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A 'Spook War' May Be Brewing

By Mark Galeotti

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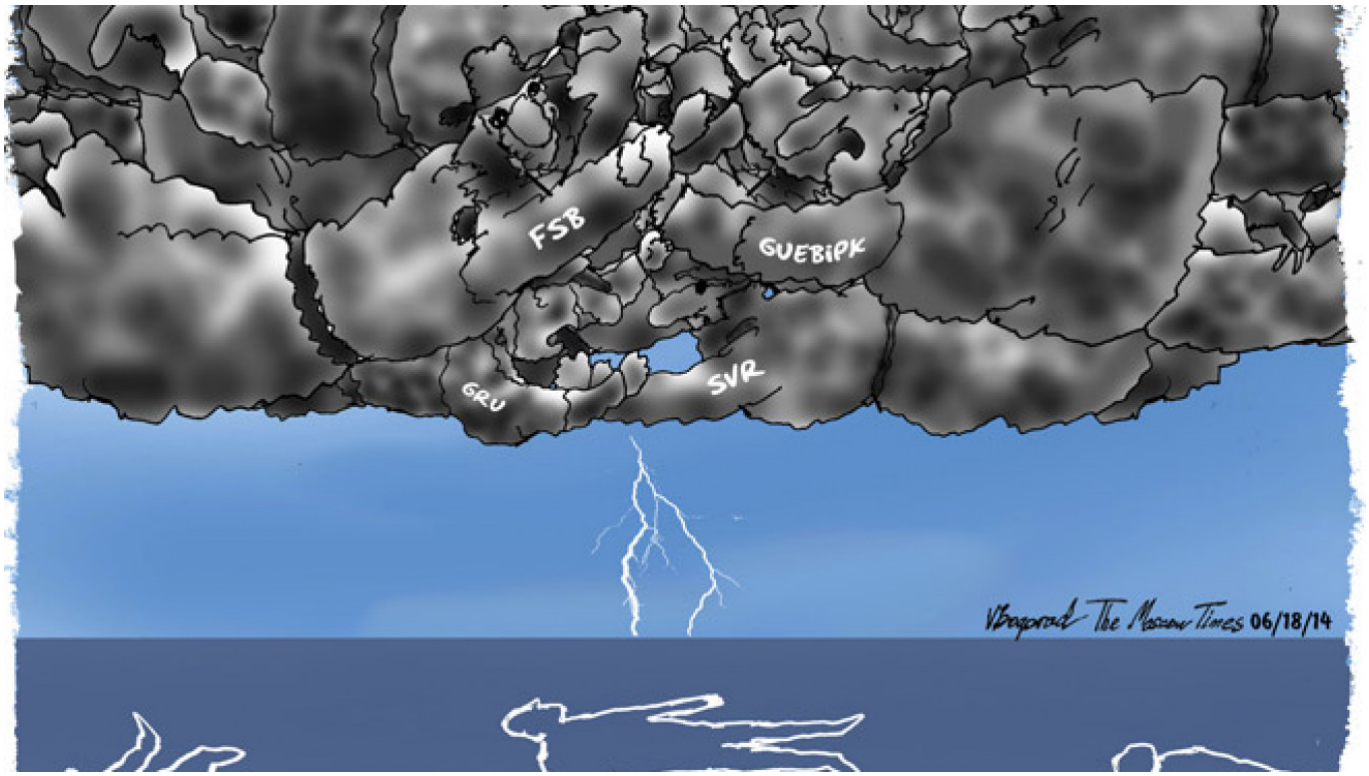

Corruption scandals are, sadly, hardly new to the Russian police and security apparatus. Often they are just signs of political struggles and lead to nothing more than demotions, reshuffles and temporary suspensions. Sometimes, though, they turn lethal.

This Monday, while being questioned on corruption charges, Major-General Boris Kolesnikov apparently managed to push past two police guards and leap out of a sixth floor window, falling to his death.

It could, of course, be that Kolesnikov was a guilty man who took a quick and dramatic way out rather than face the disgrace of a trial and a lengthy prison sentence, accompanied by all the additional risks and pressures that a former cop would face behind bars.

After all, Kolesnikov had, seemingly, tried to commit suicide at least once before. While imprisoned in Lefortovo, he suffered a cracked skull from what was first described as an assault, and then a suicide attempt.

But Kolesnikov's death also neatly closes the case against him without risking him naming

names or rebutting charges in open court.

Kolesnikov was the deputy chief of the Interior Ministry's Main Directorate for Economic Security and Anti-corruption, which goes by the jaw-breaking acronym GUEBiPK. Since February, GUEBiPK has been the epicenter of a scandal that saw both Kolesnikov and his boss, directorate head Lieutenant-General Denis Sugrobov, arrested on corruption charges.

Indictments from the Investigative Committee allege that officers of the directorate engaged in entrapment, bribe-taking and racketeering. Kolsenikov specifically was arrested on charges of trying to entrap an officer of the FSB with the aim of extorting him.

But extortion is so wide spread within the security services, that this type of major investigation in unusual. I've heard cases, for example, of police internal affairs officers who gleefully investigate cases of corruption in the ranks not to arrest the perpetrators but to sell them their silence.

Instead, a thirst for power and wealth, not justice, may be the guiding force in this case. The objective might not have been Kolesnikov, or even a way of getting at his boss Sugrobov. Instead, the prize may well have been the GUEBiPK itself.

As activist Alexei Navalny and others have discovered to their dismay, allegations of fraud, tax evasion and similar economic crimes have become the Kremlin's favored means of controlling the nation. They are also amongst the most common tools for "raiding," the theft of assets through spurious legal claims.

The GUEBiPK is thus not only a potentially powerful political asset — whoever controls economic crime investigations is especially useful to the Kremlin — but also a lucrative source of revenue. Kolsenikov's downfall, therefore, may be part of a play by the FSB and Investigative Committee to take control of the GUEBiPK.

Just as the MVD's Main Directorate for Combating Extremism is generally regarded as a tool of the FSB, so too GUEBiPK could be dominated by the FSB's Economic Security Service or else the Investigative Committee. The latter, after all, has made repeated attempts to secure a role as the primary agency for economic crime investigations.

So, in the battle to control the GUEBiPK, who won? In the immediate aftermath, Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev appointed one of his trusted men, Major-General Sergei Solopov, as the directorate's acting head.

In April, though, President Vladimir Putin told a conclave of senior FSB officers that their agency would play a crucial role in the emerging struggle against those who are trying to hide their assets and sneak money out of the country.

This seemed to be a signal that the FSB was winning the struggle to control economic crime investigations. In May, this message was given form when Major-General Dmitry Mironov was appointed to head GUEBiPK.

Mironov, after all, had worn a police officer's uniform for only a year. Until early 2013, he had been a career FSB officer, who joined the service back when it was still the Soviet KGB.

At present, there are many silent struggles taking place within the world of the security agencies.

The GRU, Russia's military intelligence agency, is trying to use the conflict in Ukraine to reassert its relevance and prevent a rumored diminution of its status. The Federal Counter-Narcotics Service is demanding to be allowed to set up its own foreign intelligence division, competing with the FSB and the Foreign Intelligence Service, or SVR.

The FSB likewise is expanding its external intelligence operations, trespassing onto the SVR's turf. The Investigative Committee and the FSB continue to compete over which agency has precedence in domestic political enquiries. And underpinning and interweaving all these institutional rivalries are myriad economic and personal feuds and interests.

In 2007, similar antagonisms between the agencies erupted into an open clash which Putin personally quashed. The Kremlin is keen to prevent a new "spook war." In Kolesnikov's case, the last thing Moscow wanted was a drawn-out trial, which might lead to public disclosures or sharpened tensions between the MVD and the FSB. Kolesnikov's death is a tragedy for his nearest and dearest, but it is undoubtedly convenient to many.

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