph immediately following.

I am satisfied that the journalists have good grounds to be confident about their sources.

Several factors lend weight to the information which has been reported.

Your service in the Ecuadorian embassy was significant over a substantial period of time. It is a public, representative role, as distinct from a private one.

If it were the latter, then different considerations might apply.

Your closeness to Julian Assange has been widely reported.

Your role in assisting Edward Snowden with safe passage to Moscow is also on the public record.

Lastly, since publication of the article, further information relevant to the subject of the article has come to light from documents made available in Ecuador.

Among that information is evidence of your involvement in what the article reports. I am advised that you did not disclose this involvement to the Guardian journalist who interviewed you last August prior to the initial publication of the article. Neither was this information mentioned in your letter dated 9 October.

Clear and important public interests are implicated in the Assange case. Ongoing reporting about the case serves those public interests.

Facts about this matter have emerged in an incremental way over several years. More are likely to continue to emerge, and slowly to build a more complete picture.

The coverage would be reduced by any amendment to the article that was not justified by clear evidence of inaccuracy.

I am not aware of evidence of inaccuracy, though I acknowledge your denial.

I recognise that my decision is likely to disappoint you, but I trust that you will recognise that the matter has been given serious consideration.

The way the matter now rests is orthodox according to journalistic practice.

The information that concerns you remains in the article, but it is accompanied by a clear denial from you. That denial has been present in the article since its initial publication.

Yours sincerely,

Paul Chadwick

Readers' editor

Guardian Readers' editor's office

twitter: [@GdnReadersEd](https://twitter.com/GdnReadersEd)

On Fri, 16 Nov 2018 at 09:00, Fidel Narvaez <[REDACTED]@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Mr Chadwick,

Thank you for your response. I do not feel you have addressed my point that the following two challenged assertions are not substantiated:

"Russian diplomats held secret talks in London last year with people close to Julian Assange to assess whether they could help him flee the UK..."

"A tentative plan was devised that would have seen the Wikileaks founder smuggled out of Ecuador's London embassy..."

Neither do you present evidence for the defamatory reference to me: "**...Fidel Narváez, a close confidante of Assange who until recently served as Ecuador's London consul, served as a point of contact with Moscow,**"

I hereby address each of the points in your response:

You say: "**At the time of first publication, and since, readers of the paragraph that attributes to two sources information that you served as a point of contact with Moscow will have read your clear denial of that in the paragraph immediately following**".

The inclusion of my denial in the article does not change the fact that, overall, the newspaper has published a fabricated "escape" story, placing me at its centre.

You say: "**I am satisfied that the journalists have good grounds to be confident about their sources**".

A false story cannot hide behind unspecified 'good grounds' for confidence. I challenge the veracity of those grounds, and the reliability of the journalist's "sources". The Guardian has not provided evidence in the article to corroborate the source's false statements but has instead cited known or partial facts in order to lend credence to a central falsehood.

You say that there are several factors lending weight to the information which has been reported:

"Your service in the Ecuadorian embassy was significant over a substantial period of time. It is a public, representative role, as distinct from a private one.

If it were the latter, then different considerations might apply."

I understand that public scrutiny is to be expected when one acts in a public role but it should also be understood that defamation of someone in a public role has a greater impact because they are known.

"Your closeness to Julian Assange has been widely reported."

Being "close" to Julian Assange does not make me his confidante nor does it convert a fabricated "escape plan" into a real one.

"Your role in assisting Edward Snowden with safe passage to Moscow is also on the public record."

This is incorrect. I did not assist Edward Snowden with safe passage to Moscow. The document I issued for Edward Snowden was to help him get to Ecuador, not to Moscow. I did not help him to get to Russia. In fact, the opposite is true. I tried to help him *leave* Russia. Russia was not his destination and it played no part in his attempt to get to South America. My role in helping Edward Snowden is mentioned and misrepresented in the article, in order to lend verisimilitude to the invented part of the article. Likewise, the mention of my attendance at two briefings for diplomats at the Russian Embassy, which took place three months *after* the alleged events described in the article.

You say that ***"since publication of the article, further information relevant to the subject has come to light from documents made available in Ecuador and that among that information is evidence of your involvement in what the article reports"***.

You are unable to provide evidence of the claims that *"Russian diplomats held secret talks in London last year with people close to Julian Assange to assess whether they could help him flee the UK..."* or that *"A tentative plan was devised that would have seen the Wikileaks founder smuggled out of Ecuador's London embassy..."* or that [I] *"...served as a point of contact with Moscow"* as these are all untruths. As such my involvement in something that did not happen is an impossibility.

You say: ***"I am advised that you did not disclose this involvement to the Guardian journalist who interviewed you last August prior to the initial publication of the article. Neither was this information mentioned in your letter dated 9 October."***

I answered, in good faith, every question put to me by the journalist who spoke to me in August and discussed the issues raised at length in a conversation that lasted approximately 40 minutes. I do not know to what specifically you are referring as you did not state it but must assume it refers to my notifying the FCO of the diplomatic appointment of Julian Assange. This was public knowledge long before the publication of the article and it was mentioned in my conversation with The Guardian's journalist. I should point out that Ecuador, in common with other sovereign states, is free to appoint whom they choose as a diplomat to any posting. Ecuador's wish for Julian Assange to be able to leave the Embassy legitimately, with the agreement of the UK government and without risk to himself is a very long way from a "plot to smuggle" him out in collusion with a third country as your paper reports.

My letter of October 9th contains only the points that have a direct bearing on how I am misrepresented in the article. Other inaccuracies contained in the article include describing me as serving *"until recently as London Consul"*. My position as Consul ended in 2013. It reports what can only be described as a ludicrous consideration of transporting Assange to Ecuador by boat, which is also false and it prints an inaccurate plan of the embassy with misleading annotations.

You say that you are not aware of inaccuracy in the report but I maintain that the article is false in its central point. There has never been a "Russian escape plan" to smuggle Julian Assange from the Embassy and I could not therefore be a key operator in such a plan. The story is inaccurate and defamatory, giving an impression of my person and position that is false.

It is the newspaper's responsibility to prove the accuracy of the story, not that of the defamed individual to prove its inaccuracy.

I respectfully request that you redirect me to the **Review Panel**, so I can file my complaint with them.

Yours sincerely,

Fidel Narváez

From: [REDACTED]@guardian.co.uk <[REDACTED]@guardian.co.uk> **On Behalf Of** Readers' editor
(Guardian)

Sent: 23 November 2018 18:22

To: [REDACTED]@gmail.com

Subject: Re: Complaint by Fidel Narváez "Revealed: Russia's secret plan to help Julian Assange escape from UK" September 22-23- 2018

Dear Fidel Narváez,

Thank you for your latest email.

To be clear, the complaint from you that I addressed was the part of the article that concerns you and states that you had "served as a point of contact with Moscow".

I will again look into the matter in the light of the further points you make on that issue and will get back to you as soon as possible.

yours sincerely,

Paul Chadwick
Readers' editor

Guardian Readers' editor's office

twitter: [@GdnReadersEd](https://twitter.com/GdnReadersEd)

From: [REDACTED]@guardian.co.uk <[REDACTED]@guardian.co.uk> **On Behalf Of**
Readers' editor (Guardian)
Sent: 14 December 2018 18:40
To: Fidel Narvaez <[REDACTED]@gmail.com>
Subject: Re: Complaint by Fidel Narváez "Revealed: Russia's secret plan to help Julian Assange escape from UK" September 22-23- 2018

Dear Fidel Narváez,

Thank you for your patience in awaiting another consideration of your complaint about this article -

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/21/julian-assange-russia-ecuador-embassy-london-secret-escape-plan>

The issue

The article states in part that you "served as a point of contact with Moscow".

In case there is confusion, I should state that I regard the word "Moscow" in the context to mean Russia and its representatives, not literally or solely Moscow the geographic location.

Whether, as you state, you are at the centre of the article is a matter of opinion. The words "a point of contact" do not convey that you were the only one.

As noted in my response of 29 October 2018, your denial has been in the article since it was first published. That is standard journalistic practice, and appropriate in these circumstances.

In cases such as this where there are directly conflicting positions it can be necessary to make a decision on the balance of probabilities.

The standard

The editorial standards require that journalists "take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information", and that significant error be corrected or clarified.

Decision and reasons

Having considered again the article and your responses (of 9 October and 16 November), and having again consulted all three journalists about the basis for the phrase appearing in the article, I have again concluded that the article does not fall below the editorial standards.

I cannot go into detail about the sources, but I can assure you that I have tested with the journalists the underpinnings of the relevant section of the article and, as presently advised, I believe that it does not require amendment.

In my view it is more likely than not that you were involved in the plan, executed unsuccessfully and dismantled in late 2017/early 2018, to make Julian Assange an Ecuadorian citizen, then diplomat and then post him to Moscow from the Ecuadorian embassy in London where he has been a resident since 2012.

My conclusion largely rests on these factors -

- Much of your longstanding service at the Ecuadorian embassy in London, which I understand ended in about the middle of this year, coincided with the period in which Julian Assange has been a resident. You were among those in closest proximity to him in what is a small place.
- In 2013, when Julian Assange and WikiLeaks assisted the US whistleblower Edward Snowden, you personally provided the document necessary for Snowden's travel, and when he first was in Moscow you were involved in efforts to help him further.
- During at least part of the period relevant to the plan for Julian Assange to serve as a diplomat in Russia you were, in the ambassador's absence, in charge of embassy affairs.
- Official documents demonstrate your involvement in the plan. For example, after the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) declined to recognise Julian Assange as an Ecuadorian diplomat (Note No A295/17) the Ecuadorian authorities revoked his appointment as political counsellor in London and his posting to Moscow and you were designated to advise Julian Assange of the revocations.

Having reviewed, in light of the documents, notes of the interview in August 2018 between you and one of the three authors of the article, I think it is fair to note that, in my view, what the documents indicate about your knowledge of the plan points in a different direction than some of your answers in the interview.

I want to emphasise that in this decision I do not mean to state or imply that you did anything other than your duty as you saw it, including in the August interview.

On the matter of the title "consul", in diplomatic lists during your period of service in London you appear at different times with the titles "consul" and "first secretary". A document made public in Quito (headed MREMH-MREMH-2018-1282-OF, dated 17 September 2018) refers to 2017 and 2018 events and describes you as "el cónsul". In my view, nothing significant turns on the matter such that amendment to the article would be needed.

Review

In your email dated 16 November 2018 you foreshadowed an appeal to the Review Panel. If, after considering this further response in conjunction with my initial decision dated 29 October 2018, you decide that you want to pursue an appeal, please let us know and we will arrange for you to receive the appropriate complaint form. The Review Panel is independent of the readers' editor's office.

Yours sincerely,

Paul Chadwick
Readers' editor

Guardian Readers' editor's office

twitter: [@GdnReadersEd](https://twitter.com/GdnReadersEd)

From: Fidel Narvaez <[REDACTED]@gmail.com>

Sent: 28 December 2018 09:02

To: 'Readers' editor (Guardian)' <[REDACTED]@theguardian.com>

Subject: RE: Complaint by Fidel Narváez "Revealed: Russia's secret plan to help Julian Assange escape from UK" September 22-23- 2018

Dear Mr Chadwick,

Thank you for your response. I will pursue an appeal with the Review Panel, to which I respectfully request you redirect me, regardless of any further comments arising from our current communication.

With all due respect, nothing you have responded substantiates the false story published by The Guardian, of a "Russian secret plot" "devised" by "Russian diplomats" in order to "smuggle" Julian Assange from the Ecuadorian Embassy.

Your response continues to fail to address the following assertions that my complaint challenged:

"Russian diplomats held secret talks in London last year with people close to Julian Assange to assess whether they could help him flee the UK..."

"A tentative plan was devised that would have seen the Wikileaks founder smuggled out of Ecuador's London embassy..."

You say that you have "tested with the journalists the underpinnings of the relevant section of the article" where it is stated that "...**Fidel Narváez**, a close confidante of Assange who until recently served as Ecuador's London consul, **served as a point of contact with Moscow**"

I must reiterate that my involvement in something that did not happen is an impossibility. I am challenging the veracity of the core of story and emphasise that there never was a "secret plan" to "smuggle" Julian Assange from the Embassy, let alone one devised by Russia.

The fact that Ecuador has given Ecuadorian nationality to Julian Assange is his right according to our legislation and serves as an additional protective shield for the asylee. The fact that Ecuador attempted to appoint him as a diplomat either in the UK, or in a third country, in this case, Russia, so as to enable his leaving the Embassy, is also a sovereign and legitimate administrative action taken by Ecuador for the defence of a political asylee under our international protection. These facts in no way relate to a "plan to smuggle" Assange to Russia as styled in the article.

The Guardian's report, however, uses these facts as its basis from which to fabricate a "secret Russian plot", describe me as the operator and embellish it with unrelated events, such as my role in helping Edward Snowden, in order to make the fabrication seem more likely.

As I said in my previous letter: *"Ecuador's wish for Julian Assange to be able to leave the Embassy legitimately, with the agreement of the UK government and without risk to himself is a very long way from a "plot to smuggle" him out in collusion with a third country as your paper reports."*

You said that in your view, *"what the documents indicate about your knowledge of the plan points in a different direction than some of your answers in the interview"*

I gave honest answers to all questions asked me. As a diplomat, I am not required to provide information to journalists that could be considered confidential and my knowledge of it does not make a factually incorrect article more correct. I do consider it my obligation however to point out information that is completely inaccurate and do not expect journalists of standing to print conjecture rather than facts.

In your previous letter you mentioned: "*Clear and important public interests are implicated in the Assange case. Ongoing reporting about the case serves those public interests*".

The reporting of the Assange case by the three authors of this invented "Russian plot" story, betrays rather than serves the public interest. I can point to several inaccuracies and plain falsehoods, in other reports written by the same journalists and will do so if the Review Panel so requires. It is worth mentioning the most recent one, authored by Luke Harding and Dan Collyns, "**Manafort held secret talks with Assange in Ecuadorian embassy**" (<https://archive.fo/pUjrj#selection-1373.1-1373.62>), published on November 27th. I served in the Ecuadorian embassy for 8 years and can assure The Guardian that this story is also false. I highlight this because it is written by two of the same authors of the subject of my complaint and it also seeks to link Julian Assange to Russia by any means.

Fabricating events surely falls below the editorial standards you refer to, that require journalists to "*take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information*", and that significant error be corrected or clarified.

For the sake of the prestige of The Guardian, I trust that the Review Panel will agree with this after reviewing my complaint.

Yours sincerely,

Fidel Narváez