The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

A Year After the Skripal Poisoning, How Much Has Really Changed?

The fallout from the Skripal affair has influenced Moscow's tactics but not its strategy.

By Mark Galeotti

March 03, 2019



Sergei Skripal **Facebook / MT**

One year ago on March 4, 2018, Russian military intelligence officer turned British spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia fell victim to what was ascertained to be Novichok, a rare nerve agent. Moscow contends that it had nothing to do with it; London is equally adamant that the Russian state was behind an attempted assassination. While Skripal's Salisbury home has finally been decontaminated, the toxic aftermath of the attack continues to pollute the international environment.

On the one hand, it has demonstrated that Moscow can dangerously misread the international mood. I was in Moscow when, in the immediate aftermath, British Prime Minister Theresa

May announced that 23 alleged Russian spies from the embassy in London were being "PNGed" — made persona non grata, in diplomatic jargon. Predictably, Moscow responded with tit-for-tat expulsions of their own.

However, none of the Russians I spoke to — pundits, diplomats, journalists or officials — thought that was anything but the end of the matter. The prevailing assumption was that this was the predictable and manageable fallout from the affair. No one had the faintest inkling of the coordinated wave of expulsions which was to follow, in which 27 countries expelled 123 Russian spies and diplomats, a move to which Moscow had no viable counter.

In immediate terms, the expulsion of so many intelligence officers at once clearly affected Moscow's campaign of espionage and interference, even if the damage was largely temporary. Networks the size of Russia's cannot be broken with such measures.

Related article: Only 3% of Russians Believe Moscow Was Behind Skripal Attack, Poll Says

Far more important was the political impact. Putin's Kremlin is on a campaign to assert Russia's great power status, and politics is all about perception.The Kremlin is enjoying the reputation of being a swashbuckling maverick, ruthless, dangerous and decisive.

This has a certain value, not least in deterring the faint-hearted. Ultimately, though, there are distinct limits to this "dark power." As was once believed to have been said by Talleyrand, Napoleon's foreign minister (and later repeated by Boris Yeltsin), you can do many things with bayonets, except sit on them. A throne needs to be built of other things: respect, reliability, trust.

The very multinationalism of the response to Skripal was its own message, as countries with little reason to placate Britain instead used this as an opportunity to express their own frustrations with Russian meddling, trolling, spying and, yes, sometimes murdering.

Related article: U.S. Opens Door to New Russia Sanctions After Skripal Attack

The Kremlin's media machine, so quick to claim London was acting out a conspiratorial Russophobic charade, had considerably more trouble handwaving away this axis of the exasperated, and has largely tried to forget this inconvenient reversal.

Reversal it was, though, and it provided a warning for the Kremlin. NATO's strength as a defensive alliance against overt hostility is precisely the solidarity of its members, as reflected in the famous Article 5 guarantee that rests on the notion that an attack on one member is an attack on all.

Given that the European Union has largely proven to be a toothless — and reluctant — force in this arena, there is no institutional framework for such solidarity in countering non-military challenges. Nonetheless, there could be. An awareness of this danger — which would dramatically reduce Moscow's freedom to manoeuvre and create another structure essentially aimed against it — weighs on the Kremlin's mind.

But not that much. Or, to put it another way, not enough to force it to adopt a radically different approach. Instead, a year on, the fallout from the Skripal affair appears to have influenced Moscow's tactics but not its strategy.

Symbolically, the GRU military intelligence service — the agency at the heart of the high-profile operations exposed — has not faced the Kremlin's wrath, as some predicted, but instead received an enthusiastic end-of-term report from the president at its centenary gala in November. The message was clear: The immediate embarrassments were acceptable costs, at most skirmishes lost, in the context of a much larger, wider political war.

So the battle lines in that war shifted. The lackluster or counter-productive results of its attempts to meddle in elections, which tended to backfire (whatever the pitch of the "collusion" row in the United States, professional opinion in Moscow does not appear to regard Donald Trump's election as an unmitigated benefit, let alone their handiwork), led to a shift in focus.

Instead, political "active measures" concentrate on social issues, magnifying existing tensions and divisions and cultivating potential "agents of influence."

Meanwhile, the role of more direct covert operations has also been modified.

"*Symbolically, the GRU military intelligence service has not faced the Kremlin's wrath.*"

The attempted coup in Montenegro in 2016 was an embarrassing failure. The 2018 Skripal case is probably considered a partial success. The method used suggests the aim was not just to kill one man, but to deliver a highly public warning to London and potential other "traitors" not to test Moscow's will.

Skripal survived and the agents used were (predictably) unmasked, but the Kremlin's reach and resolution were demonstrated. Nonetheless, the political price the Russian government then was forced to pay was clearly far higher than it had anticipated.

As a result, it seems that the Russians have again pivoted away from such direct measures, at least in Western Europe and North America. The aggressiveness has simply been displaced, though, into more peripheral regions and, more to the point, into cultivating deniable proxies for future acts of violence, from extremist militias to gangsters.

So in the past year, much has changed, and little.

Western countries have demonstrated the power of solidarity, and yet what could have been the basis for a comprehensive and collective effort to tackle Russian covert activities may prove to have been a one-off.

Russia has shifted away from election meddling and murderous “wet work” in the West, instead putting its energies into less immediately confrontational and more deniable, but no less disruptive, activities. The battle goes on.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/03/03/a-year-after-the-skripal-poisoning-how-much-has-really-changed-a64677