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Will Russian Spycraft Adapt to the Information Age? (Op-ed)

Rather than rethinking their tactics, Russia may be the biggest beneficiary of this brave new world.

By Mark Galeotti

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It seems as if one of the two alleged agents sent to try to kill Russian double-agent Sergei Skripal has been unmasked, not by the conventional media or a government agency, but by online citizen investigation outfit Bellingcat. Does this spell a new era of the international intelligence game?

On the face of it, Bellingcat did an exemplary and imaginative job of hunting through academy class records, phone books and webpages to identify "Ruslan Boshirov" as Anatoly Chepiga, the 30-year-old veteran of the Spetsnaz special forces, colonel and decorated Hero of the

Russian Federation.

Since the story broke, there has been the inevitable clash of claim and counterclaim. People from his village see the face of the boy they knew in Chepiga's service photo. Or they don't. Some facial recognition experts concur. Others deny. There are questions about the documentation produced to back the identification. The fact is, that although Bellingcat touts itself as an open source investigations agency, they seem to have relied not just on a degree of luck but also materials that we cannot double-check.

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Bellingcat has pulled off genuine intelligence coups in the past — not least in the MH17 case — so let us assume this is another. That investigators apparently without security access or secret methods can use creativity, crowdsourcing and persistence to make this identification demonstrates once again that the whole nature of intelligence and secrecy is changing in the Information Age.

Governments can create legends — fake identities — backed by a slew of documents, references, credit details and holiday snapshots, but they cannot comprehensively re-edit the past and the online record. Spooks may eschew social media, but the very absence of a virtual life is in itself suspicious these days. Facial recognition, voice pattern analysis, tools once monopolized by states are widely available, and crowdsourcing through the net allows amateurs and obsessive scattered across the internet to combine their efforts with startling effect.

Moscow is, of course, not admitting that the sports nutrition entrepreneur with a penchant for thirteenth-century ecclesiastical architecture is a commando-turned-spook. At the same time, though, they were likely surprised by the speed and depth of Bellingcat's expose.

Moscow's operation can hardly be called a success: Skripal lived. An innocent civilian died. And a damaging diplomatic incident ensued. However, given that it is unlikely the death of Sergei Skripal was the only or even the main goal — the use of novichok suggests this was meant to have a wider role as a message of the Kremlin's anger —- then nor can it be called a failure. That the fake passports on which "Bochirov" and his cohort were traveling came from a batch which can identify other officers from the GRU — military intelligence — is the more problematic.

However, Moscow can have had no doubts that its agents would be identified. This is the panopticon era, in which it is impossible to move, especially in the U.K., without coming under the scrutiny of hundreds of CCTV cameras. Furthermore, they were traveling on visas, which meant the authorities had their photos and other information. Given the resources deployed, it was just a matter of time before keen observers, facial recognition systems and the urgent covert inquiries of the intelligence community made a match. Gathering biometric information at ports of entry, as well as such arcane emerging tools as gait analysis (identifying people by their walk), mean this will only become all the easier and quicker.

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In such times, agents deployed for operations such as the Skripal hit become strictly single-use, confined after to their home nation's borders. As futurologist science-fiction writer Charles Stross tweeted, new techniques render "traditional identity management toolkits obsolete in HUMINT [human intelligence]; they knew these identities would be blown fast. No point trying for depth; instead, rapidly deploy many agents with shallow, expendable covers. Quantity instead of quality."

Quantity instead of quality is, it has to be said, something of a Russian strength. Why not use some Spetsnaz tough guy rather than a highly-skilled career case officer, if the mission is strictly one-shot? So too is a willingness to brazen a way through awkward situations, relying on the usual dramas, denials and disinformation. If anything, then, the Russians may actually be better placed to deal with the realities of espionage and active measures in the Information Age.

One way it may be thinking of responding, though, is by taking another look at Bellingcat and similar organizations, which are neither civil society nor investigative journalism, but somewhere in between. Looking at how Russian media and also Russophile commentators are characterizing Bellingcat, they claim it is funded by Western government fronts and suggest it is used by Western intelligence. Bellingcat denies any such connections, but it is not hard to see why Moscow — itself prone to use proxies and "useful idiots" — would leap to this conclusion.

If in the Information Age even civilians can become, in effect, their own intelligence agencies, then are they still civilians in the eyes of a Kremlin that sees itself facing covert Western *gibridnaya voina* or "hybrid war?" In myriad ways, the boundaries between war and peace, combatant and civilians, official and unofficial are becoming less and less meaningful.

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