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After Crimea, West's Spies, Armies to Raise Russia Focus

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A man in Odessa looking at graffiti protesting Russia's actions in Crimea.

LONDON — As Western states enter a new era of potential confrontation with Moscow, they face an awkward reality.

A quarter-century after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the level of expertise on Russia in intelligence agencies, armed forces and governments has diminished drastically.

Rising concern over Russian government espionage — including increasingly sophisticated cyber attacks and computer spyware — had sparked some modest renewed interest in recent years, primarily in counterintelligence.

But the way Washington and its allies were so blindsided by President Vladimir Putin's military seizure and annexation of Crimea from Ukraine is seen demonstrating a dramatic need for renewed focus.

The bottom line, current and former officials say, is that with the post-September 11, 2001

focus on Islamist militancy and the Middle East and later the rise of China, the former Soviet Union was simply not seen as a career-enhancing speciality.

Compared to the Cold War era, when most of Russian territory was off-limits to Westerners, regional specialists say there is no shortage of expertise among academics and in the business community today. But it has so far gone untapped.

"There is a good supply of Russia experts out there — people who have lived there with lots of good experience — but the demand has just not been there from government," says Fiona Hill, U.S. national intelligence officer for Russia in 2006-2009 and now director for the Center for the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institution.

"The Pentagon in particular has lost a lot of its Russia expertise, as has the White House."

More of those outside experts are now likely to find work in defense ministries and intelligence agencies, current and former officials say. But in an era of constrained budgets, focusing on Russia is likely to mean redeploying resources from elsewhere.

Until the Ukraine crisis that did not seem a natural choice, people with knowledge of internal discussions say.

"The main problem is one of capacity at a time when counterterrorism, Iraq, Afghanistan and the Arab awakening have taken up so much energy," said one former Western intelligence officer on condition of anonymity.

Russia is primarily a threat to its immediate neighborhood only, officials and analysts say, but still one requiring greater vigilance than over the last two decades.

'Those Who Know Most Worry'

Capacity alone is far from everything. The West's legions of Soviet specialists, with few exceptions, missed the warning signs of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989.

Still, officials and analysts say there is a growing feeling that the West should have done more to increase its Russia focus, particularly as Moscow's defense spending rose some 30 percent after its 2008 war with Georgia.

"The people who know the most about Russia's defense capability have tended to take it the most seriously," says former Pentagon official Elbridge Colby, now a senior fellow at the Centre for a New American Security.

Some Central and Eastern European and Nordic states have long focused much if not all of their intelligence and defense resources on Russia. Poland and Sweden in particular are seen leading the pack. Others are now catching up.

One reason Washington and its allies were so surprised by events in Crimea was that during Russia's military buildup in the region, there was little or no signals chatter indicating an imminent takeover, intelligence sources say.

Still, Moscow had very publicly mobilized its forces several days earlier ostensibly for an

exercise. That such obvious clues were missed, some say, suggests analysts had lost their edge in assessing and predicting the actions of the Russian leadership.

While U.S. officials are now monitoring closely a Russian troop buildup along Ukraine's eastern border, Western experts differ over whether Putin plans to invade the region.

Spy Ring, Spyware

For the U.S., two espionage incidents in the last decade helped draw counterintelligence attention back to Moscow's suspected activities.

The first was the 2008 discovery of sophisticated spy software dubbed Agent BTZ that infected Department of Defense computers after apparently entering from a USB drive later found in the car park of a U.S. military base in the Middle East.

Pentagon officials spent months cleaning systems and the attack is still seen one of the most serious breaches of U.S. government IT security. Although Washington never officially laid blame for the intrusion, several U.S. officials told Reuters on condition of anonymity that Moscow was the prime suspect.

Much higher profile was the 2010 arrest and expulsion of 10 "deep cover" spies in the U.S. including Anna Chapman, who became a Russian television presenter and celebrity. That followed information from a Russian defector and a major FBI investigation. There is little evidence the spies were hugely successful.

In Britain, security agencies began paying more attention to Russia after the 2007 death of Putin opponent Alexander Litvinenko from radioactive poisoning.

Until recently, however, military intelligence specialists were simply too busy with operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

Russia's Crimea annexation may revive military specialisms such as tank and submarine warfare neglected during the decade-long campaign in mountainous, landlocked Afghanistan.

"Antisubmarine warfare is something that has been far too sidelined for the simple reason that the Taliban do not have submarines," said one former senior European officer.

Some of the problems in understanding Russia, however, may be societal rather than military.

"For a country that is so patriotic, we can be highly intolerant of others' patriotism," former Pentagon official Colby said of the U.S.. "We just do not see their patriotism as particularly legitimate."

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