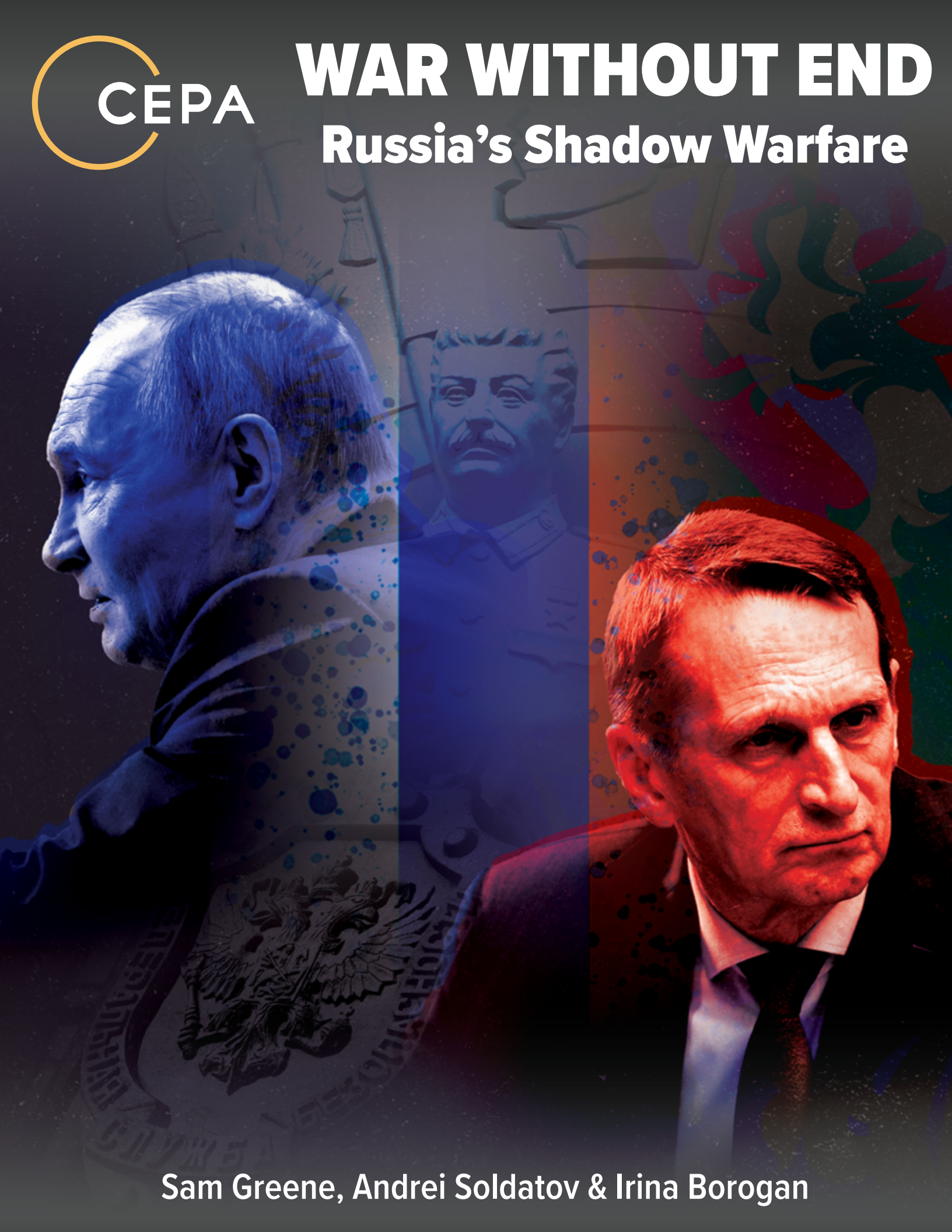
CEPA

WAR WITHOUT END

Russia's Shadow Warfare



Sam Greene, Andrei Soldatov & Irina Borogan

ABOUT CEPA

The Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, public policy institution headquartered in Washington, DC with hubs in London and Brussels, focused on strengthening the transatlantic alliance through cutting-edge research, analysis, and programs. CEPA provides innovative insight on trends affecting democracy, security, and defense to government officials and agencies; helps transatlantic businesses navigate changing strategic landscapes; and builds networks of future leaders versed in Atlanticism.

WAR WITHOUT END

Russia's Shadow Warfare

Contents

Introduction

Sam Greene

Severed cables. Disrupted aviation. Arson. Sabotage. Assassination. Infiltration. Attacks designed to distract, to confuse, and to dismay an adversary – but not to provoke a response. Such is shadow warfare, causing damage and costing lives but operating below the traditional threshold of war.

Shadow War as System, Not Strategy

Even as Ukraine continues to suffer under wave after wave of bombardment and an ever deepening occupation of its eastern and southern territory, Europe as a whole is under a sustained assault of a different kind. Earlier this year, the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) launched a major new project—*Defend, Deny, Deter: Countering Russia's Shadow Warfare*—to help lay the groundwork for a new transatlantic approach to deterrence.

In the first phase of this project, CEPA Senior Non-Resident Fellows Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan explore the who, what, why and how of Russian shadow warfare, uncovering the nature of the forces Russia brings to bear, their governance structures and, critically, the implicit doctrine that shapes strategic and tactical decision-making. Their analysis shows that shadow warfare is not merely an opportunistic tool, but an expression of a deep, self-reinforcing system of governance. Later in the year, CEPA will publish further studies, examining Europe's vulnerabilities and testing strategies of retaliation and deterrence.

What emerges from Soldatov and Borogan's investigation, however, is already sobering. Their work, presented here, makes clear that Russia's shadow warfare is not simply a covert strategy, developed to take advantage of Western soft spots or fecklessness. Rather, it is the reflection of a deeper ideological and institutional logic, a neo-Stalinist threat framework that sees warfare as continuous and ubiquitous, that fuses domestic and foreign threats, and that understands everything and everyone as a potential target.

This is an approach to warfare that generates escalation not by mistake, but by design. Unless Europe can impose discipline on the Russian shadow-warfare machine through clear deterrence, the likelihood of full-scale war between Russia and NATO will only increase.

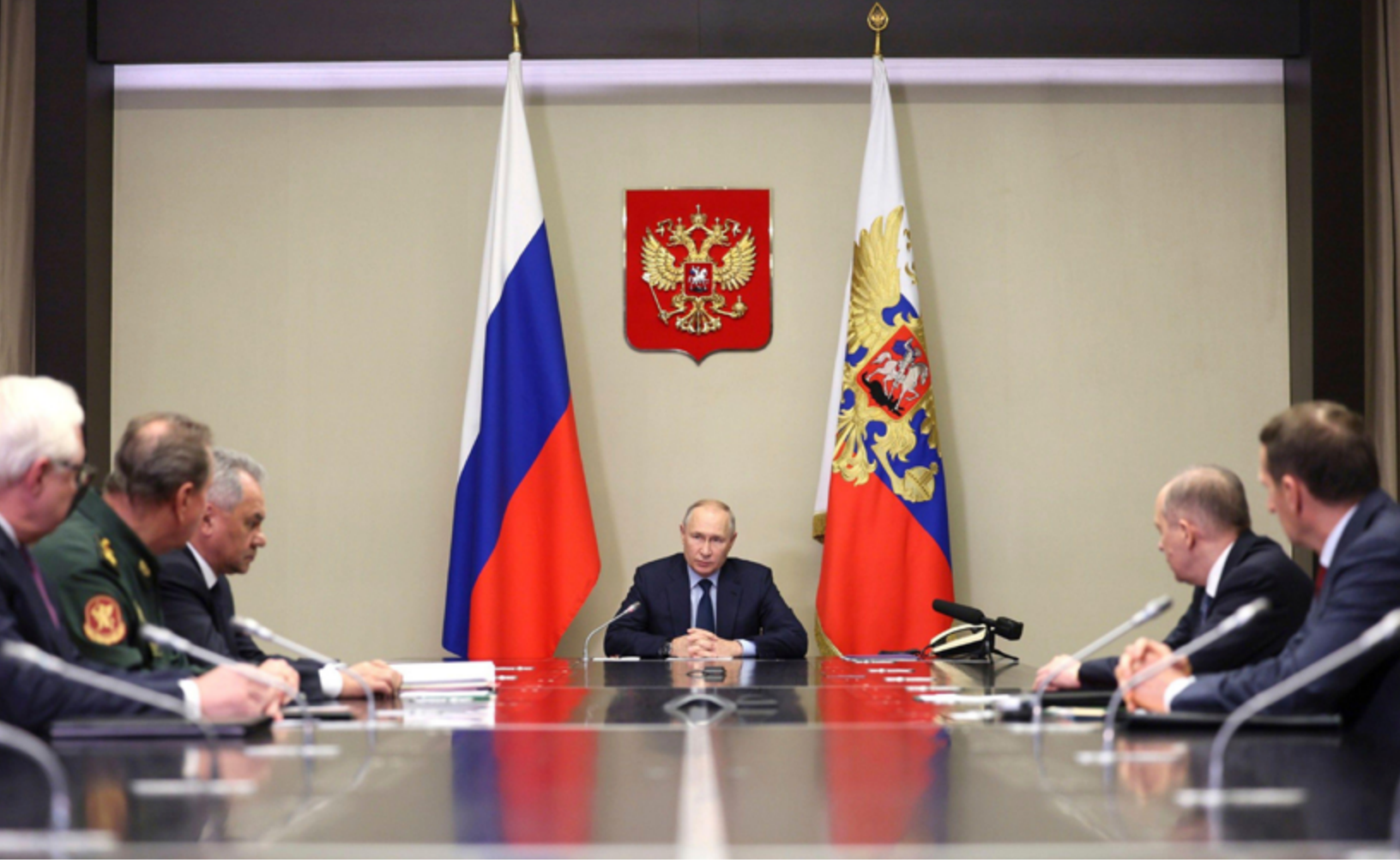


Photo: Russian President Vladimir Putin chairs a face-to-face meeting with government officials to discuss operational issues at the Novo-Ogaryovo presidential state residence, October 16, 2023 outside Moscow, Russia. Credit: Gavriil Grigorov/Kremlin Pool/Alamy Live News

As Soldatov and Borogan make clear, the Kremlin's overriding concern is not Russian national security, but the survival and continuation of the current regime—or, rather, the Kremlin's worldview is incapable of distinguishing between the two. Theirs is a paranoid political vision that sees all expressions of dissent as signs of foreign subversion, and all foreign machinations as tools of regime change.

Operationally, the machine runs from the Kremlin center, via the Security Council and the Presidential Administration, through the chiefs of the FSB, GRU and SVR, and outward into an ecosystem of auxiliaries and proxies. Shadow warfare comprises sub-threshold coercive activity: sabotage and infrastructure disruption; transnational repression and targeted violence; cyber and information operations; sanctions evasion and covert procurement; and political influence. It advances through layered deniability, multi-vector pressure, and iterative probing that tests defenses and narratives alike.

A Neo-Stalinist Vision of Perpetual War

Even before World War II, Stalin understood war to be the natural and inevitable state of affairs facing the Soviet Union, the product of inexorable global forces, and thus the logic through which everything—from regional and then global domination, to production targets throughout the Soviet economy—must be seen. Collapsing the boundary between inside and outside, between domestic and foreign, Stalinist doctrine required every element of the Soviet security state, from the Red Army to the NKVD, to see themselves as engaged in both internal and external political struggle.

As Vladimir Putin plunged Russia back into global conflict beginning with the initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Russia's post-Soviet security state has reverted to Stalinist form. While the military plays an increasingly visible role in domestic politics, it is Russia's special services whose sense of mission has been most critically renewed. The same agencies—chiefly the FSB and GRU—are tasked with handling both domestic repression and foreign sabotage. Assassinations of defectors serve both as internal reinforcement and external deterrence, signaling to all involved that no one can be kept safe.

The war on dissent that killed Alexei Navalny, then, is the same war that Russia is prosecuting in Ukraine, and the shadow war in Europe is inseparable from both. Moreover, neo-Stvalinism—now digitally enabled, and relying on bottom-up incentives of enrichment as much as on top-down repression to generate loyalty—generates a whole-of-system war machine, in which the only way to thrive is to fight.

Within this doctrine, shadow warfare and sub-threshold violence is not a substitute for suprathreshold aggression. Quite the opposite: shadow warfare is simply understood as one of the options put on the Kremlin's strategic table by a range of both military and non-military forces, alongside information manipulation, the deployment of military forces, and bombardment, through to the use of weapons of mass destruction.

A Doctrine Without Discipline

Unlike the deployment of troops or aviation, however, Russia's shadow warfare operates without empirical calibration. While front lines progress or fail, and bombs hit or miss their targets, shadow warfare operations succeed when they disrupt, they succeed when they're exposed, and they succeed when they fail. As such, in Moscow's decision-making framework shadow operations are *always* a viable option, and more operational risk-taking is *always* better than less.

Exposure, of course, is not universally useful. It can intimidate and validate the narrative of reach, but it can also burn networks, harden defenses, and trigger legal and financial frictions that raise costs. Nonetheless, a foiled plot can still

force adversaries to spend heavily, over-secure, and reallocate attention, while demonstrating resolve to domestic audiences. The lack of doctrinal discipline lies in the absence of codified success metrics for sub-threshold operations; practice leads doctrine, and narrative salience routinely substitutes for outcome, even as the state draws on Soviet traditions of active measures, maskirovka, and reflexive control.

The reason for this lack of doctrinal discipline appears to be twofold. First, the doctrine itself lacks benchmarks. While shadow warfare is central to Russian statecraft, there is no Russian theory of shadow warfare that would determine what constitutes a successful attack, and what constitutes failure. As a result, narrative supplants outcome: exposure becomes proof of relevance, and disruption by a foreign adversary becomes proof of the seriousness with which the Russian threat is taken.

Every operation is thus spun as successful, while leadership continuity—even in the face of what might seem to be objective failures—reflects the Kremlin's prioritization of loyalty and opacity over performance or adaptation. The resulting loop of success as defined by narrative, rather than by empirical facts, creates a closed system that is immune to feedback, and that is thus constantly beset by strategic drift.

Taken together, this doctrinal structure—ideological fusion, narrative elasticity, institutional insulation—systematically favors escalation. Rival agencies use operations to signal initiative and curry favor. Failures justify additional investment and increased aggression. The need to be seen to act outweighs the need to succeed, as loyalty trumps efficacy. In Russian shadow warfare, then, escalation is not a choice made by the chain of command: it is the natural result of the system's own internal logic. The greatest danger to Europe, then, is not that Russia will hit a target of particular value, but that it can and inevitably will escalate without needing to explain even to itself why it is escalating.

Restoring Deterrence

Standard Western responses—emphasizing resilience, exposure, and targeted sanctions responses—may misread the logic of the Russian system. Because the system that governs Russian shadow warfare converts almost any imposable cost into validation, and validation into further aggression, traditional responses are likely to beget only more risk.

While there is work to be done on disrupting institutional capacity and credibility, as future parts of this project will explore, effective deterrence will likely arise only by forcing the Kremlin to reckon with the broader strategic costs of its shadow warfare. In short, if Russian doctrine will not impose discipline on its shadow warfare, the only way to avoid a much larger war may be for European deterrence to impose badly needed discipline on the Kremlin.

Hierarchy of Russia's Intelligence Services

PRESIDENT
VLADIMIR PUTIN

MINISTER OF DEFENSE
ANDREY BELOUSOV

FSB DIRECTOR
ALEXANDER BORTNIKOV

SVR DIRECTOR
SERGEY NARYSHKIN

CHIEF OF THE GENERAL OF THE STAFF
VALERY GERASIMOV

LIEUTENANT GENERAL
VIKTOR LAVRENTSOV

DEPUTY GENERAL
SERGEI KOROLEV

DEPUTY GENERAL
VLADIMIR KULISHOV

GRU DIRECTOR
IGOR KOSTYUKOV

GRU DEPUTY HEAD LIEUTENANT GENERAL
VLADIMIR ALEKSEYEV

COLONEL GENERAL
ALEXANDER KUPRYAZHKIN

COLONEL GENERAL
IGOR SIROTKIN

Chapter 1 The Shape of the Challenge

Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan

Executive Summary

- The strategic resurgence of Russia's intelligence operations is deeply rooted in the continuity of Soviet ideology. Russia, cast eternally as a besieged fortress, believes it has no real allies. From the Russian perspective, true lasting peace with the West is impossible — only temporary interludes exist.
- Russian security elites maintain the memory of their Soviet-era anxieties, which are threefold:
  - A heightened sense of existential threat, where the West is perpetually seen as seeking to undermine or destroy Russia.
  - A belief in autocracy as essential to Russian state survival.
  - A determination to preserve great power status, regardless of cost.
- Russia's intelligence agencies are seeking to undo the humiliation they experienced at the end of the Cold War. They see the war in Ukraine as the latest round in their century-long intelligence war with the West.

The militarization of Russian covert operations has increasingly blurred the line between intelligence activity and open confrontation. The result is a new model in which nominally secret operations are often conducted with an overt dimension — serving not only tactical goals but strategic messaging purposes.

Russian intelligence agencies have embraced a new operational logic: If secrecy can no longer be guaranteed, then deniability can be replaced with ambiguity, intimidation, and audacity.

This section explores the nature of Russia's shadow war aggression, and the linkages between it and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with a focus on its expanding scale, scope, and ideological depth. It argues that the resurgence of Russian intelligence operations is not simply a tactical reaction to wartime needs, but a strategic, ideologically driven campaign rooted in Soviet-era doctrine and worldview.

In particular, the section will explore how and why Russia's intelligence agencies came back from the brink, including:

a. *Whether the resurgence of Russia's overseas intelligence operations and active measures is tactical or strategic.*

b. *The role of ideology and historical memory in shaping modern Russian hybrid warfare.*

Russia's Overseas Intelligence Operations and Active Measures: Tactical or Strategic?

The resurgence of Russian intelligence is best understood as strategic rather than tactical. A strong incidence of this strategy was Putin's decision not to punish the intelligence agencies after their high-profile failures during the early days of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Historically, intelligence failures under authoritarian regimes like the Soviet Union often led to brutal purges. But Putin took a different path. Despite early blunders — such as misjudging Ukrainian resistance or underestimating Western unity — no major heads rolled in Russia's intelligence apparatus. Instead, several sidelined figures were quietly reinstated. For example, the head of the FSB's foreign intelligence division, who had disappeared after the invasion began, was quickly returned to his position.

This restraint reflects a calculated decision: Putin learned from Stalin-era purges that excessive repression can weaken intelligence capabilities, as they did in the 1930s and 1940s.

Under Stalin, fear kept officials obedient, but it also decimated the institutional memory and effectiveness of the security services. Putin, in contrast, sees long-term loyalty and institutional continuity as more valuable than public scapegoating.

Even after the mutiny by Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin in the summer of 2023, widely expected to trigger a crackdown within Russia's military and intelligence circles, no major shakeup occurred. The anticipated purges did not materialize. This further illustrates the Kremlin's reliance on its intelligence and security agencies as central instruments of state power.

The blunders of February and March 2022 were, above all, intelligence failures rather than purely military ones. Political and operational assessments fed to the Kremlin — above all, the assumptions about elite and societal compliance in Kyiv, the anticipated tempo of regime collapse, and the prospects of a quick decapitation — proved wrong. Yet the response in Moscow was not to punish the services but to put them on a war footing and give them a larger strategic mandate.

This shift happened through three linked moves from the Kremlin. First, centralized tasking: The Presidential Administration and the Security Council took tighter control of priorities and inter-service deconfliction, with intelligence chiefs brought into a smaller circle of weekly decision-making on Ukraine and "the Western front." Second, protection and resourcing: By explicitly declining to purge senior officers and by quietly reinstating sidelined figures, the Kremlin signaled institutional immunity; budgets, legal authorities, and political cover for overseas operations expanded

accordingly. Third, horizontal reach: Services were told to widen the battlespace beyond Ukraine — into Europe and the Global South — using a mix of cut-outs, commercial fronts, criminal intermediaries, and sympathetic political actors.

The logic was straightforward. Conventional instruments were bounded by geography and escalation risk; the intelligence services could apply pressure across borders without triggering a direct military response. In the Kremlin's calculus, only Russia's intelligence agencies could simultaneously unsettle Western publics, complicate support to Kyiv, and impose costs on Western security services and industry.

This was not a bureaucratic drift but a leader-driven choice. Putin personally endorsed greater reliance on the services; the Security Council machine translated it into tasking; and agency heads — FSB, SVR, and GRU — competed to demonstrate utility abroad while avoiding public rupture at home. The post-9/11 United States offers an imperfect but telling analogy: A shock exposed gaps, and the state responded not by shrinking its services but by enlarging their remit.

A second reason the resurgence is strategic is instrumental: Intelligence and proxy operations give the Kremlin escalation options that fall below the threshold of overt war yet impose real pressure — on Western public opinion, on the tempo and cohesion of military aid to Ukraine, and on the bandwidth of Western security and defense institutions. In other words, they allow Moscow to widen the war's effects without widening the war.

Together, these factors demonstrate that Russian intelligence is not operating on autopilot or reacting blindly to war. Instead, it is being deliberately empowered as part of a broader Kremlin's strategic vision: to engage in an ongoing, global confrontation with the West using the tools of subversion, sabotage, and deception.

Ideology and historical memory are necessary to understand this resurgence, but they are not sufficient. Several practical drivers accelerated the trend:

- Theater expansion. If the war is understood in Moscow as an existential confrontation with the West, the battlespace cannot be confined to Ukraine. Operations in Europe and farther afield fall naturally to the services and their proxies, not to conventional forces.
- Weakening of other tools. Sanctions, diplomatic isolation, energy-leverage attrition, and battlefield costs narrowed the utility of classical statecraft. Covert action, cyber operations, and political influence work became comparatively cheaper and more scalable.
- Access to proxies. The ecosystem of deniable actors — PMCs and veterans' networks, regional businessmen, criminal logisticians, "patriotic hackers," diasporic activists — offers modular capabilities the services can task and discard.

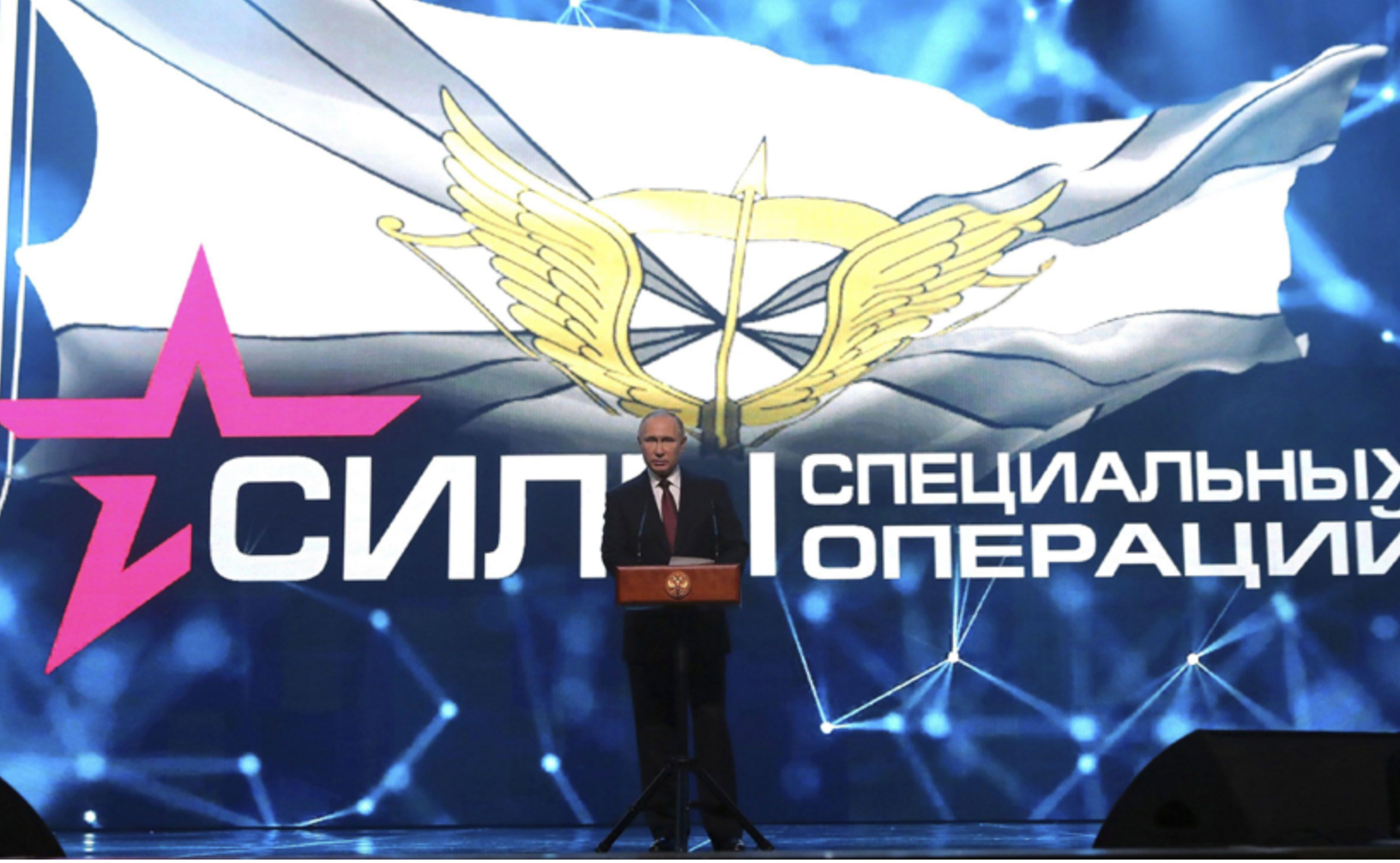


Photo: Russian President Vladimir Putin addresses a gala marking the Day of Russian Special Operations Forces February 27, 2019 in Moscow, Russia. Credit: Mikhail Klimentyev via ZUMA Wire/ Alamy Live News

- Diminished inter-service rivalry. The bruising competition of the 2000s lost momentum after Crimea; since 2022 it has been managed rather than eliminated, with the Kremlin prioritizing results over turf.
- Patronage and loyalty. Covert budgets, procurement rents, and control of licit/ illicit logistics create patron-client ties that bind mid-level cadres to agency leadership and, ultimately, to the Kremlin.
- Crucially, the narrative that “Russia is withstanding the entire West” was translated down the chain as a mission frame. Medals, accelerated promotions, hardship pay, legal impunity for “operational risk,” and a steady propaganda diet all reframed exposure or arrest abroad as proof of service rather than failure. Rather than publicly grading winners and losers inside the intelligence agencies, the Kremlin emphasized rotation and collective responsibility — a choice that preserved cohesion at the cost of accountability.

The Role of Ideology in Enabling, Shaping, and Guiding this Resurgence

The strategic resurgence of Russia's intelligence operations is deeply rooted in ideological continuity. While the tools have evolved — from telegrams and pamphlets to cyberwarfare and social media — the underlying worldview has changed remarkably little since the Soviet era. As Bob Seely argues in his 2025 book *The New Total War*, Russia's modern approach to conflict is not a break from the past but a revival of Soviet thinking: "The influences that have shaped Russian thinking about conflict and its place in the world — its strategic outlook and culture — have not fundamentally changed since Soviet days.»[1]

Seely describes the Soviet model as one that prioritized subversive warfare over traditional battlefield engagements. This model blended ideology, deception, and psychological operations to weaken enemies from within. What emerged was a distinct "Soviet way of war" — one that prized disinformation, demoralization, and destabilization as core tactics. The architects of this approach were not generals, but intelligence operatives and political commissars.

Today, Russia's security elites — many of whom came of age under the USSR — remain steeped in this strategic culture. According to Seely, the key components of this worldview include:

- A heightened sense of existential threat, where the West is perpetually seen as seeking to undermine or destroy Russia.
- A belief in autocracy as essential to Russian state survival.
- A determination to preserve great power status, regardless of cost.

This deeply rooted sense of existential threat has defined Russian leadership ever since the time of the tsars. The post-1917 Bolshevik regime emboldened this mentality, portraying the country as a solitary fortress under siege, surrounded by hostile capitalist enemies bent on its subjugation or annihilation.

From the Bolshevik Revolution to the collapse of the Soviet Union, this paranoia was accompanied by an awareness of the fragility of the Russian state and a distrust of the military and security services.

That sense of distrust of those who were charged to protect the political regime was not entirely without cause. Tsarist Russia had the world's most extensive secret police, yet the regime still collapsed. Their successors, the guardians of the new Soviet order — the post-revolutionary army and secret police — were often staffed by adventurous individuals with murky loyalties, ready to take risks and shift allegiances, or to defect to the enemy.

Stalin saw this as an existential threat. His response was to trust no one, purging spies and generals, and subjecting the rank and file to constant surveillance. But repression didn't fix the problem. When the country went to war with Nazi Germany in 1941 , thousands of Red Army soldiers defected to the Germans, forming the so-called *Vlasovtsy* — Russian volunteer units that defected and fought against Stalin's regime. This phenomenon wasn't limited to the military: there was a steady stream of traitors from Soviet intelligence and security agencies as well.

The victory in WWII did little to ease the Moscow regime's sense of vulnerability. Despite emerging as a superpower controlling now vast parts of Europe, Soviet leaders and their security apparatus remained gripped by a pervasive insecurity.

Viktor Suvorov (Vladimir Rezun), a former Soviet military intelligence officer who defected to the UK, recalled the intense paranoia during the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia in his book *The Liberators* (1981):

> They say they are building another socialism, with a human face. "But this is already enemy propaganda," interrupted the political officer. Every socialism has only one face. The bourgeoisie, comrades, has come up with the theory of convergence, and this theory is contrary to Marxism and does not contain a drop of common sense. You can't sit with one ass on two chairs, it's just uncomfortable. Judge for yourselves, comrades: what kind of convergence can there be if not even one of its advantages can be torn away from the gains of socialism? Do you remember how one anti-Soviet in the era of voluntarism wrote a vile slander against our system? It was called *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* [a reference to a famous story by Alexander Solzhenitsyn]. What came of it? All unconscious elements stirred. They started spreading this slander. Distrust spread and so on. It was stopped in time, and we don't know how it would all end." It was impossible to disagree with this. I myself didn't read about that Ivan, he didn't fall into my hands, but I remember for sure that the effect of him had been deafening."
>
> "So what did the comrade Czech communists think of?" the political officer continued. "They cancelled censorship outright! They opened the floodgates to all bourgeois propaganda! Print what you want! What can this lead to? Towards a convergence? No! To capitalism! Bourgeois influence needs only a small hole in the dam, and there the flood will break the whole dam! We had such a hole, but thanks to the Party it was patched up in time! And in Czechoslovakia it's not a hole, it's already gushing there! It must be closed urgently. What kind of convergence is this if everyone can say whatever he wants? This is not convergence; this is pure anarchy!"

> This, too, was unacceptable. If the whole system almost collapsed because of one story, what would happen if censorship were abolished altogether? "Go on, comrade lieutenant colonel!" the back rows shouted. We also shouted in support. The new political officer, unlike the previous one, spoke sensibly and intelligibly. "And I will continue, comrades. Socialism is a system as slender as a diamond and just as strong, but it is enough for a cutter to make one wrong move, and the entire stability of the crystal can be broken, and it will crumble."[2]

At that time, the Soviet Union was at the height of its power. But its military and secret services saw Soviet Eastern Europe as utterly fragile.

Those fears, though extreme, were not entirely unfounded. When the Soviet Union finally collapsed in 1991, the KGB — the regime's supposed guardians — failed in their core mission. Aside from a failed coup attempt in August 1991, which lacked support even among KGB ranks, the organization stood by as the system unraveled.

Rather than acknowledge its failures, the KGB blamed outside forces — chiefly the ever-sinister West. According to this narrative, the West had helped Lenin rise to power in 1917 and later assisted Gorbachev in dismantling the Soviet Union.

Putin, a KGB officer during the collapse of the Soviet Union, fully subscribed to this worldview. His obsession with Russia's 20th-century history reflects it. But here lies the problem: The analytical framework Putin and his elite still use to interpret history remains rooted in the Marxist-Leninist ideology instilled during the Soviet era.

This worldview holds that the combination of war and political crisis is a precursor to a "revolutionary situation" — in other words, regime change. Marxist-Leninist dogma insisted that the Russo-Japanese War triggered the 1905 Revolution, and that World War I led directly to the events of 1917.

The first component — war — is already in motion. The second — political crisis — could be triggered by anything, from local elections to a small protest rally; any of this political activity could be exploited by the ever-deceptive West to undermine and topple the regime.

This logic also renders peace — in the Western sense of post-conflict reconciliation — essentially unattainable. Kremlin elites and the security services are convinced the West has always sought Russia's destruction, starting with the Crusades in the 13th century. From their perspective, true lasting peace with the West is impossible. Only temporary interludes exist.

Russia, cast eternally as a besieged fortress, is believed to have no real allies. The famous line attributed to Tsar Alexander III — "Russia has only two allies: the army and the navy" — is still invoked today. Vladimir Putin himself underscored this belief when unveiling a monument to Alexander III, where those very words were engraved on the statue.

Those feelings, widely shared among the Russian military and security services, helped Putin to reshape the war with Ukraine into the war with the West after the initial humiliation of 2022.

The Russian intelligence agencies regrouped and found a new sense of purpose. Instead of dwelling on their failure to anticipate Ukrainian resistance, they focused on the larger picture: their confrontation with the West as a whole.

Russia "re-created its sense of permanent struggle with a re-energized and re-imagined integrated theory of war fit for Russia's battles with the Western world for this century. By combining the conventional with the subversive, Russia's new way of war results in a blurring of the tools of war and peace — and even the notion of war and peace as distinct terms. The wide array of integrated tools enables Russia's perpetual struggle with the West so that even outside periods of traditional military warfare or threat of warfare, the Russian state remains effectively in conflict with it, and by doing so, reaffirms its identity in conflict with Western liberal democracy. "Russia's new war is a whole-state concept of conflict; it is a strategic art, not simply a military one." / Seely /

This led to the revitalization of Russia's overall intelligence war against the West. For the Russian agencies, this war goes back to the earliest years of the Soviet era.

As Russian intelligence officials see it, the war in Ukraine has launched the third round of an intelligence warfare, ongoing since 1917.

The first round of this struggle, in which early Soviet operatives faced off primarily against their British counterparts, started soon after the Bolshevik Revolution. At that time, Soviets successfully compromised any chance of fomenting resistance to the Bolshevik regime from abroad with a false-flag operation. Code-named Trust, the plan involved luring politically active Russian émigrés and British spies to the Soviet Union, supposedly in support of an anti-Bolshevik organization. But the organization was a sham, and the activists were identified and killed.

During World War II Russian spies successfully penetrated British intelligence and, in the United States, infiltrated the Manhattan Project and stole the secrets of the atomic bomb.

Overall, Soviet officials believed they won this first round with the West.

The second round of the intelligence war – during the Cold War, -- however, did not end so well for Moscow. The KGB failed to save the Soviet regime it swore to protect. Then, in the early 1990s, the agency was nearly destroyed after being split apart and dismembered. The collapse left lasting scars on Putin, who witnessed it

firsthand, and his security elite, as they struggled to rebuild a Russian state that had lost its former power.

Now, Russia's intelligence agencies are seeking to reverse the setbacks that unfolded at the end of the Cold War. They see the war in Ukraine as the third round of the intelligence war with the West.

This process of retrenchment has proceeded in stages:

- Consolidation (2000–2004). After the chaotic 1990s, services stabilized, protected their prerogatives and rebuilt networks.
- Securitization of the domestic arena (2000–2012). Counter-terrorism, fear of "color revolutions," and regime-protection tasks expanded the FSB's remit and prestige.
- Remilitarization (2012–2015). With the GRU restored and enlarged, expeditionary logistics and special operations capacity grew; doctrine for information and psychological operations migrated from mobilization-only to standing practice.
- External activism (2014–2021). Crimea and Donbas, on the one hand, and Syria on the other, were the hinge. Overseas activities became more overtly coercive; cyber, sabotage, influence, and transnational repression increased. The appointment of veterans of Soviet-era active measures into new "research" and communications institutes pre-dated the full-scale invasion and laid connective tissue to proxies and audiences abroad.
- War footing (from 2022). The services were tasked to carry the confrontation outside Ukraine's borders and to make ambiguity, intimidation, and audacity part of the brand.

Symbols such as the Dzerzhinsky statue at SVR headquarters and the Soviet state security centenary celebrations belong to an arc of ideological legitimation. They likely would have occurred in some form without the invasion; the war magnified their meaning and folded them into a mobilizing narrative.

To show continuity with their predecessors, the Russian agencies held several public celebrations. In September 2023, Sergei Naryshkin, head of Russia's foreign intelligence SVR, inaugurated a statue to the founder of the Soviet secret police, Felix Dzerzhinsky, in the courtyard of the SVR's Moscow headquarters. And in November 2023, the FSB commemorated the 100th anniversary of the OGPU, the Soviet secret police, and stressing the role of the OGPU in crushing political émigré organizations.

That continuity goes well beyond celebrating early Soviet exploits. Putin has made notable use of former KGB generals who share his eagerness to avenge the humiliation of the Soviet collapse.

MAIN GOALS

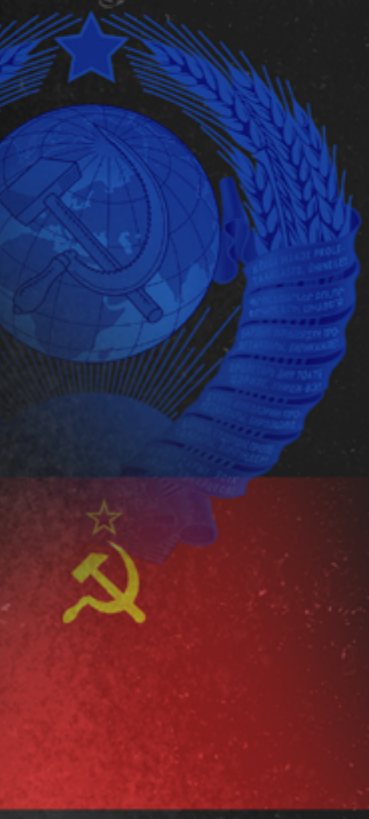
Infiltrate western systems and suppress political dissenters.

MAIN ADVERSARY

British Intelligence operatives.

OUTCOME

Soviets successfully penetrate the British Intelligence, and believe that they won the first round of Intelligence War against the West.



OPERATIONS

1917

Lenin forms vChK/Cheka (the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission). It is the first Soviet secret police group and is still regarded as the most brutal.

1922

The vChK/ Cheka changes into the GPU (State Political Administration), which is more restricted in its operations than Cheka.

1921-1927

Operation "Trust" lures politically active Russian émigrés and British spies to the USSR to support a fake anti-Bolshevik organization, killing them on arrival.

1930 - 1945

Melita Norwood, code-name Hola, a British agent, is recruited by the USSR to inform the Soviets on Britain's project to build its first atomic bomb.

1934

The NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) replaces the OGPU and oversees the peak of Stalin's 'Great Purge,' a purge of political dissenters.

1942-1946

Successfully infiltrates the American Manhattan Project, sending critical information to assist the development of the Soviet bomb.

1946

The NKVD is dissolved and replaced by the MGB (Ministry of State Security, 1946-1953) and the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 1953-1954) which continues to conduct Stalin's 'purges' on a smaller scale.

ROUND 1

1917-1950

MAIN GOALS

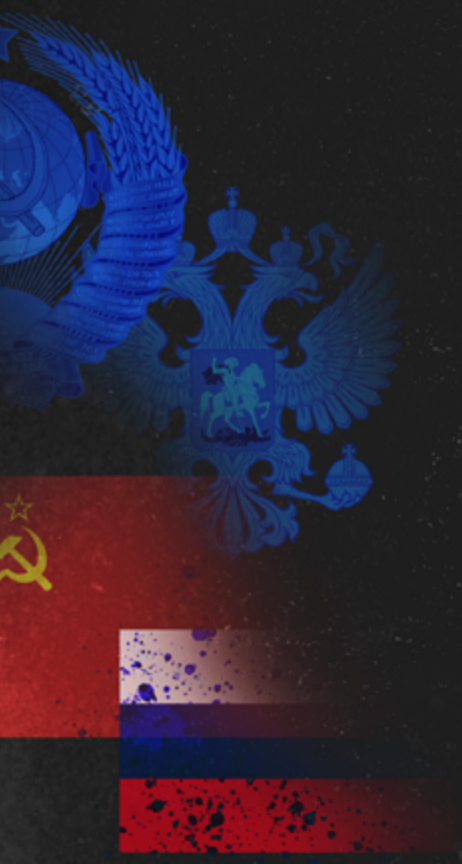
Repress dissent, expand and protect the ideology of the USSR, and inflict tensions in Western countries during the Cold War.

MAIN ADVERSARY

The US and Western allies.

OUTCOME

KGB fails to protect the Soviet regime they swore to protect. Intelligence agencies essentially collapsed in the early 1990s.



OPERATIONS

1950-1987

Soviet authorities selectively jam the signal of the BBC's Russian Service. This was never fully successful, but a significant part of the USSR's radio broadcasting system was dedicated to blocking transmissions from abroad.

1954-1991

The KGB (Committee for State Security) is formed to replace the MVD, prioritizing internal duties.

1957

The Soviet Union produces anti-American propaganda in response to the Little Rock Nine.

1960-1996

Robert Lipka, a code-clerk at the National Security Agency, works as a Soviet spy.

1967

The KGB sanctions a plan to discredit Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and publicize adultery accusations against him. This operation ultimately failed.

1969

"KGB Wanted List" is published, identifying targeted people from around the world that the Soviet government accused of violating Soviet law, specifically through defection.

1973

Günter Guillaume, one of the personal assistants of Chancellor of West Germany, Willy Brandt, is suspected by West German security organizations of spying for East Germany.

1974

Chancellor Willy Brandt of West Germany resigns after the KGB attempts to blackmail him, claiming to possess compromising information about his private life.

MID-1970S

Moscow attempts to link the CIA to the assasination of John F. Kennedy. Moscow forges a letter from Lee Harvey Oswald to E. Howard Hunt, a CIA officer, asking for information "before any steps are taken by me or anyone else." It is anonymously sent to three conspiracists and circulated in the United States.

1983

The KGB plants a false story in a small journal in India that AIDS may invade India and was the product of US experiments at Fort Detrick.

1985

Soviet news outlets pick up the story and cite the Indian reports to disguise Soviet involvement. This campaign is successful and permeates global media for years.

ROUND 2

1950 - 1991

MAIN GOALS

Rebuilding intelligence networks and rethinking intelligence strategies.

MAIN GOALS

Confrontation with the West. This period is marked by a return to ideology to attract allies, communicating that there should be an alternative to the Western global order.

MAIN ADVERSARY

Ukraine, the United States, and Western allies.

OUTCOME

The effects of these operations have had mixed results and are still be analyzed.

STAGES

2000 - 2004

Consolidation to protect Russian prerogatives and rebuild GRU networks.

2012 - 2015

Remilitarization to expand operations.

2014 - 2021

External activism to conduct cyber, sabotage, influence, and transnational repression operations abroad.

2022 - ONWARD

War footing to make ambiguity, intimidation, and audacity part of Russia's brand.

FEBRUARY 2022

Russia launches its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

2022

Founding of the National Research Institute for the Development of Communications, seeking to shape pro-Kremlin opinion of Russia's neighbors.

MARCH 2022

Chechen special forces are sent by Russia to assassinate Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. This plan is ultimately foiled. Zelenskyy has survived dozens of assassination and kidnapping attempts.

AUGUST 2023

Yevgeny Prigozhin, leader of the Wagner Group PMC (Private Military Company) dies in a plane downed by anti-air defenses.

NOVEMBER 2024

Several polling locations in American swing states, Georgia, Arizona, and Pennsylvania, endure bomb threats that appear to originate from Russian email domains.

NOVEMBER 2024 - FEBRUARY 2025

Six submarine cables in the Baltic Sea and Taiwan Strait are disrupted. Russia and the People's Republic of China are suspected actors in all cases.

NOVEMBER 2024

Baltic nations launch investigations of Russia's involvement in sabotage of two fiber-optic telecommunication cables in 2024.

MAY 2025

The National Security Agency releases a public advisory on a GRU-led cyber campaign, active since February 2022, targeting Western governments, commercial logistics entities, transportation services, and technology companies.

AUGUST 2025

The International Institute for Strategic Studies states that Russia has nearly quadrupled its sabotage operations throughout Europe since 2023.

RETRENCHMENT
2000 - 2022

ROUND 3
2022 - PRESENT

Nikolai Gribin, who in the 1980s had served as deputy head of foreign disinformation operations at the KGB's foreign intelligence branch, was placed in a lead role at a new Russian think tank, the National Research Institute for the Development of Communications the National Research Institute for the Development of Communications in 2021, which seeks to shape pro-Kremlin opinion in countries near Russia, with a particular focus on Belarus. (Gribin himself has written several research reports on public opinion in Belarus.)

In the 1980s, Alexander Mikhailov served in the KGB's infamous Fifth Directorate—the branch given the task of rooting out ideological subversion, including dissidents, musicians, and church leaders—and ran disinformation operations for the FSB in the 1990s. Since the fall of 2021, a few months before the invasion, Mikhailov has been the FSB's unofficial mouthpiece for the Russian media, promoting the agency's view of events in Ukraine. As Russian intelligence portrays it, the war pits the United States and Europe against Russia, with the Ukrainians serving merely as the puppets of their Western spymasters.

Another lesson the Russian agencies learned from Stalin's time is the significance of ideology in their efforts to win support and recruiting allies. This ideology won over so many Westerners for the Moscow cause in the 1930s and 1940s. Russian agencies learned that they didn't really need a full-format ideological doctrine with new Marx and Engels.

Communism was exchanged for the concept of an alternative to Western domination coupled with the arguments about double-standards and hypocrisy, and the easily recognizable figure of the leader who stood up against global powers.

This is exactly what Russian agencies are offering their potential allies in the third round.

To the countries that find themselves fearful of Western-sponsored regime change and in trouble with the West, Russian agencies are happy to help with the protection of traditional values (in fact, a protection of the political status quo).

This was on offer at the 12th International Meeting of High-Ranking Officials Responsible for Security Matters. Organized by Nikolai Patrushev, who led the Security Council until May 12, 2024, in April 2024 in St. Petersburg.[3]

The conference gathered security mandarins from 106 countries. Cuba, Sudan, Syria, Brazil, Bolivia, Thailand, Kazakhstan, many African countries, and many in the Middle East, sent their security supremos to St Petersburg. During the meeting, Russian leaders courted high-ranking security officials of the target countries: heads of national security councils, national security advisers, deputy prime ministers, and heads of security and intelligence agencies.

Information security and protection of traditional values were key areas of focus, and when Patrushev delivered his opening speech, Naryshkin, the head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, sat next to him as Patrushev openly advertised Russian cyber companies to the participants.

Russian cyber companies have had a history of cooperating intimately with Russian intelligence agencies, and the products the companies offer are known to collect massive amounts of data from their customers' devices. But the Kremlin's target audience of security mandarins who traveled to St Petersburg doesn't care much so long as it provides protection against the Americans.

Russia is offering to shield these countries from Western influence, via cyber security and control of social media. One ostensible purpose of the St. Petersburg meeting, then — the protection of traditional values — is easily understood; it means the survival of the political regime.

Differences of Ideology, Mindset and Approach

If any, between the main agencies active in Europe, including the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), the Federal Security Service (FSB), and military intelligence (GRU).

Before the full-scale invasion started in February 2022, the three Russian foreign intelligence agencies have shown distinctively different corporate cultures.

The Foreign Intelligence Service SVR [Sluzhba Vneshney Razvedki]

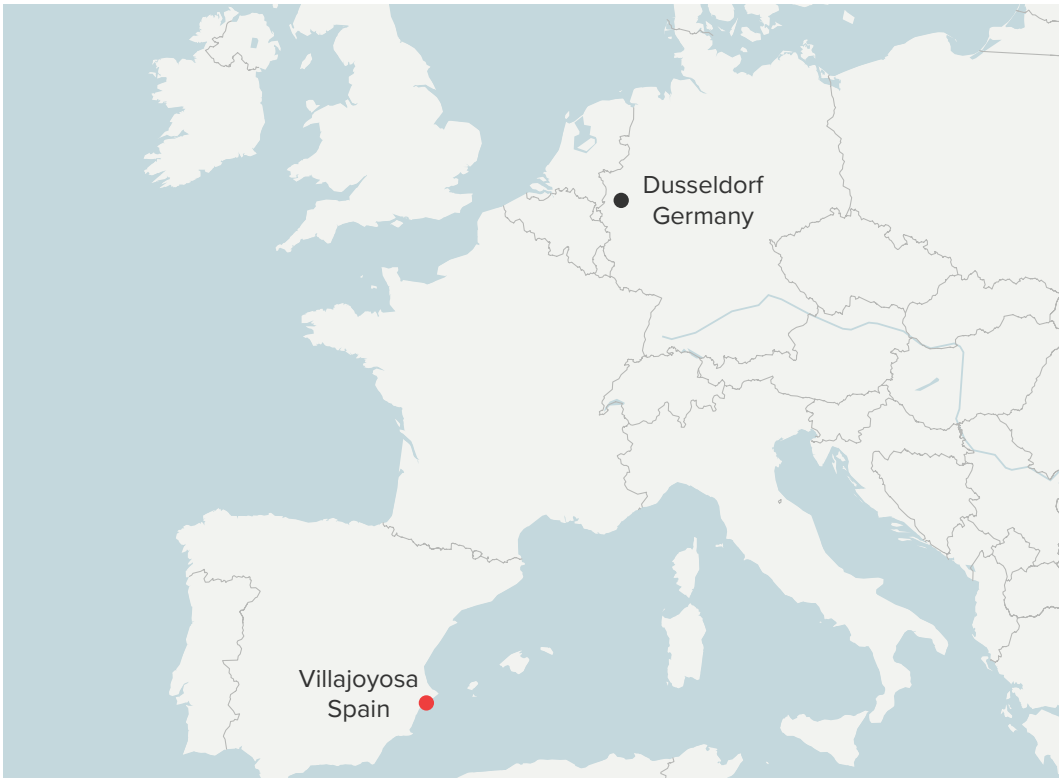
Since day one, the SVR has been positioning itself as an intelligence agency just like any other Western intelligence agency — strictly professional, nothing to do with repression taking place inside of the country; i.e., significantly less aggressive and brutal than the military intelligence or the FSB. The official narrative of the SVR, maintained by all of its directors, including the present director Sergei Naryshkin, is that the agency has never conducted assassinations, and its Soviet predecessors had stopped assassinations in the late 1950s.[4]

The origins of that approach could be traced to the 1990s, when Yeltsin was Russian president and the Russian Foreign Intelligence agency used its hybrid capabilities mostly for self-preservation. SVR's disinformation unit got the key assignment to position Foreign Intelligence as the most liberal part of the KGB, proving there was no need to reform it, and the rebranding of the SVR went largely successful.[5]

When Putin took power, however, this period of entrenchment ended.

In the two decades of his reign, Putin intensified the work of his intelligence agencies and Russia's Western presence has sharply increased. The SVR mostly focused on the traditional areas of gathering intelligence. There were some minor

Incidents of Russian Planned Killings & Assassinations



Map: Center for European Policy Analysis • Source: AP Interactives.

fluctuations, like more emphasis on economic intelligence during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev.

Putin, originally desperate to get recognition in the West, and especially from the United States, after the annexation of Crimea ended up more isolated than any Russian leader since 1980s. Among other things that meant that keeping the usual channels of communications with the Americans open – meaning traditional diplomacy through the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs – was becoming less effective.

Putin turned to his favorite agency, the FSB. This agency happily stepped in and engaged its American counterparts over counter-terror cooperation, for instance, successfully exploiting the Syria issue.

Even after the annexation of Crimea that approach worked well. The chief of the FSB was invited to Washington in 2015, despite the role the Russian security agency had played in Ukraine.

Meanwhile, the SVR was busy with damage control after the arrest in January 2015 in New York of an SVR officer with no diplomatic cover Evgeny Buryakov – the spy acted as a New York-based employee of the Russian state-owned Vneshekonombank (Bank of Foreign Economy).

A year later the scandal about Russian meddling in the U.S. presidential election broke.

Russian hackers suspected of cooperation with the FSB all over the world were hunted down by the FBI. It was the very first time in history that FSB officers were put on the most wanted list of the FBI. This was the opportunity for the SVR to step in as another intelligence agency ready to serve as a communication channel with the West. Some groundwork was laid in early 2018 when the heads of all three Russian agencies – FSB, military intelligence GRU and Foreign intelligence SVR – flew to Washington to talk.

That is why two years before the invasion, on May 15, 2019, in Sochi the SVR head Sergei Naryshkin found himself next to Mike Pompeo, the U.S. State Secretary and former CIA chief; Vladimir Putin, Foreign minister Lavrov; and Putin's adviser on foreign policy Ushakov.

Throughout the Cold War, a distinctive corporate culture emerged which tended to restrain the aggressiveness of the KGB foreign intelligence operations – posting abroad, especially in the West, was always considered a precious perk of a career of an intelligence officer, and the last thing they wanted was to provoke the hosting country which could lead to their expulsion. As many officers served in the KGB foreign intelligence branch by families, in the course of several generations, it affected corporate culture. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this distinctive corporate culture restrained the aggressiveness of the SVR operations, as well.

In March 2022 the authors obtained the transcripts of conversations between a student at one of Moscow's top universities and an SVR recruiter. Those conversations, which took place in January and February of the same year, provided a rare glimpse of the corporate culture of the SVR just a month before the invasion.

At some point the student asked about the risks, "Is there any mortal danger, like, might I get killed in this line of work?"

"No way," he was assured. Expulsion was the worst thing that could happen to him, and in that eventuality, he would be given a job in Moscow or another region. But what would be very unfair — the recruiter suddenly added, seemingly upset — according to the European rules, a diplomat removed from one European country cannot get an assignment in any other European country. The recruiter spoke about

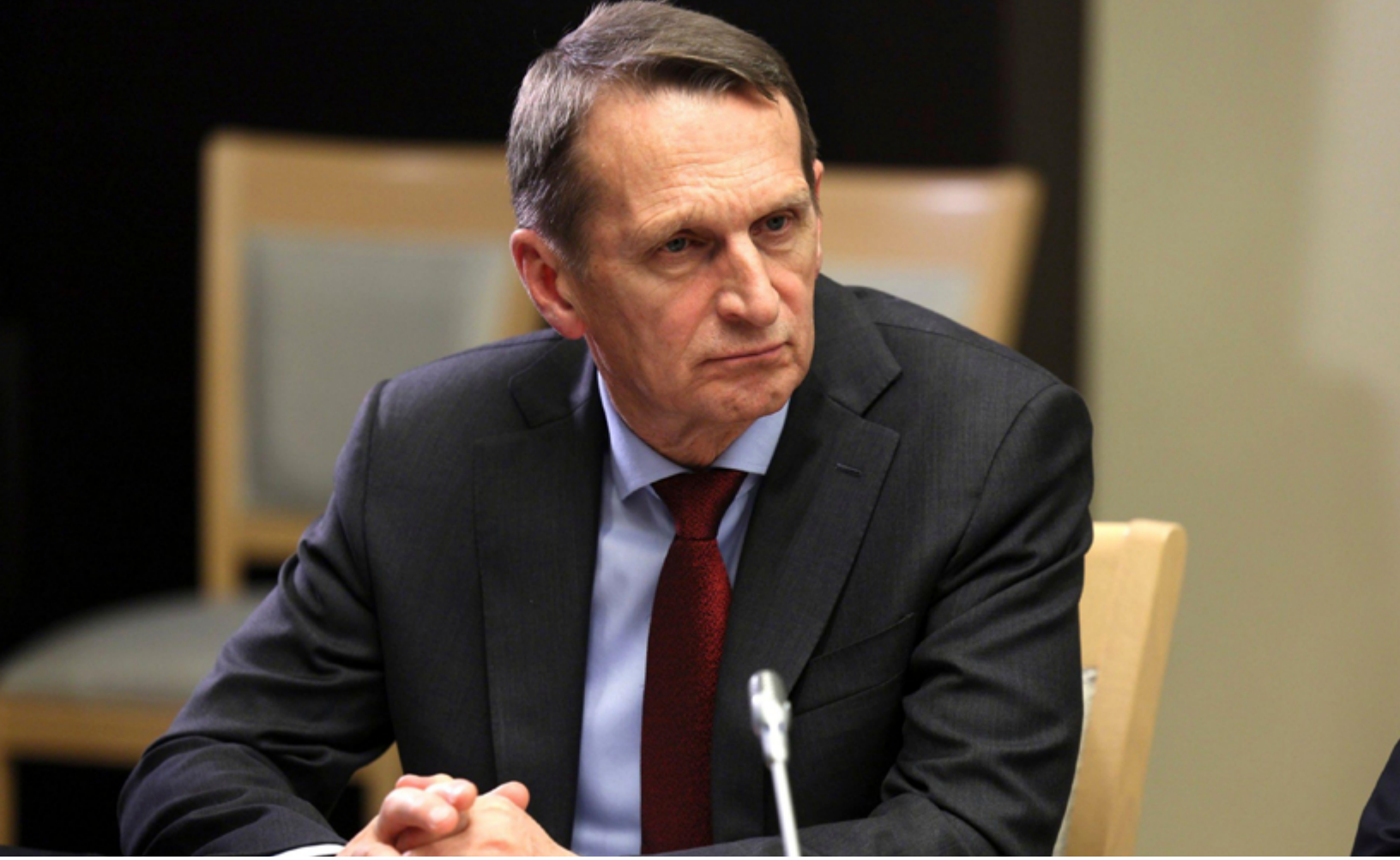


Photo: Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Director Sergei Naryshkin during a face-to-face meeting of the Security Council chaired by President Vladimir Putin at the Novo-Ogaryovo presidential state residence, October 30, 2023 outside Moscow, Russia. Credit: Gavriil Grigorov/Kremlin Pool/Alamy Live News

this for quite some time, which made clear how the SVR officers treasured their postings in Europe and how reluctant they were to put those postings in risk.

At some point the student asked about political views. “Previously, it was possible to engage in opposition activities, like Navalny,” the recruiter said, “But now it’s harshly persecuted. You can discuss this with your parents, but from the point of view of employment in the special services, if they find out that you are very disloyal, then there will be a refusal. And what’s happening is very sad, of course,” the recruiter added.[6]

Apparently, some space for free thinking was either possible at the SVR before the invasion, or the memories of such space were still traceable in the agency.

The SVR became much more active after 2022, and much more aggressive.

For instance, nowadays the agency’s disinformation campaigns in the West tend to be much more confrontational. SVR uses a combination of covert means with open, SVR-attributed methods, like the in-house SVR magazine *Razvedchik* (Intelligence operative) the agency launched after the full-scale invasion.[7] The SVR has been

also directly involved in TNR (trans-national repression aimed at Russian political exiles). In early February, the SVR publicly accused Ukraine's intelligence agencies of "preparing attacks" against Russian opposition or expat business figures. The SVR asserted that the would-be attackers, in the event of arrest, would "blame the Russian special services, allegedly on whose orders these attacks were prepared."[8] Russian exile communities across Europe realized that with this announcement, the SVR was laying the groundwork for a new round of attacks on Russian exiles, placing blame on Ukraine in advance.

FSB [Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti]

Supposed "liberalism" and free-thinking have never posed a problem within the FSB, whose primary objective is the protection of political stability — that is, the preservation of the political regime in Moscow, by any means necessary, both domestically and abroad.

The FSB's corporate culture has been shaped by the trauma of the Soviet Union's collapse and the humiliation that followed the disbanding of the KGB, of which the FSB is the main successor. Many within the FSB, alongside KGB veterans who lived through the Soviet collapse — including Vladimir Putin — developed a heightened sense of the fragility of the Russian state, as described earlier.

As a result, the FSB sees its core mission as suppressing any political groups deemed capable of sparking another revolution — regardless of their actual capabilities or intentions. From the FSB's perspective, political change can lead to revolution, which in turn means mass casualties and the collapse of the state. To prevent such a scenario, any measures — including those that may cause significant loss of life — are seen as justified.

As noted earlier, this sense of fragility is fueled by a deep distrust in the country's military and security services, a distrust that has only grown during the war in Ukraine.

The FSB has become the chief beneficiary of these fears, having been granted sweeping powers to monitor the military's rank and file, as well as the ministries and regional authorities across the country — and a free hand to suppress any opposition to the Kremlin, whether inside Russia or abroad.

Externally, the services were empowered; internally, distrust deepened. The Kremlin has worked to ensure that no military or intelligence figure acquires independent popularity or authority. Officers who briefly emerged as public symbols of competence or dissent were removed or neutralized — through dismissal, prosecution, or reassignment to distant postings. Within the services, continuity at the top (keeping compromised or criticized leaders in place) combines with constant

rotation below, especially in sensitive portfolios such as negotiations and prisoner exchanges. The effect is to prevent the emergence of barons and to keep levers in the center's hands.

Two lessons from past resurgent waves shape this approach. From Stalin's purges: Terror can buy obedience but at the cost of capacity and institutional memory. From the late-Soviet collapse: Scapegoating and splintering the organs invite strategic failure. Today's compromise is a managed distrust — heavy surveillance of the uniformed services, legal impunity for loyal enforcers, and periodic exemplary punishment — designed to preserve capability while keeping elites off-balance. The price is brittleness: Fear suppresses initiative, and the services' attention skews toward regime-security tasks even when those compete with military requirements.

Regarding corporate culture, the FSB's foreign intelligence branch was created only under Putin and lacks the Cold War legacy of the SVR. Its officers have not yet built multigenerational careers in intelligence, unlike their SVR counterparts. As a result, the threat of expulsion holds less weight for them — making them more aggressive, more risk-tolerant, and more focused on countering perceived threats to the political regime in Moscow, whether real or imagined.

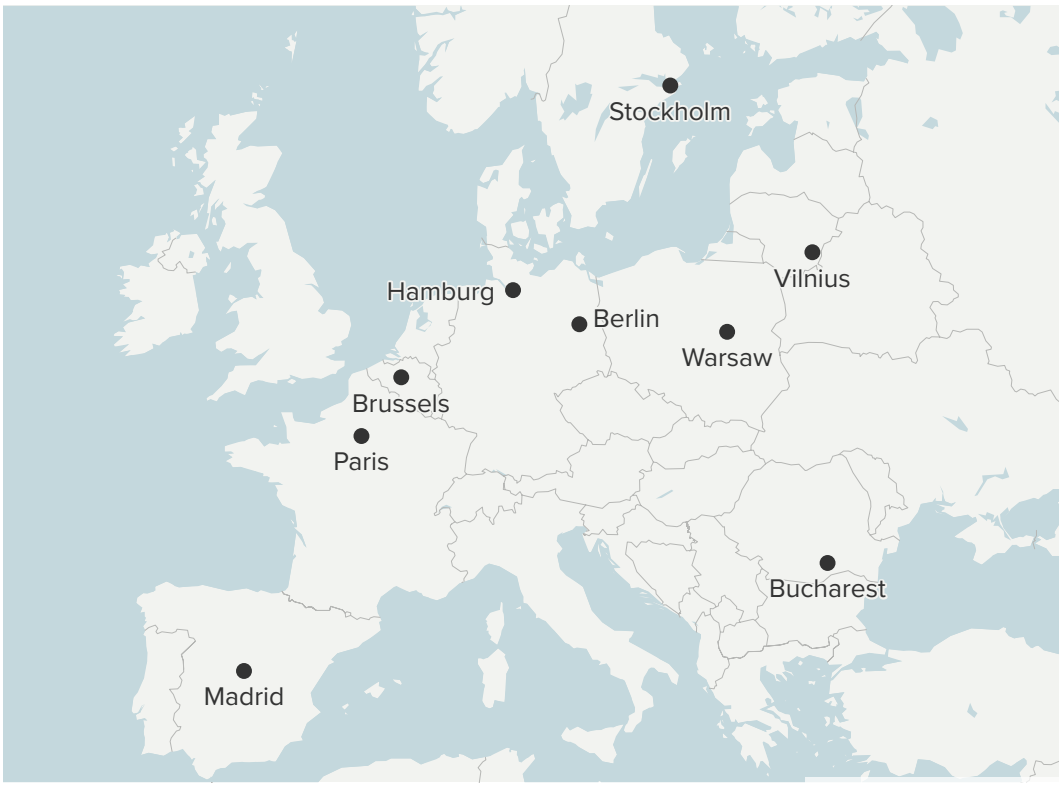
Military Intelligence GU [Glavnoye Upravlenie] of the General Staff, or GRU [Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravlenie]

Russia's military intelligence agency, commonly known as the GRU, emerged from the tumultuous 1990s largely unchanged. Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, the GRU preserved much of its late-Soviet structure and corporate culture, undergoing no significant reform during that period.

Its greatest institutional challenge came between 2008 and 2010, during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency. Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov led a broad set of military reforms, which included a significant downgrading of the GRU. The agency's size and influence were reduced, and it even lost control over its elite *Spetsnaz* (special forces) units. The GRU was so diminished that it lost one of the letters in its name, officially becoming simply the GU — *Glavnoye Upravlenie* or Main Directorate. Serdyukov and his civilian advisers believed the GRU should be subordinated to the Defense Ministry rather than remain under the General Staff. This was a period of deep institutional humiliation and uncertainty for the agency.

When Vladimir Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, his new defense minister, Sergei Shoigu, prioritized restoring the GRU, and indeed, under Shoigu, the agency was significantly expanded. But this expansion posed a practical problem: Where to find enough new recruits?

Incidents of Russian Propaganda Attacks



Locates incidents of information operations, attempted election interference, and hacking of national news websites. Map: Center for European Policy Analysis • Source: AP Interactives.

The answer lay in *Spetsnaz*. Drawing heavily from special forces personnel, the GRU absorbed a new generation of operatives shaped by a different culture — one that was brutal, efficient, and highly aggressive. By 2014–2015, the GRU had been revitalized just in time for Russia's military intervention in Syria and the escalation of its proxy war in eastern Ukraine.

These developments suited the special forces mindset perfectly, rooted in the idea of "fighting a war during peacetime." This mentality was further reinforced by developments in psychological and information warfare. In the Soviet era, disinformation campaigns were the responsibility of the Special Propaganda Directorate, housed within the army's massive political structure known as GLAVPUR (*Glavnoye Politicheskoye Upravlenie*, or Main Political Department). These operations were intended to be activated only in the event of a major war.

"As for special propaganda," Arsen Kasyuk, one of the top authorities on Soviet-era information warfare, told the Russian Defense Ministry's *Krasnaya Zvezda* newspaper in June 2011, "it is present wherever there is a conflict, where active

hostilities begin. Prior to that, the special propaganda bodies are, so to speak, in a waiting-preparatory mode — they assess the situation, improve their methods, their technical base."

But following the upheaval of the 1990s, the Special Propaganda Directorate was transferred from GLAVPUR to the GRU. From that point onward, the GRU became responsible for disinformation campaigns — and has remained in an active operational mode since the First Chechen War in 1995.

In other words, the line between wartime and peacetime operations was not blurred — it was erased.

Unmasking Russia's Covert Playbook

This section explores the demise of secrecy, exploring the fusion of covert operations and Kremlin approaches to narrative control and aggression, as well as Western emphasis on "naming and shaming" Russian covert actors, including:

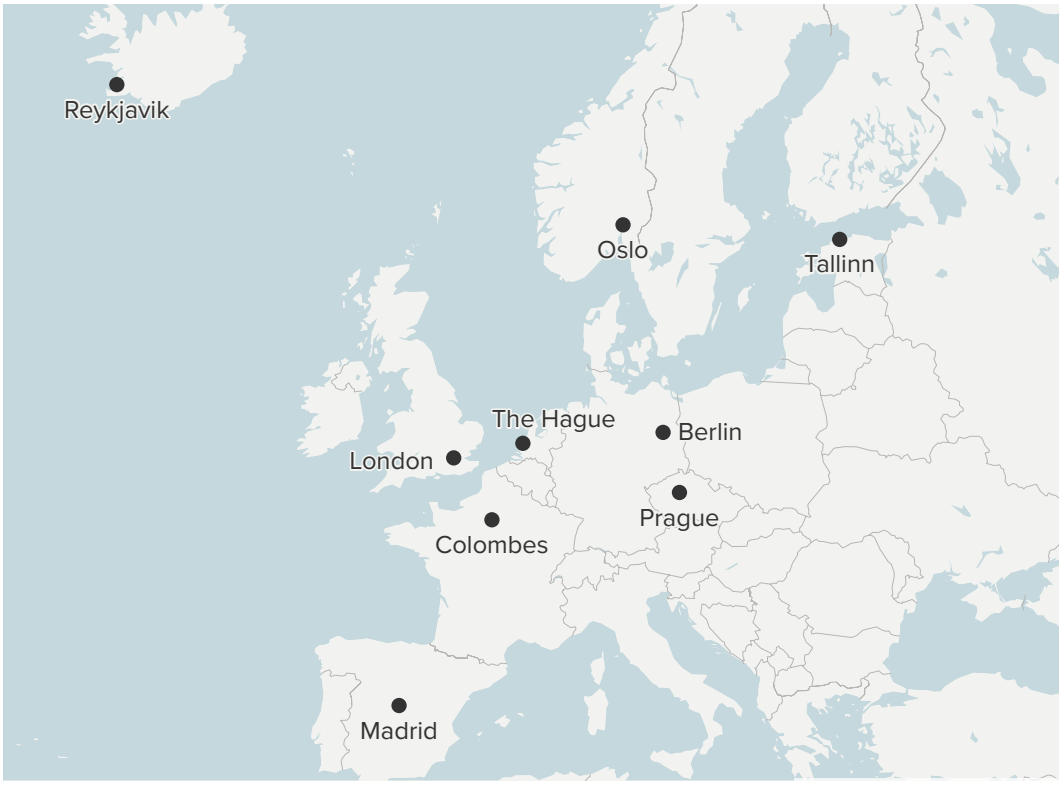
a. *The increasing focus on using nominally covert operations to produce overt intimidation.*
b. *The targeting of domestic Russian audiences, manipulating Western responses to legitimize Russian autocracy; and*
c. *The messages that Russian active measures are intended to communicate to Western peer agencies.*

The militarization of Russian covert operations has increasingly blurred the line between intelligence activity and open confrontation. The result is a new model in which nominally secret operations are often conducted with an overt dimension — serving not only tactical goals but strategic messaging purposes. This shift has been reinforced, not deterred, by the West's adoption of a "naming and shaming" strategy.

This policy emerged in 2015, when US intelligence and law enforcement applied it to Chinese cyber operations, publicly identifying individual hackers and their affiliations with state intelligence units. It was a dramatic departure from the traditional toolkit of private diplomatic complaints or tit-for-tat expulsions. The following year, the same tactic was used against Russian hackers who had infiltrated the Democratic National Committee on the eve of the 2016 US election.

Initially, the strategy had some effect. In September 2015, China and the Obama administration reached an agreement to halt industrial cyber espionage (an accord that lasted two years). In Russia, the FSB's cyber unit underwent a purge, losing its chief, two deputies, and several officers.

Incidents of Russian Cyberattacks



Map: Center for European Policy Analysis • Source: AP Interactives.

But by 2018, it became clear that Russian agencies — particularly the GRU — had adapted. When the Skripals were poisoned in the UK and the identities of the attackers (GRU officers) were publicly exposed, there was no visible deterrent effect.[9] The agency continued operating unabated, and no internal disciplinary measures followed.

The GRU, and then other Russian agencies, embraced a new operational logic: If secrecy could no longer be guaranteed, then deniability could be replaced with ambiguity, intimidation, and audacity.

Faced with public exposure, intelligence agencies generally have two choices: increase agent professionalism (a costly and time-consuming process), or turn to a different kind of operative — one whose lack of formal training is offset by extreme loyalty, toughness, and willingness to take risks.

Shoigu's recruits from the special forces fit this latter mold perfectly. They are unbothered by exposure or arrest. They hold no diplomatic cover or prestigious

postings to lose. They don't ask questions about their missions, because they operate with a worldview where the boundaries between war and peace are blurred — and concerns like collateral damage don't factor in.

The blurring of war and peace is not new; it echoes the late 1940s and early 1950s more than the Cold War-era KGB:

- Performative ambiguity over classic deniability. Where secrecy cannot be sustained, Moscow uses exposure as intimidation — operational audacity plus information theatrics to communicate resolve to both foreign services and domestic audiences.
- Platform-centered battlespace. Telegram channels, botnets, micro-influencers, and data-extraction "security" products create persistent access and narrative leverage that Cold-War tradecraft could not sustain at scale.
- Non-state auxiliaries. PMCs, veterans' clubs, regional business networks, criminal logisticians, and ideologues act as force multipliers. They lower costs, complicate attribution, and allow rapid reconstitution after disruptions.
- Legal/institutional cover. A thicket of decrees and emergency measures gives operatives formal impunity at home for extraterritorial acts abroad, tightening the loop between regime protection and external action.
- Risk-tolerant manpower. Drawn from special forces and other hard-use cadres, operatives accept arrest or exposure as occupational hazards; the loss of diplomatic cover matters less than before.

Deterrence also works differently. "Naming and shaming" alone no longer deters; it often produces adaptation and bravado. What does impose cost are combined measures that hit logistics, finance, mobility, and supply chains — export controls on dual-use hardware, visa/immigration frictions for facilitators, pressure on commercial fronts and enablers, and judicial cases that seize assets and disrupt procurement. Public attribution still matters — but mainly when it is paired with concrete follow-through that raises the price of repetition rather than merely documenting it.

Training for these operatives is relatively inexpensive, and the pool of potential recruits remains large.

For the Kremlin, this type of agent provides a convenient shield: Even when missions fail and identities are revealed, the operatives themselves are unfazed, and the Russian leadership can deny responsibility or feign disinterest — all without compromising its aggressive agenda. Western accusations are used for internal purposes: to paint the country as besieged by an incessant information offensive from hostile foreign powers.

The increasing activity of the Russian agencies, exposed by the West, is also used for external purposes: to send a signal that the Western approach to deterrence of Russian operations does not work as expected.

Chapter 2 Russia's Shadow Warriors

Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan

Executive Summary

- Russian intelligence has shifted its modus operandi back to Soviet-era practices in which it operates on the notion that the regime is at perpetual war with the West, regardless of whether it is engaged directly in a hot conflict with Western powers. Russian intelligence agencies and state institutions carrying out shadow-war operations are encouraged to act "according to the rules of wartime."
- Russian perceptions of threats — both internal and external — have significantly evolved since 2022. The Kremlin now frames dissent not merely as political opposition but as existential betrayal, thereby justifying extreme measures. This redefinition of threat perceptions plays a crucial role in legitimizing the intensification of shadow-war activities.
- After 2022, Russian intelligence fully embraced sabotage as part of a broader shadow-warfare strategy, intended to destabilize European governments and diminish European support for Ukraine by restricting governments and industries in ways that are difficult to counter.
- Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russian intelligence services have undergone a marked shift in their recruitment practices and operational structure. These reforms reflect both operational necessity and ideological continuity, reinforcing a culture of militarized statecraft and targeted violence in the subthreshold zone. Russian military intelligence today increasingly recruits from the ranks of combat veterans, particularly those who served in Chechnya, Syria, and, more recently, Ukraine.
- In contrast with earlier, more brazen tactics, most sabotage operations carried out by Russia's agencies in the past two years leave few or no direct traces of Russian involvement. This marks a deliberate return to secrecy as a protective and strategic shield.
- Moscow's strategy of attributing its own covert operations in the West to Ukrainian intelligence is likely to expand. From now on, such operations — including assassinations, arson, and attacks on infrastructure — may increasingly be framed as the work of Ukrainian agents in an effort to discredit Kyiv and shift European public opinion.

This section will focus on the who and why of Russian shadow war, including the people and institutions involved and the analytical and ideological processes that shape their decision-making.

In particular, the section will explore:

a. *The war-time mentality. This part will elucidate the ways in which the increasing role of the special forces and war veterans affects shadow war operations, including:*
   - *The "Stalinization" of methods and practices;*
   - *Changing perception of threats, both domestic and external, and the ways in which these perceptions motivate and limit shadow-war activity;*
   - *Return to the methods used in the 1930s to 1950s, including the resurgence of sabotage and TNR (trans-national repression);*
   - *Approaches to mission orientation and efficacy;*

b. *Shifting tactics and structures of Russian shadow-war aggression / the fusion of the special forces and the secret services, including:*
   - *How institutional reforms affect decision-making, capacity, and approach;*
   - *Generational changes in agencies' leadership, rank and file, and supervisory bodies.*
   - *The war-time mentality*

The War-Time Mentality

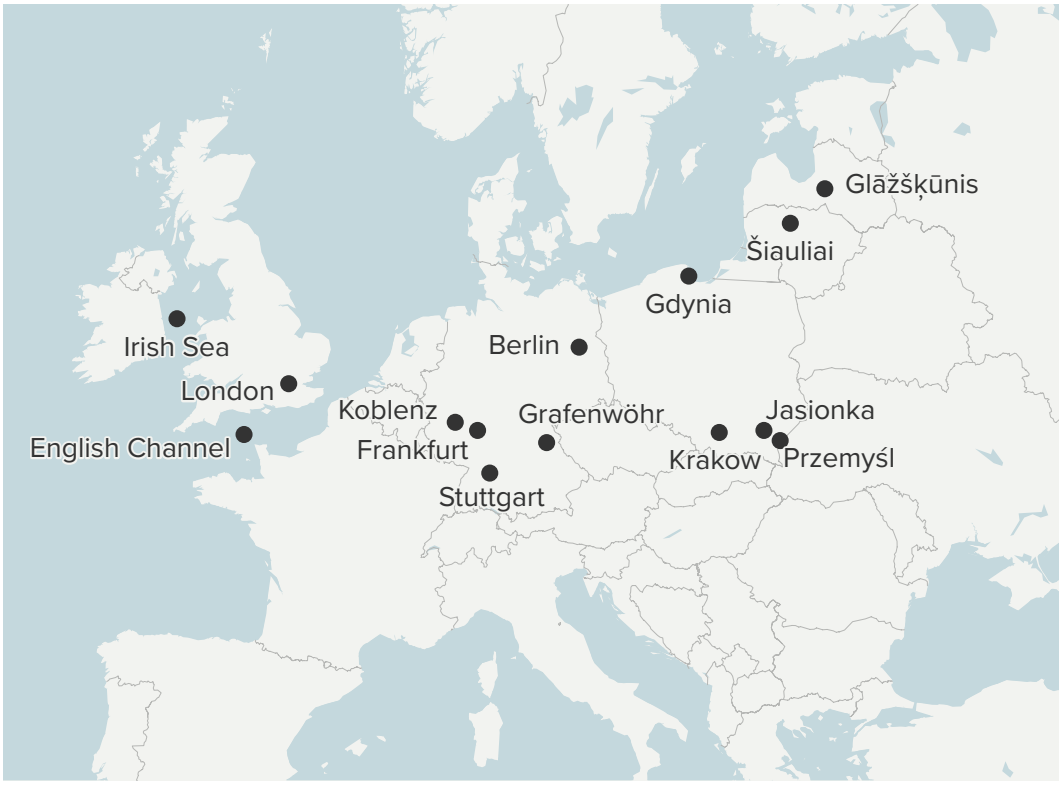
The "Stalinization" of Methods and Practices

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russian intelligence appears to have shifted its modus operandi. Rather than adhering to the Cold War–era practices of the 1970s and 1980s, it has increasingly adopted methods reminiscent of Stalin's secret police.

During the Cold War, Soviet intelligence operations in Western Europe and North America focused primarily on political and industrial espionage, political subversion (such as funding pro-Kremlin communist and socialist parties, as well as pro-disarmament groups), and targeted disinformation campaigns. These efforts extended to infiltrating and disrupting the Russian émigré community, including exiled political organizations and foreign-backed media outlets like Voice of America, Radio Liberty, Radio Free Europe, and the BBC. While these activities were aggressive, they did not generally include sabotage or targeted assassinations, the latter having been largely suspended by the late 1950s.

In contrast, the Stalin-era intelligence services employed a far broader, and more violent, range of tactics. These included not only espionage and subversion, but also assassinations, sabotage, and widespread acts of trans-national repression. Stalin's

Incidents of Russian Espionage



Identifying facilities significant for national security, surveilling military bases, and mapping critical undersea infrastructure. Map: Center for European Policy Analysis • Source: AP Interactives.

agencies operated as wartime institutions, even during periods without formal conflict. For Stalin, war was not an exception but the regime's natural condition.

The rationale for the current shift seems to reflect that Stalin's era was the last time Russia faced a major military confrontation with the West. As Russia faces what it perceives as a major confrontation with the West, its intelligence services appear to be reverting to Stalinist methods.

This fundamental transformation has impacted all three of Russia's intelligence agencies involved in shadow-war operations.

The "Stalinization" of methods and practices can be seen through the approaches adopted by the agencies, both inside and outside of the country, in treatment and perception of threats; and through institutional changes.

Changing Perception of Threats: Domestic and External, and the Ways in Which These Perceptions Motivate and Limit Shadow War Activity

Perceptions of threats — both internal and external — have significantly evolved since 2022. The Kremlin now frames dissent not merely as political opposition but as existential betrayal, thereby justifying extreme measures. This redefinition of threat perceptions plays a crucial role in legitimizing the intensification of shadow war activities.

Before 2022, Russian opposition politicians were never accused of being traitors. This changed dramatically in 2023, with the conviction of Vladimir Kara-Murza, who was sentenced to 25 years for "high treason."

Legal repression has since escalated; where once there were multiple punitive options available for opposition figures, prison is now the default. Lawyers involved in sensitive political cases have also become targets of prosecution.

One of the Kremlin's greatest concerns involves defections — specifically, military personnel, intelligence officers, and officials abandoning their posts to side with foreign powers. This fear has historical roots dating back to the Second World War, when thousands of members of the Red Army defected, forming the Russian volunteer troops that fought for the Germans — commonly monikered as *Vlasovtsy* after a Soviet general Vlasov who had agreed to lead German-backed Russian liberation army during the war.

During times of war, these concerns are heightened, as the memory of the 1941 invasion by Nazi Germany still looms large. They are coupled with a fear of defectors — the Russian military, spies, and officials who defect to the West. These fears are also rooted in 20th-century history, when Soviet Russia produced an unprecedented number of defectors.

The Kremlin's fears about defections were crystallized in the summer of 2022 when the Russian parliament amended the criminal code to designate "switching to the enemy's side during military operations" as an act of high treason, punishable by up to 20 years in prison. This legal change formalized the government's hardened stance toward defection and set the stage for more aggressive tactics.

By 2023, the Kremlin's focus had shifted to rebel groups like the Ukrainian-based Russian Volunteer Corps and the Freedom of Russia Legion, both of which consist of Russian defectors and former military personnel. These groups were labeled terrorist organizations, reinforcing the narrative that defection, even to fight against Russia's invasion of Ukraine, was an unforgivable betrayal.

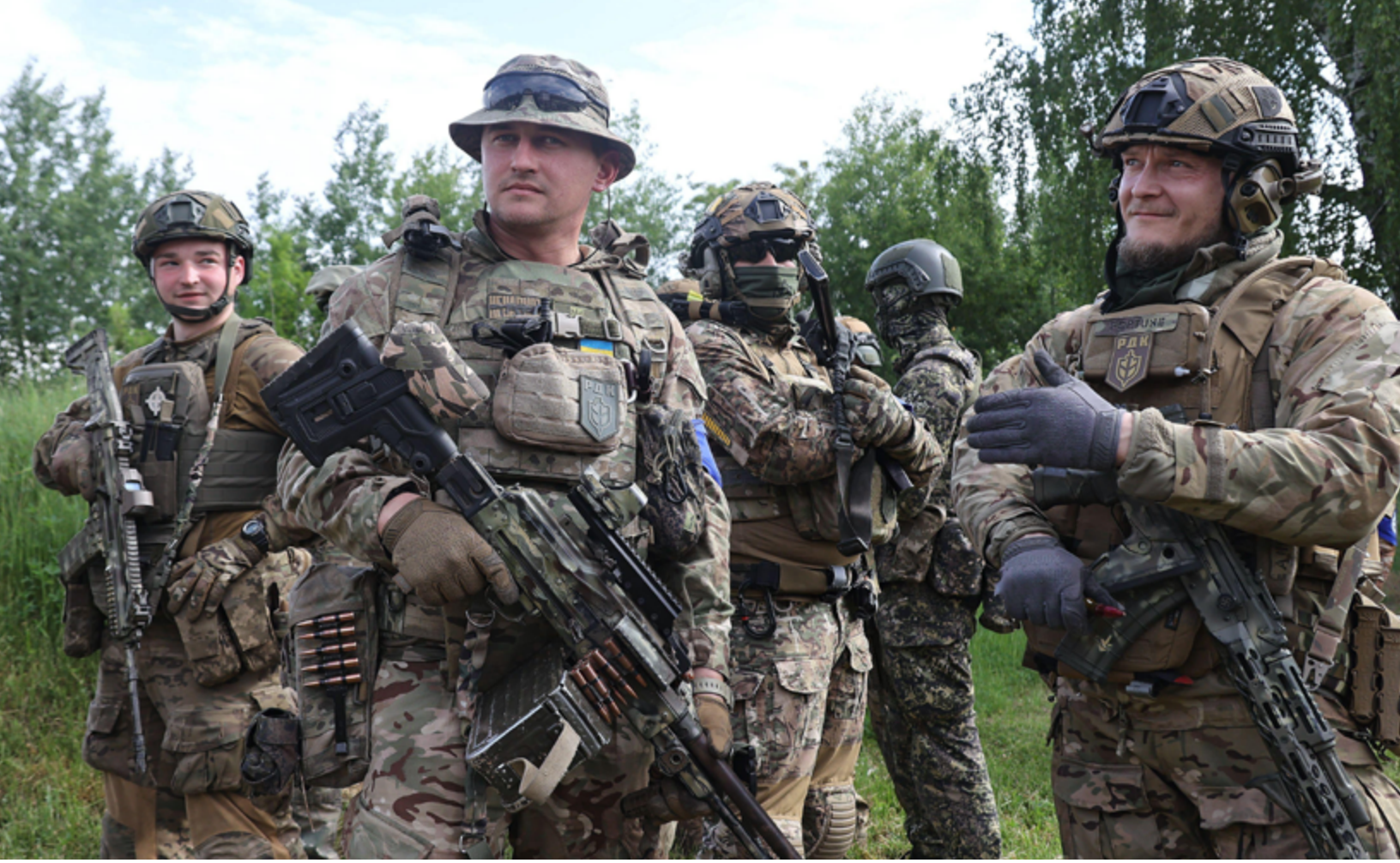


Photo: Representatives of the Liberty of Russia Legion and the Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) hold a briefing near the border in northern Ukraine, May 24, 2023. Credit: Ukrinform/Alamy Live News

In March 2024, following the presidential election, Putin delivered a speech underscoring the grave threat posed by defectors joining Ukrainian forces. He likened the current crisis to that of Stalin's era, directly harking back to the *Vlasovtsy* who defected to the Nazis during World War II. The reference was clear: Defection is not only a betrayal but a threat that could unravel the fabric of the state. Putin instructed the FSB to track down and punish any Russian nationals fighting on the Ukrainian side, vowing to pursue these individuals "without a statute of limitations, wherever they are."

The Kremlin's fixation on defections has extended beyond legal and rhetorical measures to physical action. One notable example is the case of Maxim Kuzminov, a Russian military helicopter pilot who defected to Ukraine in August 2023. Kuzminov flew his Mi-8 helicopter to Ukraine, with two of his crew members unaware of his intentions. Tragically, these crew members were killed by Ukrainian forces upon landing.

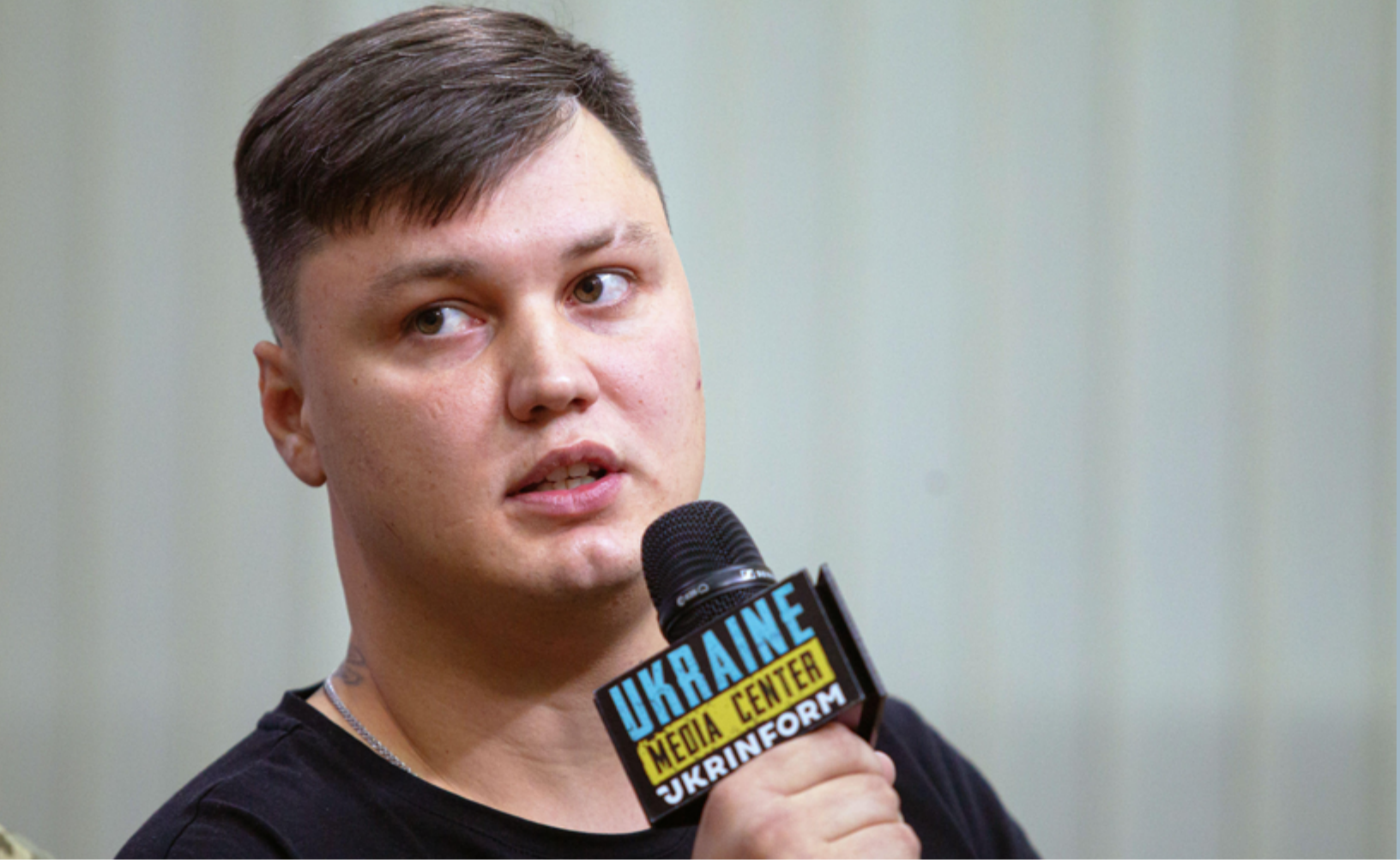


Photo: Defected Russian Mi-8 helicopter pilot, Captain Maksim Kuzminov attends a press conference to share the details of the Synytsia (Tit) special operation of the Ukrainian Defence Intelligence, Kyiv, capital of Ukraine, September 5, 2023. Credit: Ukrinform/Alamy Live News

A few months later, the Russian military responded with extraordinary anger. GRU special forces officers released a video in which they appeared, masked, stating that an assassination order had been given and vowing to find and kill Kuzminov. In February 2024, Kuzminov was killed in a parking garage in Villajoyosa, Spain, with six bullets fired from a Russian Makarov pistol — an unmistakable signature of the Russian security services.

This assassination served not only as a personal revenge against Kuzminov but also as a message from the Kremlin. By targeting a defector in this manner, Russia sought to compromise Ukraine's military intelligence and convey the message: You can't keep the people who trusted you safe.

Defection and its Impact on Host Countries: The Example of France

The Kremlin's concerns extend beyond the defectors themselves but also to the countries that harbor them. France, in particular, has been viewed with increasing suspicion by Moscow.

Since 2022, Moscow has held a growing belief that France has become a haven for defectors, potentially acting as a base for Western intelligence to lure deserters away from Russia. This suspicion grew stronger in 2023 when the French National Asylum Court granted refugee status to 19 Russian military deserters in July 2023. The court ruled that these individuals faced personal risk of persecution for refusing to participate in the war in Ukraine.

In October 2023, a group of six Russian soldiers — deserters who had fled the battlefield in Ukraine — arrived in France from Kazakhstan without travel documents. Their subsequent entry into France represented the first major case of a group of Russian deserters being granted asylum in a European country.

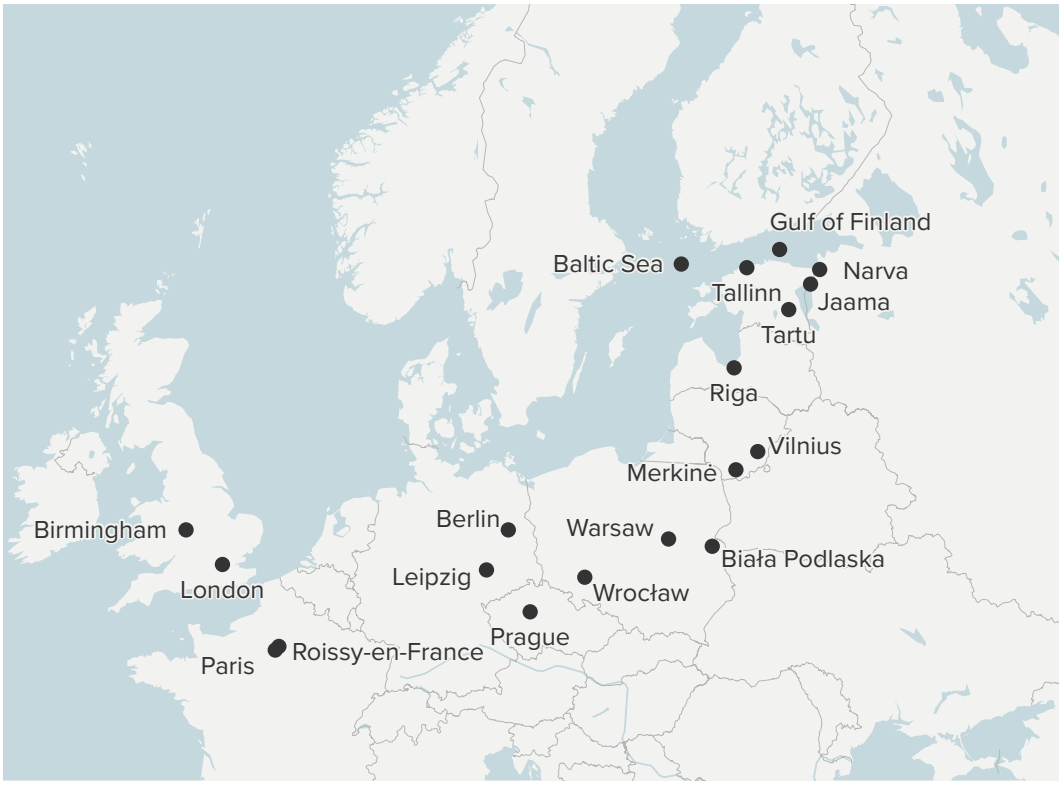
The Kremlin's evolving perception of threats has reshaped the scope and character of Russia's shadow war activities. For instance, by casting political opponents and defectors as existential enemies, the state has legitimized a range of coercive measures, from legal persecution and targeted assassinations to trans-national repression. This tension not only reveals the limits of Russia's shadow war tactics but also underscores the risks faced by both individuals and states that challenge the Kremlin's narratives.

Returning to the Methods Used in the 1930s-1950s, Including the Resurgence of Sabotage and TNR (trans-national repression)

After Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, Moscow's intelligence agencies began experimenting with foreign sabotage operations in order to pressure the West. These operations began relatively infrequently, such as when GRU agents sabotaged ammunition depots in the Czech Republic in 2014. These depots had provided supplies to Ukrainian forces in the Donbas.

Since 2022, Russian sabotage has broadened. These attacks aim to destabilize European governments and diminish support for Ukraine by imposing costs on governments and industries in ways that are difficult to counter. These operations harass the population and seek vulnerabilities in European defense.

Incidents of Russian Sabotage



Locates acts of arson, industrial abotage, and vandalism. Map: Center for European Policy Analysis • Source: AP Interactives.

In January 2025, James Appathurai, NATO's Deputy Assistant Secretary-General for Innovation, Hybrid, and Cyber, told the European Parliament that Russia was increasing its use of shadow warfare — a significant threat to the West — in what he called "incidents of sabotage taking place across NATO countries over the past couple of years," including train derailments, arson, attacks on infrastructure, and assassination plots against industrial leaders. Since the war in Ukraine began, 15 countries have seen sabotage operations linked to Russian intelligence.

The most audacious operation so far occurred in the spring of 2024, when Russia attempted to assassinate Armin Papperger, head of Rheinmetall, Germany's largest arms manufacturer. German and American intelligence services foiled the plot, as Appathurai confirmed in January. He also mentioned "other plots" against European industry leaders. This threat seems unlikely to dissipate: In conjunction with other European defense companies, Rheinmetall will likely continue arming Ukraine in a post-deal future, and the corporation's growth projections have surged since Trump administration came to power in the US.

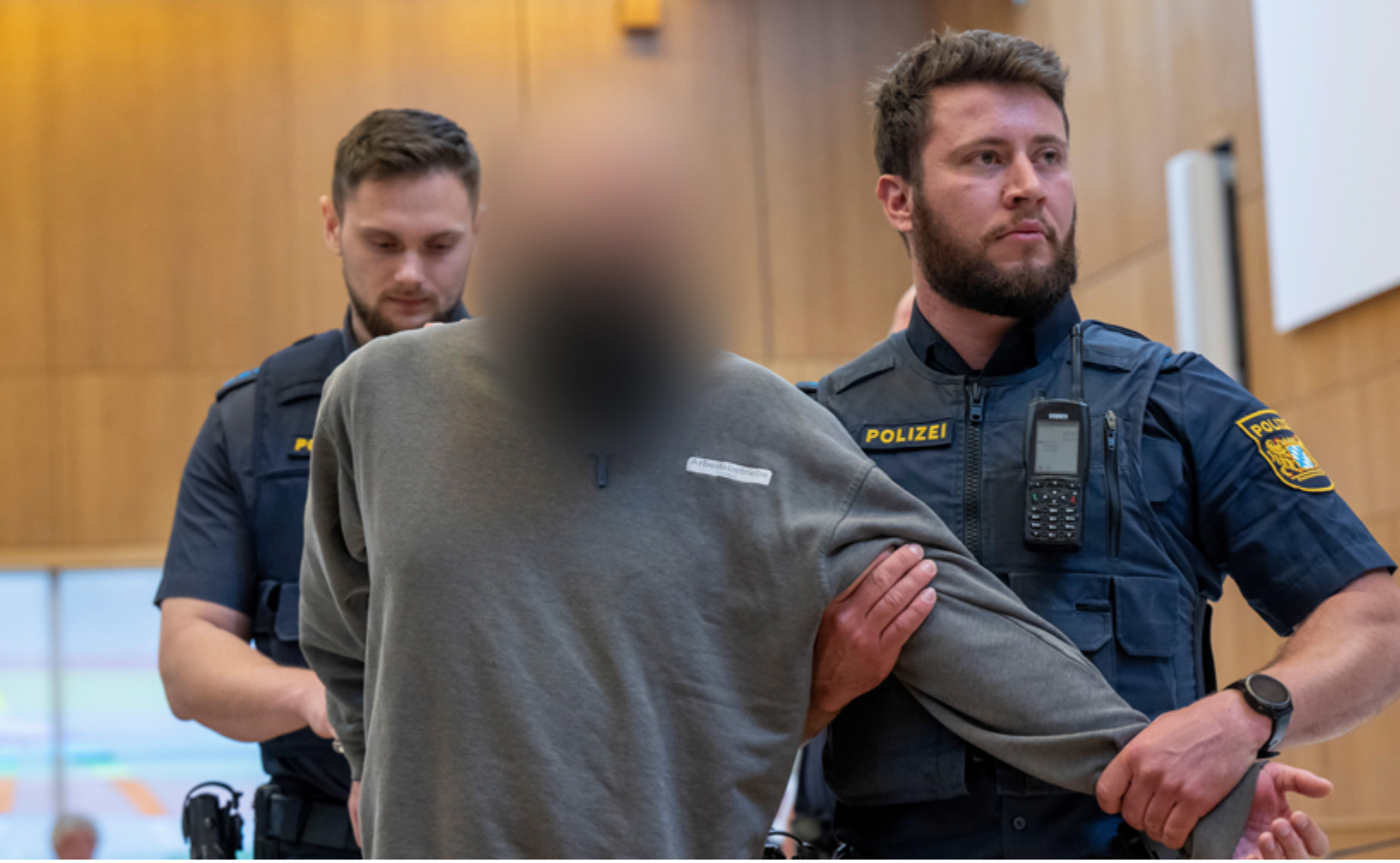


Photo: A defendant (M) is led into the courtroom at the start of the trial against a German-Russian trio for secret service activities for Russia and membership of a foreign terrorist group. The alleged Russian spies are said to have planned sabotage operations against military infrastructure and railroad lines in Germany. Note: Person(s) has/have been pixelated for legal reasons. Credit: Peter Kneffel/dpa/Alamy Live News

Russia has also been recruiting “criminal gangs, unwitting youth, or migrants” to carry out many of these operations. Local criminals can be recruited via social media for anonymous, one-off jobs harder to counter or track. This strategy also makes it more difficult to infiltrate Russian nationals into these countries.

While Moscow is targeting European infrastructure and military logistics, it also seeks to influence the political landscape in target countries through sabotage. For example, before the February federal election in Germany, a series of attacks were carried out against civilians by immigrants. According to a senior German intelligence official the authors spoke to shortly before the election, the German agencies suspected that Russian security services may have instigated these attacks to inflate support for far-right groups that oppose Germany’s support for Ukraine.

These attacks need not be violent to be effective. Russian agencies have likely used social media to recruit teenagers in target countries to spray hateful slogans on apartment buildings in neighborhoods with significant migrant populations. These actions aim to humiliate, threaten, and incite hatred against refugees from Ukraine or Syria.

These kinds of attacks are cheap and easy. More violent actions might include committing arson or throwing Molotov cocktails. The authors spoke to European intelligence officials who believe that Russia is primarily targeting Germany, along with Poland and the United Kingdom, in its sabotage operations.

The "Stalinization" of Russia's security services has shaped their attitude toward Russians abroad. Indeed, Russian agencies have fully embraced trans-national repression**.**

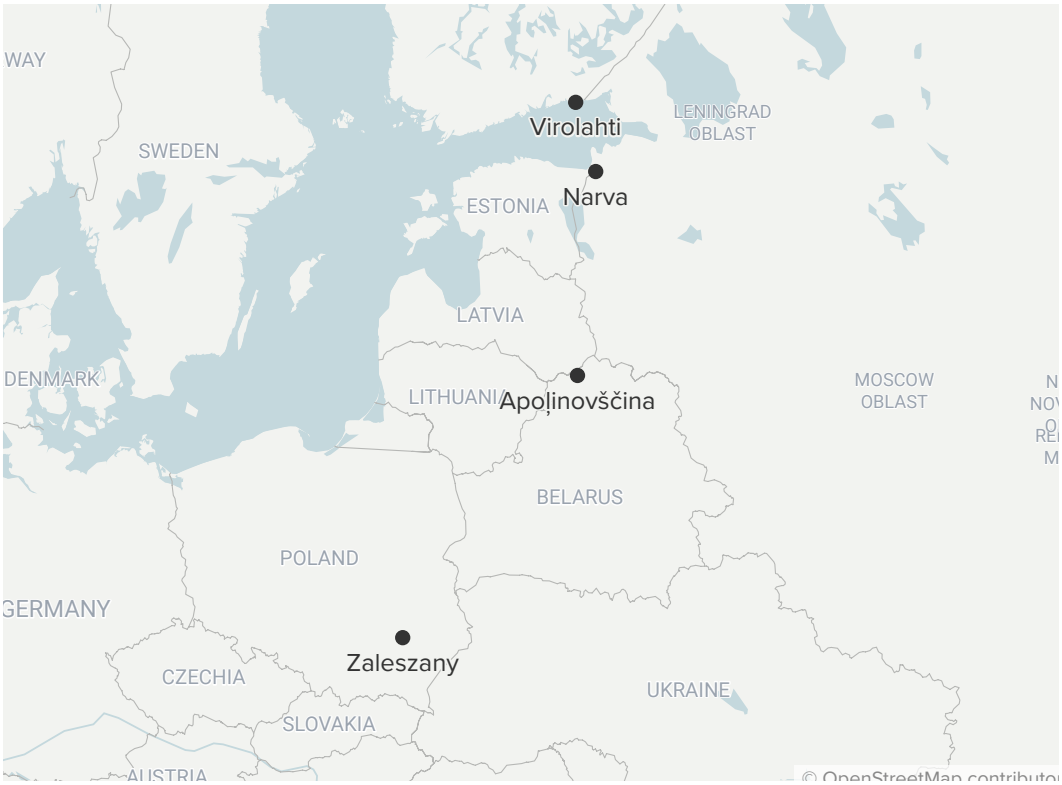
Russia has long used various strategies against exiled opposition figures — often in the same countries (including Germany, the UK, and the Baltics), where it is now engaging in acts of sabotage.

These agencies' predecessors may even have pioneered trans-national repression: Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, the tsarist secret police infiltrated and harassed émigrés in France and Switzerland. Their Soviet successors dramatically escalated these tactics, including political assassinations.

Just like the Tsars before him, Stalin was obsessed with the threat posed by political emigration and exiles, and Putin inherited that obsession. Since his invasion of Ukraine, he tasks more and more departments inside the security services to address a challenge posed by the emigration. The FSB comes first to mind as the principal actor conducting transnational repression today. We found that at least nine departments of the FSB have been involved in transnational repression – against five in the Soviet-era KGB:

- **The Fifth Service (Operative Information and International Relations Service):** Oversees Russian diasporas and positions officers in international organizations, cultural centers, and embassies.
- **The First Service (Counterintelligence):** Targets defectors and individuals suspected of aiding foreign intelligence or Ukrainian organizations.
- **The Second Service (Protection of the Constitutional System):** Focuses on political dissent and revolutionary threats, including émigré organizations.
- **Military Counterintelligence:** Investigates attacks on infrastructure and identifies foreign-based threats.
- **The Investigative Directorate:** Prosecutes individuals charged with treason and collaboration with foreign entities.
- **The Directorate of Internal Security:** Tracks journalists and whistleblowers, including Russian exiles.
- **Border Troops:** Harass and interrogate travelers, gather citizenship data, and control emigration flows.
- **The Twelfth and Eighteenth Centers:** Conduct surveillance and offensive cyber operations targeting exiled activists and journalists.

Incidents of Russian Weaponized Migration



Map: Center for European Policy Analysis • Source: AP Interactives.

In addition to the FSB, other state institutions are directly involved in TNR conducted by Russian agencies:

- **Ministry of Justice:** Designates exile organizations as "undesirable," criminalizing their activities and associations.
- **Investigative Committee:** Provides legal justifications for asset seizures, raids, and harassment of exiles' families.
- **Interior Ministry:** Operates a recruitment-and-infiltration program aimed at spying on émigré groups, as seen in the case of Vsevolod Osipov.
- **Foreign Ministry:** Offers logistical and diplomatic support for TNR operations, including attempted extraditions (e.g., the case of the band *Bi-2* in Thailand).
- **Roskomnadzor:** Enforces online censorship and surveillance, targeting exile-run media and communication platforms.

Beyond the state apparatus, pro-Kremlin media and online influencers contribute to TNR by disseminating leaked personal data and inciting harassment against activists and opposition figures abroad.

As this list illustrates, the Kremlin regime allocates very significant resources to identifying and pursuing threats abroad, real and imaginary,

The rhetoric of Kremlin officials also changed. In January 2023, deputy head of the Russian Security Council and a former prime minister and president Dmitry Medvedev described critics of the Kremlin as "traitors who have gone over to the enemy and want their Fatherland to perish" and "scraps of s***, who until recently considered themselves to be among the so-called intellectual elite."[1]

He also suggested acting "according to the rules of wartime," citing World War II or, as Russians call it, the Great Patriotic War. What he meant by that was clear: "In time of war there have always been special rules and quiet groups of impeccably inconspicuous people who effectively enforce them."

This language is clear to any Russian. The deputy head of the Security Council called for the use of death squads against politically active Russians in exile.

Shifting Tactics and Structures of Russian shadow War Aggression / The Fusion of the Special Forces and the Secret Services

How Institutional Reforms Affect Decision-Making, Capacity, and Approach

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russian intelligence services have undergone a marked shift in their recruitment practices and operational structure — particularly in their increasing reliance on war veterans for covert missions, a strategy that aligns closely with Soviet-era practices. These reforms reflect both operational necessity and ideological continuity, reinforcing a culture of militarized statecraft and targeted violence in shadow war operations.

The practice of recruiting war-hardened operatives for clandestine operations has deep roots in Soviet intelligence history. Following the Second World War, Soviet agencies, under Stalin's directive, launched a massive recruitment campaign targeting veterans of the Red Army. One illustrative case is that of Ivan Shchelokov, a combat pilot who was recruited by military intelligence shortly after the end of the war. He was chosen because of his war record and his background: Shchelokov's father was a Soviet military intelligence saboteur who had destroyed bridges in Spain during the civil war.

Shchelokov, along with his wife Nadezhda, was deployed to Western Europe with a mission to eliminate perceived traitors. In his later recollections, he described the operations with chilling precision. "We usually arranged to meet the victim near a body of water," he noted, "so that they would immediately 'swim with the fishes,' as they say." Nadezhda, he recounted, would shoot the target with a silent pistol concealed in her purse, after distracting them with a folded note. Shchelokov would then dispose of the body. Years later, he expressed little remorse — only frustration at occasional operational lapses and one instance in which a target had not, in fact, been a traitor.

Shchelokov's experience exemplifies the early institutionalization of a particular type of intelligence operative: one forged in war and deployed in peace for state-sanctioned violence. Upon returning to the Soviet Union, he helped establish the GRU's Spetsnaz.[2]

This model appears to have been revived and adapted in the post-2012 security landscape. Russian military intelligence today increasingly recruits from the ranks of combat veterans, particularly those who served in Chechnya, Syria, and more recently Ukraine.

These individuals possess the tactical expertise, commitment, and psychological resilience considered essential for sensitive missions — including assassinations and sabotage operations. They are also expected to demonstrate operational secrecy and, ideally, experience operating behind enemy lines without identifying insignia — in other words, experience associated with special forces missions. Unsurprisingly, many of these recruits come from Spetsnaz backgrounds.

One prominent example is Anatoliy Chepiga, a decorated GRU officer implicated in the 2018 poisoning of former double agent Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom. Like Shchelokov, Chepiga is a war veteran, having completed three tours in Chechnya. The operational logic behind his selection appears strikingly consistent with that of the Soviet era: Experience in battle translates into a readiness to execute assassination missions, without questions. Skripal, a defector from the GRU, would have been a typical target in the 1950s.

In this sense, the GRU has come full circle.

While this approach was long associated primarily with military intelligence, the veteran-as-operative model has expanded to other Russian intelligence and security agencies since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The war has produced a growing pool of combat veterans — many with deep loyalty to the state and few opportunities in civilian life, and a readiness to conduct lethal operations, ranging from assassinations to sabotage.

Principal Departments Responsible for Sabotage

Inside of the FSB, the Fifth Service remains in charge of sabotage operations in Europe, according to the Russian media outlet in exile, *The Insider*.[3] This assessment appears to be corroborated by the Ukrainian Security Service SBU. According to the SBU, the members of the Fifth Service of the FSB "coordinate a network of agents in Ukraine from the Moscow office, structure and analyze the intelligence gathered, and develop plans for subversive operations."[4]

It was also further confirmed by French intelligence. During the European Parliament elections of June 2024, Stars of David were spray-painted throughout Paris and its suburbs as tensions in the Middle East grew. French intelligence claimed that the Fifth Service of the FSB had directed the entire operation by flying in a Moldovan couple and providing them with phones, paint, and stencils.[5]

After the full-scale invasion, the sabotage units already active in the GRU, including the infamous unit 29155 — which had attempted to assassinate Skripal in the United Kingdom in 2018 — were expanded. According to a 2024 RUSI special report, the unit was expanded into a larger department, called the Special Activities Service [*Sluzba Spetsialnoy Deyatelnosti*, or SSD in Russian], with the same head: General Andrei Averyanov.[6]

According to RUSI, the SSD received three subunits: unit 29155; the recently established Unit 54654; and a central planning department responsible for coordination. Initially composed largely of Spetsnaz veterans, SSD's recruitment strategy has shifted since then. Many more recent recruits no longer have military experience.

Instead, the Service draws from a pool of foreign students studying at Russian universities — particularly from the Balkans, Africa, and other regions in the Global South — offering stipends in exchange for service.

This marks a significant evolution from the earlier veteran-based model, suggesting a broader, globalized approach to covert operations.

Back to Secretive Mode

For several years after 2016, Moscow's intelligence agents appeared increasingly brazen and sloppy.

One striking example was the Russian assassin Vadim Krasikov, who, in broad daylight in August 2019, shot a Chechen veteran militant in central Berlin. German police arrested him when he attempted to dump his pistol and bicycle into the nearby River Spree.[7] To some extent, such operatives didn't care about being exposed as Russian agents — the usage of such operatives is aimed to demonstrate, through

bold and public actions, that Western efforts to expose or prosecute them (naming and shaming tactics) were ineffective.

Now, however, Russia's intelligence services appear to be shifting back to a more secretive operational mode, reflected by the change of recruitment policy at the SSD. As the Ukraine war has made it harder for Russian agencies to operate in Europe, they have adjusted their tradecraft, turning increasingly to European nationals for one-off tasks, often outside established espionage networks in the target countries.

In the early 2000s, Russian-sponsored assassinations abroad often bore an unmistakable state signature — for instance, the use of radioactive polonium or Novichok, a military-grade nerve agent. But that is no longer the case. Most sabotage operations carried out by Russia's agencies in the past two years leave few or no direct traces of Russian involvement. Many rely on local recruits, often contacted via social media, and paid only a few hundred dollars for isolated tasks.

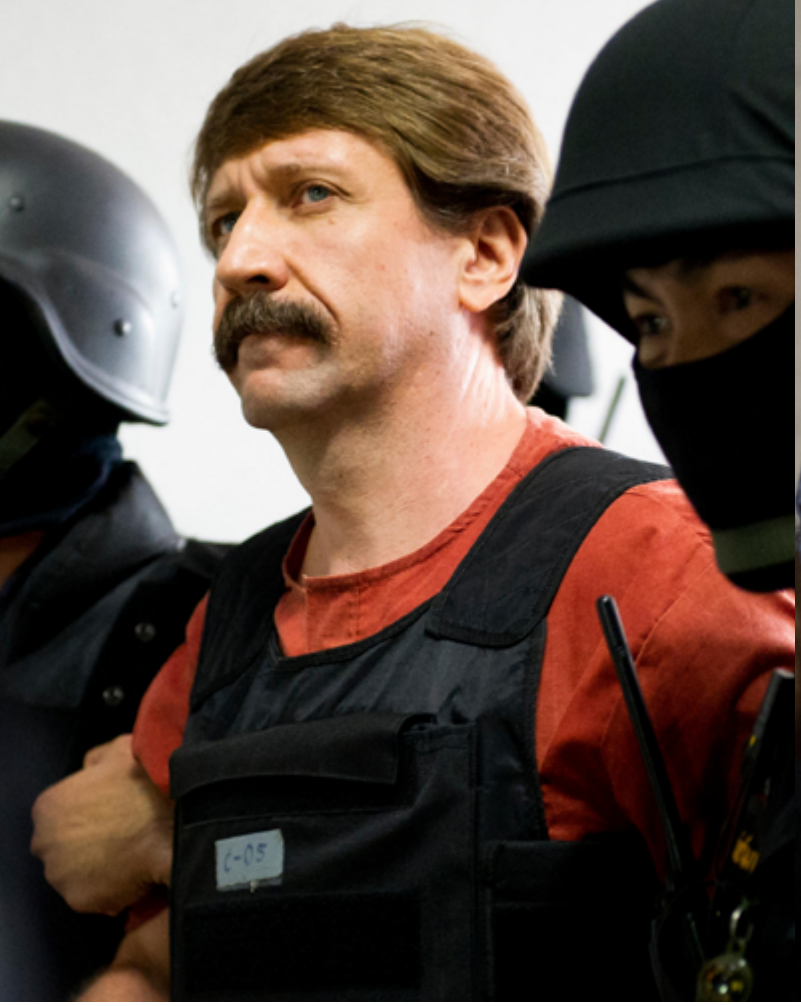
This renewed emphasis on secrecy also allows Russian agencies to blame other actors. In early February, the SVR accused Ukraine's intelligence services of "preparing attacks" against Russian opposition figures and businessmen abroad. The SVR claimed that if the perpetrators were arrested, they would "blame the Russian special services, allegedly on whose orders these attacks were prepared."

Russian exile communities across Europe quickly saw what this statement meant: The SVR was laying the groundwork for a new wave of attacks on them, with the blame preemptively placed on Ukraine. Moscow's strategy of attributing its own covert operations in the West to Ukrainian intelligence is likely to expand. From now on, such operations — including assassinations, arson, and attacks on infrastructure — may increasingly be framed as the work of Ukrainian agents, in an effort to discredit Kyiv and shift European public opinion.[8]

New Tactics: Hostage Trading

Russia is also expanding its reliance on hostage-taking. Never before has Russia detained so many foreigners holding European and American passports as it does today. Since the invasion of Ukraine began, the FSB has increasingly arrested citizens of targeted countries on dubious grounds: discovering a piece of gum laced with cannabis in a purse, say, or uncovering a minor donation to a Ukrainian charity in a detainee's phone log.

During the Cold War, prisoner exchanges were typically quiet, bilateral deals conducted between Western and Soviet intelligence agencies, separate from broader diplomatic negotiations. The KGB did not bring up spy swaps during the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) between US President Richard Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. Nowadays, that boundary has blurred. Following



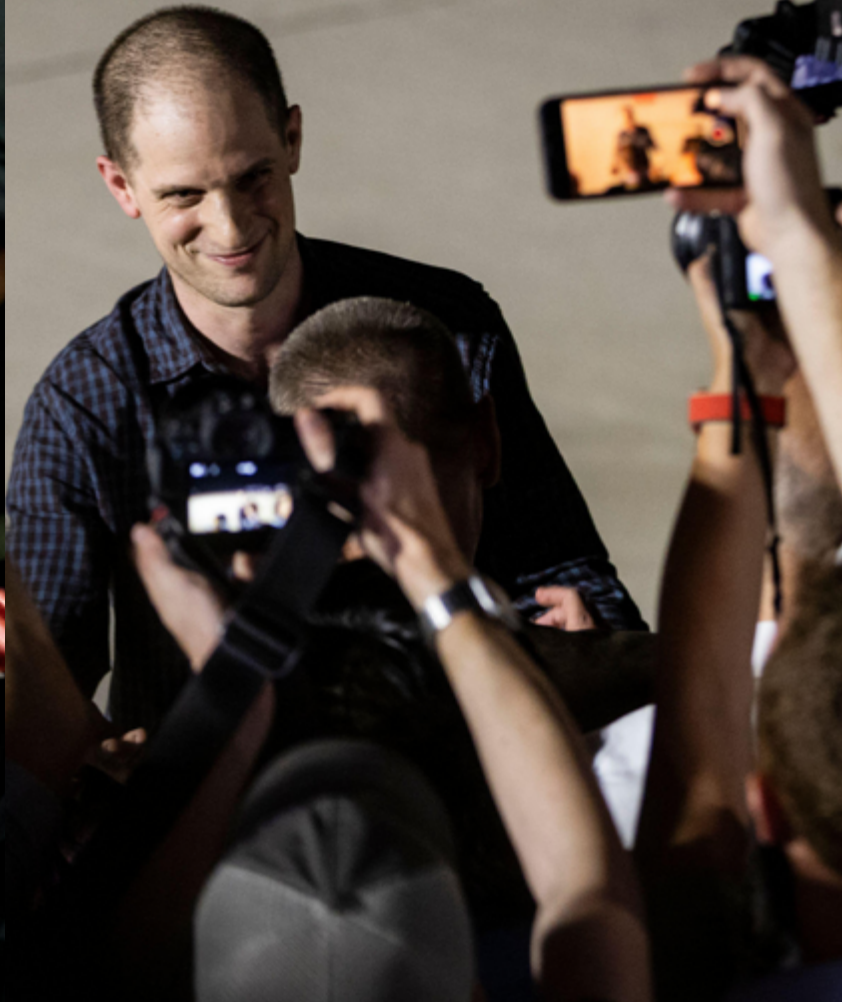


Photo Left: Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout, also known as 'Merchant of Death', is escorted by special police unit in a criminal court in Bangkok before his extradition to the United States, October 4, 2010. Bout was released in exchange for US Women's Baskeball Team player Brittney Griner in 2022. Credit: Natthawat Wongrat/ZUMApress.com/Alamy Live News.

Photo Right: Evan Gershkovich, the Wall Street Journal reporter held captive by the Russian government, walks over to greet colleagues and other reporters as he arrives in the United States at Joint Base Andrews on August 1, 2024 in Maryland. Gershkovich was part of a 24-person prisoner swap between Russia, the United States, Germany, and three other western countries. Credit: Samuel Corum/Sipa USA/Alamy Live News.

the release of American basketball player Brittney Griner in exchange for arms dealer Viktor Bout, Russian intelligence services — particularly the SVR and the FSB — see hostage trading as a powerful tool. As a result, Moscow has turned detained foreigners — from the United States, France, Germany, and beyond — into significant leverage in international negotiations.

Russia's intelligence services are increasingly formalizing this practice. The FSB has already served as a back channel with the United States in past years, so its prominent role in the 2024 negotiations over the release of American journalist Evan Gershkovich was no surprise. Sergei Naryshkin, head of the SVR, has long been involved in such talks. In 2022, for instance, then–CIA Director William Burns met with Naryshkin in Ankara to discuss issues ranging from nuclear weapons to the fate of imprisoned Americans in Russia.

More recently, during preliminary talks in February 2024 in Riyadh between Kremlin officials and Trump administration representatives about a potential Ukraine deal, Naryshkin was reportedly involved once again — presumably, among other reasons, to capitalize on the hostage issue.[9]

Notably, those talks followed the release of American teacher Marc Fogel, whom Russia detained possessing medical cannabis. In a public ceremony, Trump welcomed Fogel back at the White House, celebrating the return as a diplomatic success.

Hostage exchanges tap into the transactional, quid-pro-quo style of dealmaking that Trump has often preferred, which may encourage Moscow to continue accumulating Western detainees. On March 11, Naryshkin spoke via phone with Trump's CIA director, John Ratliff. According to Russia's state news agency TASS, the two agreed to "maintain regular contact."

The inclusion of Sergei Beseda, the former head of the FSB's Fifth Service, in the Russian delegation during the March 2025 talks in Riyadh — replacing Sergei Naryshkin — further underscores the institutionalization of hostage diplomacy and the growing role of the FSB. A *Wall Street Journal* investigation reported that Beseda had been involved in US-Russia prisoner negotiations even before the Ukraine war. The back channel for such talks was formalized during the June 2021 summit between Presidents Biden and Putin, held at an 18th-century lakeside villa in Geneva. At that meeting, US Ambassador to Moscow John Sullivan served as the American intermediary, with Beseda acting as his Russian counterpart. Since the start of the war, Beseda has remained active in prisoner exchange negotiations, including the large-scale swap in summer 2024 and the release of American journalist Evan Gershkovich in return of Vadim Krasikov.[10]

Generational Changes in Agencies' Leadership, Rank and File, and Supervisory Bodies

The war did not lead to significant changes within Russia's security and intelligence services. Vladimir Putin ensured that the limited personnel changes within the FSB were not perceived as purges.

For example, while Sergei Beseda was briefly detained and removed from his position as head of the FSB's Fifth Service, he was subsequently appointed as an adviser to the FSB director. Furthermore, at the end of 2022, Beseda's son, Alexander, was appointed head of a key government department overseeing the secret services and the military.[11]

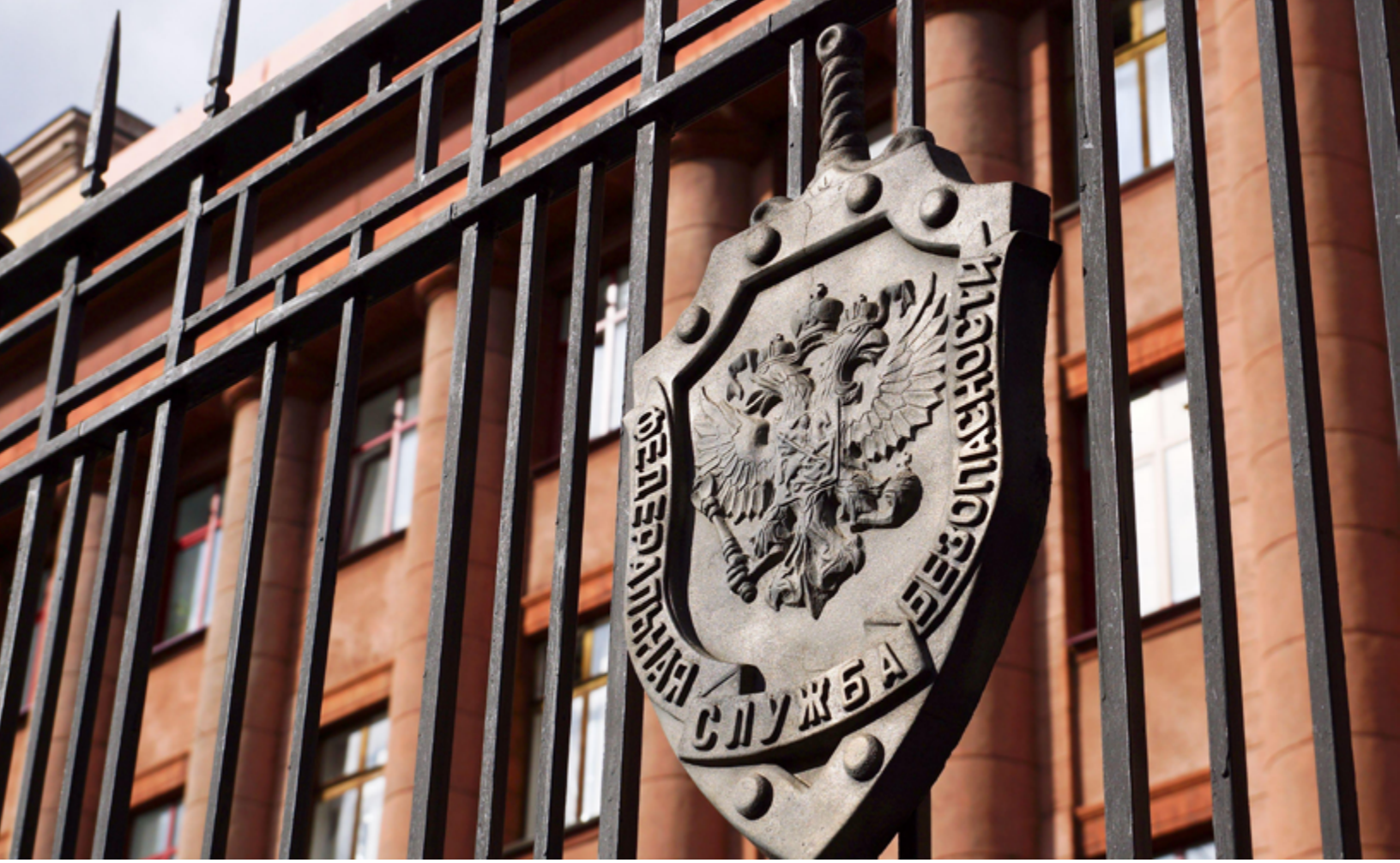


Photo: The emblem of the FSB of Russia on the fence at the headquarters building, Nizhny Novgorod, Russia - September 14, 2019. Credit: Irina Rebrova/Alamy Live News.

Alexander Tikhonov, head of the FSB's Special Purpose Center (*Spetsnaz*), also left his position (in September 2022). However, this change appeared unrelated to the performance of his unit. The official reason cited was his age — Tikhonov was born in 1952 and had led the Center since 1998. Unofficially, the dismissal was linked to a scandal involving his son, Yevgeny, also an FSB officer, who was involved in a June 2022 bloody shootout at a summer café on the Dnipro River embankment in Kherson. The incident resulted in the deaths of two FSB officers and one military officer, with several others hospitalized.[12]

Putin also appeared to apply the same strategy of personnel retention within the GRU. Vladimir Alexeyev, GRU deputy chief and former Spetsnaz officer, continued directing intelligence operations in Ukraine from May 2022 onward, despite his close ties to the now-deceased Wagner Group leader, Evgeny Prigozhin.[13]

More than three years into the war, all three heads of Russia's intelligence agencies have remained in their positions: Alexander Bortnikov, head of the FSB (despite his age — born in 1951, he was 73 at the time of writing); Igor Kostyukov, head of military

intelligence; and Sergei Naryshkin, head of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), who retained his post despite the public humiliation he had suffered at the hands of Putin during a Security Council meeting broadcast on Russian television on the eve of the invasion.

The only significant change occurred within the Security Council: Since May 2024, Sergei Shoigu has served as its secretary, replacing Nikolai Patrushev, an old friend of Vladimir Putin and former head of the FSB, who retains his significant influence as a member of the council and assistant to the president.[14]

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The evolution of Russia's intelligence and security services since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine reflects a broader strategic adaptation: a fusion of legacy Soviet practices with new methods of covert influence, violence, manipulation, and hostage trading. From the resurrection of veteran-based recruitment to the expansion of globalized sabotage networks and the institutionalization of hostage diplomacy, the Kremlin has not only revitalized old tactics but also scaled them to meet the demands of modern geopolitical confrontation.

The shift from brazen assassinations to more ambiguous, deniable operations — often carried out by proxies or foreign nationals — marks a deliberate return to secrecy as a protective and strategic shield. At the same time, the leadership structure has remained remarkably stable, suggesting that continuity, not reform, is the Kremlin's preferred mode of control.

These developments underscore a troubling trajectory: the normalization of extraterritorial repression and shadow-war aggression as central tools of Russian statecraft. Whether through subversion in European capitals, harassment of the Russian exile community, disinformation campaigns, or strategic prisoner swaps, Moscow is reasserting its influence through a complex ecosystem of covert action, psychological pressure, and transactional diplomacy.

This hybrid model — melding special operations, intelligence services, and diplomatic channels — poses a growing challenge to Western security frameworks.

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Sam served as Director of CEPA's Democratic Resilience Program from 2022 to 2025. Prior to that, Sam founded the Russia Institute at KCL, which he directed from 2012 to 2022. Before moving to London, he lived and worked for 13 years in Moscow, including as Director of the Center for the Study of New Media and Politics at the New Economic School and as Deputy Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center. He is the author of Moscow in Movement: Power & Politics in Putin's Russia (Stanford, 2014) and Putin v. the People: The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia (Yale, 2019, with Graeme Robertson), as well as numerous academic and policy papers. An American and British citizen, Dr. Greene holds a PhD and MSc from the London School of Economics and a BSJ from Northwestern University and is an elected fellow of the British Academy of Social Sciences.

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She is co-author with Andrei Soldatov of The New Nobility. The Restoration of Russia's Security State and the Enduring Legacy of the KGB (PublicAffairs, 2010), The Red Web: The Kremlin's Wars on the Internet (PublicAffairs, 2015) and The Compatriots: The Brutal and Chaotic History of Russia's Exiles, Émigrés, and Agents Abroad (PublicAffairs, 2019).

Andrei Soldatov is a Senior Fellow with the Center for European Policy Analysis.

Andrei is a Russian investigative journalist, co-founder, and editor of Agentura.ru, a watchdog of the Russian secret services' activities. He has been covering security services and terrorism issues since 1999. Soldatov covered the siege in Beslan for Echo of Moskvy, a leading independent radio station, and Moscow News. For Novaya Gazeta, he covered the 2006 Lebanon War from Lebanon and tensions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In October 2012 Agentura.Ru, Privacy International, and Citizen Lab launched the joint project 'Russia's Surveillance State' with Andrei Soldatov as a head of the project, to undertake research and investigation into surveillance practices in Russia, including the trade in and use of surveillance technologies. The project's research over surveillance measures introduced by the Russian authorities at the 2014 Winter Olympics was run by the Guardian as a frontpage story.

He is co-author with Irina Borogan of The New Nobility. The Restoration of Russia's Security State and the Enduring Legacy of the KGB (PublicAffairs, 2010), The Red Web: The Struggle Between Russia's Digital Dictators and the New Online Revolutionaries (PublicAffairs, 2015) and The Compatriots: The Brutal and Chaotic History of Russia's Exiles, Émigrés, and Agents Abroad (PublicAffairs, 2019).

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the CEPA team for their support with this paper. The authors would also like to thank those who contributed to the review and creation of this report.

This report has been supported by the Smith Richardson Foundation.

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Endnotes

1 Bob Seely, *The New Total War: From Child Abduction to Cyber Attacks and Drones to Disinformation – Russia's Conflict with Ukraine and the West* (Biteback Publishing, 2025).

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