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PUTIN'S HYDRA: INSIDE RUSSIA'S INTELLIGENCE SERVICES

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SUMMARY

- Russia's intelligence agencies are engaged in an active and aggressive campaign in support of the Kremlin's wider geopolitical agenda.
- As well as espionage, Moscow's "special services" conduct active measures aimed at subverting and destabilising European governments, operations in support of Russian economic interests, and attacks on political enemies.
- Moscow has developed an array of overlapping and competitive security and spy services. The aim is to encourage risk-taking and multiple sources, but it also leads to turf wars and a tendency to play to Kremlin prejudices.
- While much useful intelligence is collected, the machinery for managing, processing, and assessing it is limited. As a result, intelligence's capacity to influence strategy and wider policy is questionable.
- Europe should take a tougher approach to Russian operations, investing resources and political will in counterintelligence, and addressing governance weaknesses that facilitate the Kremlin's campaigns, including tougher controls on money of dubious provenance.

For his birthday in 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin was treated to an exhibition of faux Greek friezes showing him in the guise of Hercules. In one, he was slaying the "hydra of sanctions".¹

The image of the hydra – a voracious and vicious multi-headed beast, guided by a single mind, and which grows new heads as soon as one is lopped off – crops up frequently in discussions of Russia's intelligence and security services. Murdered dissident Alexander Litvinenko and his co-author Yuri Felshtinsky wrote of the way "the old KGB, like some multi-headed hydra, split into four new structures" after 1991.² More recently, a British counterintelligence officer described Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) as a hydra because of the way that, for every plot foiled or operative expelled, more quickly appear.

The West finds itself in a new "hot peace" in which many consider Russia not just as an irritant or challenge, but as an outright threat. For Europe, however, this threat is not likely to materialise in military form. Rather, it comes from covert, indirect, and political operations, typically conducted, controlled, or facilitated by the numerous Russian intelligence and security agencies, which strike from every side but are driven by a single intent.

The agencies are active, aggressive, and well funded. They are granted considerable latitude in their methods, unconstrained by the concerns of diplomats or the scrutiny

¹ "V Moskve proidet vystavka '12 podvigov Putina'", *Lenta.ru*, 6 October 2014, available at <http://lenta.ru/news/2014/10/06/putini/>.

² Yuri Felshtinsky and Alexander Litvinenko, *Blowing Up Russia: Terror from Within*, second edition (London: Gibson Square, 2006).

of legislators. Furthermore, many of the people closest to Putin hail from the ranks of the Chekists (veterans of the security agencies, after the first Bolshevik political police, the *Cheka*) or *siloviki* (“men of force” from the military, security, and intelligence services). This is especially important given that many of the formal institutions of Russian foreign and security policy making – the Foreign and Defence Ministries, the Security Council (SB), the cabinet – have become nothing more than executive agencies where policies are announced and applied, not discussed and decided. Instead, decisions are made informally by Putin and his confidants and cronies.

The Soviet KGB security service was powerful and willing to use espionage, destabilisation, and subversion, but was tightly controlled by a political leadership ultimately committed to the status quo. Under Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s, the state was weak, but the intelligence agencies doubly so. The agencies began renewing their powers during Putin’s first terms as president, but his policy was one of pragmatic accommodation with the West.

Since Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012, though, the regime has unleashed increasingly powerful intelligence agencies in campaigns of domestic repression and external destabilisation, appearing to genuinely want to revise the structures of the international order.

This is unlikely to change any time soon. It is therefore essential to look at these agencies in detail, exploring not only their missions but their strengths and weaknesses, and their position within the Putin system. This paper analyses the modus operandi and role of the agencies – the brutal competition between them, their forays into crime, and their willingness to take extreme measures, even targeted killings.

The paper rejects the widely held belief that the intelligence agencies are the power behind the throne in Moscow. Their lack of unity and common goals, and their dependence on Putin, mean that they should be considered as merely another branch of the elite. Meanwhile, the highly personalised systems for evaluating intelligence and transmitting it to the president damage its quality and impact on policy. While the agencies should by no means be discounted, what emerges is that for all their apparent effectiveness, they have serious weaknesses.

Unlike the hydra with its single controlling intellect, the agencies are often divided, competitive, and poorly tasked. They are certainly not in charge of the Kremlin, but nor is the Kremlin wholly adept at managing them.

Their actions also undermine Russia’s long-term position. So, while this is undoubtedly a serious challenge, Europe should base its actions on what the agencies are, not what Europe fears they may be. This paper calls on European Union governments to adopt a zero-tolerance attitude to Russian intelligence operations in Europe, enhancing capacity sharing and counterintelligence and tracking the

illicit movement of funds that lies behind these activities. By showing that aggression abroad has major costs, Europe can push the intelligence services to take a more cautious approach.

The “warriors of the secret battlefield”

Modern Russia has an array of intelligence and security agencies. In Soviet times, there were essentially only two: the KGB, which handled everything from foreign espionage to domestic security, and the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) of the General Staff, which handled military intelligence. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the initial plan was to dismember the KGB, but Yeltsin began to backtrack as he encountered growing political resistance, thanks to the influence of KGB veterans who opposed reform. This was reinforced when another ex-KGB officer, Vladimir Putin, rose to the presidency in 1999–2000 after a brief stint as director of the Federal Security Service (FSB).

Broadly speaking, there are four main agencies within Russia’s intelligence community. The most powerful is still the FSB, whose domestic security remit has increasingly extended to certain external activities, including assassination. Not only does the Service have the closest historical ties to Putin, but its current director, Alexander Bortnikov, and his predecessor, Nikolai Patrushev (now chair of the Security Council) are personally close to the president. The FSB is also heavily involved in cyber security and offensive information operations of every kind.

External intelligence gathering is primarily the domain of the Foreign Intelligence Service and the GRU.³ Both operate a mix of human intelligence officers under diplomatic cover, inside embassies but outside the diplomatic chain of command, and covert officers, or “illegals”. There are crucial distinctions in their missions and organisational cultures. The Foreign Intelligence Service is quite traditional, not least in its penchant for long-term, deep-cover spy rings, inherited from the KGB, and often of questionable cost-effectiveness.

The GRU’s aggressive and risk-taking culture reflects its military background and its broad portfolio of assets, which include substantial electronic, satellite, and battlefield reconnaissance capabilities, and *Spetsnaz* (special forces). Though part of the General Staff apparatus, it enjoys a degree of operational autonomy and its chief can brief the president directly.

The Federal Protection Service (FSO), which incorporates the Presidential Security Service (SBP), is the last of the major agencies. Its formal role is primarily to protect key government figures and locations, evident in its Kremlin Regiment and its supply of bodyguards to Putin’s security detail. However, it has expanded and diversified in several unexpected directions, including watching the security community itself.

³ Within the General Staff itself, the GRU is sometimes known simply (and confusingly) as the Main Administration, but GRU is much more widely used, including by Putin.

Roles of Russia's intelligence community

	Political intelligence	Economic intelligence	Military intelligence	Active measures	Counter-intelligence	Political security	Law enforcement
Federal Security Service (FSB)	●			●	●	●	●
Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR)	●	●	●	●	●	●	
Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU)	●	●		●	●		
Federal Protection Service (FSO)					●	●	●
Interior Ministry (MVD)					●	●	●
Prosecutor General's Office (GP)						●	●
Investigatory Committee (SK)						●	●
The Federal Anti-Drug Service (FSKN)		●					●
National Anti-Terrorism Committee (NAK)					●	●	●
Soviet KGB	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

● Main role
● Subsidiary role

The wider security apparatus includes a whole range of other services. The Interior Ministry (MVD) is responsible not just for regular policing but also undercover operations against serious and organised crime, including terrorists and extremists – which in practice often also means peaceful dissidents – along with the Investigatory Committee (SK) and the Prosecutor General's Office (GP). The Federal Anti-Drug Service (FSKN), which carries out limited operational intelligence gathering in Afghanistan and Central Asia, and the National Anti-Terrorism Committee (NAK), a coordinating body convened by the director of the FSB, complete the main security services.

The new National Guard, announced in April 2016, is not an intelligence agency but a public security force – a type of Praetorian Guard that answers directly to the president. As such, it is not covered in this paper – although, given the empire-building habits of Russian agencies, that does not preclude it from seeking to acquire such a role in the future. Its creation does have wider implications: the FSKN has been subordinated to the Interior Ministry, and the domestic security agencies are warily watching this new rival in case it seeks to expand its mandate. It offers a case study of one of this paper's main theses: that the security community in

Russia is characterised by division, duplication, and deep institutional rivalry.

The new nobility⁴

On the surface, this intelligence and security community may look broadly familiar to Europeans. However, there are institutional and cultural characteristics that, especially when combined with the nature of decision-making within the Russian system, mean that these agencies and the “new nobility” who work in them – to use former security chief Patrushev's words – have a distinctive operational culture of their own.⁵

Overlapping responsibilities

If the Soviet leaders tried to create efficiency and manageability by bringing nearly all security responsibilities under one agency, the KGB, their successors have adopted the opposite approach, resulting in numerous and growing overlaps between these agencies.

⁴ This section develops ideas raised in my article “Putin's Spies and Security Men: His Strongest Allies, His Greatest Weakness”, *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 173, 12 October 2015.

⁵ “Direktor federalnoi sluzhby bezopasnosti Rossii Nikolai Patrushev”, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 20 December 2000.

In Ukraine, for example, before the fall of President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014, the Foreign Intelligence Service operated there as if it was a foreign country, but so did the FSB, as if it was not. The GRU had penetrated Ukraine's security structures and was deeply embedded in Crimea, home of Russia's Black Sea Fleet. Even the Interior Ministry exerted influence over Kyiv's law enforcement structures. None appear seriously to have anticipated the outcome of the Maidan uprising (although an Interior Ministry source told me that, a month before the uprising, they were warning that the regime's mishandling of the protests had created a near-irreversible situation).

Nonetheless, when Yanukovich fled to Russia, it was the hapless Foreign Intelligence Service that bore the brunt of Putin's wrath, and sacrificial sackings and demotions ensued (this was confirmed by Source F).⁶ Through deft footwork, the FSB managed to escape blame even though Colonel General Sergei Beseda, of the FSB department tasked with operations in former Soviet republics, had visited Kyiv just ten days before Yanukovich's flight. Indeed, it used the opportunity to claim primacy over future intelligence operations in Ukraine.⁷

This is the same principle of "competitive intelligence" adopted by the United States intelligence community but with a strong admixture of bloody-fanged social Darwinism. The blurring of boundaries encourages regular direct and indirect turf wars, and not just over the usual bureaucratic prizes of responsibilities, funding, and access to the leadership but also business opportunities for officers, and sometimes outright survival.

The Federal Agency for Government Communications and Information (FAPSI) discovered this to its cost in 2003 when an alliance of the FSB, the Foreign Intelligence Service, and the GRU led to its cannibalisation, but this is only the most extreme example. "Silovik wars" have raged on-and-off since 2004. Most recently, a successful bid by the FSB to put its own man in charge of the Interior Ministry's economic crime and corruption directorate in 2014 saw the mysterious death of its deputy chief. While being questioned by the Investigatory Committee, he apparently managed to evade his guards and leap from a sixth-floor window.⁸

More often, the competition is less visible and bloody and is fought through attempts to outperform and embarrass rivals, and acquire the information that will most please the powers that be. According to Source C, for example, the Foreign Intelligence Service and the GRU collect virtually identical economic information, and, at times, officers from both services even try to suborn their embassies' economic staff in order to prevent their rivals from obtaining the latest data.

⁶ For a discussion of key sources, see the methodological note below.

⁷ Andrei Soldatov, "The True Role of the FSB in the Ukrainian Crisis", *Moscow Times*, 15 April 2014, available at <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/the-true-role-of-the-fsb-in-the-ukrainian-crisis/498072.html>.

⁸ Joshua Yaffa, "The Double Sting", *The New Yorker*, 27 July 2015, available at <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/07/27/the-double-sting>.

Likewise, GRU officer Colonel Viktor Ilyushin was expelled from France in 2014, in part for seeking to gather compromising information – *kompromat* – on President François Hollande's personal life, the kind of political operation that would usually be the responsibility of the Foreign Intelligence Service or even the FSB.⁹ Indeed, the FSB has steadily expanded its political operations and their aggressiveness in the Baltic states and to an extent in Nordic Europe, rivaling even the GRU and the Foreign Intelligence Service.¹⁰

This competition can be a strength. It means that the agencies are often aggressive, imaginative, and entrepreneurial. It also means a degree of planned redundancy. In theory, it should provide multiple, independent perspectives. As journalist Yulia Latynina put it, "The war between the security services is our 'separation of powers'. Some of them whisper into the president's right ear, others into the left."¹¹ As will be discussed later, though, the political realities of late Putinism tend to militate against that.

There are also serious drawbacks. The urge for quick results often encourages agencies to seize the low-hanging fruit. More to the point, as discussed later, the need to please the Kremlin inevitably competes with the integrity of the information gathering and analytic processes, which are vital if intelligence is to be of true value. Coordination and intelligence sharing is often limited and require direct "manual control" in the form of the intervention of Putin or his representatives.

It was clearly a matter of utmost importance that the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics proceed smoothly and safely, for example. One of Putin's trusted fixers, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak, managed the event. He convened a joint taskforce chaired by Oleg Syromolotov, veteran head of the FSB's Counterintelligence Directorate, and including a first deputy interior minister and the deputy head of the National Anti-Terrorism Committee. The need for such high-power representatives from the key services was precisely because the normal level of coordination would have been inadequate. The government made clear that the officials' futures depended on positive results and intelligence sharing. As Source B – the FSB insider – noted, "without such people pushing cooperation, knowing their heads were on the line, we would have continued to play our usual games."

⁹ Vincent Jauvert, "Révélations sur les espions russes en France", *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 24 July 2014.

¹⁰ For example, Latvia's Constitutional Protection Bureau's latest report specifically notes the use of blackmail and coercion by the FSB to recruit assets. "Several cases of Russian intelligence agents forcing Latvian residents to cooperate with them noticed last year", *LETA*, 29 March 2016, available at <http://www.leta.lv/eng/home/important/50C67943-3C10-48FA-AECA-E5A9A47AD81A/>.

¹¹ Yuliya Latynina, "Bol'shoi brat slyshit tebya", *Novaya Gazeta*, 11 October 2007, available at <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/33686.html>.

Wartime mindset

Russia's agencies regard themselves as not just sources of intelligence for decision-makers and advocates for particular policies, but also as instruments of direct action. This is especially evident within the GRU, which has established its reputation as a service willing to operate in highly unstable regions and through questionable and dangerous proxies and agents, from arms dealers such as Viktor Bout (in US prison since 2010) to the gangster-warlords, militias, and mercenaries of the Donbas.¹² As a former GRU officer put it, "not all of us were *Spetsnaz*, but we like to think we all are like *Spetsnaz*."

However, the emphasis on coercive methods, active operations, taking chances, and risking international opprobrium reflects a wartime mindset across the agencies. Even before the worsening of relations with the West, they appear genuinely to have felt that Russia was under serious, even existential threat, which demanded extreme responses.

There are three complementary aspects to this mindset, best illustrated by three quotations. The first is that "if the West loses, we gain." This zero-sum perspective, reminiscent of the Cold War, comes from a group of Foreign Intelligence Service officers, as recounted second hand by a Russian academic.

The second is that "Russia is at risk", as expressed by Source B, an FSB officer, in 2014 (before Crimea). When pressed, he pointed to the Maidan uprising, which he genuinely believes was a CIA operation. This intelligent, well-travelled individual asserted that there was a concerted Western drive to force regime change on Russia through political subversion and to undermine Russia's distinctive historical, religious, and social identity in order to weaken resistance to a global US-led hegemony.

The third is "better action than inaction", which Source F recounted hearing in a meeting with Foreign Intelligence Service officers. Source A, the former insider, agreed that although the agencies could be as bureaucratic as any Russian institution, there was a clear bias towards risk-taking, especially given the competitive environment in which they operate. Whether this is cause or effect, part of the process has been the diminution of the power of the Foreign Ministry (MID) and its capacity to curb overseas operations with potential negative political repercussions. The FSB's cross-border raid to kidnap Estonian security officer Eston Kohver in 2014, for example, seems to have been conducted with minimal consultation with the Foreign Ministry.

¹² I explore this further in "Putin's Secret Weapon", *Foreign Policy*, 7 July 2014, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/07/putins-secret-weapon/>.

Monetising security

For all their belief in their role as defenders of the state, many officers still eagerly exploit the legal and illegal economic opportunities at their disposal. Corruption remains endemic within the state apparatus, and the additional lack of transparency and control makes this a particular problem in the agencies.

This is all the more serious considering the formidable assets that security and intelligence officers have at their disposal. They can use or, even more productively, threaten to use force or legal powers and have access to sensitive, dangerous, or simply bankable information. As a result, there are many tales of businesspeople being forced to pay protection – or, more often, to hand over a share of their enterprise – to security officers (especially from the FSB).

These officers may also have contacts within the regular underworld that can be leveraged or with whom they can join forces. This reflects the general blending of money, crime, and political power in Russia, but is also a by-product of a marked willingness to use criminals as instruments of state security. There is, for example, ample evidence of Russian hackers being granted a degree of dispensation so long as, when called on, they attack targets of the FSB's choice, from foreign states to liberal websites.¹³

Likewise, the Kohver incident in Estonia revolved around the kidnapped agent's investigation of a cross-border cigarette-smuggling ring. It is implausible that a corrupt local FSB official would send an elite squad into another country and trigger a diplomatic incident just to protect a criminal sideline – or at least do this and get away with it. It is more likely that this was a joint venture in which the FSB, which has numerous and no doubt expensive political operations in the Baltic region, facilitated an organised crime venture in return for a share of the profits.¹⁴ This money, generated in Europe, becomes operational funds with no direct, provable connection to Moscow, ideal for bankrolling a useful political organisation here, bribing an official there.

However, the more agencies are involved in such activities, the harder it is to be sure that the tail is not wagging the dog. An interesting case in point relates to the GRU's tasking of their Canadian agent. Along with the usual fare of military, political, and economic information, he was asked to use his position at a military intelligence centre to find out what information the Royal Canadian Mounted Police had on Russian gangsters operating in Canada.¹⁵ Russian as well as Canadian interlocutors have separately suggested that this was not driven by strategic GRU tasking so much as someone within the chain of command realising that such information might be of commercial value to the gangsters.

¹³ Irina Borogan and Andrei Soldatov, "The Kremlin and the hackers: partners in crime?", *od:Russia*, 25 April 2012, available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/irina-borogan-andrei-soldatov/kremlin-and-hackers-partners-in-crime>.

¹⁴ Three of the smugglers were subsequently convicted on espionage charges in Estonia.

¹⁵ Leslie MacKinnon, "Spy Delisle's guilty plea preserves Navy secrets", *CBCNews*, 11 October 2012, available at <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/spy-delisle-s-guilty-plea-preserves-navy-secrets-1.1143658>.

In other words, state assets were hijacked for criminal ends rather than vice versa.

The overall result is a culture of corruption that permeates the agencies. It is hard to reach a definitive assessment of how far this undermines their operational capacity, but it does appear to influence even top-level decision-making. In 2014, for example, Investigatory Committee chief Alexander Bastrykin persuaded Putin to introduce a bill allowing criminal cases for tax crimes to be opened without consulting the tax authorities, creating sweeping new powers that are more useful for extortion than for policing.¹⁶ Likewise, the 2014 struggle over the Interior Ministry's economic crime unit was almost certainly as much because this generates rents as for any political reason.

The highest roof of all

Ultimately, the security and intelligence community as a whole enjoys the favour of Putin. At the 2015 celebration of the annual Day of Security Service Personnel, he called them "strong and courageous people, true professionals who are reliably protecting Russia's sovereignty and national integrity and the lives of our citizens, who are ready to perform the most complicated, responsible, and dangerous assignments."¹⁷ This favour is neither uncritical nor unconditional, nor just a matter of sentiment. Rather, it reflects a shared perception of Russia's situation and goals, and a pragmatic political alliance.

The agencies have all done well under him, seeing their budgets, powers, and profiles grow. When the FSB was forced to absorb a 10 percent headcount reduction in 2015 in response to the financial crisis, it was a shock to an organisation that had seen its budget increase in real terms every year since 1999, even through the 2008–2009 rouble crisis.¹⁸

Their relative political muscle has also increased. Since Putin's return in 2012, for example, the balance of power has shifted, and the spies appear far more willing to throw their weight around, both in Moscow and in the embassies. The Foreign Intelligence Service and GRU "legals" – agents under diplomatic cover – work within embassies, and their actions inevitably reflect on the Foreign Ministry. Both sources C and F observed that, in the earlier Putin presidencies, if their actions caused undue embarrassment, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov would "get someone in from Yasenevo [the Foreign Intelligence Service headquarters] to shout at", as Source C put it. Even the General Staff reportedly had to apologise when GRU operations went wrong.

Yet this support is balanced by a keen sense of the political realities and contingent on the agencies delivering. For all his ties to the FSB, for example, Putin has consistently

¹⁶ Sergei Nikitenko, "Luchshe zaplatit", *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 20 January 2015, available at <http://rg.ru/2015/01/20/dela.html>.

¹⁷ "Vladimir Putin attended gala reception to mark Security Agency Worker's Day", *Kremlin.ru*, 19 December 2015, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50977>.

¹⁸ "Aleksandr Bortnikov sokrashchaet FSB", *Fontanka*, 11 February 2015, available at <http://www.fontanka.ru/2015/02/11/021/>.

refused its more ambitious empire-building plans, which would see it absorb agencies such as the federal anti-drug agency or even the Foreign Intelligence Service, putting it on track to form some kind of KGB 2.0. As an insider, he is presumably well aware of the danger in giving any one agency too much power. Instead, he plays agencies off against each other, encouraging rivalries such as between the Foreign Intelligence Service and GRU, or Prosecutor General's Office and Investigatory Committee, up to the point at which they become inconvenient.

Likewise, the agencies must appear to be pulling their weight. Following the 2008 Georgian war, the GRU found itself in increasing disfavour. Its *Spetsnaz* special forces had acquitted themselves well, but the government felt that the wider intelligence aspects of the conflict had been mishandled. Dated information led to air strikes wasted on empty and closed airstrips, the Georgians fought better than GRU analyses had led the Kremlin to believe, and communications intercepts failed.

The agency's rivals gathered. The Foreign Intelligence Service sought to assert primacy in the field of foreign intelligence, the FSB cast hungry eyes at the portion of FAPSI's radio-electronic capacities that the GRU had acquired in 2003, and even comrades within the military capitalised on the situation. In 2010, the Kremlin reassigned the *Spetsnaz* to regular military commands¹⁹ and cut the central GRU staff by a thousand officers.²⁰

Rumours circulated that military intelligence would be downgraded from a main directorate of the General Staff to a regular one. Beyond the blow to its prestige, this would have dramatically affected its autonomy, not least by removing its chief access to the president. In the end, Igor Sergun, who headed the GRU from December 2011 until his death in late 2015, managed to turn around the agency's fortunes through a combination of luck and a keen awareness of what goes down well in the Kremlin.²¹ But it was a lesson in how an agency's future depends on performance, or at least on the leadership's perception of its performance.

Strong left arms of the state

In Soviet times, just as ordinary citizens had to go *na levoi*, "on the left", to get scarce goods or services through favours or the black market, the leadership relied on the KGB to make up for weaknesses in the state apparatus, from assessing the public mood to trying to close the technology gap with the West. Likewise, Putin's intelligence services are not only the overt and covert arms of state security, but also perform a variety of roles that are not necessarily under the remit of these agencies in other countries.

¹⁹ Sergei Ptichkin, "Letuchie myshi stanovyatsya polemyimi", *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 23 October 2010, available at <http://rg.ru/2010/10/23/gru-specnaz-site.html>.

²⁰ Denis Tel'manov, "Nachal'nika GRU uvolyat po vykhode s bol'nichnogo", *Izvestiya*, 27 September 2011, available at <http://izvestia.ru/news/501899>.

²¹ See Mark Galeotti, "Putin's secret weapon", *Foreign Policy*, 7 July 2014, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/07/putins-secret-weapon/>.

Espionage

As far back as 2010, the British Security Service (MI5) warned that “the threat from Russian espionage continues to be significant and is similar to the Cold War [...] the number of Russian intelligence officers in London is at the same level as in Soviet times.”²² Since then, security services across Europe have been registering a continued uptick in the scale and aggressiveness of Russian operations. For example, the head of the Norwegian Police Security Service warned that “Russian intelligence has the largest potential to damage Norwegian interests”, while Sweden’s security service, SÄPO, has characterised Russian espionage as its greatest challenge and warned of “preparation for military operations against Sweden”.²³ The Russians are engaging in massive and voracious intelligence-gathering campaigns, fuelled by still-substantial budgets and a Kremlin culture that sees deceit and secret agendas even where none exist.

The general consensus within European counterintelligence services appears to be that Russian collection operations are not just highly active but also often extremely professional. Tasking, though, appears less impressive. While the Foreign Intelligence Service and GRU have a strong sense of the military and technical secrets they are meant to uncover, their political objectives are sometimes naïve, reflecting a questionable grasp of democratic political systems.

It was telling that one of the tasks assigned to the ring of deep cover agents exposed in the US in 2010 was to penetrate think-tanks to uncover their agendas, as if that took more than a glance at their web pages.²⁴ In other cases, agents have been tasked with gathering information that is readily available through open sources. For example, according to the indictment against him, when Foreign Intelligence Service “illegal” agent Evgeny Buryakov was tasked with assessing the impact of economic sanctions on Russia, he simply conducted internet searches.²⁵

Active measures

Perhaps the most striking of the agencies’ external operations are their “active measures”: everything from assassination to political subversion. While many countries’ intelligence agencies sometimes conduct such operations, the Russians have put this at the centre of their concept of intelligence work. They also more readily integrate other institutions and individuals — from banks and charities to journalists and truck drivers — into their activities.

²² Richard Norton-Taylor, “Russian spies in UK ‘at cold war levels’, says MI5”, the *Guardian*, 29 June 2010, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/29/russian-spies-cold-war-levels>.

²³ “Russian spying can ‘damage’ Norway: PST”, the *Local* (Norway), 10 February 2016, available at <http://www.thelocal.no/20160210/russia-spying-seen-as-major-threat-to-norway>; SAPO Annual Report 2014, available at http://www.sakerhetspolisen.se/download/18.4c7cab6d1465fb27b01f1a/1426682274489/Arbok2014_webb_slutgiltig.pdf; Lucy Westcott, “Sweden labels Russia its biggest threat”, *Newsweek*, 18 March 2015, available at <http://europe.newsweek.com/sweden-labels-russia-its-biggest-threat-314871?rm=eu>.

²⁴ Toby Harnden and Michele Walk, “Russian spy applied for jobs at think tanks with links to Obama”, the *Telegraph*, 8 July 2010, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/7879850/Russian-spy-applied-for-jobs-at-think-tanks-with-links-to-Obama.html>.

²⁵ “US v. Evgeny Buryakov, Et Al Complaint”, 26 January 2015, available at https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/01/26/buryakov_et_al_complaint.pdf.

At the most extreme end are targeted killings and direct attacks, generally conducted by the GRU or FSB. Since the 2006 murder in London of defector Litvinenko, there has been something of a fad for seeing Muscovite murderers behind every unexpected Russian death abroad, but the main aim of such activity is generally to eliminate direct threats or to create chaos. Both the FSB and GRU, for example, have been implicated in assassinations of Chechen rebels and their allies abroad.

Likewise, Georgia before the 2008 war and Ukraine since 2014 have seen killings and terrorist attacks aimed less at specific individuals than at creating a climate of fear and insecurity.²⁶ This is meant to undermine public and political will and to support a Russian narrative that these countries are falling into anarchy. Where guns or bombs are not called for, sometimes a computer virus or directed denial-of-service (DDOS) attack will work. As noted above, the FSB is especially involved with launching cyber attacks or commissioning them from Russian hackers.

There are also direct political operations aimed at discrediting or co-opting specific individuals or groups, or undermining policies that Moscow dislikes. Again, these are not as common as sometimes suspected, especially because they are difficult and carry a considerable risk of failure and backlash. They have, however, been a feature of the Eurasian political landscape. In Ukraine, for example, the FSB has been accused of involvement in the poisoning of Viktor Yushchenko during the 2004 presidential elections and was reportedly behind a forged document meant to derail a gas deal between Kyiv and Turkmenistan.²⁷

Far more common is the use of the intelligence agencies to support political and other movements sympathetic to or simply useful for Moscow. This has long been practised in countries Russia regards as within its sphere of influence — for example, the FSB’s interference in Moldovan politics by backing populist candidate Renato Usatii in 2014.²⁸ However, the Foreign Intelligence Service and FSB are now especially active in Europe, and the organisations they support include anti-fracking environmental movements (which, however genuine in their concerns, usefully maintain Moscow’s gas markets), nationalist and anti-federal political groups, Russian diaspora movements in the Baltics, and separatists from Spain to Scotland.

They sometimes work through or in parallel with overt agencies such as *Rosstrudnichestvo* (the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation), charities, and even financial institutions, such

²⁶ The US government cable “Russian Active Measures in Georgia” of 20 July 2007 gives an especially good account of operations there conducted by both the GRU and FSB as Moscow sought to provoke President Mikheil Saakashvili into making the first move, available at https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07TBILISI1732_a.html.

²⁷ Andrei Soldatov, “The True Role of the FSB in the Ukrainian Crisis”, *Moscow Times*, 15 April 2014, available at <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/the-true-role-of-the-fsb-in-the-ukrainian-crisis/498072.html>.

²⁸ See, for example, “FSB și Patria lui Renato Usatii”, *Ziarul de gardă*, 27 November 2014, available at <http://www.zdg.md/editia-print/investigatii/fsb-si-patria-lui-renato-usatii>.

as the Russian banks that loaned millions of euros to French nationalist Marine Le Pen's Front National.²⁹ It is often difficult to tell where the activities of the agencies end and other Russian institutions begin, but this is not necessarily a meaningful distinction: to the Kremlin, the tools in its box are interchangeable.

Economic assets

Even before the current economic crisis, the Kremlin thought — as naively as the Soviets in the 1970s and early 1980s — that intelligence capacity could somehow be converted into business success and technological growth.

So far, the nature of the sanctions and Russia's continued access to markets elsewhere in the world means that the agencies have not adopted the classic role of sanctions-busters, although clearly many of their political operations in Europe in particular are directed towards undermining support for continued sanctions. Rather, the economic mission of the Foreign Intelligence Service in particular is to support strategic Russian businesses clinching deals abroad, such as the Czech Temelín nuclear reactor contract.³⁰ This could involve anything from seeking to compromise, coerce, or suborn those involved in allocating contracts, to gaining access to tenders and other commercially sensitive information.

Meanwhile, the GRU and Foreign Intelligence Service continue to seek to acquire details and examples of technology denied them by export controls or that is beyond Russian capabilities. In 2012, for example, the FBI broke a ring that was using a Texas-based export company to illegally export high-tech microelectronics with military uses to Russia.³¹ Likewise, Germany has identified Foreign Intelligence Service operations intended to steal renewable energy technologies.³²

Political control

Every external operation is first and foremost a domestic one: the single most important role of the agencies is to secure the regime. So it was under the tsars, then the Bolsheviks, and now the new Russians: defending not a constitutional order but a particular incumbent. This means carrying out operations to prevent foreign "interference" as the Kremlin sees it, as well as dividing strategic rivals such as the EU.

As Putin loses his old basis for legitimacy — his capacity to guarantee steadily improving standards of living — he is seeking to shore up his position with a narrative of foreign threats and external triumphs. The agencies play a crucial role not just in supporting the narrative but also in conducting operations against enemies of the state, both real and constructed. Counterterrorism has long been a priority across the services and is often conducted abroad, from monitoring and if need be eliminating ringleaders and supporters, through to interdicting sources of finance and recruits. As the potential source of terrorism shifts from the North Caucasus to Russian Muslims elsewhere and Central Asian migrant workers, the services are scrambling to acquire new human sources and analytic capabilities.

At the same time, many of the agencies are consumed with identifying and suppressing dissidents and government critics. Well-known figures such as liberal nationalist Alexei Navalny and communist Sergei Udaltsov have been the focus of intensive campaigns by the FSB, Investigatory Committee, and the Interior Ministry's "E Service" (for "Extremism"). However, there is a wider national and international effort to prevent criticism of the regime from spreading, whether by leaning on individuals — the FSB is reviving the KGB tactic of the "prophylactic chat" meant to intimidate without the need for prosecution — or by interfering with the free flow of information. This involves measures including pressurising remaining independent media outlets such as Dozhd TV and using trolls to spam critical voices on the internet.

As the economic crisis leads to a rising tide of small-scale labour protests, the agencies are not only directly monitoring attempts to organise strikes but also stepping up long-running efforts to track public opinion and head off any generalised unrest. The Interior Ministry and FSB are at the forefront, but the FSO, true to its broad interpretation of its role, is also active. It runs its own opinion polls and sits on a multi-agency task force identifying potential hotspots and dispensing targeted financial subsidies.³³

Overall, Russia's intelligence and security communities are extremely active in their operations and unusually broad in their responsibilities. They are directly wired into a much wider array of state activities than in the West and have revived their Soviet-era role as the multi-purpose Swiss Army Knife of the Kremlin. What is less clear, though, is how far this is of their own volition, and how far it is because they are available and trusted, and cannot say no. Did the Foreign Intelligence Service, for example, really want to get involved in the Czech nuclear reactor contract? Do people really join the FSO to parse opinion poll data? In other words, are the agencies Putin's boyars, or his serfs?

²⁹ Anton Shekhovtsov, "Russia and Front National: Following the Money", the *Interpreter*, 3 May 2015, available at <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-and-front-national-following-the-money/>.

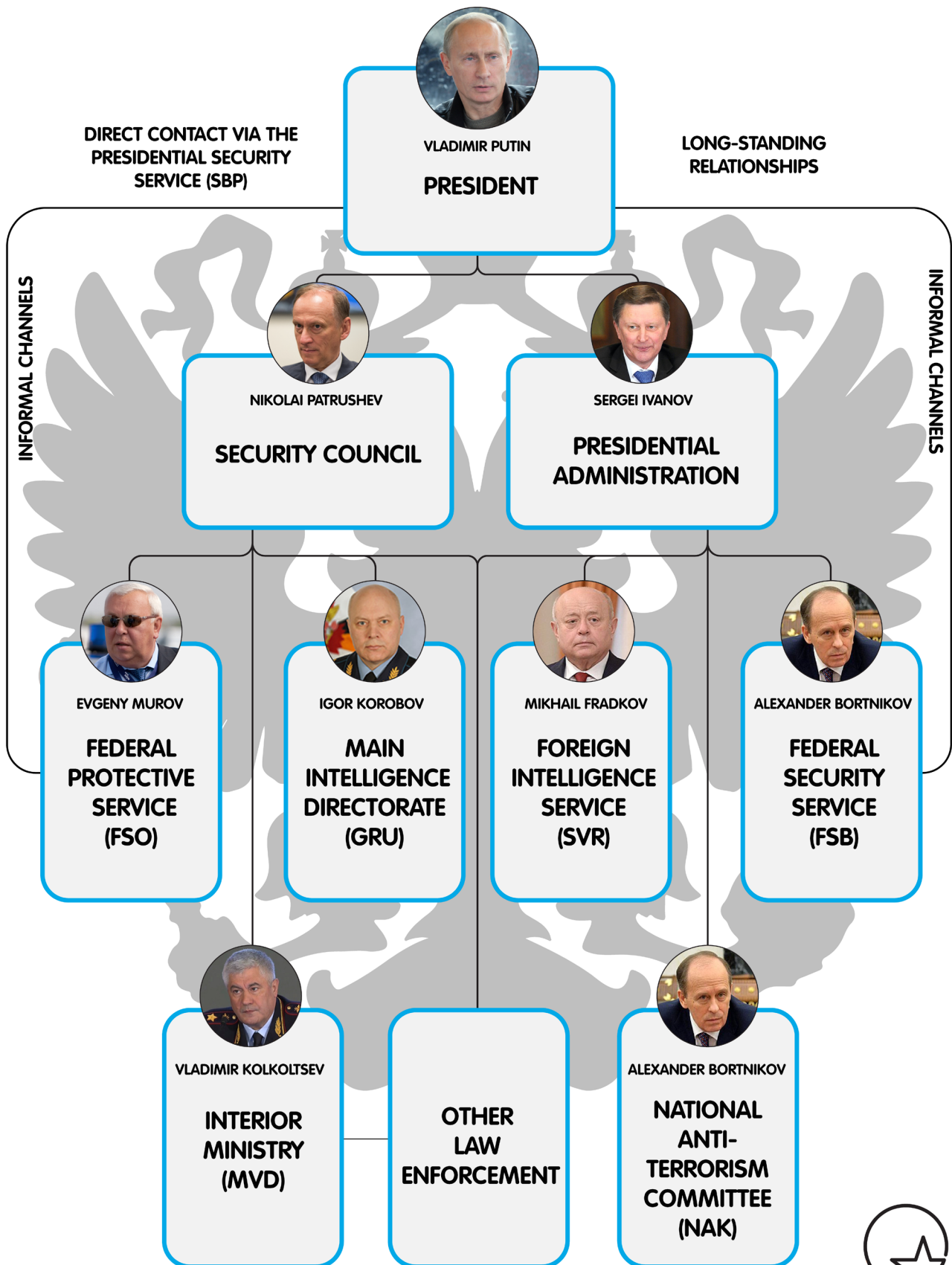
³⁰ BIS (Czech counterintelligence), *Annual Report of the Security Information Service for 2014* (2015).

³¹ "Russian Agent and 10 Other Members of Procurement Network for Russian Military and Intelligence Operating in the U.S. and Russia Indicted in New York", FBI, 3 October 2012, available at <https://www.fbi.gov/houston/press-releases/2012/russian-agent-and-10-other-members-of-procurement-network-for-russian-military-and-intelligence-operating-in-the-u.s.-and-russia-indicted-in-new-york>.

³² Dirk Banse, "Putins Konjunkturprogramm: Russische Agenten spionieren deutsche Energie-Unternehmen aus", *Welt am Sonntag*, 21 June 2009, available at http://www.welt.de/wams_print/article3965455/Putins-Konjunkturprogramm-Russische-Agenten-spionieren-deutsche-Energie-Unternehmen-aus.html.

³³ "Vladimir Putin's Bodyguards Also Do Economic Stimulus", *Bloomberg*, 9 December 2015, available at <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-12-09/tea-farming-in-siberia-how-putin-s-guardians-help-ward-off-unrest>.

Russia's intelligence architecture



Spookocracy?

In 1999, just before he became interim president, Putin toasted fellow KGB veterans: “the group of FSB agents that you sent to work undercover in the government has accomplished the first part of its mission.”³⁴ Of course, that was a joke; there was no grand plan to penetrate the Kremlin, and Putin is not a mere agent of the FSB. Nonetheless, commentators have claimed that there has been a “Chekist takeover of the Russian state” and that the FSB “has gained control of the country’s political and economic sectors and exercises its power with a firm and ruthless hand”, in a “Neo-KGB state”.³⁵

While these make for exciting headlines, there is little evidence to suggest any stranglehold by the FSB in particular or the Chekists in general. For instance, Putin claims that he took the momentous decision to annex Crimea himself and only then convened his security chiefs to discuss its execution.³⁶ Beyond that, there are numerous cases in which the agencies have not got their way and clear evidence of disagreements between and within the agencies over policy, personalities, and philosophies. In short, we should not assume that public prestige and big budgets necessarily indicate control, let alone unity.

Silovarchs and colonists?

Since the end of the USSR, there have been periodic concerns that *siloviki* were colonising the Russian state apparatus and economic oligarchy alike (what analyst Daniel Treisman called the “silovarchs”).³⁷ It is certainly true that a disproportionate number of these figures seem to have done well, although suggestions by researchers Olga Kryshstanovskaya and Stephen White that they constituted 25 percent of the state elite in 2003 and 42 percent in 2008 have been questioned.³⁸ Bettina Renz has noted that many were actually in relatively low ranks of the hierarchy, while Rivera and Rivera put the figures at 20 percent for both years.³⁹

To some, this represents the outcome of a quiet and slow-burning coup by the Chekists.⁴⁰ But the rise of these veterans likely reflects structural factors. The KGB attracted many of the most ambitious and ruthlessly effective late Soviet high-fliers, not least because of the opportunities for travel and enrichment. One would also expect them to do well under later regimes.

34 Francesca Mereu, “Putin Made Good on Promise to FSB”, *Moscow Times*, 8 February 2008, available at <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/article/putin-made-good-on-promise-to-fsb/302401.html>.

35 Julie Anderson, “The Chekist Takeover of the Russian State”, *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, 19.2 (2006); “The Making of a Neo-KGB state”, *The Economist*, 23 August 2007, available at <http://www.economist.com/node/9682621>.

36 “Putin reveals secrets of Russia’s Crimea takeover plot”, BBC, 9 March 2015, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31796226>.

37 Daniel Treisman, “Putin’s Silovarchs”, Orbis, Winter 2007, available at <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/treisman/Papers/silov06.pdf>.

38 Olga Kryshstanovskaya and Stephen White, “Putin’s Militocracy”, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 19, 4 (2003) and “The Sovietization of Russian Politics”, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 25, 4 (2009).

39 Bettina Renz, “Putin’s Militocracy? An Alternative Interpretation of Siloviki in Contemporary Russian Politics”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 58, 6 (2006); David and Sharon Rivera, “Is Russia a militocracy? Conceptual issues and extant findings regarding elite militarization”, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 30, 1 (2014).

40 See, for example, Andrei Illarionov’s “The Siloviki in Charge”, *Journal of Democracy*, 20, 2 (2009).

There is also an inevitable “old boy’s network” in play, especially around Putin. Members of his own security detail have been rising, such as Viktor Zolotov, former head of the SBP and now a first deputy interior minister, and Alexei Dyumin, a deputy SBP head, who, in less than a year, went from a colonel in Putin’s detail to deputy minister of defence, a potential head of the GRU, and then governor of the Tula region.⁴¹ There is no evidence to suggest an SBP or FSO campaign, but rather that Putin is simply elevating familiar faces and trusted individuals.

Furthermore, once officials leave the agencies, their interests and circles of friends and allies change. To take the most prominent example, Igor Sechin, chairman of Rosneft, is a presumed former intelligence officer and is still often described as the leading *silovik*. Yet for years he has essentially confined his public statements to business and general issues, and does not appear to have done anything specifically to advance the cause of the agencies. In my personal interactions with serving and former officers of the agencies, I have not heard anyone speak about him as one of them; he is now an oil baron, not a spook.

Likewise, there are many cases when the Chekists do not get their way. The treatment of Alexei Navalny, swinging between draconian sentencing and a degree of leniency, appears to reflect the defeat of the FSB and the Interior Ministry’s E-Service by purely political advisers to the Kremlin. Likewise, Investigatory Committee chief Bastrykin’s efforts to push through a bill changing the adversarial basis of court proceedings in 2014 were demolished by the Presidential Administration.

The Silovik bloc?

It is hard to see any evidence of true solidarity, let alone coordination, within the agencies. They share certain assumptions about the world, but, as analyst Denis Volkov has observed, many of these beliefs — especially about the “threat” from the West — are shared across the upper elite as a whole.⁴² One could consider this a cultural colonisation by the Chekists or simply as a reflection of wider currents of opinion, but either way it suggests that the presence of a distinct intelligence bloc within the elite is questionable.

The agencies will typically unite against a perceived common threat. According to Source D, the FSB supported the GRU when it resisted Kremlin attempts to have Dyumin, an outsider, appointed head of military intelligence, because it was concerned about a precedent being set. However, as has been demonstrated, solidarities tend to break down as soon as the opportunity arises to make money or avoid blame. Bureaucratic struggles outweigh wider sectoral interests. For example, though the Prosecutor General’s Office seems to have supported Bastrykin’s attempt to revise the legal

41 Mark Galeotti, “What Putin’s Security Appointments Say About How Russia Works”, *War On The Rocks*, 9 February 2016, available at <http://warontherocks.com/2016/02/what-putins-security-appointments-say-about-how-russia-works/>.

42 Denis Volkov, “Russian Elite Opinion After Crimea”, Carnegie Moscow Center, 23 March 2016, available at <http://carnegie.ru/2016/03/23/russian-elite-opinion-after-crimea/ivsf>.

system in principle, it instead concentrated on persuading Putin to introduce a bill reinstating its supervisory powers over the Investigatory Committee.⁴³

Under Putin, policy has swung in directions congenial to the security community as a whole and reflects many of the attitudes they hold. However, this is more likely to be because policy is shaped in the image of Putin the KGB veteran, and because of other, broader issues, such as the elite's troubles adjusting to the loss of great power status, and genuine differences in expectations between Moscow and the West. A liberal and reformist minority has largely been forced out of the centre ground of politics, but there is no evidence that this was at the hands of the Chekists.

Instead, the agencies have prospered because – and when – they are useful to the Kremlin. Putin funds the FSB lavishly because he wants an instrument of political control, not because they control him or he fears them. He supports the Foreign Intelligence Service and GRU because he wants intelligence information and “left hand” covert operations.

After successfully managing security at Sochi, for example, Syromolotov was moved from the FSB to become deputy foreign minister for counterterrorism. Despite feverish speculation at the time, this was not a creeping takeover of the Foreign Ministry by the FSB, and still less a Foreign Ministry land grab of FSB responsibilities. Rather, it reflected the Kremlin's hope that, in the post-Crimea, post-sanctions world, counterterrorism was one area where Russia could make a case for being a valuable partner to the West.

The most useful and most accurate way to think about the agencies is not as a distinct bloc seeking to control the Kremlin. Rather, this is a collection of institutions, individuals, and factions engaging in the policy process. They buy their way in through personal connections, political weight, and – most frequently – by being useful and having attractive ideas. In this respect, they are simply part of an elite, alongside the military, financial interests, defence industrialists, and all the other seemingly coherent but, in practice, disparate elements of the modern Russian political scene. It is therefore important to explore the ways in which the agencies are controlled and the ways in which they seek to influence policy.

Gatekeepers to the presidency

Many intelligence systems involve a single entity charged with evaluating, collating, and assessing different perspectives. In the US, for example, the director of national intelligence has an oversight role and is responsible for the President's Daily Brief, while it is customary for representatives of different services to sit in the same meeting, from the White House Situation Room down. In the United Kingdom, the Cabinet Office coordinates intelligence activity and manages the process that seeks to create consensus in the form of Joint Intelligence Committee papers. Furthermore, there is often

⁴³ “Putin poruchil Prokurature nadzirat' za Sledstvennym komitetom”, *News.ru*, 23 December 2014, available at <http://www.newsru.com/russia/23dec2014/sled.html>.

scope for external validation of intelligence findings, such as the US National Security Advisor, a well-informed outsider responsible to the president and independent of the agencies.

In Russia, the institutions of intelligence management – as with so many other aspects of the formal political structure – have been hollowed out and represent structures for the dissemination of policy from the Kremlin rather than the management of information into it. Most of the agencies are directly subordinate to the president, the rest indirectly. In practice, the Presidential Administration – rather than the Security Council – has become the main organ through which intelligence materials reach the president, and tasking is communicated to the agencies. The characters of these gatekeepers and their relationship to the president are crucial in this most personalised of political systems.

The three primary gatekeepers are the Security Council and its secretary, Nikolai Patrushev, the Presidential Administration, and its head, Presidential Chief of Staff Sergei Ivanov, and, more informally and less extensively, Evgeny Murov, the outgoing head of the FSO.

The Security Council

The Security Council brings together representatives of all security-related agencies, and is often presented as a kind of parallel cabinet. However, in practice it is a consultative rather than decision-making body. It has an unwieldy 30 members – including Putin – and is not used for meaningful debate. Rather, it is a managerial forum that hears reports, announces decisions, and resolves technical questions over coordination and jurisdiction. The most important aspect of the council's activities is the work of Secretary Patrushev and his secretariat from their offices near the Kremlin.

Patrushev is one of Putin's closest client-allies. Another veteran of the KGB and its successor agencies, he was Putin's choice to follow him as director of the FSB, before becoming Security Council secretary in 2008. Patrushev has shaped the role to suit his inclinations and Putin's needs. In essence, he is the intelligence and security community's representative and overseer.

He ensures that the agencies carry out the will of the Kremlin, arbitrating disputes not serious enough to go to Putin, and knocking heads together. It is also his place to articulate their views to the leadership. For example, in 2012 he surprised many by suggesting in an interview that mass anti-government protests “attest to the free activity of our citizens [...] they are participating in the process of working out the most important national decisions”.⁴⁴ According to Interior Ministry sources, he was speaking in part to signal to the leadership that the ministry did not want to be used indiscriminately against peaceful protesters.

⁴⁴ Viktor Baranets and Aleksandr Kots, “Ran'shie glavnym razdrazhitelem byla Moskva, teper' Pekin”, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 17 February 2012, available at <http://www.kp.ru/daily/25836/2809802/>.

Unapologetically hawkish, his public utterances range from the infamous assertion that the US “would much rather that Russia did not exist at all”, to his statement that “assurances by some Western leaders that NATO is a purely defensive alliance set up to safeguard global security are simply meant to disguise its aggressive nature.”⁴⁵ According to Source C, “if you want him to forward a report, it has to be couched in the most extreme language possible.”

This matters because the role of his secretariat is to provide analytic support, disseminate information, and draft documents for the Security Council and for the president, as well as to monitor the implementation of presidential instructions. In particular, it has a central role in the periodic revision of Russia’s National Security Strategy. It has the right to request and receive information and reports from any government body, including the military and intelligence agencies. As a result, it is one of the crucial conduits of information to the Kremlin, with the power to support or withhold.

Although the secretariat — and its expert committees — drafts policy, it is relatively small. When Putin first came to power, it had around 200 staff, and there is little reason to believe that there has been any dramatic increase. By contrast, the British Cabinet Office has some 2,000 staff, and the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) has over 1,600. In other words, this is at best a “big picture” agency, unable to do more than flag up particular reports as worth consideration for the president’s desk.

The Presidential Administration

The Presidential Administration is the president’s executive office, responsible for everything from drafting laws to briefing the press, monitoring government activity, and overseeing presidential representatives to the regions. Given the hyper-presidentialism of the Putin system (or maybe hyper-personalism, as it is about the dominance of the man, rather than the office), it is unsurprising that this is an extremely important institution. Although there are opportunities for representatives of key agencies to brief Putin in person or through submissions, the overwhelming majority of analytic and intelligence materials that reach him come through the Presidential Administration.

It is not coincidental that the head of this increasingly powerful agency is again a hawkish KGB veteran. A former Security Council secretary, Sergei Ivanov also served in the Foreign Intelligence Service and FSB, and has a close personal relationship with Putin. Although much more circumspect than Patrushev in his public statements, Ivanov’s views are similar and he too sets the tone within his organisation.

However, the Presidential Administration is not primarily an intelligence-oriented organisation but a political one.

⁴⁵ “Za destabilizatsiei Ukrainy skryvaetsya popytka radikal'nogo oslableniya Rossii”, *Kommersant*, 22 June 2015, available at <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2752250>; “NATO Military Buildup ‘Washes Out Structure of Global Security’”, *Sputnik*, 22 December 2015, available at <http://sputniknews.com/military/20151222/1032157940/nato-russia-threat.html>.

Intelligence materials are only one of the inputs it assesses, triages, and packages for senior policymakers, primarily the president. In some ways it is closer to the British Cabinet Office, but apart from the huge differences in culture between a civil service agency used to regular changes in government and one beholden to a specific and lasting regime, it also handles intelligence very differently. There is no single central department, such as the British Joint Intelligence Committee secretariat. Rather, several of its divisions draw on and even task intelligence activity.

The agencies themselves appear to have no direct traction on the way their materials are used. Rather, Presidential Administration officials — most of whom have no intelligence background — decide what information will be passed around and up the chain of command and how to incorporate materials into their briefings and reports. The sense from those privy to its inner workings is that, as a result, the use of these materials is often driven by political considerations.

Given that Putin is notoriously suspicious of being led by his officials, there is also an imperative to cite multiple sources, and thus a highly-classified cable from an agency may be juxtaposed with, and implicitly given similar weight to, a newspaper report or a paper from a think-tank (which, as will be discussed below, may well have been written to order). As a result, the true “value added” of intelligence reporting is often likely to be missed or wasted.

Briefing the boss

Overall, then, the day-to-day products of Russia’s intelligence activities often appear to flow through structures — the Security Council and Presidential Administration — which exert a degree of control over what actually makes it to the Kremlin. However, this is only one of the ways that the intelligence community interacts with the president and those closest to him.

The Foreign Intelligence Service and the FSB both produce daily reports analogous to the US President’s Daily Brief. This gives them a degree of unfiltered access, whether in written form or in person. The GRU and FSO also send regular reports directly to the president. However, there is a key point of distinction. Each service briefs the president individually; it is very rare for there to be any direct comparison or discussion between them, except as brokered through the Presidential Administration and Security Council. There are some formal and informal sessions at which the heads of multiple services may be present for policy discussions, but anecdotal data suggests that even this is rare. Using the publicly accessible listings of Putin’s official meetings, Michael Rochlitz and Andrei Soldatov found that on average 14 percent of his meetings in 2000-2007 were with *siloviki* (broadly defined), but only around 5.5 percent in 2008-2015.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Andrei Soldatov and Michael Rochlitz, “The Logic of Power in Russia’s Changing Political Order: The Siloviki”, unpublished draft paper, 2016, cited with permission.

One-to-one briefings can be powerful and effective, but they place a premium on the briefer's personal relationship with, and ability to appeal to the inclinations of, the president. They rarely get into the nuts and bolts of detail, sourcing, and thus credibility. Sometimes the Security Council or, more often, the Presidential Administration will weigh in at meetings or beforehand to support or question, but often they have not been willing or able to devote the time to that kind of pre-briefing exploration, especially given the lack of a specialist intelligence assessment department within either.

Nor is there a position such as a national security adviser, the expert outsider whose job is sometimes to challenge intelligence findings. For a while this position existed under Yeltsin, but it was essentially rolled into the position of secretary of the Security Council. Yet not only does Patrushev have a host of administrative and political duties, he also has a strong loyalty to the FSB.

If anything, FSO head General Evgeny Murov sometimes seems to have played this role de facto. Given that part of the FSO's remit is to watch the other agencies, he has both the ability and the justification to identify when cases are based on flimsy data or on self-interest. However, this appears to be particular to him: as the longest serving of any of the service chiefs – appointed in 2000 – and clearly having no higher ambitions (Source A called him “the last of the old-school duty-and-honour Chekists”), he could get away with it. However, he has been trying to retire for two years now, and it is unlikely his successor will have the will, capacity, or gravitas to follow in his footsteps.⁴⁷

The very personal way of conveying intelligence means that much depends on the decision-maker's willingness to entertain unwelcome information and the agencies' willingness to risk, as one interlocutor put it, “bringing bad news to the tsar's table”. Since his return to the presidency in 2012, Putin appears to have been increasingly hostile to questioning. This has been visible in the shrinking of his personal circle and the alienation of more liberal and freethinking former allies, such as former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin.

It also appears to be evident within the intelligence process. Many GRU insiders, for example, credit Igor Sergun with turning around their service's fortunes by being a skilful courtier. As Source C put it, “he knew how to flatter, while playing the bluff soldier.” Another was more specific: “Sergun always went with the flow. He would gauge the mood of the room and tailor what he was going to say to suit. He'd even have multiple talking points in his notes to be ready either way.”

Likewise, the relatively lowly status of the Foreign Intelligence Service has been ascribed by many to the lack of a close personal relationship between Putin and director

Mikhail Fradkov, and to the service's slow adaptation to changing expectations. Over the campaign to try to use social conservatism as a wedge issue in Europe, for example, the Foreign Intelligence Service was apparently unfashionably dubious about its value and lost points to the more enthusiastic FSB when this was adopted as policy, according to sources A and F.

Getting “into the room”

To be “in the room” and influence policy, intelligence chiefs cannot do their job properly – delivering the facts without concern for the consequences. Rather, they must shape and sugarcoat to suit the president and his allies or risk marginalisation and dismissal. Perhaps the best illustration of this is the rise of the FSB. The service even delivers briefings on foreign affairs, despite this hardly being its forte, and these are often considered first, setting the tone for future conversations. A Western diplomat, for example, ruefully suggested that Putin's apparent belief in some of the more outré conspiracy theories – such as over Maidan – probably stem from FSB briefings, “which seem as much culled from the press and the more lunatic think-tanks as from actual intelligence”.

Of course, it would be a mistake to assume that Putin makes every decision or always knows his mind. On some matters – especially to do with the division of assets – he does micromanage, but on many others he simply sets broad parameters and expects others to articulate policy. He encourages a marketplace of ideas and picks whichever appeals to him. To this end, the agencies can have traction over policy by shaping and influencing broader discussions.

Sometimes this is through friendly legislators who propose bills and raise publicly what the agencies would like discussed.⁴⁸ The FSB often relies, for example, on Irina Yarovaya, a former public prosecutor and chair of the Duma Committee on Security. It was she, for example, who pushed through 2016 amendments to the law on the FSB, which became infamous for lifting prohibitions on shooting at women and children under certain circumstances.⁴⁹ Each agency has its tame parliamentarians, from the Interior Ministry's former deputy, Vladimir Vasiliev, head of the United Russia bloc in the Duma, to the ally of the Prosecutor General's Office, former journalist Alexander Khinstein.

Think-tanks and the media

The services also seek to influence national conversations and moods through the media and (sometimes only notionally) independent organisations such as think-tanks. The law enforcement agencies and the FSB, for example, are publicly active, with Twitter accounts, media relations departments, and frequent public statements. The FSB has an infamously close relationship with the tabloid *LifeNews*, for example, which it often uses to embarrass

⁴⁷ Ivan Petrov, “Mnogoletnemu rukovoditel'yu FSO Evgeniyu Murovy podyskali zameny”, *RBK Daily*, 18 June 2014, available at <http://www.rbc.ru/politics/17/06/2014/930834.shtml>.

⁴⁸ I am indebted to Ekaterina Schulmann for invaluable guidance on this section.

⁴⁹ “Yarovaya: popravki v zakon o FSB napravleny protiv terroristorov”, *RIA Novosti*, 22 December 2015, available at http://ria.ru/defense_safety/20151222/1347080970.html.

enemies. Targets, from liberal parliamentarian Gennady Gudkov to assassinated opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, have suffered from leaks of undercover video footage and other questionable materials.⁵⁰ Its outreach even extends to a bimonthly magazine published under the auspices of its Public Council, *FSB: za i protiv* (FSB: For and Against).⁵¹ It is perhaps unsurprising that the overwhelming answer tends to be “for”.

Services such as the Foreign Intelligence Service and the GRU are rather less able to tell their story (beyond the gung-ho tales of *Spetsnaz* glory found in magazines and the military’s *Zvezda* TV channel), so instead encourage TV series and films talking up the exploits of Russian spies, both current and historical. Beyond that, though, they also support the array of Russian think-tanks that play an under-researched part in the policy process.

One that has become infamous is the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI). Headed by former Foreign Intelligence Service Lt. General Leonid Reshetnikov, this is an expansive organisation with 12 branch offices, a journal, and even the “Riss-TV” channel to get its message out. Although it has not technically been part of the Foreign Intelligence Service since 2009, Source F describes it as “the service’s PR arm”. From warning against Sweden and Finland joining NATO to damning the “terrorists” of Ukraine, its position is in step with official policy and Foreign Intelligence Service analysis.⁵²

There are an array of little-known policy shops, from the Institute of Strategic Studies and Analysis (ISOA), headed by former KGB Major General Vagif Guseynov to the Institute of Political Studies (headed by Sergei Markov, persona non grata in both Estonia and Ukraine for his views), which often have close relationships with one or more of the agencies. The Presidential Administration often commissions reports from these think-tanks with specific recommendations in mind.

⁵⁰ See *LifeNews*, 18 January 2012, available at <http://lifene.ws.ru/news/79472> and 28 February 2015, available at <http://lifene.ws.ru/news/150504>. See also “Was Surkov Behind The LifeNews Raid?”, *RFE/RL*, 24 March 2015, available at <http://www.rferl.org/content/surkov-behind-the-lifene.ws-raid/26918674.html>.

⁵¹ Available at <https://osfsb.ru/press-center/m/default.aspx>.

⁵² See Ivan Mon'kov, “O perspektivakh vstupleniya Shvetsii i Finlyandii v NATO”, 25 February 2016, available at <http://riss.ru/analitics/27082/> and Igor Druz', “Rezhim bezrodnykh kosmopolitov”, 26 January 2016, available at <http://riss.ru/analitics/25646/>. See also Paul Goble, “Russian Think Tank That Pushed for Invasion of Ukraine Wants Moscow to Overthrow Lukashenka”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 27 January 2015, available at http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43458.

Conclusions and recommendations

The following system for categorising military officers has been apocryphally attributed to various generals:⁵³

“I divide my officers into four classes as follows: The clever, the industrious, the lazy, and the stupid. Each officer always possesses two of these qualities.

“Those who are clever and industrious I appoint to the General Staff. Use can under certain circumstances be made of those who are stupid and lazy. The man who is clever and lazy qualifies for the highest leadership posts. He has the requisite nerves and the mental clarity for difficult decisions. But whoever is stupid and industrious must be got rid of, for he is too dangerous.”

In much the same way, one can consider the implications of having intelligence agencies that are aggressive or defensive, and well or badly managed. Defensive intelligence agencies that are badly managed do little harm in times of peace but offer no protection in hostile conditions. Defensive and well-managed ones present a strong shield against enemies. Aggressive ones are formidable instruments of statecraft when well managed but dangerously counterproductive when not.

There can be little question about the aggressiveness of the Russian intelligence community. A more important question is how well they are managed, not just in terms of day-to-day control but in terms of tasking, the extent to which intelligence is properly analysed and fed into policy, and how the agencies fit into a sensible wider strategy.

In many ways, the Ukrainian conflict encapsulates this issue. In both Crimea and the Donbas, the Russians often displayed extremely good intelligence on a tactical level, with accurate assessments of Ukrainian troop positions, the willingness of individual officers to fight, and when government forces were preparing an attack. Furthermore, the agencies have deployed a range of active measures, from terrorist attacks and cyber intrusions to disinformation campaigns and political dirty tricks.

On the other hand, there seems to have been a startling dearth of effective political and strategic intelligence, before and during the campaign. Either the agencies did not realise that the West would be more forceful than after the 2008 Georgian war, or they did not convey their concerns to the leadership, or they were not listened to. Either way, this was an intelligence failure that appears not to have been a one-off but a reflection of serious systemic weaknesses.

The agencies are now engaged in a campaign of active measures in the West that, again, may often seem tactically effective but is strategically disastrous. Russia has not

⁵³ Including Carl von Clausewitz, Helmuth von Moltke, and Erich von Manstein, though it probably originates with the less well-known General Kurt von Hammerstein-Equord. For the quote and an exploration of its origins, see <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/02/28/clever-lazy/>.

created the tectonic pressures currently opening fissures within Europe, from nationalism to the refugee crisis, but it is gleefully taking advantage of them. However, in the long term, it is vanishingly unlikely that Europe will become so divided that it can be dictated to by Russia. Indeed, whether or not some sanctions are lifted, Russia is declining and destabilising at an even faster rate. Furthermore, Russia's heavy-handed tactics have galvanised NATO, alienated nations such as Germany, and dissipated what minimal soft power Moscow ever had.

This is the irony. Putin has the intelligence and security community he wanted: a powerful, feral, multi-headed, and obedient hydra. But it is Putin himself, and his dreams of Russia as a renewed great power, that is the real victim of this aggressive and badly managed beast. The agencies reinforce his assumptions and play to his fantasies rather than informing and challenging his worldview, as good intelligence services should.

When the hydra's heads are not gnawing at one another, their activities reinforce a global image of Russia as a bully and a brat: at best, a power dismissive of the etiquette of international relations; at worst, an unpredictable threat with whom no lasting understanding can be reached. As Source E put it, "the busier and more 'productive' the special services are, the more it will cost us, sooner or later."

For Europe, the challenge is how best to resist the incursions of the Russian "special services" while maximising the cost to Moscow.

Recommendation 1: Hybrid defence for hybrid threats

Setting aside the vexed debate as to whether Russia's combined military-political-economic challenge ought to be called "hybrid war" or not, it is clear that it cannot be deterred merely with conventional military means. Rather, it calls for "hybrid defence".⁵⁴ In part this means addressing governance issues, not least resolving disputes that currently allow Moscow to play on divisions within Europe, from Greece's alienation from the EU to German disputes over migrants.

Crucially, this also means enhanced counterintelligence activities and greater capacity-sharing, especially for smaller nations with limited resources in this area. The push to ensure that NATO members reach the alliance target of spending 2 percent of GDP on defence should not be at the expense of counterintelligence. Indeed, for countries facing especially fierce Russian active measures, such as the Baltic states, the latter ought to take priority. Other allies can provide military protection, but only the Baltics themselves can combat Russian intelligence activities and information operations in their countries.

⁵⁴ I explore this more in Mark Galeotti, "Time To Think About 'Hybrid Defense'", *War On The Rocks*, 30 July 2015, available at <http://warontherocks.com/2015/07/time-to-think-about-hybrid-defense/>.

Likewise, for countries where the real challenge is financial penetration or cyber intrusion, or even Russian propaganda, defences against these dangers should be given more emphasis. Arguably, for example, better financial regulators and more police forensic accountants would serve the UK better than investment in military capacity.

Recommendation 2: Zero tolerance for Russian intrusions

There is always a debate as to how firmly and how publicly to respond to Russian intelligence operations, especially given Moscow's propensity for tit-for-tat retaliation. In the current environment, European governments must not be held hostage by this risk or by the desire to improve the relationship. Rather, they should respond firmly and publicly to all such intrusions, regardless of the immediate practical and rhetorical consequences. Estonia, for example, has already put this into practice, with its policy of publicly naming or prosecuting spies rather than quietly expelling them.⁵⁵

Europe's authorities should also sanction the vehicles of Russian intelligence operations. For example, if an illegal intelligence operative is identified as working within a Russian company, the company should face consequences. There have been recent cases where Russian news agencies, for example, have been implicated in providing cover for spies, such as RIA Novosti in the case of Leonid Sviridov, who was accused of posing as a journalist in Poland.⁵⁶ If there is a strong enough case to expel an individual, the agency that facilitated his or her activities should also be considered culpable.

This would not only deliver a political message – the Kremlin currently sees Europe as "softer" on its espionage than the US – but would also deliver a blow to the intelligence agency in question and its allies. The agencies gain resources, indulgences, and prestige through results, and lose them through failures. Their current risk-taking behaviour reflects a belief that the potential gains are high and the risks low. By reversing that cost-benefit analysis, and convincing them that aggressive behaviour is likely to lead to major costs, European governments can condition them to greater caution. While the Kremlin sets broad policy and tasking, the agencies' leaderships make many tactical decisions, and they can be influenced.

⁵⁵ Michael Weiss, "The Estonian spymasters", *Foreign Affairs*, 3 June 2014, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/central-europe/2014-06-03/estonian-spymasters>.

⁵⁶ "Russian Reporter Forced Out Of Poland On Spying Charges", *RFE/RL*, 13 December 2015, available at <http://www.rferl.org/content/russian-reporter-forced-out-of-poland-on-spying-charges/27423587.html>.

Recommendation 3: Follow the money and starve the hydra

The more Russian operations revolve around active measures, the more they involve money that has to be spent or donated. Just as Europe's governments should make counterintelligence more central to protecting themselves from the current Russian challenge, they should also focus more on addressing the capacity of its state and intelligence structures (along with gangsters, kleptocrats, and tax dodgers) to freely move their money around and hide its sources and beneficiaries. This has been asserted again and again with no success, but it may gain traction now that it can be framed in terms of national security rather than mere law enforcement.

Countries such as Latvia, long vulnerable to the penetration of their financial systems by questionable Russian money, are making real progress in tackling this. Nonetheless, small nations with substantial amounts of Russian money within their borders should make tracking finances a greater priority, such as Cyprus, the Czech Republic, and Bulgaria. While the overwhelming majority of the funds may well be legal, or at least unconnected with intelligence activity, the Kremlin's capacity to move money into and through Europe – or generate funds there – to support active measures is an important problem. Governments should ensure that major financial hubs such as London, Luxembourg, and Frankfurt are more assiduously policed, or more tightly self-regulated.

Recommendation 4: Understand the beast

European authorities have a wealth of tactical knowledge and expertise about Russia's intelligence operations and services. Much of this is shared through the EU, NATO, and through bilateral and other channels, but governments should work to expand this. However, there is less of a clear sense of the political context in which the agencies operate, which affects wider discussions about responses and counter-measures. In other words, there is often a good understanding of what the Russian intelligence services do but much less sense of why, or of its effect on policy.

This is not necessarily anyone's fault. Counterintelligence services are primarily concerned with fighting the tactical battle on the ground, while foreign policy specialists focus on their regular counterparts. However, given the significance of the "special services" to Russia's geopolitics, it is important not just to understand but also to explore and exploit the degree to which they are divided, competitive, instrumentalised, and often misused.

European governments should re-focus their analytical efforts on the policy environment that Russia's intelligence services operate in. Not only would this open up further tactical options – such as the capacity to exploit the rivalries between agencies – but, more importantly, it would provide an additional source of insight into Russian policymaking. The Kremlin is a rational actor, but its decisions are based

on the information at its disposal. The better European authorities understand the sources, biases, and limitations of that information, the more accurately they can predict Russian actions.

Recommendation 5: But keep a sense of balance

Despite all the above, this is not a new Cold War. The Russians do not pose a *long-term* geopolitical challenge to the West, and Europe's governments should think ahead to rebuilding relations with Russia in the inevitable post-Putin era. There is room for greater basic awareness of the problems, including ensuring that European visitors to Russia are less vulnerable to recruitment.⁵⁷ Russian students, entrepreneurs, tourists, and workers in Europe will inevitably include some intelligence officers. However, they are also potential assets for Europe, not so much for recruitment as spies (though that will happen) but as cultural contacts, to minimise the Kremlin's efforts to portray its current imperial designs as some kind of defensive campaign against a hostile West.

Russia, ultimately, is a declining, middle-rank power, currently able to seem to exert disproportionate influence through the concentration of scarce resources and political control and a willingness to break the rules of international behaviour. This will not last, though, and the mismanagement of its intelligence agencies is a metaphor for its general inability in the longer term to cope with the practical limitations of its position.

Europe needs to find the right balance between protecting itself from Russian intelligence activity and deterring Kremlin adventurism, and alienating the Russian population. In spite of all the official propaganda, Russians are still culturally aligned with the West and are in the future likely to seek to emulate its social, legal, economic, and political progress.

⁵⁷ Norway's Police Security Service (PST), for example, has warned that Norwegians are "too naïve" when in Russia and thus vulnerable to being blackmailed or co-opted. Ellen Omland and Mari Reisdjø, "PST advarer mot russiske sexfeller", NRK, 9 November 2015, available at <http://www.nrk.no/norge/pst-advarer-nordmenn-lures-i-russisk-honningfelle-1.12641490>.

Abbreviations

AP	<i>Administratsiya prezidenta</i> , Presidential Administration
FAPSI	<i>Federalnoe agenstvo pravitelstvennoi svyazi i informatsii</i> , Federal Agency for Government Communications and Information
FSB	<i>Federalnaya sluzhba bezopasnosti</i> , Federal Security Service
FSKN	<i>Federalnaya sluzhba po kontrolyu za oborotom narkotikov</i> , Federal Service for the Control of the Struggle against Narcotics
FSO	<i>Federal'naya sluzhba okhrany</i> , Federal Protection Service
GP	<i>General'naya prokuratura</i> , Prosecutor General's Office
GRU	<i>Glavnoe razvedyvatel'noe upravlenie</i> , Main Intelligence Directorate
KGB	<i>Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti</i> , Committee for State Security
MID	<i>Ministerstvo inostrannykh del</i> , Foreign Ministry
MVD	<i>Ministerstvo vnutrennykh del</i> , Interior Ministry
NAK	<i>Natsionalnyi antiterroristicheskii komitet</i> , National Anti-Terrorism Committee
SB	<i>Sovet bezopasnosti</i> , Security Council
SBP	<i>Sluzhba bezopasnosti prezidenta</i> , Presidential Security Service
SK	<i>Sledstvennyi komitet</i> , Investigatory Committee
SVR	<i>Sluzhba vneshnei razvedki</i> , Foreign Intelligence Service

A methodological note

Research on intelligence operations and politics can be problematic at the best of times; in Russia's current environment of uncertainty and suspicion, these are certainly not the best of times. Beyond open source materials, this paper draws heavily on conversations with Russian and foreign interlocutors who are or were once within the intelligence and security communities or who have been in a position to closely observe them at work.

For obvious reasons, they cannot be identified. Instead, a general sense of their role is given, and six particular individuals (Sources A-F) who were of especially great value to this study are given a more extensive outline below. However, it is important to note that no one source was treated as authoritative, and when one is quoted, it is simply a useful or representative phrasing.

Source A is a former Russian intelligence officer who worked within the analytic divisions of foreign intelligence, first the KGB and then its post-Soviet counterparts.

Source B is a serving colonel within the FSB, whose career includes stints in economic security and counterintelligence.

Source C is a foreign policy expert who has worked within the government apparatus under Putin and in the process handled intelligence materials. He claims never to have been an intelligence officer, although his career trajectory hints otherwise.

Source D is a journalist who has had extensive contacts with the domestic security side of the intelligence community, and who has a close relative working within the FSB.

Source E is a retired Baltic counterintelligence officer who previously worked within the KGB.

Source F is a Russian academic with close links to the Foreign Ministry who retains good connections with the Foreign Intelligence Service and has a close family connection to an official within the Security Council secretariat.

I am especially indebted to all six for their willingness to discuss these arcane and sensitive issues.

About the author

Mark Galeotti is a widely-published specialist in Russian security issues — from political-military affairs to the murkier understrata of crime and intelligence services — who has been teaching, researching, and writing in his native UK, the US, and Russia.

Educated at Cambridge University and the London School of Economics, he has been head of the history department at Keele University, professor of global affairs at the New York University Center for Global Affairs, and a visiting faculty member at Rutgers-Newark, MGIMO (Russia), and Charles University (Czech Republic). He now divides his time between Prague and London as director of the consultancy Mayak Intelligence.

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