



REPORT

CONSTRAINED YET DANGEROUS

THE WARTIME EVOLUTION OF RUSSIA'S INTELLIGENCE ECOSYSTEM

| SANSHIRO HOSAKA |

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Cover page photo: Main building of the Russian Federal Security Services, FSB, reflected in a shop's glass door on Lubyanka Square in Moscow, Russia, on 14 May 2013. AP Photo/Ivan Sekretarev, File/Scanpix

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63/4 Narva Rd., 10120 Tallinn, Estonia
info@icds.ee, www.icds.ee

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AfD	Alternative for Germany
APT28	Advanced Persistent Threat 28 (Fancy Bear)
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
BVT	Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism (Austria)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
DOI	Department of Operational Information, SOIMS
DVKR	Department of Military Counterintelligence, FSB
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FIMI	Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference
FSB	Federal Security Service
FSIN	Federal Penitentiary Service
GRU	Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff
GU	Main Directorate of the General Staff
HUR	Main Directorate of Intelligence (Ukraine)
ICC	International Criminal Court
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NIIRK	National Research Institute for Communication Development
OFAC	Office of Foreign Assets Control (US Treasury)
OPZZh	Opposition Platform – For Life (Ukraine)
OSINT	open-source intelligence
PACE	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
VRKhBZ	Radiation, Chemical and Biological Defence Forces
ROC	Russian Orthodox Church
RDK	Russian Volunteer Corps
SOIMS	Operational Information and International Relations Service, FSB
SSD	Directorate of Special Activities, GRU
SBU	Security Service of Ukraine
SVR	Foreign Intelligence Service
SZKSBT	Service for the Protection of the Constitutional Order and the Fight against Terrorism, FSB
USB	Internal Security Directorate, FSB
UZKS	Directorate for the Protection of the Constitutional Order, SZKSBT
VOG	Temporary Operational Group
VPN	virtual private network

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SANSHIRO HOSAKA

Dr Sanshiro Hosaka joined the ICDS in July 2021. His current research interests include strategic narrative, disinformation, political technology, Soviet/Russian active measures, intelligence history, epistemic community, Sino-Russian relations, and Baltic security. Previously, he served as a project management officer in Japan-funded intergovernmental committees on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus. He also worked at Japanese diplomatic missions in Dushanbe and Kyiv. His articles have been published in journals such as *Nationalities Papers*, *Problems of Post-Communism*, *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, *Demokratizatsiya*, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, and *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*. Sanshiro received research awards from the Japanese Association for Russian and East European Studies in 2017 and the Japanese Association for Ukrainian Studies in 2022. His monograph on Russian intelligence history and tradecraft won the 32nd "Yamamoto Shichihei" humanities and social science publication award. He also provides commentary for various European and Japanese media outlets.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia's intelligence ecosystem has redirected its priorities toward supporting the war effort while adapting to a more constrained and contested operational and strategic environment.

While Russian intelligence services have lost opportunities in the west and suffered setbacks in several countries that Moscow regards as its 'near abroad', including Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, they have simultaneously adapted their methods and tradecraft to wartime conditions and expanded into new theatres of operation.

The Federal Security Service (*Федеральная служба безопасности*, FSB), Russia's main counterintelligence agency, has become an increasingly active foreign actor. The FSB Fifth Service lost political intelligence opportunities in Ukraine but retained key roles in Russia's occupation administrations. It has also intensified active measures across Europe to disrupt military assistance to Kyiv, likely complementing efforts of the Foreign Intelligence Service (*Служба внешней разведки*, SVR), whose operations have been affected by mass expulsions of officers from Russian embassies in the west. The Fifth Service's prominence also lies in the penetration of Ukrainian security structures.

At the same time, the FSB remains the principal instrument of wartime control. It has gained authority to access private databases without court decisions, suspend telecommunications and internet services, and approve international scientific cooperation. It also reasserted full control over pretrial detention facilities. The FSB Second Service has intensified efforts to penetrate and discredit Russian dissident communities abroad.

Russia's strategic political intelligence attempts to exacerbate transatlantic divisions under the second Trump presidency, with the SVR accelerating overt information operations. Separately, Putin's Envoy for Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation Kirill Dmitriev uses backchannels

to bypass the established US foreign policy and intelligence community and gain direct access to the White House.

The SVR has redirected resources toward the 'global south', absorbing elements of Yevgeny Prigozhin's political technology networks in Africa, where Moscow portrays itself as an anti-colonial force and defender of traditional values. Meanwhile, the presidential administration (formally, the Presidential Executive Office) has broadened its influence operations beyond what Moscow has traditionally regarded as its 'sphere of influence', increasingly cultivating fellow travellers in the Global South and sympathetic actors in Europe.

Russia's military intelligence, the Main Directorate of the General Staff (*Главное управление Генерального штаба Вооружённых Сил Российской Федерации*, GU, still widely known by its former acronym GRU), has activated its diverse wartime functions. It conducts not only military intelligence collection but also sabotage, assassinations, psychological operations, and sanctions evasion. GRU-linked sabotage campaigns in Europe rely heavily on criminals and disposable assets. The GRU is also partly involved in monitoring Russian opposition figures abroad.

Despite the significant losses its special forces suffered during the first year of the war, the GRU has expanded its unconventional warfare capabilities, taking over Wagner's paramilitary networks and operations in Africa and elevating Unit 29155 to the Directorate of Special Activities (*Служба специальной деятельности*, SSD). However, following the exposure of multiple Unit 29155 officers, Putin separately established Centre 795, an autonomous service for assassinations and abductions abroad that reports directly to the Chief of the General Staff. The creation of dedicated services suggests that destabilising target states, eliminating perceived traitors, and deterring defections have become strategic priorities for the Kremlin.

The FSB's Department of Military Counterintelligence (*Департамент военной контрразведки*, DVKR) has been used not only to monitor the armed forces but also as Putin's political instrument to purge high-ranking Defence Ministry officials, especially Sergei Shoigu's allies. Its investigations into corruption in the armed forces remain highly politicised and ineffective. At the same time, the DVKR has been unable to prevent several high-profile assassinations of military generals, contributing to blame-shifting and tensions among military and security agencies.

Operating in a constrained environment, Moscow increasingly relies on illegal intelligence, non-Russian recruits, cultural and scientific channels, and operations conducted from Russian territory, while improving interagency coordination.

Finally, the adaptation of Russia's intelligence ecosystem has coincided with a significant redistribution of power among the Kremlin's major political clans: the collapse of Yevgeny Prigozhin's empire; the rise of Sergei Kiriyenko as a key coordinator of foreign influence campaigns; the decline of Sergei Shoigu's military patronage network; the growing influence of Igor Sechin within the military and the Defence Ministry through the DVKR; and that of Sergei Chemezov through Centre 795.

This report argues that Russian intelligence remains dangerous, adaptive, and willing to take risks, but is not invulnerable. Its vulnerabilities include a dysfunctional, personalised intelligence cycle, compounded by nepotism and corruption. These weaknesses have become more pronounced under wartime conditions and are likely to constrain its effectiveness. Western governments should monitor Russia's backchannel diplomacy, sanction political technologists, support improvements to civil registration systems in Latin America, raise counterintelligence awareness among Russian dissidents, consider creative offensive counterintelligence measures, and prepare for larger-scale sabotage against critical infrastructure during a potential 'special period'.

INTRODUCTION

Like living organisms adapting to environmental stress, the Russian intelligence ecosystem is evolving under wartime conditions. Since February 2022, Russia's intelligence and security services have redirected their priorities toward supporting Putin's war against Ukraine while operating in an increasingly constrained and contested operational and strategic environment. By the fifth year of the war, the contours of this transformation have become clearer: some opportunities have been lost, while new ones have emerged.

The Russian system is characterised by the systematic politicisation of intelligence and the "intelligencisation" of politics

In this report, the term 'intelligence ecosystem' refers to Russia's intelligence-politics nexus, extending beyond the traditional intelligence community, which primarily comprises the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), and the Main Directorate of the General Staff (GRU).¹ Rather than maintaining a clear institutional separation between politics and intelligence, the Russian system is characterised by the systematic politicisation of intelligence and, more importantly, what Jardar Østbø calls

¹ Although the current acronym of the Main Directorate is the GU, this report uses the historic term GRU (Main Intelligence Directorate).

the "intelligencisation" of politics.² President Vladimir Putin is himself a former KGB officer and Chekist, while his presidential administration and government agencies include numerous current and former intelligence officers.

Russian politics is a fierce struggle for influence and proximity to Putin. The intelligence and security services, especially the FSB, are among the principal instruments through which Putin regulates this competition. At the same time, Russia's broader intelligence ecosystem draws on the patronage, influence, and resources of individual oligarchs and powerbrokers, such as Igor Sechin, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and Konstantin Malofeev. Putin can mobilise oligarchs for tasks that serve broader political-intelligence objectives, such as cultivating high-level contacts with a new US administration.³

While the US system formally distinguishes covert action from other instruments of foreign policy, with covert action requiring presidential authorisation, Russian active measures – a broad range of practices, including disinformation operations and political influence efforts aimed at advancing Moscow's interests – have been an integral part of Moscow's foreign policy, blurring the boundary between covert and overt activities.⁴ Some active measures campaigns are not entirely covert and are employed in conjunction with overt propaganda, operating in a grey area managed in the past by the International Department of the Communist Party's Central Committee and today by certain directorates of the presidential administration.⁵ Because active measures are part of the everyday work of officers engaged in Russia's political intelligence (*политическая разведка*), these officers are required to keep

² Jardar Østbø, "The Russian Hybrid Intelligence State: Reconceptualizing the Politicization of Intelligence and the 'Intelligencization' of Politics," *Intelligence and National Security*, 24 July 2024, 1–23.

³ Roberts S. Mueller III, *Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election*, Volume I (US Department of Justice, 2019), 146.

⁴ Sanshiro Hosaka, "Cold War Active Measures," in Rubén Arcos et al. (ed), *Routledge Handbook of Disinformation and National Security* (Routledge, 2023), 46.

⁵ Yury Fedorov, *Hybrid War à La Russe* (Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies, 2016), 98–101.

an eye on ‘big politics’ and strictly calibrate their active measures operations to avoid producing negative consequences for Moscow’s strategic objectives.⁶

Strategically important political influence operations have accordingly been overseen by presidential administration officials acting as Putin-appointed ‘curators’ (*кураторы*), such as Vladislav Surkov before 2020 and Sergei Kiriyenko today, with support from intelligence agencies. Some of Russia’s information operations are outsourced to civilian political technologists.

While Russia’s military setbacks in Ukraine have led to the temporary weakening of the Russian armed forces and the dismissal of multiple generals, the same cannot necessarily be said of the intelligence services, which therefore merit separate analysis. Despite a series of planning failures and security lapses – the failed *blitzkrieg* in February 2022, Yevgeny Prigozhin’s mutiny in June 2023, the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack in March 2024, Ukraine’s incursion into Kursk in August 2024, and “Operation Spiderweb” in June 2025 – the FSB leadership, including Director Aleksandr Bortnikov, appears to have avoided serious accountability. Likewise, SVR director Sergey Naryshkin and GRU director Igor Kostyukov have retained their positions into the fifth year of the full-scale war.

This report argues that Russia’s intelligence ecosystem has adapted to wartime priorities and to an increasingly constrained operational and strategic environment. While it has lost political intelligence opportunities in Ukraine, Europe, and North America, it has compensated by restructuring its organisations, strengthening domestic control, and shifting to crisis-time tradecraft. At the same time, long-standing weaknesses – including a personalised intelligence cycle, nepotism, and corruption – have become more pronounced and are likely to constrain its effectiveness. Understanding these trajectories is essential for western governments and societies. The report examines the evolution and prospects of the Russian intelligence ecosystem through seven interconnected themes:

Ukraine: since 2022, the war to subjugate Ukraine has been Putin’s principal foreign policy priority, and, consequently, the central priority of Russia’s entire intelligence ecosystem. Although other agencies were also involved, the FSB’s Fifth Service, along with the presidential administration, played an instrumental role in political intelligence operations during the Minsk process from 2014 to 2021 and in planning, preparing, and implementing the initial phase of the full-scale invasion. While Russia’s strategic objectives have not been achieved, the FSB’s contributions to the war remain significant, including the penetration of Ukrainian counterintelligence and support for Russian occupation administrations in newly occupied territories.

Domestic control: maintaining a full-scale war for a period longer than World War I (1 568 days) or the Soviet-German War (1 418 days) requires strong internal discipline and political control. As the regime’s political police, the FSB’s Second Service monitors a broad range of actors, including the political opposition, NGOs, ethnic movements, universities, cultural and sports organisations, and religious communities. Since 2022, it has also intensified its efforts to penetrate Russian *émigré* communities abroad. The militarisation of the Russian state and society has been accompanied by a process of securitisation that has steadily expanded the Second Service’s remit to co-opt and neutralise wartime discontent.

Strategic political intelligence: The most devastating blow to Russian intelligence was the expulsion of more than 700 Russian diplomats, many of them intelligence officers operating under diplomatic cover, mainly from Europe, North America, and Japan.⁷ This forced Moscow to seek new opportunities elsewhere. At the same time, the second Trump administration – through its rejection of liberal-democratic values, reduced interest in transatlantic security, and greater accommodation of Russia – appears to represent a structural shift, significantly reshaping Moscow’s strategic political intelligence.

⁶ Hosaka, “Cold War Active Measures,” 52.

⁷ Kevin P. Riehle, “[Soviet and Russian Diplomatic Expulsions: How Many and Why?](#)” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 37, no. 4 (2024): 1238–63.



Figure 1. Russia's Wartime Intelligence Ecosystem: Functions, Adaptations, and Auxiliary Actors.
Source: Authors' compilation based on *Dossier Centre*, *The Insider*, *RUSI*, and other sources cited in the report.

Destabilising the rear and executing traitors: Moscow's need for 'direct action' – assassinations and other violent operations – has grown during the war, both to deter defections and to destabilise European countries supporting Ukraine. At the FSB board meeting in March 2024, Putin compared Russians fighting for Ukraine – including members of the Russian Volunteer Corps, which had conducted cross-border raids into Russia's border regions – to 'Vlasovites' (власовцы) during World War II, and pledged to "punish them without statute of limitations, wherever they may be."⁸

Military counterintelligence: Autocrats are often most concerned about threats originating within their armed forces, where disgruntled military officers may turn against the political leadership. This is particularly true in Putin's Russia, where the armed forces have suffered severe battlefield losses since 2022.

Operational tradecraft: The deterioration of the operational environment, especially in the west, has prompted Russian intelligence to shift to crisis mode, rely less on 'legal' residencies,

circumvent intensified counterintelligence scrutiny of Russian citizens, and exploit channels less affected by deteriorating diplomatic relations.

The deterioration of the operational environment, especially in the west, has prompted Russian intelligence to shift to crisis mode

Enduring problems: While limited resources may prompt security and intelligence agencies to improve interagency cooperation, nepotism, corruption, and the personalisation of the intelligence cycle remain enduring problems within the Russian intelligence ecosystem.

This report builds on *Putin's Counterintelligence State*, published in 2022, but broadens the focus beyond the FSB to encompass Russia's other key intelligence and security agencies as well as auxiliary actors.⁹ The analysis relies on open sources, including investigative journalism and media reports concerning exposed or convicted intelligence actors. Despite the plausible deniability surrounding

⁸ President of Russia, "Заседание коллегии ФСБ России" [Meeting of the Board of the FSB of Russia], 19 March 2024.

⁹ Sanshiro Hosaka, *Putin's Counterintelligence State: The FSB's Penetration of State and Society and Its Implications for Post-24 February Russia* (International Centre for Defence and Security, 2022).

intelligence activities, numerous operations – and the identities of individuals involved – have been revealed and attributed to Russia.¹⁰ Nevertheless, because successful operations often remain undiscovered, studies based on exposed cases risk underestimating Russian capabilities. This report seeks to mitigate that bias by shedding light on historical patterns and Russian crisis-time tradecraft.

Operational responsibilities frequently overlap, and coordination between agencies is often more complex than formal organisational structures suggest

Each section develops one of the themes mentioned above, focusing primarily on one or two services that play a leading role in that area. However, this means neither that they are the only services involved nor that a particular service operates exclusively in that domain. Operational responsibilities frequently overlap, and coordination between agencies is often more complex than formal organisational structures suggest. The conclusion summarises the findings, elaborates on their impacts on the redistribution of power among the major political clans, and offers policy recommendations for western governments and societies.

1. PUTIN'S PRIORITY, UKRAINE: FSB FIFTH SERVICE

In the 1990s, Russia reached an agreement with other members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) not to conduct foreign intelligence operations against one another.¹¹ As a result, the FSB, rather than the SVR, became more active in the CIS, with its Operational Information and International Relations Service (*Служба оперативной*

информации и международных связей, SOIMS), or the Fifth Service, assuming primary responsibility for the region. In addition to overseeing operations in the post-Soviet space, the Fifth Service served as the FSB's main liaison with foreign intelligence services. In the years leading up to the full-scale invasion, the Fifth Service's efforts increasingly concentrated on Putin's principal priority: Ukraine.

Following the failure of the FSB-led blitzkrieg in the spring of 2022, rumours circulated that General Sergei Beseda, who had led the Fifth Service since 2004, had been

arrested and imprisoned in Lefortovo for providing misleading reports to Putin and for embezzlement, and that the Fifth Service would be stripped of its primary responsibility for Ukraine in favour of military intelligence, the GRU.¹² In reality, however, Beseda retained his position until his official retirement at the age of 70 in 2024. Beseda played a key role in Russia's prisoner swaps with the United States

In the years leading up to the full-scale invasion, the Fifth Service's efforts increasingly concentrated on Putin's principal priority: Ukraine

and Germany, through which Moscow secured the return of arrested illegals (see also 6.1) as well as Vadim Krasikov, the professional assassin sentenced to life imprisonment for murdering a Georgian-born Chechen dissident in Berlin.¹³

Beseda was succeeded by Aleksei Komkov, who had previously headed the Internal Security Directorate and the Department of Military Counterintelligence. Even after his retirement, Beseda remained an adviser to the FSB director and represented Russia at technical talks with the United States in Riyadh in March 2025.¹⁴

¹⁰ Kevin Riehle, "Ignorance, Indifference, or Incompetence: Why Are Russian Covert Actions so Easily Unmasked?", *Intelligence and National Security*, 30 January 2024, 1–15.

¹¹ James Sherr, "The New Russian Intelligence Empire," *Problems of Post-Communism* 42, no. 6 (1995): 13–14; Stéphane Lefebvre and Roger N. McDermott, "Russia and the Intelligence Services of Central Asia," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 21, no. 2 (2008): 254–55.

¹² Irina Borogan and Andrei Soldatov, *The Shadow War: Putin Strips Spies of Ukraine Role*, 9 May 2022.

¹³ "Russia Exchanges Spies for Political Prisoners: Gershkovich, Kara-Murza, Whelan, Yashin, Kurmasheva, Chanysheva, Orlov Released," *The Insider*, 1 August 2024.

¹⁴ "Russia to Send Senior FSB Officer for US Consultations on Ukraine War," *European Pravda*, 20 March 2025.

Why has the Fifth Service remained intact despite initial speculation about its demise? Part of the answer lies in the Service's central role in maintaining intelligence networks in Ukraine, penetrating Ukrainian security services, and providing counterintelligence support to occupation administrations.

1.1. LOST OPPORTUNITIES IN UKRAINE

Ukrainian politicians and oligarchs who fled to Russia after the 2014 Euromaidan have been managed by the FSB Fifth Service as assets to be used against Ukraine. For

Ukrainian politicians and oligarchs who fled to Russia have been managed by the FSB Fifth Service as assets

example, leaked correspondence indicates that Serhii Kurchenko, a close associate of former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich living in exile in Moscow, was handled by Anatoly Bolyukh, head of the Department of Operational Information (Департамент оперативной информации, DOI) of the Fifth Service. In 2014, Bolyukh introduced Kurchenko to Vladislav Surkov, Putin's aide responsible for subversive political operations against Ukraine, apparently to discuss how Kurchenko's Ukrainian media resources could be leveraged to discredit the Ukrainian government and promote narratives about the Donbas 'separatist' movement.¹⁵

The Fifth Service's close relationship with the Yanukovich family likely continues to this day; in 2022 and 2023, Yanukovich's elder son, Oleksandr, now living in Russia under a false name, reportedly flew from Moscow to Sochi and back with Beseda and Bolyukh.¹⁶

President Vladimir Putin and his administration regarded Ukrainian lawmaker Viktor Medvedchuk, who served as Head of the Presidential Administration under President

Leonid Kuchma from 2002 to 2005, as a key coordinator of Russian interests in Ukraine. Putin maintained exceptionally close personal ties with Medvedchuk, even becoming the godfather of his youngest daughter in 2004. Medvedchuk's party, "Opposition Platform – For Life" (Опозиційна платформа – За життя, OPZZh), finished second in the 2019 parliamentary elections, behind Volodymyr Zelensky's Servant of the People (Слуга народу) party. As the party's leader, Medvedchuk effectively functioned as an agent group leader (агент-групповод), building and maintaining Russia's influence networks in Ukraine.¹⁷

In February 2021, Medvedchuk was placed under house arrest, and his media assets were frozen. Following the start of the full-scale war, OPZZh was banned, and Medvedchuk was arrested while attempting to flee in violation of his house-arrest restrictions. He was handed over to Moscow during a prisoner exchange in September 2022. According to Ukrainian authorities, Kyiv secured the release of 200 Ukrainian servicemen in exchange for Medvedchuk alone, underscoring the value Putin attached to his principal political proxy in Ukraine. At the same time, providing refuge to Medvedchuk had practical significance for Russia's active measures operations in Europe (see 1.4).

The GRU both complemented and competed with the FSB Fifth Service in Ukraine

The GRU both complemented and competed with the FSB Fifth Service in Ukraine. At the outset of the full-scale invasion, the GRU's Ukraine portfolio was estimated to involve 30 to 40 officers and more than 100 agents, including Andrii Derkach, a Ukrainian politician from Medvedchuk's OPZZh party who was sanctioned by US authorities for interfering in the 2020 US presidential election.¹⁸

¹⁵ Sanshiro Hosaka, "Welcome to Surkov's Theater: Russian Political Technology in the Donbas War," *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 5 (2019): 762–63.

¹⁶ Kateryna Tyshchenko, "Investigation Reveals Details about Former President Yanukovich and His Family in Russia – Including His Fake Name," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 25 July 2026.

¹⁷ Jack Watling et al., *Preliminary Lessons from Russia's Unconventional Operations During the Russo-Ukrainian War, February 2022–February 2023* (The Royal United Services Institute, 2023), 5.

¹⁸ Sanshiro Hosaka, "Russian Non-Military Warfare: Active Measures in Ukraine," in Oscar Jonsson and Ilmari Kähkö (ed) *Non-Military Warfare: A War of Our Time* (Routledge, 2025).

Subversive political operations against Ukraine were supervised by the Presidential Directorate for Cross-Border Cooperation (*Президентское управление по трансграничному сотрудничеству*), initially under Presidential Aide Vladislav Surkov and later under Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Dmitry Kozak. The directorate managed the pseudo-separatist entities known as the “Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics.”¹⁹ However, Moscow’s abandonment of the Minsk Agreements and its resort to full-scale war turned the Ukrainian population strongly against Russia; even some previously Russophile politicians, such as those in Rinat Akhmetov’s wing of the former Opposition Bloc (*Опозиційний блок*) party, adopted pro-Ukrainian positions. The outright war effectively eliminated the political intelligence opportunities this directorate pursued, ultimately leading to its dissolution in 2025 (see 3.4).

The outright war effectively eliminated the political intelligence opportunities the directorate pursued

1.2. PENETRATING ENEMY INTELLIGENCE

The FSB has been tasked with conducting external counterintelligence, aimed at penetrating and compromising hostile intelligence services and Russian *émigré* organisations (see also 2.4).²⁰ For example, FSB officers posted in Yerevan reportedly monitor Russians who arrived in Armenia after the announcement of the “partial mobilisation” in September 2022. At the same time, they also reportedly conduct operational activities targeting Kristinne Grigoryan, head of Armenia’s newly established Foreign Intelligence Service, after she declined an SVR offer of methodological assistance and instead

received training from a western intelligence service.²¹

One of the FSB’s most successful external counterintelligence operations, with devastating consequences for Ukraine, was the placement of its agent Oleg Kulinich in the

One of the FSB’s most successful external counterintelligence operations was the placement of its agent in the upper ranks of the Security Service of Ukraine

upper ranks of the Security Service of Ukraine (*Служба безпеки України*, SBU). Handled by the FSB’s Fifth Service, Kulinich was appointed by President Zelensky in 2020 to head the SBU’s Crimea Directorate. He was arrested shortly after the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022.

Ukrainian investigators established that Kulinich had actively collaborated with the “political office” run by Volodymyr Sivkovych, a former senior Ukrainian official who fled to Moscow in 2014 and operated under FSB supervision. Kulinich cultivated close ties with Ivan Bakanov, Zelensky’s long-time friend, election campaign manager, and future SBU director. Bakanov’s lobbying activities in Washington, DC, in 2019 were financed by Sivkovych’s office through an American lobbyist. As one of Bakanov’s closest confidants, Kulinich conducted espionage and subversive activities from within, while also seeking to influence appointments to state and law-enforcement agencies in favour of candidates preferred by Moscow.²²

He is accused of deliberately concealing intelligence indicating imminent attacks from occupied Crimea in the run-up to the full-scale invasion. This was particularly significant because assessments within Ukraine’s intelligence community remained divided in the days before the invasion: SBU chief Bakanov dismissed the prospect of a full-scale

¹⁹ Hosaka, “Welcome to Surkov’s Theater.”

²⁰ Sanshiro Hosaka, “[Repeating History: Soviet Offensive Counterintelligence Active Measures](#),” *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 35, no. 3 (2022): 429–58.

²¹ Sergey Kanev, “[Grabbing Him by the ‘Beard’: The Insider Identifies the FSB, GRU, and SVR Agents Russia Sent to Armenia to Take on PM Nikol Pashinyan](#),” *Investigations, The Insider*, 19 May 2026.

²² Hosaka, “Russian Non-Military Warfare,” 76–78.

assault and instead anticipated escalation along the existing contact lines in eastern Ukraine.²³

The FSB continued to maintain moles inside the SBU and other state agencies. In February 2025, the SBU arrested Colonel Dmytro Koziura, Chief of Staff of the SBU's Anti-Terrorist Centre. Koziura had been recruited by the FSB in Vienna in 2018 and, after being "mothballed," was reactivated in late 2024.²⁴ In May 2026, the SBU arrested a female major from one of its regional directorates on suspicion of providing Russian intelligence with information from internal databases on investigative and counterintelligence officers.²⁵ Similarly, in May 2024, the SBU arrested a group of Russian agents, including two colonels of Ukraine's Department of State Protection, who were handled by the FSB Fifth Service and accused of planning to assassinate Ukraine's leadership.²⁶

Beyond Ukraine, one of the FSB's most valuable assets for penetrating foreign security services was Jan Marsalek, the former chief operating officer of Wirecard, the German payments company that collapsed amid a massive accounting-fraud scandal. Marsalek fled to Russia in 2020 soon after German authorities filed charges against him. Subsequent journalistic investigations revealed that Marsalek had cultivated former officers of Austria's domestic security agency, the BVT (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung*).

Marsalek's network included Martin Weiss, a former senior BVT operations official, and his subordinate Egisto Ott. They allegedly passed sensitive personal information from police databases to Marsalek.²⁷ Using fingerprint data

and European databases, Ott searched for a Russian intelligence defector under the pretext of searching for terrorists, thereby identifying the defector's alias. The defector reportedly escaped an attempted assassination.²⁸

Ott further obtained information from other European police authorities and the Schengen entry database on Russian dissidents and other individuals whom Moscow wanted to track in Europe. He supplied Marsalek with the whereabouts of Christo Grozev, an investigative journalist who exposed GRU operations in Europe and identified multiple FSB operatives involved in the poisoning of Aleksei Navalny.²⁹ Soon afterwards, a Bulgarian spy ring led by Orlin Roussev, Marsalek's associate, broke into Grozev's apartment in Vienna. In March 2025, London's Central Criminal Court found six Bulgarian citizens from Roussev's group guilty of conspiring with Marsalek to kidnap Grozev and editor-in-chief of *The Insider* Roman Dobrokhov.³⁰

Marsalek was reportedly first recruited by the GRU around 2014.³¹ Later investigative reporting described his growing ties with FSB employees (see also 7.1).³²

1.3. MANAGING OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

Traditionally, Moscow's occupation management following military interventions has been an area in which the armed forces and military intelligence have played a relatively limited role, while counterintelligence agencies have assumed primary responsibility for monitoring potential resistance and ruthlessly neutralising suspected dissenters, often with the assistance of local collaborators. Despite initial speculation that the FSB had handed over its role in Ukraine to the GRU after the

²³ Christopher Miller, "[Behind the Scenes in Zelensky's Office Just before Invasion](#)," *openDemocracy*, 15 September 2023.

²⁴ Robert Greenall, "[Senior Ukraine Official Accused of Being Russian 'Rat'](#)," *BBC News*, 12 February 2025.

²⁵ Prosecutor General's Office (Ukraine), "[An Employee of the SBU Was Detained on Suspicion of Passing Data on Ukrainian Operatives to the FSB](#)," 12 May 2026.

²⁶ "СБУ повідомляє про затримання двох полковників УДО за підготовку замаху на Зеленського [SBU reports detention of two UDO colonels for preparing an assassination attempt on Zelensky]," *Radio Svoboda*, 7 May 2024.

²⁷ Sam Jones, "[Wirecard Fugitive Helped Run Russian Spy Operations across Europe](#)," *Financial Times*, 5 April 2024.

²⁸ Matthew Karnitschnig, "[Putin Hijacked Austria's Spy Service. Now He's Going after Its Government](#)," *Político*, 24 May 2024.

²⁹ Jones, "Wirecard Fugitive Helped Run Russian Spy Operations across Europe."

³⁰ Christo Grozev, "[Let's Hire an ISIS Suicide Bomber to Blow Him up in the Street!': Europe's Most Wanted Man Plotted My Murder – and That of My Colleague](#)," *The Insider*, 7 March 2025.

³¹ "[Wirecard Fugitive Jan Marsalek Recruited by Russian Intelligence in 2014, Says Report](#)," *The Financial Times*, 1 March 2024.

³² "[From Munich to Moscow](#)," *Dossier*, 19 July 2022.

failure of the *blitzkrieg*, it has retained major responsibility, together with the presidential administration, for consolidating Russia's occupation regimes in Ukrainian regions seized after February 2022.

Counterintelligence agencies have assumed responsibility for monitoring resistance and neutralising dissenters

In 2019, the Ninth Division, which was responsible for Ukraine within the FSB Fifth Service's DOI, was upgraded to the Ninth Directorate and is estimated to have grown from around 30 staff members to between 120 and 200 by the summer of 2021. This expansion might have signalled a shift in Russia's priorities in Ukraine from subversion to open war and occupation, although Ukrainian intelligence initially assessed it as an expansion of Russia's disinformation campaigns. Only later did it become apparent that the Ninth Directorate had developed a detailed map of potential local collaborators and individuals whom it could influence or co-opt to staff

The expansion of the Ninth Division might have signalled a shift in Russia's priorities from subversion to open war and occupation

Russia's puppet administrations in the newly occupied territories. The Ninth Directorate also identified Ukrainians who were hostile to Russia and might lead resistance to Russian occupation.³³

Temporary operational groups (*временные оперативные группы*, VOGs) were deployed in individual regions, beginning with Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014, to help establish occupation regimes. Within these groups, the Fifth Service played a major role alongside counterintelligence, military counterintelligence, and infrastructure-security personnel.³⁴ In spring 2022, the FSB created state security services in the occupied Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, led by former Ukrainian security service officials who had fled to

Moscow in 2014. In early 2023, these structures were replaced by full-fledged FSB regional directorates led by FSB officers with experience leading regional directorates inside the Russian Federation.³⁵

In February 2026, during an FSB board meeting, Putin stressed the need to continue improving the "management system of security agencies in the special military operation zone" in Ukraine.³⁶ Human rights organisation Memorial's reports indicate that the level of political persecution in the newly occupied territories of Ukraine is eight times higher than in Russia.³⁷

1.4. ACTIVE MEASURES ACROSS EUROPE

Targets of the FSB Fifth Service include not only Ukraine but also other CIS states. According to a 2022 *Dossier Centre* report, many Russian diplomats in Chişinău had connections with the FSB.³⁸ Since 2016, General Dmitry Milyutin, deputy director of the Fifth Service's DOI, has directed operations in Moldova, financially backed by Igor Chaika, a Russian oligarch whose father is Russia's former prosecutor general. More recently, as the reputation of Igor Dodon, Moldova's former pro-Russian president, became increasingly tarnished, the FSB's political technologists shifted their support to Ilan Shor, a corrupt oligarch in exile, whose party organised anti-western mass protests in October 2022 to undermine Chişinău's bid to join the EU.³⁹

However, the geographical reach of the FSB's Fifth Service is not specified in the law "On the Federal Security Service" and in practice extends far beyond CIS countries.

³⁵ "ФСБ на оккупированных территориях Украины [FSB in the occupied territories of Ukraine]," *agentura.ru*, 6 March 2023.

³⁶ President of Russia, "Заседание коллегии ФСБ России [Meeting of the Board of the FSB of Russia]," *Kremlin.ru*, 24 February 2026.

³⁷ "Level of Political Persecution in the Newly Occupied Territories of Ukraine Is Eight Times Higher than in Russia, Memorial Reports," *The Insider*, 3 April 2026.

³⁸ "Moldova's Turn," *Dossier*, 7 October 2022.

³⁹ Catherine Belton, "Russia's Security Service Works to Subvert Moldova's pro-Western Government," *The Washington Post*, 28 October 2022.

³³ Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, *The Plot to Destroy Ukraine* (The Royal United Services Institute, 2022), 9–10.

³⁴ "Чекистский фронт [Chekist front]," *Dossier*, 23 September 2022.

The Baltic states, which did not join the CIS, nevertheless, appear to remain more within the FSB's sphere than the SVR's, perhaps because of the continuity of personal relationships and Soviet-era assets whose files are likely to have stayed with the FSB (the successor to the KGB Second Chief Directorate), rather than with the SVR (the successor to the KGB First Chief Directorate).⁴⁰

The geographical reach of the FSB's Fifth Service extends far beyond CIS countries

In January 2024, *The Insider* revealed that Latvian Member of the European Parliament Tatjana Ždanoka had worked on behalf of the FSB's Fifth Service, reporting to multiple handlers, at least from 2004 to 2017.⁴¹ During her work in the European Parliament, Ždanoka visited Moldova, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan and reported sensitive political information to FSB handlers while conveying Moscow's narratives about an unjust EU. Ždanoka's relationship with Dmitry Gladey – allegedly her recruiter and an FSB Fifth Service officer – dated back to the 1970s, when they were students.⁴²

The FSB Fifth Service appears to have complemented the SVR, affected by the mass expulsion of Russian diplomats

Especially after the full-scale invasion, the FSB Fifth Service appears increasingly to have complemented the SVR, whose overseas residencies were particularly affected by the mass expulsion of Russian diplomats. In August 2023, *The Insider* reported that Vladimir Sergienko, a Ukrainian who had obtained German citizenship in November 2022 while concealing his Russian citizenship and who worked as an aide to an Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD) lawmaker, had acted under instructions

from his handler in the Ninth Directorate of the Fifth Service, which is responsible for Ukraine. He initiated legal proceedings intended to prevent Berlin from supplying Leopard 2 battle tanks to Ukraine.⁴³ Similarly, Fifth Service officers have reportedly handled their collaborators in Italy and France.⁴⁴

Ahead of the European Parliament elections in June 2024, the Prague-based website *Voice of Europe* was used to promote the Russian narrative that "peace negotiations should also respect Russian interests." Payments were made to politicians for participating in related forums. Czech authorities identified Viktor Medvedchuk and his associate as the sponsors of the operation.⁴⁵ According to Ukraine's Security Service, Medvedchuk, who was handed over to Moscow during a prisoner exchange in 2022 (see 1.1), agreed directly with Putin on the creation of the anti-Ukrainian public association "Other Ukraine." Putin then instructed the FSB Fifth Service to coordinate the project.⁴⁶

The extent of coordination with the FSB remains unclear (see also 7.1), but the GRU Unit 54777, known as the 72nd Centre for Foreign Military Information and Communication (*Центр зарубежной военной информации и коммуникации*), also conducts psychological and disinformation operations targeting European audiences. It uses foreign-language Telegram channels and data obtained by GRU hacking units such as Unit 74455, also known as Sandworm, and Unit 26165, associated with APT28/Fancy

⁴⁰ Theodore Karasik, "T. Karasik (RAND Corporation), Soviet Archives after 1991 (1993): Organization, Access, and Declassification," The Bukovsky Archives, 20 August 2020.

⁴¹ Michael Weiss et al., "Exclusive: Latvian Member of European Parliament Is an Agent of Russian Intelligence, Leaked Emails Confirm," *The Insider*, 29 January 2024.

⁴² Inga Springe et al., "Dangerous Liaisons: New Details of Latvian MEP Tatjana Ždanoka's Espionage for Russia," *The Insider*, 23 May 2024.

⁴³ "Exclusive: Far-Right German Parliamentary Aide Tasked by Russia with Stopping Leopard Tanks to Ukraine," *The Insider*, 4 August 2023; Roman Dobrokhotov et al., "The Far-Right Bundestag Aide and His Rapping FSB Case Officer," *The Insider*, 1 February 2024.

⁴⁴ Michael Weiss et al., "How the FSB Tried to Buy an Italian Political Party," *The Insider*, 6 February 2024; Christo Grozev et al., "Michelin Red Star: The Insider Reveals Identity of Arrested Russian Chef-Agent Who Planned 'Destabilizing' Acts at Paris Olympic Games," *The Insider*, 25 July 2024.

⁴⁵ Alice Hancock et al., "Pro-Russia Oligarch Accused of Running Influence Operation in EU," *The Financial Times*, 29 March 2024.

⁴⁶ "Викрито 12 поплічників Медведчука: свідчення на них дав затриманий Кирило Молчанов [12 Medvedchuk's henchmen exposed: detained Kyrylo Molchanov testified against them]," *ArmyInform*, 14 August 2025.

Bear.⁴⁷ These activities include amplifying anti-NATO and anti-Ukraine narratives and cultivating local networks.⁴⁸ The GRU manages not only overtly pro-war Z-propaganda Telegram channels, but also pseudo-pro-Ukrainian channels designed to undermine trust and morale and to promote war fatigue among Ukrainian refugees.⁴⁹

2. WARTIME DOMESTIC ORDER: FSB SECOND SERVICE

In the Russian worldview, deeply shaped by Soviet Chekist traditions, internal threats to political stability are presumed to originate from external actors.⁵⁰ This logic underpins the FSB's Service for the Protection of the Constitutional Order and the Fight against Terrorism (*Служба по защите конституционного строя и борьбе с терроризмом*, SZKSBT), better known as the Second Service, which is the successor to the notorious KGB Fifth Directorate. As the regime's ideological vanguard, how has the Second Service maintained political control over Russian society and suppressed wartime discontent and dissent?

The Second Service is also tasked with infiltrating Russian *émigré* communities and other national diasporas abroad. Even before the full-scale invasion, the FSB actively deployed agents to Russian opposition communities in countries such as Georgia.⁵¹ However, the scale of Russian emigration since 2022 has been unprecedented. How have the massive flows of Russians into neighbouring states and the EU affected FSB activities abroad?

2.1. EXPANDING CONTROL OVER COMMUNICATIONS

The FSB Second Service appears to have advocated internet shutdowns and measures against VPN connections. According to *The Bell*, in the summer of 2025, the Second Service proposed restricting calls through WhatsApp and Telegram. The FSB alleged that Telegram was being used by the intelligence services of NATO countries for "terrorist acts," including the assassination of Daria Dugina and high-ranking military officers.⁵²

However, after the internet blackout in early 2026, Putin's approval rating dropped to 67%, a level last recorded before the full-scale war against Ukraine. There were reportedly disagreements over the appropriate approach between Sergei Kiriyenko's domestic politics team and the FSB Second Service. Kiriyenko reportedly sought to convince Putin that the situation in the country could be controlled through political tactics, while the FSB Second Service advocated a tougher line based on restrictions, pressure, and coercive control.⁵³

In February 2026, the State Duma adopted amendments to the Law on Communications. One amendment grants the FSB the authority to require telecommunications operators to suspend communication services in cases "established by regulatory legal acts of the President of the Russian Federation." Officials explained that expanding the FSB's authority to shut down internet services was necessary to combat Ukrainian drones. Previously, the FSB could demand the suspension of

⁴⁷ Roman Dobrokhoto et al., "[Talking Points from Moscow: How RT and the GRU Set the Agenda on German-Language Telegram](#)," *The Insider*, 6 February 2026.

⁴⁸ "[Диверсии с безопасного расстояния: Кто стоит за новой тактикой ГРУ в Европе](#) [Sabotage from a safe distance: Who is behind the GRU's new tactics in Europe?]," *Dossier*, 24 July 2024.

⁴⁹ "[«Ховайтесь москальки»](#) ['Hide, little Muscovites'], *Dossier*, 17 December 2023.

⁵⁰ Hosaka, "[Cold War Active Measures](#)," 49.

⁵¹ Hosaka, *Putin's Counterintelligence State*, 9.

⁵² Mariya Kolomychenko and Valeriya Pozychanyuk, "[«Теперь они все решают». У рунета появился новый куратор — служба ФСБ, отвечающая за отравление Навального](#) ["Now they decide everything." The Russian Internet has a new curator: the FSB agency responsible for Navalny's poisoning], *The Bell*, 16 April 2026.

⁵³ "[В Кремле усилился конфликт между командой Кириенко и ФСБ](#) [The conflict between Kiriyenko's team and the FSB has intensified in the Kremlin], *Verstka*, 7 May 2026.

communication services only after declaring a counterterrorism operation regime.⁵⁴

Furthermore, from April 2026, the FSB gained access to databases held by commercial and non-state organisations without a court order. Previously, it could access the information systems of state organisations, as well as company databases, within the framework of operational-investigative activities, usually with court authorisation.⁵⁵ This may be a countermeasure against investigative journalists' use of databases containing information on addresses, premises, and vehicles to expose numerous Russian intelligence officers.⁵⁶

2.2. REPRESSION UNDER THE BANNER OF EXTREMISM

Russia, expelled from the Council of Europe in 2022, no longer needs to maintain even the appearance of compliance with European human-rights standards. In the spring of 2026, the FSB took back pretrial detention centres, including the notorious Lefortovo prison in Moscow, from the Federal Penitentiary Service (*Федеральная служба исполнения наказаний*, FSIN), a federal agency under the Ministry of Justice. These prisons had historically been under KGB-FSB jurisdiction but were transferred to the FSIN in 2006 in formal compliance with Council of Europe recommendations, while remaining under effective FSB control through Directorate M

officers seconded to the Ministry of Justice.⁵⁷ Pretrial investigations can now be conducted entirely within the FSB system.

In 2022, the State Duma expanded the definitions of high treason and espionage. For example, a new Article 275.1 of the Criminal Code, dubbed the “treason lite” provision,

Pretrial investigations can now be conducted entirely within the FSB system

criminalises confidential cooperation with foreign states or organisations. Because the law does not define what constitutes such “confidential” cooperation, it grants broad discretion to the authorities. Failure to voluntarily report such contacts to the FSB is punishable by up to eight years in prison.⁵⁸ According to Parubets Analytics, Russian courts convicted 468 people of treason and espionage offences in 2025, marking the highest annual figure on record.⁵⁹ To pressure detainees into confessing, FSB investigators rely not only on loyal defence lawyers appointed through the state legal aid system, but also on cellmate-agents, clergy – or “Chekists in cassocks” – and state psychiatrists.⁶⁰

Furthermore, the law criminalising the search for – not merely the distribution of – “extremist” materials entered into force in September 2025. The first case reportedly involved a young man riding public transportation who accessed online information about the Azov Regiment and the Russian Volunteer Corps. His telecom operator reported his visits to channels associated with these organisations to the FSB.⁶¹

⁵⁴ “ФСБ дали право требовать от операторов связи отключать интернет – где угодно и насколько угодно [The FSB has been given the right to demand that telecom operators shut down the internet anywhere and for as long as they want],” *Meduza*, 30 January 2026. However, one former FSB officer attributes the internet shutdown in Moscow to the Federal Protective Service (FSO), tasked with protecting the president, rather than the FSB. Roman Anin, “Vladimir Putin Fears an Assassination Attempt and a Coup, Tensions among Security Services Are Rising, an EU Intelligence Agency Says,” *Important Stories*, 3 May 2026.

⁵⁵ Yegor Safronov, “ФСБ с 2026 года получит право на доступ к базам данных любых организаций [The FSB will have the right to access the databases of any organisations starting in 2026],” *fontanka.ru*, 16 December 2025.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Sergey Kanev, “‘You Order Pepperoni? Affirmative!’: SVR Spooks Outed through Pizza Delivery Database,” *The Insider*, 30 January 2024.

⁵⁷ Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, “Как ФСБ сделала вид, что вернула тюрьмы Минюсту [How the FSB pretended to return prisons to the Ministry of Justice],” *Yezhednevnyi zhurnal*, 16 January 2006.

⁵⁸ “В России еще сильнее ужесточают понятия госизмены и шпионажа. За что еще будут сажать? [Russia is further tightening the definitions of treason and espionage. What else will people be jailed for?],” *Meduza*, 6 July 2022.

⁵⁹ Kirill Parubets, “Treason and Espionage in Wartime Russia - 2025,” Parubets, 2025.

⁶⁰ Yulia Balakhonova, “Следствие ведут палачи [Executioners are conducting the investigation],” *Proekt*, 15 December 2021.

⁶¹ “Searched and about to Be Fined. First Man in Russia Charged under New ‘Searching for Extremism’ Law after Provider Reports Him to FSB,” *Mediazona*, 6 November 2025.

Despite extensive internal surveillance, the FSB Second Service failed to prevent the deadliest terrorist attack in Russia in two decades, at a concert hall near Moscow in 2024, reportedly disregarding warnings provided by the United States. While the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack, the FSB sought to link it to Ukraine, thereby supporting Putin's broader political narrative (see also 7.5).⁶²

The FSB failed to prevent the deadliest terrorist attack in Russia in two decades and sought to link it to Ukraine, supporting Putin's broader narrative

2.3. SECURITISING SCIENCE

Russian scientific research institutes and universities have housed FSB security officers since the 1990s. Their functions have included, among other things, conducting prophylactic conversations (*профилактика*), providing security briefings before foreign travel (*инструктаж*), and reviewing publications for the possible disclosure of state secrets.⁶³ While the Fourth Department of the Second Service's Directorate for the Protection of the Constitutional Order (*Управление по защите конституционного строя*, UZKS) monitors most universities, oversight of Russian scientists still largely falls to the FSB's Economic Security Service (*Служба экономической безопасности*) – the so-called Fourth Service, now led by General Sergei Alpatov – and its Directorate for Counterintelligence Support of Industrial Enterprises, or Directorate P (*Управление контрразведывательного обеспечения промышленных предприятий, Управление «П»*).⁶⁴

In 2023, the Investigative Committee, acting on materials provided by the FSB Fourth

Service, opened a case against Vasily Vasekin, an Honoured Chemist of Russia and co-owner of the scientific and production complex "Supermetal." In 2025, a court sentenced him to five years in prison for fraud. According to his lawyer, the investigation's only evidence of fraud was testimony given in 2018 by a former business partner concerning the transfer of a bag of cash; no one has seen the money itself.⁶⁵

The FSB's role in science has expanded significantly. In November 2025, the Russian government approved new rules requiring foreign citizens and organisations, as well as Russian organisations with foreign founders, to obtain FSB permission to participate in scientific activities and experimental development in Russia.⁶⁶

Since 2022, 43 criminal cases have reportedly been opened against Russian scientists for transferring data to third countries; at least ten involve accusations of espionage for China. The "hypersonic case," involving the prosecution of at least 11 physicists working on technologies relevant to the Avangard and Kinzhal missile systems since 2015, has reportedly pushed some young scientists to leave the field.⁶⁷

2.4. PENETRATING RUSSIAN ÉMIGRÉ COMMUNITIES

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the FSB Second Service has intensified external counterintelligence activities aimed at penetrating and disrupting Russian dissident communities abroad.

Political refugees granted asylum or protection by European countries can also provide cover for Russian intelligence agents.

⁶² Sanshiro Hosaka, "A Failure of Personalised Services: Prioritising Regime Security over Public Safety," ICDS, 3 April 2024.

⁶³ Sanshiro Hosaka, "The Elephant in the Lecture Hall: Russian Intelligence and Western Academia," *Studies in Higher Education*, 23 September 2025, 1–19.

⁶⁴ "Как и почему ФСБ преследует учёных, которые занимаются гиперзвуком [How and why the FSB is persecuting scientists who study hypersonics]," *Perviy otdel*, 26 December 2023.

⁶⁵ Mikhail Krasnikov, "Совладелец «Суперметалла» получил пять лет колонии по делу о мошенничестве [The co-owner of Supermetal received a five-year prison sentence for fraud]," *RTVI*, 1 November 2025.

⁶⁶ "ФСБ будет согласовывать участие иностранцев в научных проектах России [The FSB will coordinate the participation of foreigners in Russian scientific projects]," *fontanka.ru*, 27 November 2025.

⁶⁷ "The Old to Prison, the Young to the Exit: The Final Verdict in the Hypersonic Scientists Case," *T-Invariant*, 20 May 2026.

In July 2024, Polish authorities arrested Igor Rogov, a 29-year-old Russian asylum seeker, on suspicion of receiving a courier shipment containing components for explosive

Washington-based think tankers.⁷⁰ According to the FBI, during her visit to her Siberian hometown of Tomsk in 2020, Zarubina was summoned by the local FSB directorate for a recruitment conversation.⁷¹

The FSB Second Service has intensified external counterintelligence activities aimed at penetrating and disrupting dissident communities abroad

devices. Four months later, he was charged with participating in Russian intelligence activities. Rogov had previously worked for Aleksei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation in Saransk and for the Mordovian branch of Mikhail Khodorkovsky's Open Russia movement. According to Polish media reports, he had been recruited during his student years and covertly reported on opposition activities while in Russia. After relocating to Poland, he allegedly provided his FSB handler with information on Polish Foreign Ministry officials and academic exchange organisations.⁶⁸ The FSB's ultimate objective was reportedly to use Rogov as a dangle, hoping a western intelligence agency would recruit him, and enable the FSB to run him as a double agent (for the penetration of enemy intelligence services, see also 1.2).⁶⁹

In November 2024, Nomma Zarubina, a US-based Russian national, was arrested on charges of giving false testimony to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) about her meetings with FSB officers. Since February 2022, Zarubina had presented herself as a Russian opposition activist, speaking at events associated with the Free Nations of PostRussia Forum and at another conference in Canada on Russia's 'decolonisation'. She actively sought to network with anti-Kremlin figures, including Leonid Volkov, former chairman of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, as well as with

Another case concerns Maria Chashchilova, an alleged Russian human rights activist known for her work assisting LGBTQ+ people facing persecution in Chechnya and victims of sexualised violence. She falsified her

biography and gained access to information that could have endangered people persecuted by Russian authorities. After February 2022, she left Russia and became active in the *émigré* community as a lawyer for OVD-Info, a human rights media project. Chashchilova was among the organisers of a human rights conference convened by Mikhail Khodorkovsky in Berlin, where two participants, including Free Russia Foundation head Natalia Arno, later complained of health problems.⁷²

A similar case in Germany concerns Konstantin Khrapov, a Russian national who was hired by a German lawmaker to prepare reports on the Russian opposition. According to German media reports, he is suspected of having ties to the FSB. The lawmaker believed that Khrapov was "clearly opposed to the Putin regime." However, Khrapov had previously worked for an organisation linked to the Russian presidential administration that handled relations with Abkhazia, as well as for associations and youth organisations controlled by the Russian government.⁷³

In recent years, the GRU has also participated in monitoring Russian dissident communities. One example is GRU officer Pavel Rubtsov,

⁶⁸ Tomasz Molga, "Polska zapewniła mu mieszkanie i stypendium. Rosjanin Igor nadawał prosto do FSB [Poland provided him with housing and a scholarship. Russian Igor sent messages directly to the FSB]," *WP Wiadomości*, 3 November 2025.

⁶⁹ Shaun Walker, "A Bungled Bomb Plot in Poland Exposed a Spy – but Whose Spy Was He?," *The Guardian*, 13 August 2026.

⁷⁰ "Moscow's Alleged 'Decolonization' Mole The FBI Says a Political Networker in New York Lied for Years about Her Secret Contact and Cooperation with Russian Intelligence," *Meduza*, 3 December 2024.

⁷¹ Roman Dobrokhoto and Christo Grozev, "Alice in Adult-Land: Nomma Zarubina Admits to Collaborating with the FSB and Involvement in Prostitution," *The Insider*, 26 February 2026.

⁷² Media investigations revealed that Chashchilova's uncle, Vladimir Pershin, a former Interior Ministry colonel, had been convicted of extortion but was released from prison after being contacted by FSB operatives and giving testimony against former Khabarovsk governor Sergei Furgal in a contract-killing case. Irina Dolina, "I Admit That I Deceived You," *Important Stories*, 31 January 2025.

⁷³ "German Newspaper Links CDU Lawmaker's Employee to Russian FSB," *Meduza*, 13 March 2025.

also known as Pablo González, a Russian-Spanish ‘journalist’, who gained the trust of Zhanna Nemtsova, the daughter of Boris Nemtsov, and other Russian opposition activists. He reported on the activities of the Boris Nemtsov Foundation to Russian intelligence. Polish authorities arrested him near the Polish-Ukrainian border shortly after Russia’s full-scale invasion.⁷⁴ According to Nemtsova, Rubtsov first approached her at a meeting of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in 2016, where he was accredited as a journalist for a Basque newspaper. The two were in a relationship from 2017 to 2019.⁷⁵

2.5. FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE FROM RUSSIAN TERRITORY

However, the foreign activities of the Second Service extend beyond monitoring Russian dissidents. During the Soviet period, the KGB Fifth Directorate developed an extensive regional structure that was inherited by the FSB Second Service: in smaller regions, dedicated departments operate within local FSB directorates, while in major cities, such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, separate services were established.⁷⁶ The Second Service can recruit agents inside Russia and subsequently deploy them abroad, an approach broadly consistent with the Soviet practice of conducting ‘intelligence from the territory’.

The Second Service can recruit agents inside Russia and subsequently deploy them abroad

A revealing Second Service operation involved Aleksandr Ionov, the representative of the Moscow-based NGO “Anti-Globalisation

⁷⁴ “[Alleged Moscow Military Spy Revealed Close to Daughter of Murdered Russian Opposition Leader](#),” *Agentstvo*, 2 May 2023.

⁷⁵ “[Жанна Немцова рассказала о своих отношениях с Пабло Гонсалесом — российским шпионом, который выдавал себя за испанского журналиста. Полгода назад его обменяли на Владимира Кара-Мурзу](#) [Zhanna Nemtsova spoke about her relationship with Pablo Gonzalez, a Russian spy who posed as a Spanish journalist. Six months ago, he was exchanged for Vladimir Kara-Murza],” *Meduza*, 21 January 2025.

⁷⁶ Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, “[Мутация органов безопасности](#) [Mutation of security organs],” *Indeks*, 2007.

Movement,” known for its support of the California secessionist movement. Ionov also organised a fundraising campaign to finance the legal defence of Maria Butina, who was sentenced to 19 months in prison in the US for acting as an unregistered foreign agent while seeking to influence American politicians. According to US authorities, Ionov reported to his handler, Yegor Popov, an officer of neither the SVR nor the FSB Fifth Service, but of the FSB Second Service. The NGO helped marginal American activists establish an office in the Russian capital and hosted them, along with other separatists from around the world, at a Moscow conference called the “Dialogue of Nations” in 2015.⁷⁷

The same group of FSB officers handled Natalia Burlinova, who was charged in the United States in 2023 with conspiracy to defraud and failure to register under the US Foreign Agents Registration Act. She attempted to cultivate young Americans and Europeans by organising conferences and paying for their trips to Moscow through an NGO called Creative Diplomacy.⁷⁸

The Second Service appears to be entrusted with particularly sensitive operations at home and abroad

As noted earlier, Ukraine was primarily a target of the Fifth Service. Yet according to Aleksandr Fedotov, a former FSB officer and defector, in late 2013, First Deputy Head of the Second Service Aleksandr Tatko was secretly dispatched to Crimea, where he began preparations for the illegal ‘referendum’.⁷⁹ The Second Service, as a trusted political shield at the heart of the regime, appears to be entrusted with particularly sensitive operations both at home and abroad.

⁷⁷ Mike Eckel et al., “[“You Wanted Turmoil. You Got It’: How FSB Officers Chatted, And Plotted, To Sow Discord In The U.S.”](#),” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 6 September 2024.

⁷⁸ Eckel et al., “[“You Wanted Turmoil. You Got It’.](#)”

⁷⁹ Mikhail Kalinin, “[“Our People Poisoned Navalny’: Former FSB Officer on Surveilling Opposition Figures and Running Black Ops in Russia and Ukraine,”](#) *The Insider*, 18 October 2025.

3. STRATEGIC POLITICAL INTELLIGENCE

Russia's political intelligence – understood here as encompassing both intelligence collection on political targets and active measures operations intended to influence political outcomes – has been reshaped by tectonic shifts in the international environment. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led to a reduction, albeit perhaps a temporary one, in political intelligence opportunities in the west, which expelled hundreds of Russian intelligence officers, as well as in parts of the post-Soviet space. Meanwhile, the neutral stance of many countries in the global south and the return of Donald Trump to the White House have created new opportunities.

3.1. THE SECOND TRUMP PRESIDENCY

For Putin, the second Trump administration appears to represent a once-in-a-generation opportunity. The US president himself and many of his senior appointees are steeped in an 'art of the deal' mindset, deep-state conspiracy theories, or both. President Trump appointed Tulsi Gabbard, who opposed US 'regime change' policies and has been criticised for amplifying Russian narratives, as Director of National Intelligence. Kash Patel, the new FBI director, has cast doubt on Russia's interference in the 2016 election, calling it the "Russiagate hoax," and reportedly sidelined experienced counterintelligence experts at the Bureau.⁸⁰ The Trump administration also effectively dismantled the US Agency for International Development (USAID), scaled back *Voice of America* and *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, and halted funding for think tanks – institutions that Putin has portrayed for more than two decades as instruments of US-backed 'colour revolutions.'

Under this new strategic constellation, in which the worldviews of Moscow and Washington appear significantly aligned on some issues, Russian foreign intelligence began piggybacking on the US administration's dismissive stance towards European Allies, thereby amplifying divisions within the Euro-Atlantic Alliance. In April 2025, the SVR Press Bureau published an essay arguing that during World War II, Russia – the Soviet Union –

Russian foreign intelligence began piggybacking on the US administration's dismissive stance towards European Allies

and the United States had fought together against European 'fascism'. The essay was accompanied by a satirical cartoon depicting both countries skewering a demonised European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.⁸¹

It would be far-fetched to assume that Moscow will abandon its long-standing view of the United States as the 'main adversary'. However, the SVR's overtly pro-US and anti-EU messaging suggests a tactical effort to signal ideological alignment with Trump's MAGA supporters.

The SVR's overtly pro-US and anti-EU messaging suggests a tactical effort to signal ideological alignment with Trump's MAGA supporters

Furthermore, the SVR Press Bureau has begun actively publishing (dis)information under its own name, using formulations such as "according to information received by the SVR." This marks a departure from traditional active measures, in which such claims would more often be planted covertly through other government agencies, experts, or anonymised Telegram channels. From November 2024 through June 2026, the SVR Press Bureau issued around 40 such statements, including claims that "Europe is fabricating new

⁸⁰ Hannah Rabinowitz, "Kash Patel Gutted FBI Counterintelligence Team Tasked with Tracking Iranian Threats Days before US Strikes, Sources Say," CNN, 3 March 2026.

⁸¹ Press Bureau of the SVR of Russia, "Еврофашизм, как и 80 лет назад – общий враг Москвы и Вашингтона [Eurofascism, like 80 years ago, is the common enemy of Moscow and Washington]," Foreign Intelligence Service of Russia, 16 April 2025.

accusations of Trump's ties to Moscow," "the EU wants to create its own nuclear weapons," "Ukrainian presidential elections were held at an Alpine resort," "Ukraine is preparing strikes against Russia from Latvia."

Traditionally, overt propaganda has been a primary function of Maria Zakharova's Information and Press Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). However, as Zakharova's routine aggressiveness has attracted less attention and lost credibility – with fewer and fewer western journalists attending her regular briefings, partly, though not primarily, because of the MFA's entry bans on them – the SVR appears to have taken over some of this overt information work. Its aim seems to be to attract publicity and reach new audiences, especially by imitating the strategic intelligence disclosures practised by western services.

The SVR aim seems to be to attract publicity and reach new audiences, especially by imitating the strategic intelligence disclosures

3.2. INFLUENCING DECISION-MAKERS THROUGH BACKCHANNELS

Russia's influence operations ultimately seek to shape target countries' decision-making. Recent attention often focuses on operations aimed at influencing public opinion or elections. However, Russian political intelligence has also traditionally sought to influence decision-makers directly through so-called agents of influence. 'Conversations of influence' (*беседы влияния*) are conducted with "prominent figures of target states, on whom important political decisions depend."⁸² Well-prepared (dis)information materials can be quickly communicated through such agents to a targeted government, military command, or enemy intelligence service.⁸³

⁸² V. M. Vladimirov and Yu A. Bondarenko, *Политическая разведка с территории СССР* [Political Espionage from USSR Territory] (Krasnoznamennyi institut KGB SSSR imeni YU. V. Andropova, 1989), 86–88.

⁸³ *Основные направления и объекты разведывательной работы за границей* [Main Directions and Targets of Intelligence Work Abroad] (1970), 75–76.

Direct access to decision-makers need not, however, depend on recruited agents of influence. Backchannel diplomacy can provide another channel for such direct influence. Negotiations conducted through unofficial channels can circumvent bureaucratic obstacles and avoid publicity. From a Russian perspective, such channels can help

Backchannel diplomacy can help isolate leaders from institutional checks and competing sources of advice, allowing Moscow to shape their perceptions

isolate leaders from institutional checks and competing sources of advice, allowing Moscow to shape their perceptions through direct and confidential communication. As Soviet intelligence officer Georgy Bolshakov put it, when running a backchannel to President John F. Kennedy through his brother, Robert F. Kennedy, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, "The Pentagon, the State Department and the CIA could not exert influence on that channel."⁸⁴

Donald Trump appeared more willing to trust Putin's personal assurances when the Russian president claimed the "complete encirclement" of Ukrainian forces in Russia's Kursk region in March 2025.⁸⁵ In cultivating a direct channel to the Trump administration, Putin personally engaged Steve Witkoff, Trump's special envoy to the Middle East, speaking with him for hours in February 2025. The symbolic release of an American prisoner helped build a false sense of trust. Witkoff lacked detailed knowledge of the Russia-Ukraine war and, as one of Trump's closest allies, offered Moscow a potentially valuable channel through which it could bypass the US intelligence community and communicate directly with Trump.

Witkoff's counterpart became Kirill Dmitriev, Russia's presidential envoy for foreign investment and economic cooperation. Dmitriev serves as the CEO of the Russian Direct

⁸⁴ Herbert Romerstein, *Soviet Agents of Influence*, no. 3, Intelligence Issues Series (Center for Intelligence Studies, 1991), 4–8.

⁸⁵ Erin Banco, "Exclusive: Intelligence Shared with White House Shows Ukrainians Not 'encircled' in Kursk," *Reuters*, 20 March 2025.

Investment Fund. He had already figured in the investigation of Russian interference with the 2016 US election for attempting to deliver a Putin-authorised “reconciliation plan” to the Trump transition team while cultivating ties with Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner.⁸⁶ According to Dmitriev’s text messages to George Nader, an adviser to the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed who helped him facilitate meetings with the Trump team, his “boss,” Putin, had emphasised that establishing a backchannel for communication with the US to “avoid bureaucracy” was a high priority for Moscow.⁸⁷ According to an investigation by *The Insider*, Dmitriev was backed by FSB Lieutenant General Andrei Chobotov, a close associate of Sergei Ivanov, who served as Chief of the Presidential Administration from 2011 to 2016. Dmitriev could also ask Ivanov and his successor, Anton Vaino, to have foreign investors checked against FSB and SVR operational files.⁸⁸

Dmitriev’s Russian Direct Investment Fund is also known as a front organisation that houses officers seconded from Russian intelligence agencies.⁸⁹ The fund is tasked with “attract[ing] money to Russia” and helping foreign investors “make money in Russia.” This was the pitch made by the FSB Academy graduate and former Deputy Minister of Economic Development Sergei Belyakov, who was seconded to the fund in 2016, while approaching convicted American sex offender and financier Jeffrey Epstein.⁹⁰ Dmitriev’s approach similarly combined two objectives: drawing Witkoff toward a peace plan on Kremlin terms while offering post-war business opportunities in

Russia from which American companies could profit. He invited Trump’s entourage to invest in highly profitable Russian energy giants such as Novatek and Rosneft, while encouraging American investors to pressure the US government to lift sanctions.

The Dmitriev-Witkoff channel eventually fed into the Putin-Trump Alaska summit in the summer of 2025. While European and Ukrainian diplomats had little access to Witkoff, Dmitriev continued cultivating Trump’s close ally and helped draft a 28-point peace plan that included the “de facto recognition” of Crimea and Donbas as Russian territory, contrary to established US policy.⁹¹

Dmitriev’s role illustrates how politically appointed intermediaries outside the formal intelligence agencies can draw on intelligence resources within Russia’s broader intelligence ecosystem and play a key role in Putin’s strategic influence operations.

Politically appointed intermediaries outside the formal intelligence agencies can draw on resources within Russia’s broader ecosystem and play a key role in strategic influence operations

3.3. STRATEGIC PIVOT TO THE GLOBAL SOUTH

After the expulsion of Russian intelligence officers from Europe and North America, Moscow sought to reassign them to Russian embassies in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and CIS countries. This process, however, has encountered difficulties. Quotas for Russian diplomats are set by host states, while Russian intelligence agencies and the MFA are reluctant to give up their respective slots to one another.⁹²

Nevertheless, many expelled intelligence officers appear to have been posted to Latin

⁸⁶ Erin Banco, “[Jared Kushner’s Private Channel With Putin’s Money Man Kirill Dmitriev](#),” *The Daily Beast*, 23 August 2020.

⁸⁷ Mueller III, *Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election*, 158–59.

⁸⁸ Dmitriev used an officer’s certificate issued in 2000 when registering a foreign car. Its number was close to those used by SVR Academy graduates and GRU officers. Sergei Kanev, “[«Любит устраивать шоу со звонками от высоких лиц». Как друг путинской дочери Кирилл Дмитриев стал главным «решалой» в Кремле](#) [“He loves to put on a show with calls from high-ranking officials.” How Kirill Dmitriev, a friend of Putin’s daughter, became the Kremlin’s top fixer], *The Insider*, 28 August 2023.

⁸⁹ Joakim von Braun, *Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service 1991–2020* (2020), 54.

⁹⁰ US Justice Department, “[Re: My New Position](#),” US Justice Department, 30 January 2016.

⁹¹ Drew Hinshaw et al., “[Make Money Not War: Trump’s Real Plan for Peace in Ukraine](#),” *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 November 2025.

⁹² Sergey Kanev, “[Dear Kremlin: Expelled GRU Spies Bemoan Lack of Decent Jobs and Kindergarten Slots in Russia](#),” *The Insider*, 6 November 2023.

American countries, where counterintelligence agencies subject Russian services to less scrutiny for historical, political, and ideological reasons. Latin America, with its significant presence of US officials and businesses, has also traditionally been seen as a springboard for intelligence operations against the United States.⁹³ Its importance is likely to increase further, as the second Trump administration has declared the western Hemisphere a strategic priority. In late 2025, Putin appointed Mikhail Zlobin as SVR first deputy director. Zlobin had served in Washington, DC, in the early 2000s and in Peru from 2013 to 2015 as the SVR resident, following the FBI's 2010 arrest of ten Russian 'illegals'.⁹⁴

Russia's influence operations in the global south resemble Soviet active measures targeting the 'third world' countries during the Cold War.⁹⁵ Instead of Marxism-Leninism, however, Moscow now exports distorted forms of anti-colonialism, the concept of a multipolar world order, anti-LGBTQ+ 'traditional values',

Moscow exports distorted forms of anti-colonialism, the concept of a multipolar world order, anti-LGBTQ+ 'traditional values', and authoritarian foreign-agent legislation

and authoritarian foreign-agent legislation, at times in close coordination with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and Ramzan Kadyrov, the Kremlin-loyal ruler of Chechnya.⁹⁶ Russia's promotion of 'traditional values' is also aimed at Americans and Europeans opposing what Moscow calls the 'destructive neoliberal ideological agenda' in their home countries. On these grounds, the Russian Foreign Ministry reportedly issued more than 1 100 visas to foreign nationals.⁹⁷ While Russian Houses, Russian cultural centres under Rossotrudnichestvo, were closed in the US and

some European countries, which viewed them as platforms for Russian intelligence, Moscow has expanded the network of Russian Houses across Africa.⁹⁸

This pivot to the global south coincided with the redistribution of Yevgeny Prigozhin's assets. His Wagner Group functioned as a state-sponsored instrument of unconventional warfare and as a vehicle for expanding Russia's influence in Syria and African states. In hindsight, the scale of Prigozhin's assets and influence explains why Putin handled the issue with great care, even allowing him, after the failed rebellion, to attend the Russia-Africa Summit, until his death in a mysterious plane crash widely believed to be orchestrated by the Kremlin.

Moscow no longer appears to care about the plausible deniability once provided by Prigozhin's 'private companies'. On the basis of Prigozhin's military assets, Russia established a Volunteer Corps subordinated to Russian military command in Ukraine, as well as an Expeditionary Corps (Africa Corps) directed by the GRU.⁹⁹ After Prigozhin's death, GRU deputy director Colonel General Andrei Averyanov, together with Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-bek Yevkurov, toured African countries to assure partners that Moscow would continue to provide local elites with a 'regime survival package'. This package consists of military assistance, political and economic protection from international pressure over regime violence, and domestic propaganda support supplied by Russian political technologists.¹⁰⁰

Prigozhin's media empire, including the *Internet Research Agency* – the so-called 'troll factory' – and the *Patriot Media Group*, was initially reported as likely to be transferred

⁹³ "Latin America Remains a Playground for Russian Intelligence," *The Economist*, 14 September 2023.

⁹⁴ "Russia: SVR Management Reshuffle," *Intelligence Online*, 16 January 2026.

⁹⁵ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (Basic Books, 2005).

⁹⁶ Jack Watling et al., *The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare Beyond Ukraine, 2022–24* (The Royal United Services Institute, 2024), 26–32.

⁹⁷ "Russian MFA Issued Over 1K 'Traditional Values' Visas in 2025," *The Moscow Times*, 17 June 2026.

⁹⁸ Privilege Musvanhiri, "Зачем России студенты из Африки и чем она их привлекает? [Why does Russia need students from Africa and what attracts them to it?]," *Deutsche Welle*, 1 November 2025.

⁹⁹ Watling et al., *The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare*, 20. By late 2024, the Africa Corps had established a presence in Libya, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, while legacy Wagner structures remained active in the Central African Republic and, to some extent, Mali. Christopher Faulkner et al., "Africa Corps: Has Russia Hit a Ceiling in Africa?," *CTC Sentinel* 17, no. 11 (2024): 23–30.

¹⁰⁰ Watling et al., *The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare*, 22–25.

to Putin's ally and media magnate Yury Kovalchuk or to be dissolved.¹⁰¹ According to investigations by international journalists, however, it was ultimately divided among Russia's intelligence and security services.

Prigozhin's media empire was ultimately divided among Russia's intelligence and security services

The FSB established the news agency *African Initiative* using some of these assets and tasked Artem Kureev, an officer of the Fifth Service, who had previously handled Latvian Member of European Parliament Tatjana Ždanoka (see 1.4), with running it.¹⁰² Much of Prigozhin's non-military infrastructure, however, appears to have passed to the SVR, which took over Joint Stock Company "Inter," also known as "African Politology."

In 2024 alone, more than 98 employees reportedly worked within African Politology. Investigative media identified 60 employees, most of whom had previously participated in Prigozhin-led influence operations since 2013. The network is supervised by SVR General Dmitry Fadeev and Ilya Savelyev, an intelligence-linked executive director of the Centre for the Study of Socio-Political Problems of African Countries and BRICS at St Petersburg State University of Economics.¹⁰³

African Politology is tasked with destabilising target countries and providing a broad range of informational support to anti-western authoritarian regimes. Its tasks include discrediting Ukraine in the eyes of African publics and suppressing international support for Kyiv. In 2024, Russian political technologists placed paid pseudo-investigative articles on Malian news sites alleging "Ukraine's role in supporting terrorist groups in the Sahel," after which the stories were amplified by

French-language media.¹⁰⁴ In the Central African Republic, Mali, and Burkina Faso, Russia has promoted foreign-agent legislation modelled on its own laws.¹⁰⁵

The African Politology team also operates in other regions. It conducted operations seeking to legitimise the results of Venezuela's presidential election by planting paid articles and organising events in support of Nicolás Maduro in Latin American media,¹⁰⁶ and assisted Bolivian President Luis Arce in developing counter-narratives to neutralise protest movements.¹⁰⁷

3.4. SETBACKS IN THE NEAR ABROAD

While Russia's intelligence apparatus has tried to expand in Africa, its influence campaigns have begun to crumble in neighbouring countries. After 2022, many of the CIS countries, which the Kremlin continues to view as its 'sphere of influence', began distancing themselves

While Russia's intelligence apparatus has tried to expand in Africa, its influence campaigns have begun to crumble in neighbouring countries

from Moscow.¹⁰⁸ For example, Central Asian countries have increasingly pursued multi-vector foreign policies by diversifying their partnerships and promoting regional formats, such as the Consultative Meetings of Central Asian Presidents, that exclude Russia.¹⁰⁹

The activities of the Presidential Directorate for Interregional and Cultural Relations

¹⁰¹ "«Не доставайся же ты никому»: сотрудников медиахолдинга Пригожина попросили уволиться ["Don't let anyone get you": Prigozhin's media holding employees asked to resign]," *The Bell*, 30 June 2023.

¹⁰² "Радио Африка [Radio Africa]," *Dossier*, 21 November 2024.

¹⁰³ "Антиколониальная борьба Службы внешней разведки [Anti-colonial struggle of the Foreign Intelligence Service]," *Dossier*, 20 February 2026.

¹⁰⁴ "Новые приключения старой гвардии [New Adventures of the Old Guard]," *Dossier*, 14 February 2026.

¹⁰⁵ *Dossier*, «Новые приключения старой гвардии.»

¹⁰⁶ *Dossier*, «Антиколониальная борьба Службы внешней разведки.»

¹⁰⁷ *Dossier*, «Новые приключения старой гвардии.»

¹⁰⁸ Sergei Kanev, "Провал башни. В Кремле заменят кадры, отвечающие за внешнюю политику [Tower collapse. Kremlin to replace personnel responsible for foreign policy]," *The Insider*, 9 December 2022.

¹⁰⁹ Sanshiro Hosaka and Toomas Hanso, *Between Giants: Central Asia Balancing China, Russia, and the Rest* (International Centre for Defence and Security, 2025).

with Foreign Countries – the main political intelligence command responsible for the former Soviet space – became increasingly limited. Its chief, former SVR colonel Igor Maslov, made only symbolic trips to Armenia, South Ossetia, the Russian-occupied territory of Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan. Like his predecessor, SVR General Vladimir Chernov, Maslov was embarrassed by leaked private photos.¹¹⁰

Despite frequent visits by SVR Director Sergei Naryshkin, Armenia established the new Foreign Intelligence Service in 2023 without Russia's support (see also 1.2) and later removed FSB border guards from its border checkpoints.¹¹¹ After Russia's downing of an Azerbaijani passenger aircraft in late 2024, Azerbaijan accused the Russian House in Baku of serving as a platform for espionage and shut it down.¹¹² Russia's support for Russian-Armenian businessman Samvel Karapetyan during Armenia's 2026 parliamentary election likewise proved counterproductive, strengthening rather than weakening incumbent Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.¹¹³

In August 2025, Putin dissolved the Directorate for Interregional and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and the Directorate for Cross-border Cooperation (*Управление Президента РФ по межрегиональным и культурным связям с зарубежными странами*), and established the Directorate for Strategic Partnership and Cooperation (*Управление стратегического партнёрства и сотрудничества*).¹¹⁴

Kiriyenko's ally Vadim Titov, CEO of Rosatom International Network, was appointed as head of the Directorate. Although some experts initially warned that Kiriyenko's team might prove even more effective and ruthless than the Chekists who preceded it, the new directorate has continued to employ approaches similar to those of predecessors and has yet to achieve significant results (see also 3.5).¹¹⁵

The new directorate continues to collaborate closely with the National Research Institute for Communication Development (*Национальный исследовательский институт развития коммуникаций*, NIIRK), headed by former SVR officer Vladislav Gasumyanov. The NIIRK organised a conference on "traditional values" in Tbilisi in 2024.¹¹⁶ Titov's first foreign trip was to Bishkek, where he attended the opening of the Eurasian Centre for Russian Language and Culture. The centre was funded by sanctioned Moldovan oligarch Ilan Shor.¹¹⁷ It is noteworthy that Shor is also a co-owner of A7, Russia's sanctions evasion network, along with Promsvyazbank, which is expanding its outreach in Africa.¹¹⁸

Meanwhile, in December 2025, Yevgeny Kozhokin, a professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations and a former SVR officer, reportedly authored a confidential report for the Directorate for Strategic Partnership and Cooperation.¹¹⁹ Kozhokin's report suggests that it is increasingly difficult for Moscow to treat Russian-speaking

¹¹⁰Sergey Kanev, "[Spies, Banquets, and Embezzlement: The Inner Workings of Putin's 'Cultural Ties' Directorate](#)," *The Insider*, 12 September 2025.

¹¹¹At the same time, Armenia's National Security Service, which retains deep institutional and personal ties to Russia's FSB, has preserved significant powers. Sanshiro Hosaka, *A Mountain to Climb: Russia's Influence in the South Caucasus and EU Policy Options* (International Centre for Defence and Security, 2025), 23.

¹¹²Sanshiro Hosaka, "[Trump-Brokered Azerbaijan-Armenia Peace Deal: Breakthrough or Another Geopolitical Conundrum?](#)," *International Centre for Defence and Security*, 19 August 2025.

¹¹³Investigative journalists further revealed that when Karapetyan's Russian passport was issued in 1999, the "place of work" field listed "IC FSB," a designation suggesting employment under FSB supervision. Kanev, "Grabbing Him by the 'Beard.'"

¹¹⁴"[В АП появится управление по стратегическому партнёрству и сотрудничеству](#)" [The Presidential Administration will establish Directorate for Strategic Partnership and Cooperation], *Vedomosti*, 29 August 2025.

¹¹⁵Mihaela Tobultoc, "[Valeriu Paşa: 'Very Important Changes in the Kremlin's Policy towards Moldova Are Happening. And Not for the Better!'](#)," *Cotidianul*, 31 August 2025.

¹¹⁶"[Созданный выходцами из КГБ и ФСБ институт организовал конференцию по «традиционным ценностям» в Тбилиси](#)" [Institute created by former KGB and FSB officials organises conference on 'traditional values' in Tbilisi], *Agentstvo*, 22 April 2024.

¹¹⁷Sergey Kanev, "['Pancake,' 'Lenin,' and an FSB Hacker: Meet the Fresh Faces at Putin's New Directorate 'for Strategic Partnership and Cooperation'](#)," *The Insider*, 13 February 2026.

¹¹⁸"[Sanctioned and Expanding: Russia's A7 Network Deepens Its Africa Footprint](#)," Centre for Information Resilience, 4 April 2026.

¹¹⁹Michael Weiss, "[The SVR Plan for Influencing the Russian Diaspora](#)," *Foreign Office by Michael Weiss*, 24 January 2026.

‘compatriots’ from post-Soviet countries as a single cohesive category.¹²⁰

The new directorate not only inherited its predecessors’ focus on former Soviet states but also expanded its remit to include Hungary and several African countries.¹²¹ This

This geographically eclectic portfolio symbolises the end of an era in which Putin concentrated on restoring Russia’s influence in the post-Soviet space

geographically eclectic portfolio symbolises the end of an era in which Putin concentrated on restoring Russia’s influence in the post-Soviet space, exemplified by the creation of the Directorate for Interregional and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries in 2005, following the ‘colour revolutions’ in Georgia and Ukraine.

3.5. CULTIVATING TROJAN HORSES IN EUROPE

Titov’s directorate has thus renewed its focus on Budapest. For Moscow, Viktor Orbán’s Hungary served as a Trojan horse in the EU. According to one estimate, of the 47 diplomats working at the Russian Embassy in Hungary, 15 were dispatched from Russian intelligence agencies, and six more might have ties to them. The relatively high number of intelligence officers, compared with other European capitals, reflected the Kremlin’s concentration of strategic interests in Budapest.¹²² The small Hungarian city of Szentendre served as a hub where Russian officers met their informants.¹²³

Investigative journalists have also revealed that a hotline between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Hungarian counterpart, Péter Szijjártó, provided Moscow with strategic intelligence on critical issues discussed within the EU. Szijjártó reportedly helped Russia weaken EU sanctions packages and shield Kremlin-linked oligarchs from sanctions.¹²⁴ He also coordinated with Lavrov to pressure Ukraine over minority rights and to block EU funding for Kyiv.¹²⁵

With Orbán’s electoral defeat in April 2026, however, Moscow began to lose its influence; an SVR officer who had targeted Hungarian think tanks close to the government was quietly expelled – a move that had previously been blocked for political reasons.¹²⁶

The presidential administration’s influence operations have targeted European elections by running vote-buying networks and troll farms

The Russian presidential administration’s influence operations have targeted European elections, such as the Romanian presidential election in 2024 and the Moldovan parliamentary election in 2025, by running vote-buying networks and troll farms aimed at supporting pro-Russian candidates. During Hungary’s parliamentary election in April 2026, a team of political technologists working under Kiriienko’s supervision was tasked with helping incumbent Prime Minister Viktor Orbán secure another term. GRU-linked experts were also deployed to the Russian embassy in Budapest to amplify pro-Orbán narratives.¹²⁷ Interestingly, Kremlin analysts suggested that Orbán build his campaign around friendship with Donald Trump, rather than Vladimir Putin, and the claim that the US president was

¹²⁰ Yevgeny Kozhokin, [Prospects for Interaction with Representatives of the Russian Diaspora in Modern Geopolitical Conditions. Recommendations for Russian Policy](#) (2025), 5.

¹²¹ Kanev, “‘Pancake,’ ‘Lenin,’ and an FSB Hacker”; Szabolcs Panyi, “Putin’s GRU-Linked Election Fixers Are Already in Budapest to Help Orbán,” [VSquare.Org](#), 6 March 2026.

¹²² Aleksandr Rodionov, “Почти половина сотрудников российского посольства в Венгрии может быть связана со спецслужбами [Almost half of the Russian embassy staff in Hungary may be linked to the secret services],” [Agentstvo](#), 8 April 2026.

¹²³ “HUNGARY: Szentendre, a Hub for Serbian and Russian Handlers in Europe,” [Intelligence Online](#), 9 June 2023.

¹²⁴ Wojciech Cieśła et al., “[Kremlin Hotline: Hungary Colluded with Russia to Delist Sanctioned Oligarchs, Companies and Banks](#),” [VSquare.Org](#), 31 March 2026.

¹²⁵ Wojciech Cieśła, Anna Gielewska, Szabolcs Panyi, et al., “[Kremlin Hotline: How Hungary Coordinates With Russia Blocking Ukraine From the EU](#),” [VSquare.Org](#), 8 April 2026.

¹²⁶ Szabolcs Panyi, “[The Think-Tank Spy: Russian Diplomat Infiltrating Orbán’s Right-Wing Elite Quietly Expelled](#),” [VSquare.Org](#), 8 May 2026.

¹²⁷ Panyi, “Putin’s GRU-Linked Election.”

Hungary's best chance of ensuring security and economic stability.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, all of these operations ultimately failed to achieve their strategic goals.

4. DESTABILISING THE REAR AND EXECUTING TRAITORS: GRU

The GRU is primarily responsible for military intelligence and special operations abroad. Some of its functions – such as psychological operations, scientific and technical intelligence, and illegal intelligence – overlap with those of the SVR and the FSB.

The GRU's Unit 29155 is notorious for a series of subversive operations and assassinations in Europe – the attempted poisoning of an arms dealer in Bulgaria in 2015, the failed coup in Montenegro in 2016, and the attempted assassination of former GRU officer Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom with the nerve agent Novichok in 2018. During the full-scale war, the GRU has increasingly focused on sabotage operations behind enemy lines and on targeting defectors and other individuals.

The GRU has increasingly focused on sabotage operations behind enemy lines and on targeting defectors

Yet during the first year of the full-scale war, GRU special forces (*спецназ*) suffered devastating losses after being deployed to frontline combat. The depletion of elite personnel may also have reduced the GRU's capacity to train proxies and paramilitary groups in unconventional warfare.¹²⁹ While the GRU absorbed part of the Wagner Group's paramilitary assets in Africa, Putin created new services specialising in 'direct action'.

4.1. SABOTAGE THROUGH DISPOSABLE ASSETS

The GRU is believed to be behind a wave of sabotage attacks in Europe, including arson attacks on warehouses, explosions targeting trucks and railways, and the vandalism of historical monuments and museums. Many of these attacks have been carried out not by professionally trained agents but by petty criminals or low-level recruits hired through social media channels for money. They are treated as disposable assets: unlike recruited agents, their handlers usually show little concern for what happens to them after the operation.¹³⁰

Many attacks have been carried out by petty criminals or low-level recruits hired through social media channels

In recent years, according to the *Dossier Centre*, the GRU has been actively collaborating with former and active operatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to identify potential recruits from the criminal world. It hires criminals not only in Russia but also in Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, and Serbia, particularly valuing individuals who can travel to the EU (see also 6.2).¹³¹

One illustrative example is Aleksei Kolosovsky, a former taxi driver from the Russian city of Krasnodar with ties to criminal groups involved in hacking, document forgery, and car theft. He is suspected of involvement in planning and executing a series of sabotage campaigns in Poland, Lithuania, Britain, and Germany under GRU supervision. Such 'service providers', who possess extensive networks of contacts capable of travelling across Europe without attracting police attention, have become indispensable to Russian sabotage operations following the expulsion of Russian intelligence officers from Europe.¹³²

¹²⁸ Dada Lyndell, "[‘Matryoshka’ Enters the Fray: The Kremlin and the GRU Are Spreading Disinformation in Hungary Ahead of Its Pivotal Parliamentary Election](#)," *The Insider*, 11 April 2026.

¹²⁹ Alex Horton, "[Russia's Commando Units Gutted by Ukraine War, U.S. Leak Shows](#)," *The Washington Post*, 14 April 2023.

¹³⁰ Kacper Rekawek et al., [Russia's Crime-Terror Nexus: Criminality as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare in Europe](#) (GLOBSEC, 2025).

¹³¹ *Dossier*, «Диверсии с безопасного расстояния.»

¹³² Michael Schwartz and Adam Goldman, "[The Ex-Taxi Driver at the Center of Russia's Shadow War](#)," *The New York Times*, 22 February 2026.

Although Russian services often recruit untrained individuals, some experts warn that those who prove themselves in low-level assignments may later receive more complex tasks and clandestine training.¹³³ The ‘red hands’ vandalism campaign against a Jewish memorial in Paris, reminiscent of the KGB’s swastika campaign of 1959, was carried out by a group of hired Bulgarian nationals and demonstrates that valuable auxiliaries are not necessarily disposable; they may be employed in multiple operations.¹³⁴

Notably, in the case of Kolosovsky’s alleged accomplice in the plot to place incendiary devices on DHL cargo planes, who is wanted by Poland through Interpol, Russia reportedly filed a counter-request with Interpol – a measure more commonly used to rescue arrested intelligence officers and valuable agents.¹³⁵

Wagner-linked social media channels have also been used to recruit petty European criminals for GRU sabotage attacks. A group of UK citizens who set fire to a warehouse in East London was recruited through internet chat rooms linked to Wagner with the promise of easy money.¹³⁶ The so-called shadow fleet – an array of sanctioned tankers exporting Russian oil through the Baltic Sea – also regularly carries two-man security teams composed of veterans, many of whom were formerly affiliated with Wagner Group or the GRU.¹³⁷

4.2. DIRECT ACTION: SSD AND CENTRE 795

Spanish intelligence services have accused the Kremlin of hiring professional gunmen to assassinate Maksim Kuzminov, who was murdered in Spain in February 2024. Kuzminov

was a Russian pilot who defected to Ukraine with his Mi-8 helicopter in August 2023. Ukrainian military intelligence had presented his defection as a successful special operation,

The shadow fleet carries security teams composed of veterans formerly affiliated with Wagner Group or the GRU

“Synytsia,” offering financial rewards to Russian servicemen who defect with their equipment. His killing served as a warning that defectors could not be assured of safety, potentially instilling fear among Russians considering defection or those who had fled the country. Sergey Naryshkin, the SVR director, told Russian state media that Kuzminov was a “traitor and criminal” who “became a moral corpse at the very moment when he was planning his dirty and terrible crime.”¹³⁸ Six months later, the house of former Russian opposition politician Ilya Ponomarev on the outskirts of Kyiv was attacked by Russian drones. Ponomarev, the only member of the Russian State Duma to vote against Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea, obtained Ukrainian citizenship in 2019 and has cooperated closely with the Freedom of Russia Legion.¹³⁹

As Moscow intensified its direct-action operations in Europe, Putin created the Directorate of Special Activities (SSD) in 2023 by expanding GRU Unit 29155 and incorporating some elements of the FSB. Overseen by GRU Deputy Director Andrei Averyanov, the former commander of Unit 29155, the SSD is responsible for clandestine operations, including assassinations and sabotage, as well as the infiltration of western companies and universities. Averyanov’s deputy, Lieutenant General Ivan Kasianenko, is said to have overseen the takeover of Wagner’s paramilitary operations in Africa.

Western intelligence officials attribute the attempted killing of an executive of a German

¹³³ Kevin Riehle, “[Dismissing Russian Agents as ‘Disposable’ Misses How Espionage Works](#),” *The Moscow Times*, 23 January 2026.

¹³⁴ Grace Parcover, “[Red Hands in Paris: A Small Act of Vandalism in a Big Russian Strategy](#),” *War on the Rocks*, 20 November 2025.

¹³⁵ Schwartz and Goldman, “The Ex-Taxi Driver at the Center of Russia’s Shadow War.”

¹³⁶ Sam Jones, “[Russia’s Wagner Group Pivots to European Sabotage, Say Western Officials](#),” *The Financial Times*, 15 February 2026.

¹³⁷ Holger Roonemaa et al., “[From Wagner to GRU, Russian Military Men Are Manning Moscow’s Shadow Fleet](#),” *OCRP*, 10 March 2026.

¹³⁸ Claudia Chiappa et al., “[The Death of a Russian Defector](#),” *Politico*, 18 November 2024; Claudia Chiappa, “[Moscow Hired Gunmen to Murder Russian Defector, Spanish Intel Says](#),” *Politico*, 22 February 2024.

¹³⁹ “[Russian Oppositionist Ponomarev Reportedly Injured in Drone Attack near Kyiv](#),” *The Kyiv Independent*, 1 August 2024.

arms manufacturer and the plots involving DHL cargo planes to the SSD. The directorate also administers “Senezh,” a training centre for elite ‘spetsnaz’ forces.¹⁴⁰

Unit 54654, newly established under the SSD, reportedly seeks to create support structures based on networks of illegals – officers operating without diplomatic cover (see 6.1). Following repeated exposures of GRU officers, Unit 54654 is said to recruit contractors through front companies, thereby separating their data from government personnel records and military salary systems.¹⁴¹

At roughly the same time, however, the SSD faced the emergence of a competitor. Following the exposure of multiple officers from Unit 29155, Putin reportedly created Centre 795, an autonomous service for political assassinations and abductions abroad. The new organisation is said to consist of elite spetsnaz officers from the GRU and the FSB’s Alfa unit and reports directly to the Chief of the General Staff.¹⁴²

Following the exposure of multiple officers from Unit 29155, Putin reportedly created Centre 795, an autonomous service for political assassinations and abductions abroad

Centre 795 is based at the Kalashnikov Concern’s training facility. Kalashnikov is part of Rostec, headed by Sergei Chemezov, a longtime associate of Putin and former KGB colleague. Some officers of Centre 795 were recruited from allied intelligence services, including Belarus’s State Security Committee, whose personnel would likely attract less scrutiny from western counterintelligence agencies. To monitor the Kremlin’s political opponents in the west, the Centre relies on local agents who can move freely across Europe and lack overt connections to Russia. For example, to secretly monitor family members of the

¹⁴⁰Bojan Pancevski, “A New Spy Unit Is Leading Russia’s Shadow War Against the West,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 February 2025.

¹⁴¹Watling et al., *The Threat from Russia’s Unconventional Warfare*, 11.

¹⁴²Christo Grozev et al., “Lost in Translation: How Russia’s New Elite Hit Squad Was Compromised by an Idiotic Lapse in Tradecraft,” *The Insider*, 13 March 2026.

Chechen opposition figure Akhmed Zakayev, Centre 795 recruited a Serbo-Croatian speaker residing in the United States.¹⁴³

4.3. SANCTIONS EVASION FOR THE MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

Moscow-based machinery and equipment companies, such as Serniya Engineering and Sertal, have coordinated illicit procurement

Moscow-based companies have coordinated illicit procurement networks for military-grade and dual-use technologies at the direction of the SVR and other services

networks for military-grade and dual-use technologies at the direction of the SVR and other Russian services. They have used front companies, shell entities, and bank accounts around the world to evade western sanctions.¹⁴⁴ Even after these companies were added to the US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctions list in March 2022, a Greek national – described as a “supporter of the Orthodoxy, including as the basis of friendship with Russia” in the correspondence by representatives of Serniya and Sertal – continued to procure sensitive technologies for Russia by falsifying end-user countries.¹⁴⁵ In the winter of 2022, a Russian national residing in Estonia, suspected of ties to the FSB, attempted to smuggle 35 types of semiconductors and electronic components across the Estonian-Russian border.¹⁴⁶

Alongside the SVR and the FSB, the GRU has renewed its focus on sanctions evasion since 2022. A GRU officer reportedly operated

¹⁴³Grozev et al., “Lost in Translation.”

¹⁴⁴“Treasury Targets Sanctions Evasion Networks and Russian Technology Companies Enabling Putin’s War,” US Department of the Treasury, 31 March 2022.

¹⁴⁵Nicholas Milan, “Affidavit and Complaint in Support of an Application for an Arrest Warrant: Against Nikolaos Bogonikolos,” US Department of Justice, 2 May 2023.

¹⁴⁶“Suspected Russian Intelligence Operative Extradited from Estonia to Face Charges Related to Providing American-Made Electronics and Ammunition to Russian Military,” US Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, 14 July 2023.

from Brussels, where he procured sensitive European-made precision machine tools used in the production of Russia's Kinzhal hypersonic missile.¹⁴⁷ The GRU's little-known Twentieth Directorate has reportedly targeted Japan – a country with an advanced high-tech sector and comparatively weak counter-espionage legislation. One of its officers, operating under the cover of an Aeroflot employee in Tokyo, reportedly procured Japanese-made components through third countries.¹⁴⁸

5. MILITARY COUNTERINTELLIGENCE AS POLITICAL INSTRUMENT

The GRU is one of the agencies placed under the surveillance of the FSB DVKR, which has historically infiltrated counterintelligence officers, known as 'osobisty' (особисты), into military command echelons and bases, and even aboard nuclear submarines.¹⁴⁹ It is even said that for Russian military officers, it is virtually impossible to build a successful career in the armed forces without covert cooperation with military counterintelligence.¹⁵⁰

It is virtually impossible to build a successful career in the armed forces without covert cooperation with military counterintelligence

Since the start of the full-scale war, monitoring the military through the FSB's military counterintelligence apparatus has become particularly important for Putin. However, military counterintelligence is not limited to counterespionage and combating corruption; it also serves as a political instrument through which Putin can obtain 'kompromat' (компро-мат) on and punish Defence Ministry officials.

5.1. MONITORING THE ARMED FORCES

Two days before Prigozhin's uprising, the FSB appears to have detected his plans to detain Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov.¹⁵¹ According to Andrey Soldatov and Irina Borogan, the FSB infiltrated counterintelligence officers into Prigozhin's Wagner, although they only called on Wagner fighters to arrest Prigozhin and were unable to prevent his mutiny.¹⁵² After the aborted mutiny, the FSB DVKR detained and interrogated at least 13 senior military officers – including Colonel General Sergei Surovikin, a deputy commander of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine – while another 15 were suspended from duty or dismissed from their posts.¹⁵³

Systematic bribery schemes within Russian occupation forces suggest that the DVKR has been unable to curb widespread corruption

Alongside counterintelligence work in military commands and units, as well as within VOGs in the Russian-occupied territories (see 1.3), the DVKR is also tasked with combating corruption in the armed forces. This role became increasingly important after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which revealed widespread theft at all levels – from rank-and-file personnel stealing fuel to senior commanders taking kickbacks and inflating procurement contracts.

In the fifth year of the full-scale war, however, systematic bribery schemes within Russian occupation forces – including payments to obtain promotions or avoid being sent to the front – suggest that the DVKR has been unable to curb widespread corruption.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁷ Sergei Ezhov, "Our Man in Brussels: The Insider Has Unmasked the GRU Officer Helping the Kremlin Evade Sanctions from His Base in the Heart of Europe," *The Insider*, 27 January 2024.

¹⁴⁸ Jane Bradley et al., "How Putin Turned Japan Into a Den of Spies," *The New York Times*, 12 July 2026.

¹⁴⁹ Hosaka, *Putin's Counterintelligence State*, 10–11.

¹⁵⁰ Sergey Kanev, "'He Knew Exactly Where to Take a Bite.' Why Was Russian Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov so Confident He Wouldn't Face Consequences?," *The Insider*, 4 May 2024.

¹⁵¹ Bojan Pancevski, "Wagner's Prigozhin Planned to Capture Russian Military Leaders," *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 June 2023.

¹⁵² Irina Borogan and Andrey Soldatov, "Russia's Security Forces Learn Bitter Lessons From Mutiny," *CEPA*, 25 June 2023.

¹⁵³ Thomas Grove, "Russia Detained Several Senior Military Officers in Wake of Wagner Mutiny," *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 July 2023.

¹⁵⁴ Schemes and Systema, "A Russian General's Secret Bribes: Inside A Wartime Corruption Network," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 18 March 2026.

The DVKR also investigates desertion, surrender, self-inflicted injuries intended to secure compensation, and crimes linked to alcohol and drug abuse. At the same time, FSB leadership has assigned *osobisty* additional tasks, such as patriotic education for schoolchildren and students, which, according to The Insider's source within the DVKR, diverts attention from its core responsibilities.¹⁵⁵

5.2. FAILED PREVENTION OF HIGH-PROFILE ASSASSINATIONS

Another important duty of the DVKR is to provide security for the military leadership, a task it has performed poorly amid multiple successful assassinations attributed to Ukrainian services.

On 17 December 2024, Lieutenant General Igor Kirillov, head of the Radiation, Chemical, and Biological Defence Forces (*Войска радиационной, химической и биологической защиты, VRKhBZ*), was killed in Moscow by an explosion likely organised by Ukraine's Main Directorate of Intelligence (*Головне управління розвідки Міністерства оборони України, HUR*). The killing reportedly infuriated Putin, who dismissed DVKR chief Nikolai Yuryev. Two days after the assassination, during a live broadcast, the Russian president called it a "grave blunder" by Russian security agencies.¹⁵⁶ Ivan Tkachev, who rose through the FSB under the patronage of Rosneft president Igor Sechin, was eventually appointed the new DVKR chief.¹⁵⁷ Tkachev had previously led the Sixth Service of the FSB Internal Security Directorate (*Управление собственной безопасности, USB*), dubbed "Sechin's security forces," and later the Directorate K of the Economic Security Service. Although Tkachev is said to harbour ambitions of taking over as FSB director after Bortnikov, two high-ranking military officials were killed in car bombings in Moscow following the change in the DVKR

leadership, likely weakening his prospects.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, Ukraine successfully conducted "Operation Spiderweb," damaging dozens of Russia's strategic bombers in June 2025.

Ukraine's targets include not only military officials but also FSB leaders. Some Russian media reported an attempted bombing targeting Deputy Head of the FSB Fifth Service General Aleksei Titov in August 2025 at the Detsky Mir department store near Lubyanka, although Russian authorities initially concealed the incident.¹⁵⁹

Nevertheless, during the FSB board meeting in 2026, Putin did not openly criticise the DVKR. Instead, he merely stressed that the FSB, together with other agencies, needed to increase the level of security for Defence Ministry officials and other state and public figures.¹⁶⁰ According to one report, at a meeting chaired by Putin, the Defence Ministry, the FSB, and Rosgvardia (*Росгвардия*) blamed each other and shifted responsibility for protecting senior military leaders, forcing Putin to defuse the confrontation by ordering each agency to submit proposals within a week.¹⁶¹

5.3. PURGING THE MILITARY LEADERSHIP

Despite its failures, the DVKR remains important to Putin as a political instrument for purging military leaders.

In May 2024, Putin replaced Sergei Shoigu with Andrei Belousov as defence minister, moving Shoigu to the post of Secretary of the Security Council. The previous month, Timur Ivanov, deputy defence minister responsible for construction and housing for military personnel, was detained on corruption charges. Signs of Ivanov's corruption had reportedly been identified by DVKR agents as early as 2014, but they did not lead to prosecution,

¹⁵⁵ Sergey Kanev, "Inside Moscow's Latest Clash of Clans: A New Counterintelligence Chief Could Hand Igor Sechin Influence over Both the FSB and the Army," *Investigations, The Insider*, 1 January 2026.

¹⁵⁶ "Путин назвал «тяжелейшим проколом» спецслужб убийство генерала Кириллова [Putin called the killing of General Kirillov a 'most serious blunder' by the security services]," *RBK*, 19 December 2024.

¹⁵⁷ Kanev, "Inside Moscow's Latest Clash of Clans."

¹⁵⁸ "Russian General Killed by Car Bomb in Moscow, Officials Say," *BBC*, 22 December 2025.

¹⁵⁹ Taras Safronov, "У Москві приховали спланований підриг посадовця ФСБ під виглядом «вибуху балона» — нові дані [In Moscow, a planned bombing of an FSB official was concealed under the guise of a 'balloon explosion' — new data]," *Militarnyi*, 15 April 2026.

¹⁶⁰ President of Russia, "Заседание коллегии ФСБ России," 24 February 2026.

¹⁶¹ Anin, "Vladimir Putin Fears."

likely because of his close relationship with DVKR head Aleksandr Bezverkhny. Ivanov is rumoured to have helped Bezverkhny renovate his luxurious mansion.

After Bezverkhny's transfer to the Office of the Inspector General of the Defence Ministry (*Управление генеральных инспекторов Министерства обороны Российской Федерации*) in 2015 – a move symbolic of the Chekist presence within the military establishment – new DVKR head Nikolai Yuryev began wiretapping Ivanov. Although Yuryev kept Ivanov under surveillance, Ivanov remained confident of Shoigu's protection.¹⁶² Once Putin decided to replace Shoigu, that protection no longer worked: Ivanov was sentenced to 13 years in prison.

A series of purges followed at the Defence Ministry. In July 2024, Dmitry Bulgakov, another former deputy defence minister responsible for logistics from 2008 to 2022, was arrested on corruption charges and remains awaiting trial.¹⁶³ A month later, another former deputy of Shoigu, Pavel Popov, was arrested; in April 2026, he was sentenced to 19 years in prison after being found guilty of fraud and abuse of office related to the development of Patriot Park, a military-themed recreation complex in the Moscow suburbs.¹⁶⁴ In December 2025, former deputy defence minister Colonel General Yuri Sadovenko died in Moscow from heart disease.¹⁶⁵ Finally, in March 2026, Ruslan Tsalikov, a former first deputy defence minister from 2015 to 2024 and one of Shoigu's closest associates, was arrested for his alleged role in the formation of a "criminal community" that embezzled state funds between 2017 and 2024. Tsalikov had brought Ivanov into Shoigu's team in 2012,

when Shoigu was governor of the Moscow Region.¹⁶⁶

By mid-2026, Putin has largely dismantled Shoigu's patronage network. Although high-profile corruption cases are formally investigated by the Investigative Committee (*Следственный комитет*), the FSB,

Putin has largely dismantled Shoigu's patronage network

particularly the DVKR, provides operational support (*оперативное сопровождение*), collecting intelligence and evidence on Defence Ministry officials.¹⁶⁷ The purge thus demonstrates the political importance of military counterintelligence: evidence and 'kompromat' can be accumulated for years but acted upon only when political protection is withdrawn and the leadership allows investigations to proceed.

The purge demonstrates the political importance of military counterintelligence

6. OPERATIONAL ADAPTATION

Russia's main foreign intelligence agency, the SVR, is believed to have accounted for the majority of Russian diplomats expelled after the 2022 invasion. Estimates vary by country, but more than half of intelligence officers serving in embassies ('legal' residencies) are generally thought to be affiliated with the SVR, followed by the GRU at around 30-40%, while FSB officers constitute a small minority, usually 10% or less.¹⁶⁸

From an intelligence tradecraft standpoint, the prospect of war and the severing of diplomatic ties require valuable assets handled by

¹⁶² Kanev, "He Knew Exactly Where to Take a Bite."

¹⁶³ "Former Russian Deputy Defense Minister Dmitry Bulgakov Arrested in Connection with Corruption Case," *Meduza*, 26 July 2024.

¹⁶⁴ "Former Russian Deputy Defense Minister Pavel Popov Sentenced to 19 Years in Prison," *The Insider*, 10 April 2026.

¹⁶⁵ Aleksandr Shepelev, "Участник «любовного треугольника» в Минобороны и давний соратник Шойгу. Что известно об умершем генерале Юрии Садовенко [A participant in the 'love triangle' at the Ministry of Defence and a longtime associate of Shoigu. What is known about the deceased General Yuri Sadovenko?]," *Vot Tak*, 26 December 2025.

¹⁶⁶ "Russia's Ex-Deputy Defense Minister Ruslan Tsalikov Arrested on Corruption Charges, yet Another Shoigu Associate Detained since MoD Shakeup," *The Insider*, 5 March 2026.

¹⁶⁷ "ТАСС: замминистра обороны Иванов давно находился в «разработке» [TASS: Deputy Defense Minister Ivanov has long been under investigation]," *Vedomosti*, 24 April 2024.

¹⁶⁸ "ФСБ за границей [FSB abroad]," *Dossier*, 17 February 2020; *Putin's Counterintelligence State*, 8.

‘legal’ residencies to be transferred to illegal residencies, which, lacking overt ties to Russia, are less vulnerable to exposure and expulsion.

Yet SVR chief Sergei Naryshkin’s conspicuous hesitation during the televised Security Council meeting three days before the full-scale invasion – when he appeared to advocate giving the west one more diplomatic chance – might reflect his concern about the implications of the decision. While his remarks do not necessarily indicate the SVR’s operational preparedness, the subsequent disruption of Russia’s intelligence infrastructure in Europe and North America raises a broader question: how has the Russian intelligence ecosystem adapted its operational tradecraft to wartime conditions?

6.1. ILLEGAL INTELLIGENCE AT THE FOREFRONT

Putin has praised illegals as “special people who devoted their lives to the Motherland,” and in 2024, he personally greeted several illegals at the foot of the aircraft stairs after they returned to Moscow in a prisoner exchange following their arrests in the west.

A corollary of western governments’ expulsion of Russian intelligence officers operating under diplomatic cover is that Russian intelligence is likely to increase its use of illegals. Illegals are intelligence officers who operate without diplomatic immunity, assuming forged or genuine identities as citizens of the target country or a third country. Because they conceal their ties to Russia, illegals are largely unaffected by the deterioration of diplomatic relations.

As a rule, valuable assets handled by ‘legal’ residencies are expected to be transferred to illegal residencies if the former are suspended.¹⁶⁹ Artem Dultsev and Anna Dultseva, SVR illegals living in Slovenia and posing as Argentinians, were reportedly activated in 2022 after an extended period of dormancy, likely to support depleted ‘legal’

residencies in European countries. However, they were arrested by local authorities less than a year after activation.¹⁷⁰

Brazil has long been mocked as a ‘factory’ for Russian illegals. Yet in recent years, through cooperation with other countries and the screening of data on millions of Brazilian citizens to identify patterns in an investigation codenamed “Operation East,” Brazil’s Federal Police has uncovered nine illegals posing as Brazilian nationals. At least two were arrested, while the others appear to have fled back to Russia. The first case, initiated by Brazilian authorities based on CIA information in April 2022, exposed a Brazilian passport holder known as “Victor Muller Ferreira,” who applied for an internship at the International Criminal Court in the Netherlands after it had begun investigating Russian war crimes. He was identified as Sergei Cherkasov, a GRU officer. Later the same year, another GRU illegal, Mikhail Mikushin, who posed as the Brazilian researcher “José Assis Giammaria” at the University of Tromsø, was arrested by Norwegian authorities.¹⁷¹

The legalisation of Russian deep-cover officers using birth certificates was a widespread practice in Latin America

Brazil was targeted for several reasons: its passport allows visa-free travel to many countries; its ethnic diversity makes individuals with Russian features or accents less conspicuous; and, crucially, its birth certificates have been relatively easy to falsify. The legalisation of Russian deep-cover officers using birth certificates was also a widespread practice in other Latin American countries.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Institute of National Remembrance, “Forms, Methods, and Organization of Intelligence Work from Illegal Positions,” file number IPN BU 3484/75, Polish Ministry of the Interior, 35.

¹⁷⁰ “Russian Spy Family Convicted of Espionage in Slovenia Receives Secret State Decorations from Putin after Return in August Prisoner Swap,” *The Insider*, 10 December 2024.

¹⁷¹ Michael Schwartz and Jane Bradley, “The Spy Factory,” *The New York Times*, 21 May 2025.

¹⁷² Sanshiro Hosaka, “From Moscow to Tokyo: Operation TOURIST and KGB Illegals, Live Doubles, and Sabotage Plans,” *Intelligence and National Security*, 22 February 2026, 18.

Recent years have also seen other types of illegals. ‘True name illegals’, a term used by the FBI, refers to a late Soviet-era model in which operatives use their real identities rather than forged ones. Anna Chapman, arrested in 2010, is an example. She operated under her own name and did not require elaborate false documents or extensive legend-building. This approach reduces the burden of training operatives to assume new identities, but it has a drawback: because these operatives are openly Russian, their exposure fuels broader suspicion towards Russian nationals abroad, increasing scrutiny of Russians in general.¹⁷³

There is also a spectrum between classic illegals and true-name illegals. One example is Sergei Konovalov, whose real family name is Kononov, a type of GRU illegal who did not fully conceal his ties to Russia. To strengthen his legend, or cover story, he trained at an Austrian sewage treatment company and won a local sambo and judo tournament. After his exposure through a sequential passport number, he obtained a job as a project manager at Pushkin University, which teaches Russian language to foreigners.¹⁷⁴

In 2022, the SVR celebrated the 100th anniversary of the creation of illegal intelligence. Since then, the SVR has been organising seminars dedicated to illegals, portrayed as “heroes of Russia,” for Russian students. For example, in February 2025, former illegal intelligence officer Colonel Tamara Netyksa visited several universities in St Petersburg to give lectures to students.¹⁷⁵ Netyksa was one of seven Russian illegals publicly named and praised in 2020 by SVR Director Sergei Naryshkin in an unusual move. The SVR’s magazine *Razvedchik* devotes many pages to episodes from the history of declassified illegals.

The promotion of illegals among Russian students is not solely about fostering

patriotism. The SVR illegal couple arrested in Slovenia publicly shared their experiences of family life on assignment, including having children during a mission abroad and the challenge of adapting their children to life in Russia after the prisoner exchange, as the children had not known they were Russian before arriving in Moscow. Such issues represent practical concerns for prospective Russian illegals.¹⁷⁶ The real aim appears to be to cultivate the next generation of illegals.

However, the quality of the preparation of the new generation can be questioned. Multiple GRU illegals have been exposed since 2022. In the case of Cherkasov, who was arrested by Brazilian authorities, his legend – a detailed cover biography that an illegal should not carry while deployed – was recovered and published by Dutch authorities.¹⁷⁷ Leaked messages between a GRU illegal posted in Brazil and his wife, also an intelligence officer, in Greece, show the husband’s frustration that his job neither allowed them to live an ordinary family life nor produced tangible achievements. His wife admitted that they had been “tricked” into becoming illegals.¹⁷⁸

Long-term isolated foreign postings, combined with the subordination of family and personal interests to operational requirements and limited prospects for future career advancement in Moscow, may undermine motivation and increase the risk of defection.

6.2. NON-RUSSIAN ASSETS AND AGENTS GROUP LEADERS

To evade increased scrutiny of Russian citizens by western counterintelligence agencies, Russian intelligence has made greater use of non-Russian assets abroad.

¹⁷³Braun, *Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service 1991–2020*, 77.

¹⁷⁴“A Champion like No Other: The Curious Life of a Unit 29155 Operative,” *The Insider*, 4 November 2025.

¹⁷⁵“Тамара Нетыкса, заслуженный сотрудник органов внешней разведки России, находится с визитом в Санкт-Петербурге [Tamara Netyksa, a distinguished employee of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, is on a visit to St. Petersburg],” Комитет по внешним связям Санкт-Петербурга [Committee for External Relations of Saint Petersburg], 10 February 2025.

¹⁷⁶“Разведчики-нелегалы Артем и Анна Дульцевы: «Нелегалы всегда ходят по грани. И за гранью. Это осознанный риск» [Illegal intelligence officers Artem and Anna Dultsev: ‘Illegals always walk the line. And beyond it. It’s a calculated risk’], *Razvedchik*, December 2024.

¹⁷⁷General Intelligence and Security Service of the Netherlands (AVID), “Cover Identity of Russian Intelligence Officer,” General Intelligence and Security Service of the Netherlands (AVID), Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties [Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations], 16 June 2022.

¹⁷⁸Michael Schwirtz and Jane Bradley, “Text Messages Between Russian Spies, Annotated,” *The New York Times*, 21 May 2025.

The GRU's Centre 161 (Unit 29155) reportedly focuses on recruiting foreign students at Russian universities, especially those from the Balkans, Africa, and other regions. They are useful not only as intelligence sources on their

To evade increased scrutiny, Russian intelligence has made greater use of non-Russian assets abroad

respective countries, but also for providing broader non-Russian legends.¹⁷⁹ The GRU reportedly recruited Cubans and Colombians for a sabotage operation in Šiauliai, northern Lithuania, in 2024.¹⁸⁰

Nevertheless, citizens of former Soviet states who can communicate with Russian handlers in the same language are of particular value. Russian intelligence targets Moldovans, who have relatively easy access to the EU Schengen Area and may be willing to work for low wages.¹⁸¹ In 2023, French police arrested a Moldovan couple who had painted Stars of David on building facades on the orders of a Russian man in exchange for a small fee.¹⁸²

Citizens of former Soviet states who can communicate with Russian handlers in the same language are of particular value

Ukrainians are seen as valuable assets who can provide plausible deniability, taking advantage of western sympathy for them after 2022 and their broad refugee mobility across the EU. In January 2026, German authorities detained a Ukrainian-born woman who also held German citizenship and was alleged to have used her Ukrainian background to gain access to influential figures in politics and the defence industry, while secretly passing

sensitive information to the GRU.¹⁸³ In June 2024, French authorities detained a Donbas-born Ukrainian-Russian dual citizen who was seriously injured after an explosive detonated in his hotel room; he was suspected of planning violent action in France.¹⁸⁴ Former Ukrainian parliamentarian Viktor Medvedchuk's political technologist Artem Marchevsky, a Ukrainian-Israeli citizen, was granted temporary protection in Czechia and later Slovakia while running the Prague-registered *Voice of Europe* website, which spread anti-Ukrainian propaganda and disinformation.¹⁸⁵

Ukrainians are seen as valuable assets who can provide plausible deniability, taking advantage of western sympathy and broad refugee mobility

Furthermore, non-Russians recruited by Russian intelligence services often go on to recruit their own compatriots, acting in a role similar to that of an 'agent group leader'. The aforementioned cases involving Moldovans, Cubans, Britons, and Bulgarians illustrate this practice. On behalf of Russian intelligence services, such individuals direct the activities of one or several other agents. 'Legal' residencies typically employ 'agent group leaders' in countries with a difficult operational environment, especially when 'legal' residency officers are unable to maintain regular contact with agents because of limited personnel or geographical distance – a problem exacerbated by the mass expulsion of Russian intelligence officers in 2022.¹⁸⁶ Alongside illegals, non-Russian agent group leaders have provided Russian intelligence with additional operational opportunities.

¹⁷⁹ Watling et al., *The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare*, 11.

¹⁸⁰ "Prosecutor: Russian Intelligence Recruited Cubans and Colombians for Sabotage Operation in Lithuania," *The Baltic Sentinel*, 19 January 2026.

¹⁸¹ Grozev et al., "Michelin Red Star."

¹⁸² Pierre de Cossette, "Tags d'étoiles de David en Île-de-France : les enquêteurs envisagent la piste d'une opération de déstabilisation venue de la Russie," *Franceinfo*, 7 November 2023.

¹⁸³ Maxim Volovich, "Germany Arrests Alleged Russian Spy with Access to Zelenskyy, Merz," *Euromaidan Press*, 23 January 2026; Der Generalbundesanwalt [The Federal Prosecutor General], "Festnahme Wegen Mutmaßlicher Geheimdienstlicher Agententätigkeit [Arrest for Alleged Espionage]," 21 January 2026.

¹⁸⁴ Soren Seelow, "Russian-Ukrainian man detained in France amid heightened fears of violent acts in Europe," *Le Monde*, 6 June 2024.

¹⁸⁵ "Slovakia Revokes Protection of Alleged Pro-Russia Propagandist," *TVP*, 27 August 2024.

¹⁸⁶ P. N. Ignatov et al., *Агентурно-оперативный словарь разведчика* [Agent-operational dictionary of intelligence officer] (State Security Committee under the Council of Ministers of the USSR School No. 1, 1967), 6.

6.3. CULTURE AS AN INTELLIGENCE CHANNEL

Since the 1920s, cultural diplomacy has been integral to Russian intelligence practice.¹⁸⁷

Non-Russians recruited by Russian intelligence services often go on to recruit their own compatriots

A KGB training manual for intelligence officers, *The Use of Delegations and Tourism for Intelligence Activities*, noted that as the operational environment became more difficult for Soviet 'legal' residencies abroad, Soviet intelligence placed growing importance on exploiting "channels of tourism, cultural, and scientific exchanges." These channels were actively used both to gather intelligence from foreign visitors to the USSR and to send Soviet officers and agents abroad for intelligence purposes.¹⁸⁸ The arrest and conviction of Viacheslav Morozov, a Russian citizen and prominent professor of international relations in Estonia, in 2024 illustrate the continued relevance of this approach. According to the prosecution, he had, for many years, collected information on Estonia's domestic, defence, and security policy, as well as its people and infrastructure, on behalf of the GRU.¹⁸⁹

Today, Russian intelligence activity through academic and cultural channels has become particularly focused on the so-called global south: countries that have adopted a neutral stance toward the Russia-Ukraine war. In 2025, the Gorchakov Fund launched the "InteRussia" training programme for young professionals aged 21 to 40. The programme covers fields such as international relations, journalism, Russian studies, medicine, energy, theatre, and engineering. Most participants come from

BRICS countries – China, India, Brazil, and South Africa – as well as from other countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.¹⁹⁰ Similarly, Natalia Burlinova's "Creative Diplomacy" (see 2.5) has shifted its focus to Latin America by organising the Russian-Latin American Youth Forum "Hablemos con Rusia" in Moscow.¹⁹¹ In India, Russia also organises the conference "Cryptography in a Multipolar World." FSB officers, including Igor Kachalin, Deputy Head of the Centre for Information Protection and Special Communications (the Eight Centre, *Центр защиты информации и специальной связи*), serve on its steering committee alongside Indian, Vietnamese, and Japanese professors.¹⁹²

Importantly, cultural channels remain useful even in countries that have imposed sanctions on Russia. For example, Mikhail Shvydkoy, the Russian President's Special Representative for International Cultural Cooperation, has travelled to Hungary, Austria, and Slovakia, where political leaders have made overtures toward Moscow. According to one report, former German and Russian officials held confidential meetings in Abu Dhabi and Baku to discuss visits by Germans to Moscow and a possible return visit to Germany by Shvydkoy, with the German Foreign Ministry reportedly agreeing to issue him a visa. Shvydkoy has maintained ties with AfD co-leader Alice Weidel since 2021.¹⁹³ Shvydkoy has also targeted French Russophiles. In 2023, a grandson of French war hero and former president Charles de Gaulle was warmly welcomed by Putin and Shvydkoy at the St Petersburg International Cultural Forum.¹⁹⁴

However, the most stable platform for Shvydkoy's engagement appears to be Japan. He stated openly that "Japan, unlike Europe, is prepared to continue cultural exchanges," and that "those who attend Russian cultural

¹⁸⁷ Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to Soviet Union, 1921-1941* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 30–35, 41, 60.

¹⁸⁸ P. N. Eliseev, *Использование делегаций и туризма в разведывательных целях* [Use of delegations and tourism for intelligence purposes] (Комитет государственной безопасности при Совете министров СССР, 101 Краснознаменная школа, 1968), 3–4.

¹⁸⁹ Vladimir Sazonov, "Russian Influence Activities and Espionage in the Estonian Academic Environment: The Case of Viacheslav Morozov, a Russian GRU Spy at the University of Tartu," in Marcin Grabowski et al. (ed.) *Research and Education Security Report* (2026).

¹⁹⁰ "InteRussia," InteRussia, accessed in October 2025.

¹⁹¹ "The Russian-Latin American Youth Forum Hablemos Con Rusia in Moscow," PICREADI, accessed in June 2026.

¹⁹² "AgileCrypto 2026 Cryptographic Flexibility in a Multipolar Environment," AgileCrypto, accessed in July 2026.

¹⁹³ Ingo Malcher, "Schattendiplomatie in Abu Dhabi: Die geheimen Treffen der deutsch-russischen Freunde," *Die Zeit* (Hamburg), 3 December 2025.

¹⁹⁴ President of Russia, "Plenary Session of the United Cultures Forum," Kremlin.ru, 21 November 2023.

events can no longer maintain hostility toward Russia.” He also announced that a 2026 Japan tour by Russian pianist Denis Matsuev had been confirmed and that discussions were underway regarding a Japan tour by conductor Valery Gergiev. Both Matsuev and Gergiev are known as supporters of Putin and Russia’s war of aggression, and their performances have been widely cancelled across Europe. Shvydkoy’s activities extend beyond cultural exchange. During his visit to Japan in August 2025, he met high-ranking Japanese officials, including the head of the National Security Secretariat and the vice foreign minister. These meetings suggest that Japan’s continued cultural exchange with Russia already carries political costs.¹⁹⁵

Culture is also a tool for maintaining influence among Russian ‘compatriots’ abroad. Former SVR officer Kozhokin’s report (see 3.4) argued that Moscow should engage apolitical members of the diaspora, who seek to maintain cultural ties with Russia and provide Russian language education for their children, through the cultural arms of Russian propaganda and disinformation, including Rossotrudnichestvo, the Russkiy Mir Foundation, and the Gorchakov Fund.¹⁹⁶

7. ENDURING PROBLEMS

7. 1. INTERAGENCY COORDINATION

Improving coordination among intelligence services has long been a challenge for Moscow. In the 1960s, despite a Central Committee resolution, the KGB noted that the GRU leadership was reluctant to deepen contacts with the KGB’s First Chief Directorate.¹⁹⁷ Similarly, disputes arose between the First

Chief Directorate, responsible for foreign intelligence, and the Second Chief Directorate, responsible for counterintelligence, over the division of foreign work, requiring interventions by the KGB leadership.¹⁹⁸

Similar overlaps may lead to clashes of interest between agencies today. Some researchers stress competition and rivalry among Russian intelligence agencies, while others argue that interagency conflicts can be resolved with Putin’s personal blessing. Some directorates of the presidential administration, staffed by FSB, SVR, and GRU officers, have coordinated overall activities in target areas such as Ukraine and the South Caucasus, especially when Putin appoints issue-specific ‘curators’.¹⁹⁹

After the full-scale invasion, the presidential administration reportedly established the Committee of Special Influence (*Комитет специального влияния*) under the supervision of First Deputy Chief Sergei Kiriyenko. The committee assigned special tasks to intelligence agencies targeting specific countries and evaluated the effectiveness of those operations.²⁰⁰ Kiriyenko’s overhaul likely led to the reorganisation of the two presidential directorates into the new Directorate for Strategic Partnership and Cooperation (see 2.4).

Russian intelligence services are known for their strict observance of the principle of compartmentation: officers remain shielded from intelligence outside their narrow operational remit.²⁰¹ Nevertheless, recent reports provide sporadic evidence of interagency coordination.

Cooperation between the FSB and the SVR appears to be growing, especially in the field of external counterintelligence: monitoring Russian diplomats, penetrating *émigré* communities, and targeting hostile intelligence

¹⁹⁵Sanshiro Hosaka, “日露「文化・学術交流」「民間外交」が諜報と影響工作の起点になるリスク：ロシア情報機関の視点から（下）” [The Risk of Japan-Russia ‘Cultural and Academic Exchange’ and ‘Public Diplomacy’ Becoming Starting Points for Intelligence and Influence Operations: From the Perspective of Russian Intelligence (Part 2)],” *Foresight*, 18 November 2025.

¹⁹⁶Kozhokin, *Prospects for Interaction with Representatives of the Russian Diaspora*, 3.

¹⁹⁷Vasilii Mitrokhin, “USA - Illegal Intelligence,” 1987–1992, GBR/0014/MITN 1/6/2, p. 176, The Papers of Vasilii Mitrokhin.

¹⁹⁸Hosaka, “Repeating History,” 438–39.

¹⁹⁹Mark Galeotti, *Putin’s Hydra: Inside Russia’s Intelligence Services* (The European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016), 4; Hosaka, “Russian Non-Military Warfare,” 80.

²⁰⁰Watling et al., *The Threat from Russia’s Unconventional Warfare*, 8.

²⁰¹Sean Michael Wiswesser, *Tradecraft, Tactics, and Dirty Tricks: Russian Intelligence and Putin’s Secret War*, 1st ed (Naval Institute Press, 2026), sec. RIS Compartmentation of Cases.

services.²⁰² The FSB increasingly relies on the SVR's more advanced overseas infrastructure to conduct a broader range of special operations, from surveillance to assassinations.

Cooperation between the FSB and the SVR appears to be growing, especially in the field of external counterintelligence

In some cases, an SVR resident may also serve as a trusted contact for the FSB, effectively extending the latter's authority abroad. In practice, such cooperation is coordinated through the head of the SVR residency and the residency's senior security officer, usually the Line KR (*линия КР, контрразведка*) officer responsible for counterintelligence.²⁰³

According to *The Insider*, Mikhail Kolesov, a mid-level officer, was affiliated with both the FSB and the SVR, a practice that has become increasingly widespread among Russian intelligence agencies.²⁰⁴ Joakim von Braun similarly argues that the FSB and SVR have maintained institutional overlap since at least 2002, with SVR officers embedded in key FSB units such as the Directorate for Coordination of Operational Information (*Управление координации оперативной информации*, UKOI; now the DOI), and the Service for Analysis, Forecasting, and Strategic Planning (*Служба анализа, прогноза и стратегического планирования*, SAPSP; now the SOIMS).²⁰⁵

There are similar reports of dual FSB-GRU affiliation. An undercover technical officer for the GRU also belonged to the FSB cyber unit known as the Sixteenth Directorate as well.²⁰⁶ The FSB, particularly its DVKR, is reported to maintain close ties with criminal hackers

involved in financial cybercrime and to provide personnel to the cyber department of GRU Unit 29155. Some GRU officers are reportedly assigned simultaneously to work with the DVKR.²⁰⁷

However, as is often the case in highly compartmentalised organisations, informal networks based on family ties and friendships developed within the KGB outside formal workplace structures.²⁰⁸ Informal communication through personal networks may also transcend institutional boundaries among these secretive agencies. An SVR officer reportedly coordinated with the GRU's Andrei Averyanov through a personal network involving his father, a military general, while working on an influence operation.²⁰⁹ Elite amateur ice hockey teams may also facilitate contacts between officers from different agencies.²¹⁰

Informal communication through personal networks may also transcend institutional boundaries

The Jan Marsalek case (see 1.2) suggests possible interagency coordination in highly sensitive areas, including the transfer or shared handling of agents across agencies. Marsalek was involved in infiltrating Austria's security agency, likely a form of external counterintelligence traditionally associated with the FSB.²¹¹ The case of GRU illegal Pavel Rubtsov (see 2.4) likewise suggests that elements of the GRU may also be involved in monitoring dissidents abroad, an area usually associated with the FSB. Furthermore, the FSB, given its close ties to organised crime groups, may serve as an intermediary linking the GRU

²⁰² Hosaka, *Putin's Counterintelligence State*, 8–9.

²⁰³ Dossier, "ФСБ за границей [FSB abroad]."

²⁰⁴ Roman Dobrokhoto et al., "«Соображениями морали и нравственности пренебречь»: как СВР организует дезинформационные кампании на Западе [“Neglecting Considerations of Morality and Ethics”: How the SVR Organises Disinformation Campaigns in the West],” *The Insider*, 4 July 2024.

²⁰⁵ Braun, *Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service 1991–2020*, 53.

²⁰⁶ "Undercover Chef: How the FBI Interrogator of a Russian Spy Arrested in Florida Later Came down with Havana Syndrome,” *The Insider*, 1 April 2024.

²⁰⁷ Michael Weiss et al., "Hidden Bear: The GRU Hackers of Russia's Most Notorious Kill Squad,” *The Insider*, 31 May 2025.

²⁰⁸ Wayne Lambridge, "A Note on KGB Style - CIA,” The Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2 July 1996.

²⁰⁹ Dobrokhoto et al., "«Соображениями морали и нравственности пренебречь»."

²¹⁰ Sergey Kanev, "Blades of Glory: Putin's Aide, FSB Generals, and a GRU Spy Lace up with a Convict on Russia's Most Secretive Amateur Ice Hockey Team,” *The Insider*, 16 June 2025.

²¹¹ Michael Weiss et al., "Our Jan in Moscow: The Secret Russian Life of Europe's Most Notorious Fugitive-Turned-Spy,” *The Insider*, 16 September 2025.

to elements of the Russian criminal diaspora for assassinations and sabotage operations abroad.²¹²

The FSB may serve as an intermediary linking the GRU to elements of the Russian criminal diaspora

7.2. CORPORATE IDENTITY AND NEPOTISM

In September 2023, a new statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky was unveiled – not on Lubyanka Square in front of the FSB, but at the SVR headquarters outside Moscow. Dzerzhinsky was the founding head of the Cheka, the precursor to the KGB and today's Russian security services. This may have been a gesture of renewed loyalty after SVR Director Naryshkin's disagreement with Putin during the Security Council meeting three days before the full-scale invasion.²¹³ In April 2026, Putin signed a decree restoring Feliks Dzerzhinsky's name to the FSB Academy. He himself graduated from the KGB Higher School – the predecessor of the FSB Academy – in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when it still bore Dzerzhinsky's name.²¹⁴ These symbolic events reaffirm the privileged status of the Chekist elite in contemporary Russia.

Putin's confidant and long-serving Secretary of the Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, was among the first to describe Chekists as Russia's

"new nobility."²¹⁵ Since then, stagnation and nepotism within Russia's security and intelligence services have deepened.

According to one investigation, three out of every four officials have relatives employed in public administration or government-related businesses.²¹⁶

Putin is well known for favouring Chekists with whom he has close personal ties, including those from St Petersburg. In June 2026, Sergei Ivanov, Putin's longtime ally who had served alongside him in the Leningrad KGB and later as Security Council Secretary and Head of the Presidential Administration, passed away at the age of 73. Putin personally attended his funeral and paid tribute.²¹⁷ The so-called 'golden age' generation in Chekist mythology – those who joined the KGB in the 1970s during Yuri Andropov's chairmanship – is now ageing.²¹⁸ It includes Putin himself (born 1952), Nikolai Patrushev (born 1951), Aleksandr Bortnikov (born 1951), who has served as FSB director since 2008, and Sergei Naryshkin (born 1954), who has served as SVR director since 2016. With this prolonged leadership stagnation, transition to the next generation might pose a challenge for the Russian intelligence community.

The transition to the next generation is likely to be shaped by nepotism and cronyism

7.3. SUCCESSION TO THE NEXT GENERATION

The transition to the next generation of Chekists is likely to be shaped by nepotism and cronyism, with the children of the 'golden age' generation taking crucial positions in the government and security agencies. In 2024, when Shoigu was appointed Secretary of the Security Council, Patrushev was reassigned as presidential aide for shipbuilding. Some

²¹² For example, investigative reporting has alleged that Gennady Petrov, the leader of the Tambov-Malyshev organised crime group arrested by the Spanish authorities in 2008, maintained close ties to Sergei Korolev, the current First Deputy Director of the FSB. Anastasiya Kirilenko, "[День чекиста празднуют все. Прослушки обнаружили связь тамбовской ОПГ с главой СЭБ ФСБ и прокурором Петербурга](#)" [Everyone celebrates the Chekist Day. Wiretapping discovered a connection between the Tambov organised crime group and the head of the SES FSB and the prosecutor of St. Petersburg], *The Insider*, 20 December 2018.

²¹³ "[Памятник Дзержинскому открыли в штаб-квартире Службы внешней разведки](#)" [A monument to Dzerzhinsky was unveiled at the headquarters of the Foreign Intelligence Service], Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation, 11 September 2023.

²¹⁴ Sanshiro Hosaka, "[Dzerzhinsky Returned: What Connects the FSB Academy Renaming and the Demolition of Soviet Repression Memorials](#)," *International Centre for Defence and Security*, 28 April 2026.

²¹⁵ "[С гуманитарным образованием в ФСБ очень плохо. Там процветает конспирология](#)" ["The FSB's humanities education is in dire straits. Conspiracy theories are rampant there"], *Holod*, 26 September 2022.

²¹⁶ "[We Are Passed down through Generations](#)," *Proekt.*, 10 November 2025.

²¹⁷ President of Russia, "[Farewell Ceremony for Sergei Ivanov](#)," Kremlin.ru, 3 July 2026.

²¹⁸ Julie Fedor, "Chekists Look Back on the Cold War: The Polemical Literature," *Intelligence and National Security* 26, no. 6 (2011): 842–63.

interpreted this move as a decline in Patrushev's influence. However, he remains a member of the Security Council and has managed to keep at least two FSB generals close to him – Rashid Nurgaliyev and Oleg Khramov – at the Security Council, potentially allowing Patrushev to retain influence over the Security Council under its new secretary.²¹⁹

Furthermore, Patrushev's eldest son, Dmitry – an FSB Academy graduate who served as Minister of Agriculture from 2018 to 2024 – was promoted to Deputy Prime Minister overseeing agriculture. His younger son, Andrei, has also experienced an unusually rapid rise within the FSB. After joining the FSB in 2003 at the age of 22, he became deputy head of the Ninth Department of the Directorate P, the industrial branch of the FSB's Economic Security Service, which closely monitors the oil market. The FSB later seconded him to state energy companies, including Rosneft, where he served as an adviser to Igor Sechin in 2006.²²⁰ In March 2026, Andrei acquired a stake in Cross Technologies, a company that provides information security services to state institutions and banks and supplies specialised equipment for internet censorship.²²¹

Pavel Fradkov, the son of Mikhail Fradkov – SVR director from 2007 to 2016 and prime minister from 2004 to 2007 – studied at the FSB Academy alongside Andrei Patrushev.²²² After serving in the MFA, the FSB, and the Administrative Directorate of the President of the Russian Federation, Pavel was appointed in June 2024 as a deputy to Defence Minister Andrei Belousov, who had replaced Sergei Shoigu.

Another prominent case is Boris Korolev, the 29-year-old son of high-ranking FSB official Sergei Korolev, who serves as first deputy director general of X Holding, a company supplying equipment for surveillance and internet blocking in Russia.²²³ Sergei Korolev, who has close ties to Gennady Petrov, the leader of the Tambov-Malyshev organised crime group, headed the FSB's Economic Security Service from 2016 until becoming First Deputy Director of the FSB in 2021. He is regarded as a possible candidate for FSB director.

7.4. FIGHTING CORRUPTION

As discussed in 5.1, the FSB's Department of Military Counterintelligence (DVKR), which is formally tasked with combating corruption in the armed forces, is itself partially complicit in corrupt practices and exercises its powers selectively.

The FSB's Department of Military Counterintelligence is itself partially complicit in corrupt practices and exercises its powers selectively

Furthermore, in 2024, three officers of the FSB's Directorate M, responsible for investigating corruption within the judicial system, were charged with attempting to accept bribes totalling over ₺5 bn (approximately €50 mn) – a record amount for Russian security service corruption cases.²²⁴ Several officers of Directorate K of the Economic Security Service, which combats crimes in the banking sector, were also implicated in bribery schemes, though they received comparatively

²¹⁹ Sergey Kanev, "A Country for Old Men: What's Happening to Nikolai Patrushev's Protégés at the FSB after His Departure?", *The Insider*, 26 September 2024.

²²⁰ "Доходы и бизнес семьи – Николай Патрушев [Family Income and Business - Nikolai Patrushev]," *Dossier*, 21 February 2020.

²²¹ "РБК: Сын Николая Патрушева купил долю в 'Кросс-технологии' [RBC: Nikolai Patrushev's son bought a stake in Cross Technologies]," *Radio Svoboda*, 19 March 2026.

²²² Nadezhda Yurova, "Отцы и дети [Fathers and sons]," *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, 14 May 2024.

²²³ "Сын замдиректора ФСБ оказался топ-менеджером компании, зарабатывающей миллиарды на интернет-блокировках в России [The son of the FSB deputy director turned out to be a top manager at a company making billions by blocking internet access in Russia]," *Nastoyashchee Vremya*, 16 March 2026.

²²⁴ Sonya Sabina, "Троих офицеров антикоррупционного управления ФСБ обвинили в получении взяток на рекордную сумму свыше 5 млрд рублей [Three officers from the FSB's anti-corruption department have been accused of accepting bribes totaling a record-breaking 5 billion rubles]," *Important Stories*, 8 January 2024.

lenient sentences.²²⁵ Cases of bribery and embezzlement involving FSB regional offices and FSB-linked enterprises continue to surface.²²⁶ Even a general of the FSB's Internal Security Directorate (*Управление собственной безопасности*, USB), whose mission is to detect spies and combat corruption within the FSB, has reportedly been involved in illicit sand and gravel businesses.²²⁷ The FSB's ineffective anti-corruption work is likely to impede Russia's military reforms, announced by Defence Minister Shoigu in December 2022, as well as the restoration of the country's economic and industrial capabilities.

Dissatisfaction with supervisors is a vulnerability that should be of interest to western intelligence agencies

The massive expulsion of Russian intelligence officers from western countries has reportedly left many officers struggling to secure new overseas postings because of their compromised status, fuelling internal rivalries and mutual recrimination. Meanwhile, kickbacks, patronage, and nepotism continue to play an important role in promotions and career advancement.²²⁸ These factors may prevent many capable officers from advancing in their careers, leaving them potentially dissatisfied with their supervisors – a vulnerability that should be of interest to western intelligence agencies.

²²⁵ Irek Murtazin, “[А тонна денег – чья?](#) [And whose is that ton of money?],” *Novaya gazeta*, 10 October 2024.

²²⁶ Andrei Vasil'ev, “[В Ульяновске по обвинению в получении взятки арестован сотрудник управления ФСБ](#) [An FSB officer has been arrested in Ulyanovsk on charges of bribery],” *Kommersant*, 27 October 2025; “[ФСБ расследует комплекс хищений](#) [The FSB is investigating a series of embezzlements],” *Kommersant*, 17 May 2026.

²²⁷ Sergey Kanev, “[Sandpit General: Senior FSB Official Quietly Does Business with Lithuanian Partners](#),” *The Insider*, 7 August 2025.

²²⁸ Sergey Kanev, “[Drunk Driving and Prostitutes: Members of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service Have Taken to Denouncing Their Colleagues](#),” *The Insider*, 22 January 2026.

7.5. PERSONALISATION OF THE INTELLIGENCE CYCLE

Russia's intelligence cycle does not function like those of its western counterparts. Putin receives intelligence products that reinforce his prior assumptions, encouraging poorly grounded and potentially damaging decisions.

In a highly personalised intelligence system, agencies compete not only to provide accurate assessments but also to anticipate the preferences of the principal customer. Information that challenges Putin's assumption risks being filtered or reframed as it moves upward, while assessments consistent with his worldview face fewer obstacles. Three days before Russia's full-scale invasion, Sergei Naryshkin, the SVR Director, whose views on how to deal with Ukraine differed from Putin's, was publicly shamed and compelled to revise his stance.²²⁹ Such episodes signal to intelligence officials that challenging the president's assumptions can carry personal and professional costs, reinforcing incentives to tailor assessments to his expectations.

Challenging the president's assumptions can carry personal and professional costs, reinforcing incentives to tailor assessments to his expectations

Putin and the FSB's response to the terrorist attack on Crocus City Hall near Moscow also illustrates the personalisation of the intelligence cycle. A US advance warning of possible terrorist attacks at mass gatherings in Moscow was dismissed by Putin himself. After the attack, Putin drew parallels between the terrorists and Ukrainian “Nazis,” while the FSB deliberately altered its reporting to support Putin's perspective, despite the Islamic State having claimed responsibility for the attack.²³⁰ This dysfunctional intelligence cycle distorts decision-making across the state, including in the military, economic, and scientific

²²⁹ “[Нарышкин оговорился и заявил, что поддерживает присоединение ДНР и ЛНР к России](#) [Naryshkin misspoke and stated that he supports the annexation of the DPR and LPR to Russia],” *Kommersant*, 21 February 2022.

²³⁰ Hosaka, “A Failure of Personalised Services.”

spheres. Military commanders are afraid to report the real situation at the front, while Putin appears to believe falsely that the war is nearing its end.²³¹ According to *The New York Times*, the main purpose of CIA Director

in Europe. The Fifth Service has likely complemented the efforts of the SVR, whose ‘legal’ residencies have been affected by the mass expulsion of officers from the west.

This dysfunctional intelligence cycle distorts decision-making across the state, including in the military, economic, and scientific spheres

John Ratcliffe’s visit to Moscow in August 2026 was to privately share his bleak assessment of Russia’s war against Ukraine and to urge the Russians to cut a peace deal. The CIA suspected that Putin’s subordinates had not provided him with credible information about the war’s trajectory and toll.²³²

While it is important for western governments to prevent Putin from repeating the kind of strategic miscalculation that led to the prolonged war in Ukraine, they should also prepare for a post-Putin scenario in which a successor could optimise Russia’s intelligence cycle and thereby contribute to the restoration of the country’s military, economic, and technological capabilities while retaining imperial ambitions and authoritarian institutions.

The war has accelerated the securitisation of Russian society, and multiple legislative amendments to the Law on the FSB indicate an expansion of its powers during wartime. The FSB has gained new powers to access private databases, suspend telecommunications and internet services, and approve international scientific cooperation and has re-established control over pretrial detention facilities. Its Second Service has accelerated its efforts to penetrate and discredit Russian dissident communities.

The SVR has begun engaging in overt information work. It exploits transatlantic divisions under the second Trump presidency,

The war has accelerated the securitisation of Russian society

while Putin’s envoy Kirill Dmitriev uses backchannels to bypass the established US foreign policy and intelligence establishments and gain direct access to the White House.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Russian intelligence and security agencies have not only redirected their priorities toward supporting the war effort but have also adapted their tradecraft to a more constrained and contested operational and strategic environment.

The full-scale war eliminated Moscow’s political intelligence opportunities in Kyiv. Nevertheless, the FSB Fifth Service continues to play a significant role in Russia’s occupation administrations in Ukrainian territories and has intensified active measures operations

The redistribution of Prigozhin’s Wagner Group assets after his aborted mutiny has further reshaped the intelligence ecosystem. The SVR has inherited political technology assets in Africa, where Moscow presents itself as an ‘anti-colonial’ force and defender of ‘traditional values’ while providing authoritarian regimes with paramilitary and propaganda support.

The reorganisation of the Presidential Directorate for Interregional and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, established by Putin in 2005 to restore Moscow’s influence in the post-Soviet space, and the geographically eclectic portfolio of its successor reflect Moscow’s shrinking opportunities and, in some cases, outright setbacks in what the Kremlin has traditionally regarded as its ‘sphere of influence’. Although the Kremlin remains focused on the former Soviet space, its political influence efforts have increasingly shifted toward fellow travellers in the global

²³¹“[Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 28, 2026](#),” *Institute for the Study of War*, 29 May 2026.

²³²Adam Entous and Julian E. Barnes, “[C.I.A. Chief Delivered Bleak Assessment of Russia’s War in Secretive Moscow Visit](#),” *The New York Times*, 27 August 2026.

south and potential Trojan horses in Europe, such as Viktor Orbán's Hungary.

The GRU took over Wagner's paramilitary networks and operations in Africa. This coincided with the expansion of Russia's sabotage and assassination capabilities, including the reported creation of the SSD and the emergence of a new Centre 795 for assassinations and abductions abroad. The creation of dedicated services suggests that destabilising target states, eliminating perceived traitors, and deterring defections have become strategic priorities for the Kremlin.

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FSB military counterintelligence has become increasingly important as both a security and political instrument during the war. While responsible for monitoring the armed forces, the DVKR has also been used by Putin to purge military officials and dismantle Sergei Shoigu's patronage network.

In response to the deterioration of the operational environment, Russian intelligence has expanded its use of illegals, non-Russian assets, cultural and academic channels unaffected by sanctions, and operations conducted from Russian territory. It has also increasingly exploited Ukrainians and other non-Russian nationals to avoid counter-intelligence scrutiny.

Russian intelligence remains dangerous, adaptive, and willing to take risks, but it is not invincible. Its vulnerabilities include a dysfunctional, personalised intelligence cycle, compounded by nepotism and corruption. Adaptation at the organisational and operational levels does not necessarily remedy Russia's dysfunctional strategic decision-making; rather, Putin's personalisation of the intelligence cycle has worsened under wartime conditions.

Last but not least, the adaptation of Russia's intelligence ecosystem has coincided with a significant redistribution of power among the Kremlin's major political clans: the collapse

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of Yevgeny Prigozhin's empire; the rise of Sergei Kiriyenko as a key coordinator of foreign influence campaigns; the decline of Sergei Shoigu's military patronage network; the growing influence of Igor Sechin within the military and the Defence Ministry through FSB military counterintelligence; and that of Sergei Chemezov through Centre 795.

At a closed meeting with leading business figures in March 2026, Putin called on them to make voluntary contributions to the state budget to finance the war. The initiative to mobilise oligarchs reportedly originated with Sechin, the president of Rosneft.²³³ Yury Kovalchuk, chairman of the *National Media Group* and one of Putin's closest friends, is believed to have encouraged Putin to launch the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Through his control over nationwide television channels, news sites, and the social media platform VK, whose CEO is Kiriyenko's son Vladimir, he has also played a central role in supporting the war effort.²³⁴

The adaptation of Russia's intelligence ecosystem has coincided with a significant redistribution of power among the Kremlin's major political clans

Yet even Putin's closest allies have found themselves under mounting pressure. Underinvestment, Ukrainian drone attacks on energy infrastructure, and US sanctions

²³³ "The Bell: Путин на закрытой встрече с бизнесменами предложил им добровольно профинансировать войну. Эту идею ему подсказал Сечин [The Bell: At a closed meeting with businessmen, Putin proposed that they voluntarily finance the war. Sechin suggested this idea to him]," *Meduza*, 26 March 2026."

²³⁴ "Как Путин возненавидел Украину [How Putin came to hate Ukraine]," *Verstka*, 25 April 2023.

against Lukoil and Rosneft – the first major sanctions imposed during the second Trump administration – have constrained Russia’s ability to expand oil production despite the global energy crisis triggered by the US-Israel war against Iran.²³⁵ Swiss oil trader Gunvor, linked to Putin’s longtime associate Gennady Timchenko, abandoned plans to acquire Lukoil’s international assets because of US sanctions.²³⁶ Billionaires Arkady and Boris Rotenberg helped shield and relocate assets linked to Putin’s family to evade western sanctions imposed after 2014.²³⁷ Both brothers remain under western sanctions, and Boris Rotenberg’s assets in Finland have been frozen since 2022.²³⁸

The possibility that a potential contender for power could use military or intelligence assets against Putin cannot be excluded

Putin has succeeded in micromanaging the Russian intelligence ecosystem through a divide-and-rule approach. However, the possibility that a potential contender for power could use military or intelligence assets against Putin cannot be excluded. This is likely one of the developments Putin fears in the fifth year of a war of attrition and sanctions, which has created considerable potential for discontent among political, business, and military elites.²³⁹

The preceding analysis suggests several policy implications for western governments and societies. The following recommendations aim to address the challenges posed by Russia’s evolving intelligence activities:

CHECK RUSSIA’S BACKCHANNEL DIPLOMACY

The rise of Putin’s envoys, such as Kirill Dmitriev and Mikhail Shvydkoy, demonstrates that Moscow systematically uses business and cultural channels as avenues for political influence.

Both channels exploit western assumptions: that backchannels are privileged and effective means of communication, and that music, art, and sport exist outside politics. The Russian leadership and intelligence services, however, do not separate business and culture from politics. Instead, they use them as channels to access high-level decision-makers and advance foreign policy goals.

While vigilance towards Russian diplomats and related personnel has increased since 2022, activities that fall outside traditional diplomacy – such as those conducted by Dmitriev and Shvydkoy – may receive less counterintelligence scrutiny because of their overt or semi-official character. However, their western interlocutors should be warned of Russia’s *modus operandi*, and governments should ensure that such channels do not circumvent established policymaking processes or become privileged sources of information for political leaders. Where necessary, proactive measures should be taken to disrupt Russia’s backchannels or directly engage Moscow’s targets to counter its influence over them.

SANCTION POLITICAL TECHNOLOGISTS AND MAKE INFLUENCE OPERATIONS COSTLY

As SVR-supervised influence operations in Africa suggest, Russian intelligence services occasionally outsource influence operations as ‘projects’ to political technologists or social-engineering companies. These private actors are contracted for specific operations and move from one target country to another, depending on the Kremlin’s changing priorities. While much of their work is not entirely covert, their role in Russia’s contemporary active measures is significant, and this practice is not new. For example, a Russian political technologist who

²³⁵ “Дефицит инвестиций в 25г, атаки на инфраструктуру и санкции подрывают рост нефтедобычи в РФ [2025 investment deficit, infrastructure attacks, and sanctions are undermining Russia’s oil production growth],” *The Moscow Times*, 22 June 2026.

²³⁶ “Gunvor после заявления Минфина США отказался от сделки с ‘Лукойлом’ [Gunvor abandoned its deal with Lukoil following the US Treasury Department’s announcement],” *Radio Svoboda*, 7 November 2025.

²³⁷ Dmitry Velikovsky et al., “Documents Suggest Billionaire Oligarch Financed Purchase of Austrian Chalet Used by Putin’s Daughter,” *Stories, Important Stories*, 20 June 2023.

²³⁸ “Роскошная вилла Бориса Ротенберга в Ханко была арестована [Boris Rotenberg’s luxury villa in Hanko has been seized],” *Yle*, 17 December 2025.

²³⁹ Anin, “Vladimir Putin Fears.”

led anti-Ukrainian information campaigns in 2014–15 was found operating in Republika Srpska, targeting Balkan audiences in 2018.²⁴⁰

Political technologists often proactively formulate and propose projects based on key parameters provided by senior intelligence officers.²⁴¹ Some work for multiple agencies. Examples include Medvedchuk's associate Kyrylo Molchanov, who works with both the FSB's Fifth Service and the SVR,²⁴² and Russian pro-war propagandist Yuri Podolyaka, who began his career at Prigozhin's Federal News Agency and has maintained ties with both the GRU and the FSB's Fifth Service.²⁴³

Russia has a large domestic market for political technologists engaged in electoral manipulation. Foreign information operations have emerged as spin-offs from this market. To counter Russia's foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), it is not enough to sanction only companies whose services Russian intelligence agencies use, as personnel can simply move from sanctioned companies to newly created or unsanctioned entities.²⁴⁴ Sanctioning individuals involved in such operations can complicate hiring processes and thereby increase the costs of Russian operations.

In March 2024, the US Treasury's OFAC imposed sanctions on Ilya Gambashidze and Nikolai Tupikin, as well as their companies, Social Design Agency and Structura, "for being owned or controlled by, or having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly" the Russian government in its interference with US elections.²⁴⁵ However, this is only the tip of the iceberg. According to an investigation, as of December 2025, at least 52 employees – including project managers, political consultants, analysts, and media managers – continued to work

in former Prigozhin-linked companies in St. Petersburg.²⁴⁶

RAISE VIGILANCE AMONG DISSIDENTS AND REFUGEES

Most Russian *émigré* communities have yet to recognise that they are targets not only of harassment but also of penetration by Russian intelligence.²⁴⁷ They should increase their counterintelligence awareness and, where appropriate, cooperate with trusted western authorities. Regardless of whether such cooperation exists, Russian services are primed to view Russian dissident communities abroad as potential collaborators with local intelligence services. The need to raise counterintelligence awareness also applies to Ukrainians and other nationals, whom Russian intelligence increasingly uses as layers of plausible deniability.

At the same time, caution is needed against the assumption that Russian dissident communities have been thoroughly infiltrated. Drawing on the KGB tradition of '*kompromat*', the FSB may spread allegations of 'cooperation with the FSB' against genuine opposition members to sow distrust among host-country authorities and discourage support for them.

For example, an email exchange between SVR officers obtained by *The Insider* revealed an operation called "Icepick," aimed at tainting the reputation of a former Russian banker living in the United States who sponsored Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation. By leaking fabricated stories about his alleged financial support for rogue FSB officers and for Chechen warlord Ramzan Kadyrov, the smear campaign aimed to "discredit the individual in the eyes of his immediate circle, the authorities of the host country, stable business contacts, local security services, and community and diaspora groups in the cities where he resides."²⁴⁸

²⁴⁰ Hosaka, "Russian Non-Military Warfare," 71–73.

²⁴¹ Hosaka, "Welcome to Surkov's Theater," 765.

²⁴² ArmyInform, "Викрито 12 поплічників Медведчука."

²⁴³ Dobrokhoto et al., "Talking Points from Moscow."

²⁴⁴ Serge Poliakov, "Trolls Behind the Mask of Journalists: How Yevgeny Prigozhin's Patriot Media Group Was Organized," *Problems of Post-Communism* 72, no. 5 (2025): 416–28.

²⁴⁵ "Treasury Sanctions Actors Supporting Kremlin-Directed Malign Influence Efforts," US Department of the Treasury, 13 February 2026. the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC

²⁴⁶ Dossier, "Антиколоніальна боротьба Службы внешней разведки [Anti-colonial struggle of the Foreign Intelligence Service]."

²⁴⁷ Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, "Truth and Consequences: Russia's Exiles Shudder at Spy Claims," *CEPA*, 12 November 2025.

²⁴⁸ However, most likely, the plan was not implemented for unknown reasons; the targeted banker reportedly did not notice any such rumours. Michael Weiss et al., "Morality and Ethics Should Play No Part: Leaks Reveal How Russia's Foreign Intelligence Agency Runs Disinformation Campaigns in the West," *The Insider*, 4 July 2024.

Country	Doubles	Records Created	Root Identity Bases
Argentina	2 (women)	6 (3 women and 3 men)	8
Bolivia	—	1 (woman)	1
Brazil	7 (5 women)	9 (7 women)	20
Paraguay	1	—	1
Chile	6	6	2
Uruguay	13	5	10
Colombia	2	—	2
Peru	—	7	1
Mexico	4	5	4
Spain	2	4	5
Guatemala	3	—	2
Portugal	—	1	2

Table 1. The KGB's Preparation of Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Illegals in 1974.
Source: Mitrokhin, "K16: Illegals."²⁵¹

CONSIDER OFFENSIVE COUNTERINTELLIGENCE

For western services, which have often limited counterintelligence to defensive measures, it is time to consider more active approaches to disrupting and manipulating Russia's aggressive operations.

Offensive counterintelligence is not limited to running double agents and penetrating foreign intelligence services. Ukrainian services provide some examples of creative approaches, conducting complex operations to mislead Russian intelligence agencies. According to Ukraine's military intelligence (HUR), it staged the death of Russian Volunteer Corps (*Русский добровольческий корпус*, RDK) Commander Denis Kapustin – one of the figures Putin called "Vlasovites" – and received the bounty money from Russian intelligence services that had ordered his assassination.²⁴⁹

Offensive measures can also seek to disrupt an adversary's supply chains by covertly introducing sabotaged components and to manipulate its decision-making by feeding misleading information into channels on which it relies. At minimum, such a proactive posture would make Russian counterintelligence officers more suspicious, forcing them to expend additional resources on internal

spy-catching and contributing to existing dysfunction within the state system.

IMPROVE CIVIL REGISTRATION SYSTEMS

The arrests of Russian illegal intelligence officers after 2022 reveal the continued use of Soviet tradecraft. In at least two exposed cases, Russian illegals posed as a Brazilian student and a Brazilian researcher. First, a Cold War-era training manual on illegal intelligence identified studying in western countries as an advantageous form of cover because it provided sufficient free time for intelligence activities.²⁵⁰ Second, since the Cold War, multiple Latin American countries have provided opportunities for Russian illegals to appropriate the identities of deceased persons or construct entirely new identities (Table 1). Technically, these opportunities stemmed from decentralised civil-registration systems in which birth and death records were not always automatically cross-referenced.

The extent of this vulnerability perhaps varies considerably by country and has declined as registries have become more digitised and interoperable. Further improvements to such systems will reduce the risk of exploitation by Russian intelligence.

²⁴⁹The HUR reportedly used video footage of two strike drones to convince the Russians that the target had been successfully eliminated. Abbey Fenbert, "How Ukraine's Military Intelligence Faked the Death of Denis Kapustin, a Russian Commander Fighting for Kyiv," *The Kyiv Independent*, 2 January 2026.

²⁵⁰"Forms, Methods, and Organization of Intelligence Work from Illegal Positions," 14.

²⁵¹"The Documentation Base Maintained by Department 2 of Directorate S of the KGB First Chief Directorate for the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Direction as of 1 May 1974" in Vasiliy Mitrokhin, "K16: Illegals (Items 218–494)," (1992-1997), GBR/0014/MITN 2/16/2, p. 150, The Papers of Vasiliy Mitrokhin.

PREPARE FOR A SPECIAL PERIOD

Russian handlers deliberately structure sabotage operations so executors do not know the organisers' identities. As in organised criminal scams, they employ multiple cutouts (intermediaries), disposable mobile phones, anonymous communication channels, and cryptocurrencies, making it difficult to trace the chain of command back to senior operatives. Nevertheless, Russia's increased reliance on local criminal networks suggests that complicating such operations may require not only counter-intelligence measures, but also broader law-enforcement efforts to combat organised fraud and related criminal activity.

The goal of Russia's low-intensity sabotage attacks – ranging from vandalism to arson and often carried out by petty criminals – is to undermine western unity in support of Ukraine. According to one report, sabotage activities by the GRU peaked in the summer of 2024 and then subsided. European intelligence officials have suggested that the lull could be intended to create space for Moscow to negotiate with the new US administration.²⁵² Such attacks resemble what Yuri Andropov called "special actions of a political nature":

sabotage and other violent activities in peacetime designed to advance Soviet policy objectives.

However, Europe must prepare for larger-scale and more professional sabotage operations that Russia could activate during a transition to a wider conventional war beyond Ukraine – the so-called "special period" – aimed at disabling critical infrastructure and disrupting civil administration in rear areas.

Europe must prepare for large-scale, professional sabotage operations that Russia could activate during a transition to a wider conventional war beyond Ukraine

During the Cold War, the KGB's First Chief Directorate, the predecessor of the SVR, developed such plans using networks of illegals.²⁵³ Today, multiple GRU illegals have reportedly been exposed, whereas comparatively few SVR illegals have been identified. The creation of new structures, such as the SSD and Centre 795, indicates Moscow's growing interest in expanding its capacity for professional sabotage and other direct-action operations.

²⁵²Pancevski, "A New Spy Unit Is Leading Russia's Shadow War Against the West."

²⁵³Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (Basic Books, 1999), 374; Hosaka, "From Moscow to Tokyo."

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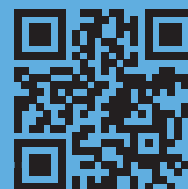
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INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND SECURITY
63/4 NARVA RD., 10120 TALLINN, ESTONIA
INFO@ICDS.EE

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