



BETWEEN OVERT DISINFORMATION AND COVERT PRACTICE

THE RUSSIAN SPECIAL SERVICES' GAME

Jolanta Darczewska

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INTRODUCTION

It is generally believed that one sign that the secret services are doing their job well is that the media says nothing about them. In this respect, Russia is a special case: the services receive an excess of media coverage. This is only partly due to the media's natural interest in an attractive subject, as well as the services' own self-promotion (although that is increasingly true around the world). In fact, it is a symptom of Russia's information warfare, in which the special services' public image is just one block in building the appearance of a strong state and a strong government. It also justifies and legitimises the high position which the services and elite members of the institutions of force enjoy in the Russian Federation's political system.

However, this artificial, mythologised image of the services conflicts with their non-public practices. These are revealed when their cover is blown, when journalists investigate criminal scandals involving the services, when controlled and uncontrolled leaks of compromising information take place, and when the opposition publicises cases where the special services violate fundamental rights and civil liberties – something they often do under the pretext of fighting the 'fifth column' of the West, international terrorists and foreign spies. This produces two different images of the services: the official one and the common one. The former presents the services as professional, patriotic and a stronghold of traditional values, Russia's 'sword and shield'; the latter shows them as pampered by the regime, lawless, corrupt and undisciplined, involved in brutal competition with one another, bureaucratized and criminalised.

This text attempts to explain the paradox of the Russian special services' dual public image as reflected in the media. By placing this question in the context of information warfare, it intends to portray a broader picture of how the services operate domestically and externally, as well as their strengths and weaknesses.

Information warfare itself is discussed only selectively: the services' active role in conducting that kind of warfare, which involves obtaining, defending and distorting information, is mentioned only briefly; and the text does not address issues concerning cyberspace, even though this is the services' main theatre of operations at present.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Russian special services owe their high institutional position to their place in the system of government. They are directly subordinate to the highest, presidential, decision-making centre at the strategic level of governance, as are the functions they perform in the centralised system of power, such as meeting informational needs, providing control, security, repression, as well as conducting reconnaissance and intelligence. Traditionally the special services have also actively participated in Russia's war for predominance in the political, economic, military and informational spheres. Their official image is an element of the propaganda of 'strong state and strong leadership' which prevails in Russia. However, when confronted with the actual outcomes of their secret activities as they are uncovered, this ideologised and mythologised image encounters a certain cognitive dissonance. The opinions and judgements about the services seen in generally available sources are often mutually contradictory, and incompatible with their own declared objectives, values and attitudes. The two narratives being promoted, the official one and the common one, evoke different, and in some cases contradictory images of the services. The former highlights their statutory tasks and is painted in bright colours, while the latter is dark and emphasises their extrajudicial and illegal activities. Both narratives have accumulated different myths; both have distinct styles (official pathos versus emotionally-charged negative characterisations), and both are based on different underlying theories about the secret services' role in the Russian system of power ('Chekistocracy' and praetorianism vs kleptocracy and 'corpocratism').¹ While the official representation of the services primarily highlights their role as guardians of the state and its stability, the common image emphasises their criminality and pliancy (or even servility)

¹ *Korpokratura* (here rendered as 'corpocratism') is a term used by the Russian opposition to denote the rule of the 'Chekist' corporation. It was coined as a variant of *demokratura* ('democratism'), a word used by Boris Yeltsin's critics to denote his system of power.

towards the decision-makers, which trumps respect for the law; it also stresses the services' role as 'hitmen' for the 'assassins' corporation' ruling Russia which deals ruthlessly with its opponents.

The generally accessible sources of information about the services are broad and diverse. They are used as tools of disinformation and propaganda, as well as in the information overload which results from that, and they serve several different purposes. For this reason, the special services' prominent presence in the information space should be analysed in several dimensions:

- as support operations for the ruling elite (on the one hand, they give the impression that Russia has freedom of speech, social justice and is fighting corruption; but on the other, they justify the state's restrictions on civil liberties);
- as a way to manage public opinion, i.e. distracting public attention from the problems which are most troublesome to the people and which the opposition highlights, but the state cannot solve;
- as a safeguard for the nexus of politics, force and business that underlies Putin's system of power;
- as self-promotion for the services (especially their counter-intelligence, anti-terror and anti-extremist activities);
- as distraction and camouflage, designed to divert attention from and mislead about the services' operations; and
- as a form of immunisation, i.e. a way to strengthen the security system's resilience and cohesion (the information war involves a series of successes and failures for the services, but which remain hidden from the public eye).

One cornerstone of the Kremlin's image policy involves making sure that uncontrolled information which presents reality

negatively does not overshadow the reality portrayed in official narratives. This declared reality pushes the real one to the margins and makes it irrelevant. As a result, when scandals involving the special services are unearthed, their reputation is not affected, and no crises of confidence in them arise. The public's trust in the special services remains stable in opinion polls; with favourable ratings at 55.7%, they rank as one of the top three most trusted institutions, after the army (84.8%) and the Orthodox Church (65.7%). Interestingly, the services are still trusted even though the public actually knows little about their work.

Moreover, it has long been understood in Russia that effective image management requires not just a long-term strategy, but also consistency in implementing it and involving the authorities. So the latter help to shape the public's expectations regarding the services, and in repairing their image following the crises caused by their widely-publicised scandals.

The opposition also wages its own information war² against the Kremlin, in which the question of the special services is just one of several areas of confrontation – but it has to do so on unequal terms. The government treats it as a testing ground for ways to combat ‘counter-information’. The efforts to disintegrate the opposition and push it to the margins of society and politics rely on reinforcing the distinction of ‘friend or foe’ in the public imagination. The critics of authoritarian rule are thus represented as foreign agents inspired by other countries’ intelligence services, and traitors to the homeland, lacking any patriotic feelings, who are intent on marginalising Russia. Unsurprisingly, the opposition media have much more limited opportunities to promote

² According to a classic definition, “information warfare is mutual negative co-operation, involving at least two entities, pursued in the spheres of information acquisition, information distortion and information defence, where each action by one side corresponds to an analogous action of the other side”. See L. Ciborowski, *Walka informacyjna* [Information Warfare], Toruń 1996, p. 9.

their views than do the Kremlin's image makers, who have access to open and secret, formal and informal channels of indirect influence (popular culture including films and TV series, disinformation and provocations, copy-paste texts for further circulation, interpretative text messages, and compromising materials to smear opponents), as well as instruments of direct influence such as leading articles by special service chiefs, press and television interviews, information and photo services, and videos circulated in the media). The government can also use legal and organisational instruments, with which they can tighten control over the media and non-governmental organisations, and penalise all forms of criticism against the government. All these factors mean that their information measures are highly effective domestically.

In Western democracies, with their open societies, media pluralism and absence of censorship (as well as Western empathy towards Russia, or more widely, tolerance towards outsiders, ignorance of Russian realities, and Western societies' pacifist attitudes), Russian disinformation has faced few major obstacles until recently. The growing international awareness of the threats coming from Russia was cemented by the Skripals' case,³ which eventually forced the West to mount a firm and consolidated reaction against the Kremlin's growing aggression.

Last year's events, as well as certain permanent systemic features, seem to suggest that the Russian special services cannot support the Kremlin elite effectively in the West or improve its image in the eyes of Western public opinion. But that does not mean they will cease their destructive activities in the information space (including cyberspace), which offers the Kremlin convenient instruments to influence the global situation. On the contrary; following the GRU's series of recent blunders, Russia will seek to deploy

³ This operation, carried out by Russian military intelligence functionaries, involved poisoning the former spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia on British territory.

a full range of information warfare forces and methods (both defensive and offensive), involving existing and new bodies, in order to consolidate and co-ordinate the potential of its services. It has the necessary traditions & experience, and the well-trained human resources. This also means that the Russian special services will retain their status as beneficiaries of the authoritarian regime, because their covert operations are of such great importance in the Kremlin's programme of information warfare.

I. WAR?! BUT WHAT KIND OF WAR?

The special services' high position in Russia's political system has received various ideological justifications: in the 1990s the *siloviki*, who were working to get a top position in the political and economic system, were represented as a worldly, polyglot elite with a good understanding of the market economy. The myth of the services' elite status and exceptionality was then expanded when they were represented as a stronghold of patriotic and traditional values and the vehicle for a shared worldview (part of which was a vision of imperial Russia as a key factor in today's Russia rising from its knees). They were also described as performing functions not typically associated with the special services, such as modernising the state and acting as the guardians of the nation's spiritual values. Since the beginning of Vladimir Putin's rule, the idea of the strong services has been embedded in the metaphor of the *Chekist* 'hook' which Russia is hanging from, and which stops her from falling off the precipice. That image of the services has clearly influenced the image of the new ruling elite, which has its roots in the KGB, and which has been legitimised by narratives about strong leadership and the dictatorship of law.

Since the annexation of Crimea, the role of the institutions of force in governing the country has increased. The Kremlin's confrontational strategy has been justified by a geopolitical vision of the world as an arena for the rivalry between the Russian services and their Western counterparts who are plotting against Russia. In this vision, the Russian special services are in a state of permanent information war with the West, and must constantly improve their defences to gain an advantage in the information sphere. In daily practice, this is reflected in a narrative about how strong the Russian services are, and how weak the enemy states and their services are. However, this 'community of success' narrative about the Russian services does not reflect reality, or make the services any more transparent or less secretive. The Russian people's knowledge about the services is rather scant: in keeping with Russian legal culture,

the security sector is a closed system, and the range of information classified as state secrets is substantially broader than the Western equivalent.

At the opposite end are the media outlets run by the so-called ‘intransigent opposition’ and human rights defenders in Russia,⁴ which describe the services as part of the ‘assassins’ corporation’, and emphasise that their official pathos and privileged position has not really made the ordinary people any safer. For years, these groups have been investigating criminal acts involving members of the institutions of force (including smear campaigns to discredit businesses and opposition members; the fabrication of charges and evidence in lawsuits against so-called enemies of the regime; the infiltration of the opposition and the internet; the secret killings of journalists, business competitors and political rivals; and fostering pathologies such as organised crime, protectionism, corruption and nepotism). Abuses involving functionaries who acquire assets illegally have been a constant element in those stories. One such case was recently described in *Novaya Gazeta*, which explained the not-overly-sophisticated mechanism whereby members of the Federal Security Service (FSS)’s leadership appropriated the land of the NKVD *kolkhoz* near Moscow.⁵ In this case, the special services are just one area of the opposition’s confrontation with the Kremlin, especially since new, dramatic elements of this confrontation have emerged in the wake of Russia’s wars in Ukraine and Syria, such as the recently uncovered case of the Russian mercenaries from the so-called Wagner group.

The opposition’s information war against the Kremlin is not being fought on a level playing field. Unsurprisingly, the opposition media have far fewer opportunities to promote their views than

⁴ See e.g. www.index.org.ru/journal; <http://grigoryants.ru>; <https://fbk.info>; <http://navalny.com>

⁵ Р. Анин, ‘Дворцы под охраной’, *Новая газета*, 19 November 2018, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/11/19/78623-dvortsy-pod-ohranoy>

the Kremlin's image makers, who have access to open and secret, formal and informal channels of indirect influence (popular culture including films and TV series, disinformation and provocations, copy-paste texts for further circulation, interpretative text messages, or compromising materials to smear their opponents), as well as instruments of direct influence such as leading articles by service chiefs, press and television interviews, information and photo services, and videos circulated in the media). The government can also use legal and organisational instruments, with which it can tighten control over the media and non-governmental organisations, and penalise all forms of criticism against the government.⁶

The fight against the domestic opposition is a testing ground for new ways of predominating in information warfare. Alexei Navalny, a lawyer, blogger and organiser of demonstrations promoting democracy and the fight against corruption – and public enemy number one for the Russian elite – is a case in point. He published a story about abuse in the Russian Guard (*Rosgvardiya*) on the website of his Anti-Corruption Foundation;⁷ the report struck at the public image of the service, whose establishment in 2016 was supposed to put an end to abuses in the Interior Ministry. In some ways the government's battle against Navalny has had unexpected consequences:⁸ the case revealed the behind-the-scenes

⁶ See 'Putin for the fourth time', *OSW Report*, March 2018, pp. 53–56, https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/report_putin-for-the-fourth_net.pdf

⁷ 'Кто объедает Росгвардию', <https://fbk.info/blog/post/441/>

⁸ The Russian Guard's chief Viktor Zolotov recorded an appeal to Navalny calling on him to stop spreading lies and threatening to "make mincemeat" of him. The unexpectedly strong negative reaction from the media forced Zolotov to radically change his public relations tactic: in his next public appearance he emphasised that "his service was working with the counterintelligence, military prosecutors, the Accounting Chamber and the internal security service to investigate the corruption." He admitted that corruption had indeed taken place and said, "We are fighting against it, revealing those people, firing them and taking them to court." See 'Золотов записал обращение к Навальному', <https://ria.ru/society/20180911/1528277795.html>; <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/5691029>

business machinations and the methods employed to ‘economically reclaim’ Crimea, by showing how overpriced meat products were delivered to the Russian Guard by the Crimean-registered Friendship of the Peoples meat processing plant owned by Boris Kantemirov, a former chief of the Central Archive of the Interior Ministry Troops (a body which was transformed into the Russian Guard). On the other hand, however, it allowed the services to perfect their methods of influence: the Russian Guard learnt the lesson that one cannot carry out disinformation ‘against the current’ because doing so triggers strong reactions from the ‘wrong’ people.

The state’s attempts to break up opposition groups by reversing the vectors of their ‘counter-information’ rely on enforcing the distinction between friend and foe. The critics of authoritarian rule are presented as foreign agents inspired by other countries’ intelligence services, and emotionally decried as ‘scum’ and ‘traitors to the homeland’ who lack patriotic feelings and are intent on marginalising Russia. Representation like this also consolidates the general sense of ‘defence awareness’, which explains all of Russia’s problems as the results of Western (and especially American) plotting, and the workings of an internal fifth column (according to a recent poll, this opinion is shared by 60% of respondents).⁹

⁹ В. Дергачев, ‘Россияне стали лучше относиться к ВЧК и КГБ’, РБК, 21 February 2018, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/21/02/2018/5a8d59f49a79471a70e186ba>

II. THE KREMLIN'S STRATEGIC AND TACTICAL OBJECTIVES

It is clear that the reports from the information-war frontline (which are dominated by propaganda, disinformation and other ways of distorting information) do not make the public any better informed about the services, their objectives or methods. That is because their purpose is to drown out the information coming from the broadly-defined 'enemy', and to protect strategic information (information about the special services is treated as a strategic resource in Russia). These information exercises are both defensive and offensive. The pro-Kremlin media emphasise the protective, defensive aspects of the services' operations, while the enemy's secret services are accused of actions such as illegally obtaining information, manipulating perceptions, distorting the information space and other antagonistic measures. Such actions, oriented towards obscuring the enemy's message, do not accurately reflect the realities of the services, but they do actually shape the way the services are perceived. Reports on popular online websites aggregating news stories from the Russian press that discredit the services, such as <http://www.comproamat.ru> and <http://www.rospress.ru> should be taken with a large pinch of salt; the Russian opposition treats them as information sabotage, and has responded by creating its own website, <http://anticomproamat.org>. The online world is competing with television as a mass medium, which forces the services to use digital multimedia technologies (videos in particular are very popular) and create attractive websites that resemble social media. One example is PASMI (*Первое антикоррупционное средство массовой информации*, or the First Anti-Corruption Mass Medium), which publishes stories about corruption in the Moscow Internal Ministry Academy,¹⁰ and which in this way channels and isolates genuine journalistic investigations.

¹⁰ For example, see 'ФСБ перестала быть неприкасаемой', <https://pasm1.ru>. Dmitri Verbitsky, the founder of this site, is a graduate of the Moscow Internal Ministry Academy, an accomplished social activist (a deputy chair of the anti-corruption group in the Russian Union of Journalists, and a member of

Stories about corruption among functionaries are usually presented in a 'state-building', didactic context. They are accompanied by comments which emphasise the dramatic consequences of corruption as a malady that hampers reforms, causes substantial losses to the state budget, demoralises the public, fosters turf wars, and even degrades spiritual values by promoting the violence and ideology of the criminal world. By shining light on the mechanisms of corruption, the outlets in question are supposed to demonstrate that Russia enjoys pluralism of opinion and social justice – and thus to score publicity points for the government. The widely reported stories that penal colonies for members of the security departments are becoming overcrowded are another part of this effort. In highlighting this problem, the deputy chief of the Federal Penitentiary announced that the growing number of convicted functionaries meant new specialised penal colonies had to be created¹¹, or that existing ones had to be reclassified.¹² The publicity for this kind of social justice also includes stories about riots among functionaries serving time in penal colonies.¹³

The statistics about corruption within the services which are quoted in such reports are fragmentary, and therefore misleading¹⁴; they cannot be said to reflect the real scale of crime among their personnel. Such reports, which augment the informational chaos by creating the impression of a war of 'all against all',

the expert group for preventing corruption in the Presidential Administration and other bodies), and has received a number of awards from the Interior Ministry, including medals for 'Best Functionary of the Criminal Police' and '10 Years of Flawless Service'.

¹¹ В. Гордеев, 'Замглавы ФСИН заявил о нехватке колоний для осужденных', *РБК*, 13 November 2018, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/13/11/2018/5beb2b2d9a79479f9f0ea504>

¹² А. Раскин, 'Мест всем хватит. Для осуждённых силовиков готовят новые колонии', *Life.ru*, 14 November 2018, https://life.ru/.../miest_vsiam_khvatit_dlia_osuzhdionnykh_silovik...

¹³ 'Осуждённые силовики устроили бунт в колонии и потребовали прокурора', *Lenta.ru*, 21 August 2018, <https://lenta.ru/news/2018/08/21/perm/>

¹⁴ 'Полиция и местные депутаты лидируют по числу фигурантов дел о коррупции', *Интерфакс*, 9 December 2018.

increased noticeably on the occasion of the budgetary debate in December, which coincided with International Anti-Corruption Day (9 December: in Russia such media campaigns are ‘attached’ to official celebrations, department holidays and other occasions, as well as to the adoption of new legal acts like presidential decree no. 378, which approved the ‘Plan for fighting corruption in the years 2018–2020’). So it is possible that the penitentiary service’s increased media activity was linked to its involvement in the Kremlin’s anti-corruption project. However, it could also have been explained equally logically as an effort to get more funding to implement another governmental programme, this time for the ‘Development of the Penitentiary System in the years 2018–2026’,¹⁵ the preamble of which refers not so much to increased crime levels among functionaries as to the generally rising crime levels in Russia and the dramatic situation in prisons and penal colonies; there are estimates that the maximum limits of inmates has been exceeded by between 23 and 56%.

The stories one hears about the so-called *silovik* wars – rivalries among the services of different ministries and the competitive struggles between different parts of the same service, usually the Federal Security Service (FSS) – actually serve to camouflage their real activities. Usually these reports are pretty much worthless, and are usually difficult to verify. For example, in 2018 Russian commentators devoted a great deal of attention to the supposed rise of the Federal Protection Service (FPS), as ostensibly demonstrated by its newly expanded prerogatives. Indeed, under Putin’s decree of 27 February 2018, point 12 was added to the FPS’s bylaws concerning the government elite’s security, which read: “As part of its competences, the Service will take part in the implementation of the international information security policy, undertakings of information warfare and activities aimed at detecting, preventing and mitigating the effects of attacks on the

¹⁵ Both bills can be accessed at <http://pravo.garant.ru>

Russian Federation's information resources.”¹⁶ Hitherto the media had only emphasised the FPS's protective and auxiliary functions (such as monitoring public sentiment and conducting opinion polls commissioned by the Kremlin).

The line taken at that time was that the Federal Security Service's position had been shaken, and that it had become paralysed with regard to information security. This was supposedly the consequence of the weakening of the FSS's Information Security Centre as a result of its struggles with military intelligence (the former GRU) and its twin structure within the FSS, the Centre for the Protection of Information and Special Communications. The former body, also known as military unit 64829, went through a personnel shock as two of its leaders, Sergei Mikhailov and Dmitri Dokuchev, were arrested on charges of high treason after they allegedly passed information to the CIA about 12 GRU hacker groups; also, two other officers faced criminal lawsuits after being charged with the embezzlement of state funds. In an atmosphere of scandal, the Centre's long-time head Andrei Gerasimov was reportedly demoted to the reserves amidst a campaign discrediting him, his son and daughter, who owned IT companies involved in implementing state contracts. In this context, the attempt to expand the FPS's competences could have been aimed at strengthening Russia's offensive potential in cyberspace. However, the conclusions about the shakeup in the information security structures proved premature: Aleksandr Bortnikov's order no. 366 of 24 July 2018 establishing the National Co-ordination Centre for the Prevention and Impact Mitigation of Computer Incidents¹⁷ re-asserted the FSS's key co-ordinating role in the system.

What this shows is that the political information war involves all the uniformed services: first and foremost, the security and protection services (the FSS, the FPS, the Federal Service of the

¹⁶ <https://rg.ru/2018/02/27/prezident-ukaz89-site-dok.html>

¹⁷ <https://rg.ru/2018/09/10/fsb-prikaz366-site-dok.html>

National Guard, the Russian Guard), as well as the intelligence services (the civilian Foreign Intelligence Service and the military Main Directorate of the General Staff (formerly the GRU), and to an extent the FSS). These observations about the intelligence services¹⁸ apply equally to the entire security sector. The Kremlin's projects push its constituent organisations to undertake both defensive (involving psy-ops, inciting and propaganda) and offensive operations (breaking into foreign information resources, manipulating the enemy's media and public opinion). As a result, there is no single image which unifies the special services.

Their presence in the public sphere serves different purposes, and should thus be analysed in several different dimensions:

- as support operations for the ruling elite (on the one hand, they give the impression that Russia has freedom of speech, social justice and is fighting corruption; but on the other, they justify the state's restrictions on civil liberties);
- as a way to manage public opinion, i.e. distracting public attention from the problems which are most troublesome the people and which the opposition highlights, but the state cannot solve;
- as a safeguard for the nexus of politics, force and business that underlies Putin's system of power;
- as self-promotion for the services (especially their counter-intelligence, anti-terror and anti-extremist activities);
- as distraction and camouflage, designed to divert attention from and mislead about the services' operations; and

¹⁸ M. Galeotti, 'Russian intelligence is at (political) war', *NATO Review*, 12 May 2017, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2019/Themes/EN/index.htm>

as a form of immunisation, i.e. a way to strengthen the security system's resilience and cohesion (the information war involves a series of successes and failures for the services, but which remain hidden from the public eye).

III. TRADITION AND LEGACY

The Kremlin's image policy, in which the services' public perception is treated as part of the image of a strong state and strong government, is based on ensuring that uncontrolled information which depicts reality negatively does not overshadow the reality presented in the official declarations. This declared reality pushes the actual reality to the margins, making it irrelevant. As a result, any scandals unearthed which involve the special services do not affect their reputation or engender any crises of confidence. The picture of the special services portrayed in traditional and social media, official statements, documentaries and television series, meets the public's expectations and reinforces the cult of the strong state¹⁹ and strong leadership. The public's trust in the special services remains stable in opinion polls;²⁰ with favourable ratings of 55.7%, the services rank as one of the top three most trusted institutions, after the army (84.8%) and the Orthodox Church (65.7%). The services are trusted even though the public knows little about their work: in a survey conducted by FOM after the GRU's latest series of blunders, 65% of respondents said that they did not know what the services' foreign operations were about, but at the same time 45% said they had a positive opinion about those activities (10% had a negative opinion), and 26% believed that the quality of work of Russian foreign intelligence had improved considerably over the past decade.²¹

The security sector's public image has been of special concern for the Kremlin since the times of Yuri Andropov. When he helmed the KGB, a massive propaganda campaign was initiated, involving literary and film competitions and even beauty contests; this

¹⁹ Д. Федор, *Традиции чекистов от Ленина до Путина. Культ государственной безопасности*, СПб, 2012.

²⁰ А. Ласнов, 'Определен уровень доверия россиян к ВС и церкви', *Взгляд*, 12 October 2018, <https://vz.ru/news/2018/10/12/945841.html>

²¹ '65% граждан ничего не знают о работе российских служб за рубежом', *Regnum*, 12 November 2018, <https://regnum.ru/news/2517172.html>

effectively obliterated the image of the KGB as a political police and of its functionaries as oppressors which had become ingrained in public awareness during the Khrushchev thaw. The image of the executioner which had predominated during the rehabilitation of the victims of Stalinist crimes was replaced by that of the legendary intelligence officer Stirlitz. The campaign itself, which emphasised the KGB's intelligence activities, took place at an opportune moment, and helped to end the crisis of confidence in the state. A similar campaign accompanied the rise to power of the former KGB officer Vladimir Putin.

Nevertheless, since 2000 the provenance of the Russian ruling elite has continually raised questions about the special services' role in Russia's political, economic and social life. It has long been accepted in Russia that effective image management requires not only a long-term strategy, but also consistency in its implementation, as well as the involvement of the authorities. So the latter participate in shaping the public's expectations regarding the services, and in repairing their image following the crises caused by widely publicised scandals.

President Putin has also played an important role in shaping and adjusting the special services' image, as he demonstrated repeatedly in 2018 in connection with the GRU's centenary celebrations. In early 2018 he praised the military intelligence for their activities in Syria, saying they had contributed to Russia's success there. Then he became personally involved in the campaign to whitewash the GRU operation in Salisbury: he said of the perpetrators: "We know who they are. They are civilians. There is nothing criminal here,"²² and went on to characterise Sergei Skripal as 'lowlife' and a 'traitor' around whom an entire information campaign had been developed. Putin then said that all the rest was

²² В. Рувинский, 'Как Путин закрыл тему российского следа в Солсбери', *Ведомости*, 12 October 2018, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2018/09/12/780732-kak>

just espionage which, “just like prostitution, is one of the world’s most important professions.”²³ On 2 November, on the eve of the centenary celebrations, the president stated that he was “reassured about the professionalism, courage and determination of the military intelligence officers,” and that – as commander-in-chief of the Russian armed forces – he “knew the unique potential of the service and valued the information and intelligence coming from the General Staff”. He explained the problems plaguing the GRU as the result of “mounting conflicts in today’s world, which is witnessing provocations, blatant lies and attempts at distorting the strategic balance.” He also recalled the military intelligence of the Tsar’s army, “whose officers were aware that there was no greater shame than betraying their homeland and their comrades, and who helped preserve the continuity of the service and its tradition in times of revolutionary tumult.”

The accusations against military intelligence were also dismissed as ‘crude provocations’ by the head of civilian intelligence, Sergei Naryshkin, who assured the viewers of the state-owned Channel 1 that the Russian intelligence triad (the Foreign Intelligence Service, military intelligence and the Federal Security Service) shared an understanding of their objectives and tasks. An order by defence minister Sergei Shoigu also emphasised the efficacy of “the current generation of military intelligence in Russia, which upholds the traditions of its predecessors with dignity. It successfully accomplishes difficult and responsible tasks involved in defending the nation and the state”. Both opinions were repeated and amplified by the pro-Kremlin media, while the military commentator Viktor Baranets announced that the presidential proposal to restore the military intelligence’s former name of GRU had provoked a “standing ovation with the force of a nuclear explosion”.

²³ ‘Путин о Скрипале: предатель и подонок’, *Regnum*, 3 October 2018, <https://regnum.ru/news/2493946.html>

IV. PITFALLS IN INTERPRETATION

The image of a professional, effective force stands in sharp contrast to the image of the GRU as painted by the opposition media (*Novaya Gazeta*, *Meduza*) with mischievous satisfaction; they, on the contrary, emphasise the disgraceful scale of the services' amateurishness. But neither the official nor the common image really reflects the truth. The former approach emphasises the services' statutory tasks and is painted in bright colours, while the latter highlights their extrajudicial, illegal activities. Both sides have accumulated their distinctive myths; both use distinctive narrative styles (official pathos versus emotionally-charged negative characteristics), and both have separate underlying theories about the special services' role in the Russian system of government ('Chekistocracy' and praetorianism versus kleptocracy and 'corpocratism'). While the official image represents the services as guardians of the state and its stability, the common image emphasises a pliancy or even servility towards the political decision-makers which trumps adherence to the law, as well as the way in which the special services have become instrumentalised in order to use brutality on the government's opponents.

Table 1. Characteristic features of the Russian special services in their official and common images

Official image	Common image
High professionalism	Poor training, amateurishness, disregard for the rules of secrecy
Flawless, impeccable elite	Crime-ridden abusers of power for their own benefit
Patriotism and national pride	Lack of discipline and indiscretion
Pillars of order and stability in Russia	Servility and brutal methods

Official image	Common image
Bulwark of traditional values	Corruptibility and demoralisation
Defenders of homeland	Defenders of their particular corporate interest
Community of values	Rivalry and conflicts

The prevalence of conspiracy theories and the inability to verify intuitive hypotheses often lead their authors to rash conclusions (for example, that GRU officers are poorly trained, or that the service’s organisational and personnel stability have been shaken by minister Anatoliy Serdyukov’s reforms), or to cookie-cutter models of interpretation such as the ‘war among the *siloviki*’ mentioned above. The common image questions the services’ loyalty to the Kremlin, emphasises their unaccountability, and highlights their conflict and criminal potential. However, it is quite easy to undermine these proposed interpretations. The ‘wars’ allegedly waged between the FSS and GRU via the Fancy Bear and Shaltai Boltai hacker groups do not explain how, for instance, the GRU became implicated in the ‘doping war’ (computers owned by the GRU officers Alexei Morents and Yevgeni Serebryakov were seized by the Dutch services and found to contain evidence of a hack into the network of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA); however, the doping scandal mainly served to discredit the FSS, which was shown to have been involved in falsifying doping tests during the Olympic Games in 2008, 2012 and 2014).

The claims of disloyalty among functionaries seem implausible when we consider that the services are treated as a recruitment pool for the administration, providing a reservoir of loyal people appointed to key positions who lack their own political following and are entirely dependent on the presidential centre of power. The claims of their political independence, on the other hand, do not stand the test of political practice: it is the President who

founds and disbands the services and appoints and dismisses their top leaders, which constitutes an effective legal safeguard preventing the services from gaining political independence. Moreover, the concentration of power and resources in the hands of a ruling elite which hails from the special services does not provoke any hostility among ordinary functionaries or generational conflicts within the services.

The factors restraining any potential discontent include the following:

- the salaries of functionaries have been rising regularly and their working conditions have been improving (this also applies to retired functionaries of the uniformed services);²⁴
- it is relatively easy for a functionary to obtain authorisation to engage in gainful activity outside the service (e.g. in the large private security sector);
- selective 'disciplinary' measures are applied for show against senior officers (accompanying the natural generational change in the leadership of the services);
- the corporate mentality emphasises hierarchies, loyalty and commitment, combined with the conviction that the services stand above the rest of society.

However, in some cases the opposition media have hit the bullseye. The fellowship within the ranks of the broadly understood 'Chekist' and *siloviki* corporations was confirmed by reports about the so-called 'Sechin *spetsnaz*', i.e. the structures ensuring the FSB's economic security which control business magnates and protect

²⁴ In 2019, pensions for retired members of the uniformed services will rise by 6.3%. See 'Путин: рост военных пенсий превысит 6% в 2019 году', RT, 25 October 2018, <https://russian.rt.com/russia/news/567437-putin-rost-voennyh-pensii>

the interests and influence of state oligarchs like Rosneft’s chairman Igor Sechin. In this context, it also seems logical to assume that the FSS is performing a non-statutory function as a market regulator by carrying out show detentions, employing so-called *krishevanie* (protectionism), and seizing property by force.

However, these seemingly logical reports (e.g. about the rivalry among the services, which is seen as a kind of competition among ‘companies of the same sector’) are one-sided and therefore tendentious. But the Kremlin tolerates them, as they contribute to the information overload. *Novaya Gazeta* obtained some interesting statistics in this context when it analysed media reports about anti-terror activities, the topic around which many services, including the FSS, the Interior Ministry, the National Anti-Terror Committee, and the Security Council of the Russian Federation, organise their self-promotion. Those services have different outreach potentials in the media (measured in terms of the number of identical stories published). What is notable is the conclusion: even though success has so many fathers, the actual outcomes of these anti-terror activities are rather modest. However, they miss the important fact that this strategic dimension is an important platform for co-ordinated activity among all the services, to enhance the flow of information between them, and for joint exercises.

Table 2. Reports about anti-terror activities (between November 2015 and November 2017)

Media reports	FSS	Interior Ministry	National Anti-Terror Committee	Security Council
Number of official communiqués	3505	1702	492	236
Number of identical stories	18,560	3571	852	1122

Media reports	FSS	Interior Ministry	National Anti-Terror Committee	Security Council
Information about results	13 convictions, 14 detentions	3 convictions, 2 detentions	No data	No data

Source: <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/04/27/76328>

V. TRENDS FOR 2019 (CIRCUMSTANCES, PRIORITIES AND GUIDING IDEOLOGIES)

It is an open secret that Russia's special services are in a systemic dead-end. The political transformation which put the KGB at the helm of the political process has also secured a high institutional position for its successors. At the same time, however, it has built a number of problematic mechanisms into the Russian security system, including:

- **absence of limitations** (a sense of impunity and relative freedom to undertake non-statutory activities), which encourages aggressive risk-taking;
- **no public supervision of the security sector** (the president's supervision, or the lack thereof, means the services are shielded from accountability);
- **legal nihilism**: this applies to small machinations by functionaries (such as paying bribes to obtain licences), as well as greater scandals, e.g. involving how functionaries acquire their property;
- **absence of a clear division of functions, activities and tasks** (intelligence and counter-intelligence, control, security: for instance, the FSS combines the functions of a political police and an intelligence agency, while the Federal Protective Service takes part in information warfare);
- **clashes between different ministries' services** stemming from the conflict-generating overlaps in their competences, an idea which was originally intended to stimulate competition;
- **abuse of the right to classify information** (the business community rooted in the former KGB also has the right to classify information about itself. Because of the privilege of secrecy and the

mutual support between the state and *siloviki* business, it should be seen as internal to the system, occupying a special place within it, rather than merely being part of its surroundings);

- **conflicts of public and private interests** stemming from corporate solidarity with the so-called *siloviki* oligarchy (the business backing of Putin's rule, which has been described as 'Russian crony capitalism');
- **systemic corruption** as a multi-purpose instrument for doing business, blackmail, disciplining the elites, bribing political opponents, etc.).

These systemic, long-lasting features affect the daily work of the Russian special services and their media image, both when targeting the regime's internal opponents and the 'enemy' more broadly understood. The current ideology justifying the Kremlin's confrontational strategy and its militarist turn is not expected to change radically.

However, there are also some new factors:

- the West's determination to counter Russia's external information warfare and reveal its sabotage tactics (more than thirty states imposed sanctions on Russia following the Skripals' poisoning in solidarity with Great Britain);
- the growing resolve in NATO states to prevent Russia's aggressive operations from escalating;
- awareness of the antagonistic relations between the EU and Russia over the Eastern neighbourhood, which brings the threats Russia poses into relief;
- the events which have demonstrated the potential for using the internet and the power of making information openly

available (the GRU's Dutch failure, and the expulsion on 13 April of four officers detained in connection with the attempted cyber-attack on the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons; these events triggered a wave of journalistic investigations which produced photos of the functionaries, their travel routes, real identities and cover documents, home addresses etc., which effectively neutralised Russian attempts to spread disinformation about 'Western provocations' against the GRU).

In recent years, Russia's special services have stepped up their operations in cyberspace, which offers instruments for activities capable of affecting the global situation. The challenges coming from this area will remain crucial in Russia's relations with its nearer and further neighbourhoods.²⁵

Technological progress has accelerated the circulation of information, made access easier and opened up broad possibilities to manage information. However, it has also made information a double-sided sword – what used to be secret is now quickly revealed, which effectively undermines Russian disinformation efforts. Thus, Russia will seek to deploy a full range of information warfare forces and means (both defensive and offensive²⁶), involving both existing and new entities. It has the necessary traditions and experience, and the well-trained human resources.

Contrary to media speculation about 'wars' between the services of different ministries, efforts to consolidate the potential of the different special services – i.e. ensuring that they work together

²⁵ The United States' reaction has been noteworthy in this context: in 2019 the Congress plans to consider a new bill entitled 'The Defending American Security from Kremlin Aggression Act'.

²⁶ See P. Żochowski, 'Rosyjskie służby specjalne – ofensywność za wszelką cenę' [Russia's special services – offensive at all costs], *Teologia Polityczna*, 22 October 2018, <https://teologiapolityczna.pl/piotr-zochowski-rosyjskie-sluzby-specjalne-ofensywnosc-za-wszelka-cene-1>

in a co-ordinated manner in strategic areas such as information warfare or anti-terror activities, and in carrying out the Kremlin's strategic political projects – have been observed for years. In the context of those shared objectives and tasks, it seems that there is not so much a rivalry between individual services, but rather a competition between methods, ways of influence, and resources (human and other). This much is clear from the presidential decree of 3 September 2018²⁷ which extended the rules for state secrecy to information concerning persons involved in intelligence activities who are not intelligence staff members of the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign Intelligence Service or the Federal Security Service. The decree does not cover people who had previously co-operated with the intelligence services and were covered by secrecy provisions; rather, apparently, it covers external actors to whom more tasks will be outsourced.

In the foreseeable future we should also expect to see further efforts aimed at restoring balance in the aftermath of the series of the Russian military intelligence's blunders. The emphasis will presumably be on ensuring the internal cohesion of the Russian security and defence sectors and the *siloviki* elite (the 'Russian force community' or 'community of successes', as success is Russia's main propaganda brand). This is especially true since the historical memory of the fall of two empires (Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union) is still alive in Russia, along with the awareness that authoritarian regimes do not collapse as a result of social protests or leaders losing popularity – they collapse when the ruling elites lose their internal cohesion.

²⁷ 'О внесении изменений в перечень сведений, отнесенных к государственной тайне', <http://prezident.org/articles/ukaz-prezidenta-rf-506-ot-3-sentjabrja-2018-goda-03-09-2018.html>

CONCLUSION

The events of the past year, and especially the Skripal poisoning, have brought the Russian special services back into current debate, defining the main threads of international debates about them. Those debates had been going on before, but the Skripals' case, unlike the similar Litvinenko case of 2006, has definitely sharpened their tone. It also brought about a qualitative change in political practice by triggering a consolidated reaction from Western states and international organisations, which included diplomatic measures (jointly agreed official statements, synchronised expulsions of 'diplomats' suspected of dual activities), as well as new political and economic sanctions against Russia.

In the West, the Skripals' case also reinforced the Russian special services' negative image, employing illegal means (blackmail, bribery, secret killings), techniques of disinformation and incitement also known as 'active measures' which serve to deepen tensions, creating divisions and strengthening destructive social behaviours in other countries in order to destabilise them. Analyses and opinions on this subject commonly refer to the KGB's methods from the Cold War era of information and psychological warfare in 1946–1991, which crystallised the political divisions between East and West.

In reality, the Cold War experience is only part of Russia's disinformation legacy. "The art of lying is as old as Russia", wrote the philosopher and Russia scholar Alain Besançon in his essay *Holy Russia*, arguing that disinformation was a fundamental feature of the nation.²⁸ When used as a weapon in the struggle against the West, it has proven so effective that the Russians clearly cannot extricate themselves from their centuries-old addiction to it. This is because, by creating deep divisions around the world, it makes it possible to focus other states' attention on the Kremlin's

²⁸ A. Besançon, *Święta Ruś [Holy Russia]*, Warszawa 2012, p. 11.

imperial policy. It is for this reason that blackmail and military threats have been a permanent part of the Kremlin's narrative: Tsar Alexander announced to the world that "Russia had only two allies: the army and the navy", Nikita Khrushchev boasted his country was "producing rockets like sausages", and Vladimir Putin has threatened to enter a new arms race and produce a weapon that would "overcome all existing and prospective anti-aircraft and anti-missile defence systems". This leads to the conclusion that Russia is being pushed to continue and enhance its methods of manipulation and disinformation by the very nature of the authoritarian Russian state.

These constant, systemic circumstances and the West's aforementioned mobilisation against the Kremlin's aggressive policies also warrant the conclusion that the Russian special services cannot successfully do anything in the West that could help the Kremlin's elite to resolve its fundamental problem concerning the image of Russia and its ruling elite in the eyes of foreign public opinion. But that does not mean they will stop undertaking activities in the information space (including cyberspace), which may offer the Kremlin convenient tools to influence the global situation. On the contrary, after the GRU's failures in 2018, Russia will aim to deploy a full range of information-war forces and measures (both defensive and offensive), involving existing and new actors, and to consolidate and co-ordinate the services' potential. It has the necessary traditions, legacy and well-trained people. It should be noted that domestically, the damage to the Russian services' image was minimal; that should be interpreted as proof of how effective have been the efforts to obscure the actual reality by focusing attention on the defence against information-war provocations by Western services.

In conclusion, it is worth noting once again that the Russian special services' model of operation is primarily a product of Russian authoritarianism; on the one hand, this is founded on a confrontational, anti-Western strategy, and on the other, it is focused on

domestic challenges (represented as the defence of the ‘besieged fortress’ that is Russia against all sorts of spies, saboteurs, foreign agents, terrorists and extremists). And since there is no indication²⁹ that the Russian authoritarian system might collapse in the foreseeable future, the Russian institutions of force will continue to be its beneficiaries: in the context of Russia’s information wars, the significance of their secret operations is difficult to overestimate. This means that the challenge they pose will remain crucial for international relations and global security.

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²⁹ See ‘Putin for the fourth time’, *OSW Report*, March 2018, *op. cit.*, https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/report_putin-for-the-fourth_net.pdf