

Russian intelligence and security agencies vie for central role

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As Russian President Vladimir Putin embarks on his fourth and likely last presidential term, his intelligence and security agencies remain central to his rule at home and his adventures abroad. *Mark Galeotti* reports from Moscow on the agencies' heightened prominence in Russian geopolitical strategy

Key Points

- A succession of cases in 2018 has highlighted the increasing role of Russia's security and intelligence agencies as an instrument of geopolitical leverage and domestic control for President Vladimir Putin.
- Inter-agency competition remains high, driving an escalation in the intensity and risk of operations, and competition is fomented further by ongoing speculation about the creation of a security super-agency.
- There is a growing awareness in Moscow of the backlash from foreign intelligence operations, amid growing Western intolerance of such activity, but it is unclear whether these reservations extend to the presidency.

At the start of Russian President Vladimir Putin's fourth term, in May 2018, the country's intelligence and security community again found itself in the spotlight. A new entrant into the cabinet was Yevgeny Zinichev (see box), formerly one of Putin's bodyguards, who took over the powerful Ministry of Emergency Situations (Ministerstvo po Chrezvychainnym Situatsiyam: MChS). According to reports in the Russian press, Zinichev's appointment took place over the objections of Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu, who created the MChS in the 1990s.

Also in May, the Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team's report blamed Moscow for shooting down Malaysian Airlines passenger flight MH17 over Ukraine in 2014. This focused attention on Russian military intelligence, the Main Intelligence Directorate (Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravleniye: GRU), for its role in providing the Buk missile used in the incident and for seeking to impede the inquiry.

Earlier, in March, the unsuccessful attempt in the UK to assassinate former GRU officer Sergei Skripal prompted a sustained Western campaign of expulsions of Russian diplomats. Alongside rolling investigations into election interference in the US, Russia's security services in general – and the GRU in particular – have been the subject of significant media exposure throughout 2018.

Russian intelligence agencies are central to Kremlin activities at home and abroad, and are also defining Russia's image in the world. Their heightened profile comes as Putin – seeking to arrange a succession that guarantees his own personal security and historic legacy – is involved in a careful recalibration of the political system. Moreover, he will be conscious of his own position: Putin's personal approval ratings have dipped since his fourth-term inauguration: according to polling by the Russia-based Levada Center, his trust rating dropped from 60% in January to 48% in June, with popular opposition to a new retirement age provoking nationwide protests in July.

Moreover, there is a tension between the geopolitical circumstances – in which Russia’s intelligence and security services are clearly key Kremlin instruments – and Putin’s desire to control their visibility and autonomy. The Federal Security Service’s (Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti: FSB) role as a reservoir of candidates for deployment around the government, both in Moscow and the localities, has diminished; the GRU is simultaneously revelling in, but also embarrassed by, its current high international profile; and the Foreign Intelligence Service (Sluzhba Vneshney Razvedki: SVR), hit hard by the post-Skripal expulsions, is seeking to define a role for itself that plays to its strengths.



Russian President Vladimir Putin (centre) reviews Russian naval ships in the Crimean port of Sevastopol on 9 May 2014, with head of the FSB Alexander Bortnikov (right) and Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu (left) attending. As Putin enters what may be his final term in office he is seeking to ensure his control over military and civilian intelligence agencies. (Yuri Kadobnov/AFP/Getty Images)

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Putin appears eager to ensure that he has an unquestioned grip over the security agencies at a crucial time in which succession is an unspoken but dominant concern in the Kremlin and beyond. By late August 2018, a frequently proposed consolidation of most of the security services into a single agency was again under sporadic discussion, albeit possibly more to generate uncertainty than as a prelude to actual change.

FSB remains dominant

Despite repeated allegations and accounts of corruption and favouritism in the Russian press, the FSB – Putin’s former service – remains the dominant agency in the Russian security apparatus, and continues to expand from domestic security into international operations. However, its primacy also carries risks, given Putin’s high expectations of the agency.

Under the direction of Alexander Bortnikov, the FSB has capably deflected the blame for past failures, such as its assessment that the government of former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich (2010–14) would survive in Kiev. However, it failed to predict and adequately control the 2011–12 political protests in Moscow, and its efforts to monitor social media and internet-facilitated grassroots activism have appeared clumsy and tardy.

The agency was also criticised for its inability to prevent the April 2017 metro bombings in St Petersburg, in which 15 people died. This highlighted its relative blind spot regarding Islamist militancy among Central Asian migrant workers rather than radicals from the North Caucasus.

Nevertheless, as the dominant force on the National Anti-Terrorism Committee (which is chaired ex officio by the FSB director), the agency led the successful operation to secure the FIFA World Cup in June–July 2018, a significant challenge given the influx of almost three million foreign visitors and the need to protect 11 host city venues. It would have been difficult for the FSB to avoid blame had adverse incidents soured this bid to regain some ‘soft power’ for Russia.

The World Cup security operations proved to be an opportunity for the FSB rather than a distraction, with the agency gaining political credit for the peaceful passage of the event and the relatively benign experiences of visitors. Even before this dividend, the FSB used the event’s importance to acquire wider powers, particularly in electronic surveillance and the use of new tools such as running camera footage through facial recognition software.

An unintended consequence was the strengthened role of local FSB offices amid a sharpened focus on both counter-terrorism and political control. *Jane’s* understands that the Kremlin’s concern about Moscow-based protests galvanised by opposition leader Alexei Navalny has shifted to a focus on a more diffuse wave of small-scale, localised unrest.

Such unrest may be rooted in economic grievances, the abuses or inefficiencies of individual local administrations, or grassroots dissatisfaction about national issues such as the proposed raising of the pension age. A Russia-based political observer told *Jane’s* in August that such protests were “the grit in the machine at a time when Putin needs it to be working as well as possible”.

The FSB also continues to prioritise economic security, in part reflecting the Kremlin’s assessment that Western sanctions constitute an economic war against Russia and that the basic structures of national financial and logistical infrastructure therefore require protection. For example, an awkward campaign in early 2018 against the encrypted messaging app Telegram – in which the state telecommunications regulator Roskomnadzor accidentally shut down banking services and online shopping – was ostensibly triggered by Telegram’s refusal to hand over decryption keys to the FSB.

However, in a letter leaked to the RBC business media service in April, Roman Antipkin of the FSB’s surveillance department described the main concern as Telegram’s planned launch of a new cryptocurrency called Gram. This, according to Antipkin, could lead to a “fully uncontrollable financial system” that therefore “threatens the country’s security”.

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