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No, Mr. Putin, the Bungled Spying Won't Blow Over (Op-Ed)

The string of embarrassing failures is ruining the image of omnipotence the Russian leader spent years trying to build.

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The latest failures of Russia's military intelligence service, commonly known as the GRU, expose a major flaw in President Vladimir Putin's habitual way of dealing with public fiascos: He mistakenly believes the uproar will blow over.

The Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte, and his British counterpart, Theresa May, said Thursday that the GRU had tried to hack the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in the Hague, which was testing the substance used to poison ex-spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the U.K. in March. The Russian agents allegedly were caught trying to disrupt the OPCW computer network using equipment hidden in a car trunk. They also are

said to have been caught with diplomatic passports. The Netherlands expelled them.

This follows a similar scandal in Switzerland, where two Russian agents allegedly tried to hack the Spiez Laboratory, a chemicals testing facility that also examined the substance used on Skripal. The two were eventually detained in the Netherlands.

Also on Thursday, the U.S. Justice Department announced criminal charges against seven Russian military intelligence officers for trying to hack into anti-doping agencies and international sports organizations in response to accusations of doping against Russia.

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The new revelations extend a line of embarrassing GRU failures, including a botched effort to conceal Russian links to the downing of a Malaysian passenger airliner over eastern Ukraine and an alleged failed coup in Montenegro, both in 2014. In addition, U.S. authorities presented highly detailed charges against GRU officers in the hacking of the Democratic National Committee in 2016. Recently, one of the Skripals' alleged unsuccessful poisoners was convincingly identified by open source intelligence researchers as a GRU colonel, decorated with Russia's highest military medal for his part in the Crimea annexation.

In Soviet times, such carelessness probably would have led to reprisals against the spy agency, but Putin appears to be taking a different attitude. There have been no reports of a GRU shakeup, and on Wednesday, Putin said he thought the agitation would just go away. "I think it'll all pass someday, I hope it'll be over, and the sooner it's over, the better," he said of the Skripal story, which he described as "another spy scandal being artificially blown up."

For a leader known for his ability to wrong-foot opponents with lightning judo-like moves, Putin has been strangely passive in recent months. He has missed several opportunities to escalate military action in Syria and made no surprising moves elsewhere, including Ukraine or the Balkans.

Putin hasn't been shy about conveying his belief that time is on his side. During a call-in session with voters in June, he said he expected Western attempts to put pressure on Russia to run their course eventually. "All this pressure will end when our partners realize that the methods they're using are inefficient, counterproductive, damaging to everyone and that the Russian Federation's interests will have to be taken into account," he said.

But nothing will blow over as long as Putin's intelligence services keep waging, and losing, a high-stakes, secret war against the West. The GRU flops aren't the only examples of Russian ineptitude; in July, Greece, a North Atlantic Treaty Organization member traditionally friendlier to Russia than most others, expelled two Russian diplomats for trying to obtain and distribute sensitive information.

Related article: U.S. Indicts 7 Russian Intel Officers in Alleged Doping Scandal Hack

Putin was right when he said Wednesday that spy wars "cannot be shut down." But a

government that can afford to wait wins more often than it loses. The Russian spy operations are too transparent to Putin's adversaries to be of any help to him. They're so painfully incompetent that they undermine Putin's domestic support, even as many Russians are grumbling about a sharp retirement-age increase he signed into effect on Wednesday.

The Russian president doesn't have a reputation as a lovable bungler; his propaganda machine has honed an image of ruthless efficiency and cunning. The Russian leader doesn't have the Teflon coating of a Donald Trump, who can make one misstep after another and still keep his support base. The Russian president can't afford to look fallible, but he increasingly does. Simply trying to wait out one unfavorable news cycle after another won't fix the problem.

Putin has more than five years left in what is likely to be his last presidency. I don't know which prospect is scarier: That he will realize passivity works against him and start making even riskier moves, or that he'll retreat further into his shell, leaving the various corrupt cliques in the Russian elite to fight it out. Both could have disastrous consequences for Russia the country, as opposed to Russia the political regime.

The most unlikely scenario is that Putin ends the ham-handed spy operations and looks for better, smarter ways for Russia to assert itself internationally.

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