



January 3, 2025

Russia's Foreign Intelligence Services

Russia has an extensive foreign intelligence system composed of several overlapping agencies that compete for bureaucratic, political, and often economic influence within the Russian government. Russia's foreign intelligence agencies play a key role in advising and influencing Russia's leadership, as well as in implementing its foreign policy. Congress has previously imposed sanctions on Russia's foreign intelligence agencies, and some in Congress continue to express concern about these agencies' activities. Members of Congress may be interested in assessing the structure of Russia's foreign intelligence services and the continued challenges they pose to U.S. and allied interests.

U.S. and Allied Intelligence Concerns

Over the last decade, Russia's foreign intelligence services have been linked to election interference, assassinations, cyber operations, espionage, and sabotage operations globally. In May 2024 testimony before Congress, Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines stated that,

Russia remains the most active foreign threat to our elections. The Russian government's goals in such influence operations tend to include eroding trust in U.S. democratic institutions, exacerbating sociopolitical divisions in the United States, and degrading Western support to Ukraine.

U.S. and allied intelligence agencies report an increase in Russian intelligence operations since 2022, described by the head of a UK service as a "staggering rise." In response, the U.S. and allied governments have expelled suspected Russian spies, uncovered espionage operations, pursued criminal indictments, and sanctioned the agencies and their leadership for their aggressive and reckless activities.

Evolution and Current Structure of Russia's Intelligence Services

After the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, its Committee of State Security (KGB) was broken up into several smaller organizations. The First Chief Directorate in charge of foreign intelligence, considered an elite unit within the KGB, was renamed the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and established as Russia's primary civilian intelligence agency. Many of the KGB's domestic and counterintelligence missions were divided among several agencies and eventually consolidated into the Federal Security Service (FSB), which eventually gained a foreign intelligence mission. The Main Directorate of the General Staff (GU), which was separate from the KGB, is Russia's defense intelligence agency and is responsible for collecting military intelligence as well as for overseeing *spetsnaz* (special light infantry forces) and proxy forces.

As a former KGB officer and head of the FSB, Russian President Vladimir Putin appears to place special importance on the roles and activities of Russia's foreign intelligence agencies. Russia's personalist system of government contributes to competition for favor and access to key policymakers among the services. This system also arguably contributes to a lack of coordination among the services and may encourage duplication of effort—including through similar or overlapping operations and areas of responsibility. Some observers assess that Russia's intelligence agencies shape and mold intelligence to confirm and support policymakers' views rather than to inform and advise.

Security Council

The Security Council (SB) is the key deliberative and formulative body advising the Russian President on security and intelligence policies. The SB consists of the heads of Russia's defense and security agencies. While formally part of the presidential administration, the Security Council retains a level of independence. It is unclear how much of that independence is formal or due to the status of the SB's leadership; it is currently headed by former Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, who replaced longtime SB head Nikolai Patrushev in May 2024.

Analysts note that the SB's primary functions appear to be conducted by its professional staff, the secretariat. The secretariat arguably has a key role in shaping and managing Russian security policy by channeling reporting to senior government officials and coordinating intelligence operations. In some ways, it is comparable to the U.S. National Security Council, but in other ways it is distinct. According to a leading observer, the SB is not a "decision-making body" but rather the coordinator and "enforcer" of policies across the Russian intelligence community.

Foreign Intelligence Service

As Russia's primary civilian foreign intelligence agency, the SVR is tasked with collecting the full spectrum of political, economic, and scientific intelligence. The SVR operates both official and unofficial intelligence operations. Official operations consist of human intelligence operations conducted out of Russian embassies and consulates under diplomatic cover. The SVR also uses nonofficial cover agents who operate without diplomatic immunity and with no apparent connection to Russia or the Russian government. SVR operations reportedly have been affected by mass expulsions of officers from Russian embassies in the United States and Europe in response to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

In addition to its traditional human intelligence missions, the SVR conducts cyber, disinformation, and influence

operations. U.S. authorities determined the SVR and its cyber units were responsible for the 2021 SolarWinds cyberattack. They continue to issue warnings of SVR cyber operations.

Main Directorate of the General Staff

The Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (also known as GRU, or Main Intelligence Directorate) is Russia's military intelligence agency. The GU is responsible for all levels of military intelligence, from tactical to strategic. The GU also commands Russia's *spetsnaz* brigades, which conduct battlefield reconnaissance and sabotage missions, and manages proxies and mercenary units (e.g., Redut and the so-called Africa Corps). Additionally, the GU conducts traditional intelligence missions through the recruitment and collection of human, signals, imagery, and electronic assets. Like the SVR, GU officers operate under both official and nonofficial cover.

Beyond its traditional combat- and intelligence-related roles, the GU conducts extensive cyber, sabotage, and assassination operations. These operations often are aggressive and brazen, such as some reported sabotage plots across Europe, leading to publicity and the exposure of GU culpability.

Russian Foreign Intelligence Agency Leadership

SVR (Foreign Intelligence Service)

- Sergei Naryshkin, Director (since 2016)

GU (Main Directorate; also known as GRU)

- Admiral Igor Kostyukov, Director (since 2018)
- Lieutenant General Vladimir Alekseyev, First Deputy Head

FSB (Federal Security Service)

- Alexander Bortnikov, Director (since 2008)
- Sergei Korolev, First Deputy Director

Federal Security Service

The FSB is the largest and arguably the most powerful of Russia's security agencies. The FSB inherited most of the KGB's domestic security missions and controls Russia's Federal Border Guard Service. It has an expansive list of responsibilities covering counterintelligence, counterterrorism, combating economic crime, and conducting domestic political security operations.

Despite being a domestic intelligence and security agency, the FSB also increasingly conducts foreign intelligence operations, especially in countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union. These operations are conducted by the FSB's Service for Operational Information and International Relations, also known as the Fifth Service. The Fifth Service reportedly played a key role in advising Russian policymakers prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The FSB also has been linked to assassinations, cyberattacks, and influence operations around the world.

Activities and Operations

Russia's foreign intelligence services conduct the full spectrum of clandestine operations, including intelligence collection, disinformation, and assassinations. U.S. and allied officials assess Russia's intelligence services have a high operational tempo and demonstrate flexibility in adapting operations in response to changing conditions.

Espionage. The primary mission of Russia's foreign intelligence services is to conduct espionage using human, signals, electronic, and cyber methods. The SVR and GU use officers operating with and without official diplomatic cover. As noted above, some of these operations have been hampered by the expulsion of more than 750 Russian diplomats from the United States and allied countries in response to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. In response, Russia's services reportedly have adapted by using proxies and organized crime groups to conduct operations.

Cyber Operations. All of Russia's foreign intelligence services have cyber units, conducting a wide range of espionage, sabotage, and disinformation operations. Successive U.S. Administrations have levied sanctions and criminal indictments against Russian services and their officers for cyber activities.

Assassinations and Sabotage. Since 2014, Russian foreign intelligence agencies have been directly linked to or suspected of numerous assassinations and sabotage attempts globally. According to a recently declassified 2016 U.S. intelligence report prepared for the House and Senate intelligence committees, "[Russia] will continue to use its intelligence services and other loyal entities to assassinate suspected terrorists as well as individuals abroad whom it deems as threats." Additionally, since 2022, U.S. and UK officials have described Russian intelligence services as waging a "campaign of sabotage across Europe," including bombings and other activities. Most of these attacks, or attempted attacks, have been linked to the GU and, to a lesser degree, the FSB.

Issues for Congress

In the 118th Congress, some Members expressed concern regarding the threat posed by operations carried out by Russia's foreign intelligence services. Congress and successive Administrations have imposed sanctions on Russia's foreign intelligence services and their officers, including under Section 231 of P.L. 115-44 and Executive Orders 13694 and 14024, as amended. Members of the 119th Congress may be interested in assessing U.S. sanctions and their effectiveness; the extent of the threat posed by Russia's foreign intelligence services; and possible U.S. and congressional responses, including via executive branch reporting requirements. Members also may consider whether to maintain or adjust current sanctions and may evaluate other options for responding to concerns about Russia's foreign intelligence services, including via oversight of executive branch policies.

Andrew S. Bowen, Analyst in Russian and European Affairs

IFI 2865

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.