The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia's Secret Organizations Are Not Secret Anymore. It Seems They Don't Care

What has become clear is that to expect the Kremlin or its secret services to be embarrassed when they are unmasked is to miscalculate greatly.

By Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan

December 17, 2020



Evgenij Razumnyj / Vedomosti / TASS

There seems to be a global shift in the secret services world these days — the Russian organizations are not that secret anymore. They do conduct secret operations, but then they routinely and inevitably get exposed — the rank-and-file members involved, the departments in charge and the substances and technologies they use, at home or abroad.

This has become a common practice for many of the Kremlin's supposedly secret and

sensitive operations, in cases from cyberattacks to poisonings. And the Kremlin and secret services seem to have adjusted to this new reality just fine.

The Bellingcat unmasking of the Federal Security Service (FSB) operatives involved in the Navalny operation and the follow up makes this very clear. The report provides detailed information about a number of FSB operatives involved in shadowing Navalny. It also exposed the role of the NII-2, one of two main FSB research facilities intimately involved in the FSB's Navalny operation.

This information made a crucial contribution to our understanding of what happened to Navalny in August, though some key elements of the operation remain murky, particularly the chain of command. Because the NII-2 is a research facility, not an operational unit, there should be some unit in Lubyanka headquarters to coordinate a team with the FSB's numerous regional departments and update the group with intelligence on the Navalny team's movements provided by local surveillance teams.

In combination with Bellingcat's previous report on the GRU units and people involved in the Skripal poisonings in Britain, it paints a pretty damning picture of the Russian secret services' poisoning program.

But what became clear some years ago is that to expect the Kremlin or the secret services to be embarrassed is to miscalculate greatly.

Related article: Media Investigation Names FSB Agents Behind Navalny Poisoning

In 2015, U.S. intelligence and law enforcement applied a "naming and shaming" policy to Chinese hackers, exposing the names and the unit affiliation of the Chinese intelligence agencies involved in hacking in the U.S. It was a revolutionary move in comparison with the traditional responses of passing on a message via diplomatic channels or expelling diplomats. The next year, the naming and shaming tactic was applied to Russian hackers caught inside the Democratic National Committee systems on the eve of the 2016 U.S. election.

The strategy had some effect – in September 2015 the Chinese came to an agreement with the Obama administration to stop industrial cyber espionage (the agreement lasted for two years); in Russia, the FSB cyber unit was purged, losing on the way its head, two deputies and a number of officers.

But in two years it became clear that the attackers had found a way to adjust. When the Skripals were poisoned in Britain and information about the true identities of the attackers — officers from Russia's military intelligence — was duly exposed, it didn't have the same deterrent effect as it had on the Chinese hackers. Russia's military intelligence showed no signs of slowing down and no internal purge followed.

There are two ways to adjust to this new transparent world: You can increase the professionalism of your secret agents, which is an expensive and long-term effort. Or you can start using the kind of operatives whose lack of training combines with toughness, no-questions-asked loyalty and adventurism. Accidentally, Russian military intelligence found itself with large numbers of the second type of operative in the mid-2010s. There was a reason

for that: Under Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, the Defense Ministry went through reforms resulting in, among other things, the downgrading and reduction in numbers of its intelligence branch the GRU. The GRU was so humiliated that it even lost one of the letters, becoming just GU — *Glavnoye Upravlenie*, or Main Directorate. Putin reinstated its traditional name a few years later).

When Putin returned to the Kremlin in 2012, his Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu was determined to get the GRU back on its feet. For that, the GRU needed more people, but where to get these new people from? The only source of recruits available was the special forces. These were tough guys — brutal, brave and ready to kill, but by no means intelligence operatives. It was these kind of operatives who were assigned to the operation in Salisbury, and they changed the modus operandi of Russian intelligence.

They get caught red-handed but they are not afraid of that, and that provided the Kremlin with a sort of protection from the new world of transparency.

Unlike traditional spies, this lot are not afraid of being exposed, or expelled from the country. They have no exalted positions in an embassy to fear losing. They don't ask questions about the operation because they live in a world with no difference between war and peace, so no questions about collateral damage either. The training for this kind of operative is cheap, and the supply of potential recruits plentiful.

Putin, an intelligence officer by training, understands this well. Besides, if you are dealing with a country already accused of so many things, from downing a civilian plane to invading a neighboring country, another accusation won't change much and could have a liberating effect.

The accusations might be even used for internal purposes to paint the country as a besieged fortress facing an incessant information offensive from hostile foreign powers.

That the secret services became so adventurous also has an educational and intimidating effect. Almost all the people we talked to while researching our book "The Compatriots" — from an oligarch-in-exile in London to a highly connected priest in Moscow — mentioned Novichok. They all understood that the rules have changed, again. So the Kremlin was not as furious after the failure in Salisbury as most experts expected it to be.

The GRU was apparently first to grasp this new reality, and the FSB followed suit. The FSB is in a perfect position to do so. It has large human resources at its disposal, operatives in regional departments who don't have the bad habit of questioning orders. Lubyanka also has a new generation of operatives in its Moscow headquarters, officers in their late 30s and 40s who didn't witness the collapse of the KGB but have been trained and spent a significant part of their careers under one president who never ever wavered in his support for the FSB.

So how can one expose somebody who is not afraid of exposure?

Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan are co-authors of "The Compatriots: The Brutal and Chaotic History of Russia's Exiles, Émigrés, and Agents Abroad."

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

Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/12/17/russias-secret-organizations-are-not-secret-anymore-it-seems-they-dont-care-a72393