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Journalist Enjoying A Security Monopoly

By Nabi Abdullaev

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Soldatov researches the security services and has been the subject of their investigations. **Vladimir Filonov**

Andrei Soldatov has certainly kept busy since launching the web site Agentura.ru.

Since 2000, the Moscow-based investigative journalist has twice become tangled up with the authorities in cases of alleged leaks of state secrets, been contacted by senior CIA officials and even been asked by a Russian emigre living in Argentina to help him buy weapons in Russia.

"The Federal Security Service branch in the republic of Tuva asked me to send them everything I have on the Mongolian special services, which I did," Soldatov, 33, said smiling.

Part of the reason he is so busy is that his site, which has grown into something more like a mini think tank, is about the only game in town when it comes to studying the country's security and intelligence agencies.

While Russian Internet search engines return more results for the word "security" than they do for "sex," little of what can be found is of much use to academics or journalists writing on the subject. Most information about Russia's security services is either officially classified or so difficult to access publicly that it might as well be.

This is in contrast to the West, where there is significant research publicly available from civilian experts at think tanks like the Washington-based RAND Corporation and in universities.

The same studies exist here, Soldatov said, but they are conducted by the security agencies themselves and remain classified.

It is impossible, for example, to find even basic catalogues of studies by the FSB Academy, the institution charged with studying security challenges facing the country and working out responses. The academy's web site consists of only a welcome page.

"You will not even find any official analysis of the terrorist groups that might be active in Russia," said Soldatov. The Supreme Court has compiled a list of designated terrorist organizations, but nothing more than a name is provided for any of the 17 entries on the list.

In 2000, Soldatov and his partner working on the site, journalist Irina Borogan, decided to try to fill the gap in public knowledge about terrorism and those who fight it by setting up Agentura.ru to collect and present all the information about Russian security forces that was publicly available in a systematic manner.

"At the time, we thought that our work would help to establish public oversight of the special services, and we even had a banner on the web site that read 'We watch those who want to remain in the shadows,'" Borogan said.

New realities ultimately led him to remove the banner.

"Since Vladimir Putin became president in 2000, the special services have grown increasingly secretive and powerful, making any idea of outside control impossible," he said.

All the same, Agentura.ru has developed into an information and analytical hub, updated on a daily basis and covering developments related to security services in Russia and the former Soviet Union and terrorist groups worldwide. It also publishes articles on the history and practices of foreign security agencies and issues like media and legislative oversight of security services.

Today, only web sites offering anti-virus programs rate higher than Agentura.ru among results for the search term "security" on the Rambler web portal.

Soldatov said that, according to the site's own statistics, Agentura.ru is frequented by visitors using official government servers in the United States, Great Britain, France and Canada.

Soldatov himself has emerged as a security expert whose insights and opinion are in high

demand from the media and Western think tanks.

In 2005, Soldatov and Borogan published the book "New Patriot Games: How Secret Services Have Been Changing Their Skins," featuring over 40 interviews with top security officials, Russian and foreign, on the way special services have morphed in the face of the emerging terrorist threats in the post-Cold War world. Soldatov had by that time established his think tank, which he said receives no outside financing.

"I live on my salary as a journalist," he said.

Soldatov works for the Novaya Gazeta, a paper known for its investigative reporting and for not toeing the Kremlin media line.

Soldatov said the FSB, the primary security agency responsible for fighting terrorism in Russia, remains the least cooperative organization when it comes to sharing information with him and other journalists and researchers.

His attempts to get information about the FSB have not made Soldatov any more popular with the organization. In 2002, an article he wrote detailing an FSB swap with City Hall of some of its vast property holdings in Moscow for apartments for some of its personnel led to a criminal investigation into the leaking of classified information six months after the story's publication.

The investigators seized the computer server at the newspaper Versia, where Soldatov worked at the time. The seizure came on the eve of the publication of a number of articles critical of the handling of the Nord-Ost hostage crisis a month before. The articles were published anyway and the criminal probe into Soldatov was closed in spring of 2003.

Last month, Soldatov was called in for questioning by the FSB in another investigation into allegedly divulging state secrets.

The case involved a published interview with Sergei Tretyakov, a Foreign Intelligence Service colonel who defected to the United States in 2000. A criminal investigation into Tretyakov's activities was opened in January, after he published a book in the United States in which he spoke of some of his intelligence activities abroad.

Books are a big deal for Soldatov, who said he spends most of his salary ordering volumes on security theory from Amazon.com but is not interested in going into academia himself.

"Walking away from newspaper journalism would cut me off from the daily information and field research," he said.

Alexander Golts, an independent military and security analyst, said research on questions such as terrorism in today's Russia had to be done by journalists instead of academics.

"Academic thought needs to be based on facts, but the special services don't provide enough information to be used by serious researchers," he said. "In the absence of facts, research

remains in the domain of belles-lettres."

Golts appears to have a point. It is impossible to find academic treatments of questions like terrorism and the security services in Russian bookstores, but there is an abundance of memoirs from retired spooks and trashy conspiracy theory works.

"There is also no tradition in Russia of educating civilian experts on security subjects," Golts added.

Not everyone agrees, however, that any of this should even be a matter of public or academic discussion.

"Everything related to the methods of fighting crime should remain closed to the public," said Gennady Gudkov, a member of the State Duma's Security Committee and a retired KGB officer. "We should not disclose how the special services work because terrorists will adapt their own methods."

"Moreover, unlike in America or Western Europe, the secrecy surrounding the special services is part of the Russian and Soviet tradition and mentality, so that enemies never learn their nemesis," Gudkov said.

Most prominent Russian military analysts that do exist hail from the Institute of the United States and Canada, where they studied U.S. security forces. Only after the collapse of the Soviet Union did they turn those academic models to the study of Russian capabilities.

One trend that both Golts and Soldatov identified is an increasing tendency on the part of the security community to portray itself as a kind of new Russian elite.

Former FSB director Nikolai Patrushev has used the term "new nobility" to refer to security service officers, while the don of the so-called siloviki, Viktor Cherkesov, said chekism — taken from the name of the first Bolshevik secret police service — was a patriotic ideology descended from the Soviet era and the country's savior during the turmoil of the 1990s.

While Soldatov says he conducts interviews with active and retired senior foreign intelligence officials to demonstrate that a different, more open mindset is possible, there is still a different, overarching ethic.

"Roughly speaking, these people think and act as if they are members of a medieval monastic order," he said.

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