

Secretive FSB Unit Steers Russia's Sweeping Wartime Spy Crackdown – WSJ

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Peter Kovalev / TASS

An elite Federal Security Service (FSB) unit has spearheaded a sweeping campaign of wartime surveillance, intimidation and arrests of Russians and foreigners amid heightened tensions with the West, the Wall Street Journal [reported](#) Friday.

The FSB's Department for Counterintelligence Operations (DKRO), previously [identified](#) by WSJ as leading the March 2023 arrest of its reporter Evan Gershkovich on espionage charges, has a long history of targeting Americans. Established in 1998, DKRO initially focused on monitoring U.S. investors, journalists and visitors who flooded into Russia after the Soviet Union's collapse.

During Vladimir Putin's early presidency, DKRO allegedly placed informants in the Moscow bureaus of U.S. media outlets and harassed American diplomats, particularly after large-scale protests against Putin's rule swept Moscow in 2012.

Gershkovich, whose reporting during his 16-month detention helped shed light on DKRO's activities, wrote that the unit has played a central role in various campaigns since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

After the FSB won an internal power struggle over blame for the invasion's early failures, DKRO allegedly led a purge within the Russian Defense Ministry, resulting in the arrests of dozens of senior officials on fraud charges. Earlier this year, Putin replaced former Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, in part due to DKRO's efforts, according to the report.

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DKRO also ramped up arrests of U.S. citizens after being tasked with securing the release of convicted hitman Vadim Krasikov from Germany. According to WSJ, Gershkovich and former U.S. Marine Paul Whelan were detained as "trade bait."

Lt. Gen. Dmitry Minaev, DKRO's head, was said to have personally escorted political prisoners during the Aug. 1 East-West prisoner exchange, which included Krasikov. Minaev plays a direct role in selecting Americans for arrest and determining which Russians to trade for them, WSJ reported, citing U.S. and European intelligence sources.

Likewise, Lt. Gen. Vladislav Menschikov, head of the FSB's First Service overseeing DKRO, reportedly briefs Putin directly on operations such as Gershkovich's arrest.

Domestically, DKRO was said to have ordered the arrests of hundreds of Russians on charges of espionage, collaborationism and treason. Gershkovich said FSB investigators told him they had to double their staff to handle the surge in such cases.

Despite DKRO's extensive operations, none of its estimated 2,000 officers — who oversee a vast network of personnel across Russia and enjoy significant privileges — are known to have defected to the West, U.S. and European officials told WSJ.

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