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The True Role of the FSB in the Ukrainian Crisis

By Andrei Soldatov

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The intrigue is growing over the Federal Security Service's involvement in Ukraine. On April 11, Ukraine's Deputy Prosecutor General said there was no evidence implicating the FSB in events on Maidan Square. At the same time, it is officially confirmed that FSB generals visited Kiev on Feb. 20 to 21. Recall that the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry sent a note to Moscow on April 4 demanding to know why FSB Colonel General Sergei Beseda visited Kiev on Feb. 20 and 21, and that the very next day Interfax cited a source in Russian intelligence confirming that visit.

The answer as to why Beseda was in Kiev with his entourage could be key to understanding the role of Russia's intelligence agencies in the current crisis and to the Kremlin's entire strategy in Ukraine.

Beseda heads the FSB's Fifth Service, or the Service for Operational Information and International Communications. That service includes the Operational Information Department that Beseda headed until 2009. Since the end of the 1990s, that division has been

responsible for conducting intelligence activities focusing on the former Soviet republics.

When the chekists formed their own foreign intelligence agencies, they cited a number of reasons why Russia needed a third such service in addition to the Foreign Intelligence Service, or SVR, and the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff, or GRU. They argued that when the SVR became a separate intelligence service, the FSB still included divisions responsible for recruiting foreigners living in Russia, and that in turn necessitated the formation of a coordinating structure at its central headquarters at Lubyanka. But it was soon apparent that the FSB agencies intended to expand the scope of their intelligence work. That is understandable: Russia was headed for the first time by a former intelligence officer who was accustomed to primarily trusting information gathered by intelligence agencies. The Kremlin considers its near abroad a priority, and it apparently seemed illogical to President Vladimir Putin not to have information from that region coming directly from the country's main intelligence agencies.

The foreign intelligence agencies of the FSB have developed a well-defined style during their 15 years in operation. For example, in contrast to the SVR and GRU, the FSB has no qualms about appearing in the spotlight and its generals have a penchant for paying visits to senior officials in neighboring countries. As a result, Belarussian observers accused the FSB of trying to influence the political situation prior to that country's presidential elections in 2003. In 2004, FSB generals visited Sukhumi, Abkhazia to support the pro-Moscow candidates in their presidential race and, according to news reports from Chisinau, FSB generals personally worked with local Moldovan politicians in the mid-2000s. It also came to light four years ago that FSB intelligence services are actively involved in Ukraine. As an example, in 2010 a disaffected chekist published FSB documents on the Lubyanskayapravda.com website he created. That site was scuttled only two weeks later, but among the documents it revealed was a report on a Ukrainian document the FSB had forged with the intention of misleading the government of Turkmenistan and spoiling a gas deal between Kiev and Ashkhabad.

The second distinguishing feature of Russia's intelligence services is their lack of interest in mass movements and the activity on the street in favor of a total focus on the corrupt elites holding power. This is based on the old idea that "if we control the shah, we control the country."

Oddly enough, this aspect of their work is remarkably similar to the style of British intelligence during the collapse of the British Empire. In the 1950s, British agents in Egypt tried to their very last to compromise the monarchy, whereas U.S. agents were already working with the "free officers" of Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, ultimately leading to the Suez Crisis of 1956. At the same time, the corporate cultures of the British Secret Intelligence Service and the FSB are so different that this single unexpected similarity can have only one explanation: The intelligence services of imperial powers tend to have the same biases toward their former colonies.

This approach has at least two major drawbacks. First, all of the Ukrainians who cooperated with the FSB now have no political future in that country — depriving the FSB of access to the ruling circles. Second, if the FSB relied entirely on information provided by close associates of former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych, how accurate was their picture of the

overall situation in the country?

Even this problem could be overcome were it not for the fact that all of the decision-makers in the Kremlin also share a background in the FSB. In the case of Ukraine, some former KGB generals now serving in Ukraine's security service told a different group of former KGB generals now serving in Russia's Federal Security Service what was happening in the country. And that situation is further complicated by the fact that, according to a report in The New York Times, that information was passed along to Putin's inner circle of presidential chief of staff Sergei Ivanov, Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev and FSB head Alexander Bortnikov — all of whom, together with the president, worked in the KGB.

That common "education" might help them all stay on the same page, but it does nothing to help them understand the world at large. In fact, KGB operatives were not taught to engage in politics. They were instilled with a narrow and limited view of events, one confined to a reliance on tactics while ignoring overall strategy. This is an outlook that disregards larger social processes in favor of a focus on agents of influence in different states.

Perhaps this explains why government officials are constantly saying privately that Russia's policy is nothing more than an improvisational reaction to various crises. If that is true, it makes the situation in Ukraine even more unpredictable.

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