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Putin Pulls Russian Spy Agency Out of Ukraine

The Russian president put military intelligence in charge of spying in Ukraine.

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Russia's Deputy Defense Minister, head of the Russian Armed Forces' General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, Russia's President Vladimir Putin, Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Vice-Admiral Igor Kostyukov (L-R). **Alexei Druzhinin / Russian Presidential Press and Information Office / TASS**

Vladimir Putin has removed Russia's biggest intelligence agency, the FSB, from its role as the primary spy agency for the war in Ukraine and handed responsibility to a heavily militarized branch of military intelligence, the GRU.

The new lead officer, Vladimir Alekseyev, the first deputy head of the GRU, is strongly implicated in several of Putin's most serious attacks on the West over the past decade. He is accused by the U.K. and the European Union of overseeing the chemical weapons attack in

Salisbury in 2018. An experienced special forces officer, he is also sanctioned by the U.S. for direct cyber interference in the U.S. 2016 election.

The public signal of the switch came last week, when the pro-Kremlin Tsargrad TV channel ran a story entitled, "Generals of victory: who is in charge of the Russian special operation?" The item suggested that these men would ensure the Russian military finally achieved its objectives in Ukraine.

Some of those named —like Gen. Alexander Dvornikov who was given overall command of the operation last month — were familiar to viewers, as were the heads of several military districts and major units. But there was one name that stuck out. Alekseyev was identified for the first time as the top general for intelligence on Ukraine.

The news marked a significant shift. Until now, Ukraine had been the responsibility of the Fifth Service of the FSB, the department which provided Putin with intelligence on Ukraine before the invasion. The disastrous start to the war, clouded by the pre-emptive publication by Western intelligence of highly secret plans as yet unrealized, and by the complete absence of popular uprisings by Russian speakers (which Putin was told would occur) cast a dark shadow over the department. Its boss, FSB general Sergei Beseda, was initially arrested and held in the notorious Lefortovo prison.

Alekseyev is a very particular type of Russian military intelligence officer. He started his career in the special forces, or Spetsnaz, rather than a posh and sought-after posting at some embassy in the West. His job in the GRU was to supervise the 14th directorate – leading the Spetsnaz, the paramilitary arm of the agency — and in 2011 he became first deputy head of the GRU.

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The promotion of such men was typical of the new approach brought by Sergei Shoigu after he become Defense Minister in 2012. Alekseyev and his ilk became the new face of an agency that Shoigu was determined to expand, and quickly. But where to find the personnel? He raided the ranks of the special forces. They might not have the softer skills of other intelligence officers, but they were tough guys and ready to kill.

Alekseyev saw military action in Syria, and he was involved in the conflict in Donbas. Fellow officers regard him as brutal and self-confident to the point of recklessness.

The new man's arrival has been accompanied by more shadowy and bemusing news about Beseda. Throughout the ordeal of his fall from grace, Beseda and his department became a magnet for in the blame game in Moscow – the military and even other departments of the FSB accused Beseda and his people of misinforming Putin, so laying the groundwork for a failed military campaign. Large sums of money earmarked for the subversion of Ukrainians were said to have gone missing.

It was widely assumed that Beseda was to be left languishing for years in solitary confinement in the Lefortovo, where Stalin's disgraced aides were once held.

But two weeks ago, the pro-Kremlin media broke the news that Beseda had been seen at the funeral of the KGB general Nikolai Leonov. According to the report, Beseda gave a speech. He was described as acting chief of the Fifth service (although no footage was provided.) The aim was obvious — to kill or downplay the news of his downfall.

We checked with our sources in Russia. Finally, news came that Beseda had been seen walking into his office in the Lubyanka, the FSB's neo-Baroque headquarters in Moscow. That sounded very odd, and completely unprecedented. To throw a general into prison and then return him to office was the sort of maneuver that only Stalin was capable of playing with his generals.

But there is some logic in that move. Putin is adamant that the war has been going "according to plan" and is likely acting accordingly. His audience is not the general public, still very much under the control of the Kremlin propaganda, but the Russian elites – the bureaucracy in the capital and beyond, including the military and secret services. They have been questioning Putin's strategy, though only in private, and they are the people Putin needs to persuade that everything is going according to plan in Ukraine.

Throwing your top Ukraine spymaster into prison said the precise opposite and made clear that there had indeed been a significant intelligence failure in Ukraine. So, Putin's message is now to pretend that nothing ever happened to Beseda.

But putting Beseda back in his office doesn't mean Putin trusts the FSB, or Beseda's service in particular, on Ukraine, as the Alekseyev appointment makes clear.

It is the gung-ho forces within Russia's spy community that are now charged with plucking victory from the morass of their country's worst military and intelligence failure since World War II.

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