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# Ignorance, indifference, or incompetence: why are Russian covert actions so easily unmasked?

Kevin P. Riehle 

## ABSTRACT

Although plausible deniability is a definitional characteristic of covert actions, numerous Russian actions have been unveiled and attributed to Russia over the past decade. The reason for these frequent revelations can be explained by three factors: ignorance, indifference, and incompetence. Russian actions often display ignorance about the reactions they might elicit, indifference to global opinion if they are caught, and incompetence that allows foreign governments to unpeel the sometimes thin veneer of clandestinity that is supposed to cover Russian actions. Frequent revelations based on a combination of those factors have given Russia a reputation of aggressiveness in the international arena, while also limiting Russia's own actions, even in overt areas such as diplomacy and economic relations, because of that reputation.

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When a government sponsors a covert action, one of the definitional goals is for the action to remain covert. In the U.S. context, that goal is articulated in 50 U.S. Code § 3093, which defines covert action as, 'An activity or activities of the United States Government to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States Government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly'.<sup>1</sup> The concealment of the U.S. government's hand behind the action – labeled, plausible deniability – is a defining characteristic of covert action. Other countries vary from the United States definition somewhat, but plausible deniability is a normal criterion. The UK similarly emphasizes deniability in covert operations, considering it 'politically feasible to deny complicity in public statements' in some instances.<sup>2</sup> This sometimes also leads to government officials responding to public inquiries by neither confirming nor denying involvement to maintain ambiguity of responsibility.

Covert and clandestine activities both seek to hide something but are distinguished from each other by what is being hidden. Clandestine means secret. It means that the activity should not become publicly known, although the participants are typically aware of the entity sponsoring the activity. Covert, on the other hand means that the activity itself may or may not be secret, but the hand of the sponsoring power should not become known publicly, often even to the participants. These activities include what George Kennan called 'political warfare' and included a wide range of activities, including political intervention, unacknowledged paramilitary support, sabotage, and even assassination.<sup>3</sup> In some cases, the action itself may be broadcast widely – a weapons warehouse is destroyed, a foreign leader is assassinated, or a government is overturned. Those actions cannot themselves be hidden. But the actor can deny involvement.

No linguistic difference exists in Russian between the words 'covert' and 'clandestine'. Nevertheless, Russian leaders vigorously deny involvement in covert activities through official

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public statements and counteraccusations. According to Vasili Mitrokhin, the definition of the Soviet-era KGB concept of 'active measures', a Cold War manifestation of covert influence operations, was

agent-operational measures aimed at exerting useful influence on aspects of political life of a target country which are of interest, its foreign policy, the solution of international problems, misleading the adversary, undermining and weakening his positions, the disruption of his hostile plans, and the achieving of other aims.<sup>4</sup>

That influence can only be effective if it is deniable. If a target country becomes aware of the operation, it takes steps to guard against it and punish the perpetrator politically. The concept of covertness is pivotal to the success of such an operation; the unveiling of Moscow's hand behind supposedly covert influence activities led to hundreds of expulsions of Soviet embassy-based personnel during the Cold War.<sup>5</sup> The Soviet-era concept of 'active measures' lives today, recast as 'measures of support' and led by a dedicated directorate in the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR).<sup>6</sup>

What then explains the fact that Russia has been caught conducting so many aggressive covert actions around the world in the past decade? Russian operatives have been identified in numerous cases in three broad categories of covert actions: informational – manipulating foreign governments and disseminating disinformation; physical – conducting assassination operations against regime opponents and sabotage operations against infrastructure targets; and military – inserting undeclared military or paramilitary forces into neighboring countries or providing covert support to foreign forces.

Polyakova and Boyer claim that new technologies make Russia's covert activities 'cheaper, faster, and allow for maximum plausible deniability'.<sup>7</sup> However, while Internet technology does offer greater anonymity, Russia's hand behind online covert activities has been frequently and undeniably revealed. Contrary to Polyakova's and Boyer's assertion, the European Union East Strategic Communications Task Force, which was set up to raise awareness to Russian covert disinformation activities, reported that in its first three years, 2015–2018, it 'catalogued, analysed, and put the spotlight on over 4,500 examples of disinformation by the Russian Federation'.<sup>8</sup> After Russian military forces were identified as participating in the Russian takeover of Crimea in 2014, Mark Stout applied the phrase 'implausible deniability' to describe Russia's 'little green men'.<sup>9</sup> Rory Cormac and Richard Aldrich even claimed that plausible deniability is no longer possible if it ever was, replacing it with unacknowledged interference instead.<sup>10</sup> Warner disputes that, claiming that covertness 'is naturally difficult to maintain, and embarrassing or even fatal to lose'.<sup>11</sup> But is that why Russia's sponsorship of covert activities is so easily unmasked?

The Russian government's reflexive answer to accusations against it is to blame a U.S.-inspired anti-Russian 'hybrid war' that unfairly ties Russia to actions that it did not commit.<sup>12</sup> But with so many operations being unveiled leading to hundreds of Russian diplomats being expelled by dozens of governments, it is implausible to claim that an all-powerful U.S. covert force is behind all allegations against Russia, especially when Russian leaders simultaneously claim that U.S. influence in the world is waning.<sup>13</sup>

Rather than being the result of a concerted anti-Russian U.S. plot, frequent revelations of Russia's hand behind covert actions can be analyzed based on a combination of three factors, which are present in different degrees depending on the operation. I label those factors ignorance, indifference, and incompetence. Russian actions often display ignorance about the reactions they might elicit, indifference to global opinion if they are caught, and incompetence that allows foreign governments to unpeel the sometimes thin veneer of clandestinity that is supposed to cover Russian actions (see Figure 1).

These reasons are not mutually exclusive, and some actions may show elements of all three. This article examines those three reasons in relation to events that have been attributed to Russia over the past decade. Those revelations risk doing more harm than good to Russia's fulfillment of its priority security objectives and may have left Russia with few options other than an overt military

	<b>Russian intent</b>	<b>Why Russian hand is revealed</b>
<b>Ignorance</b>	Hide Russia's hand while achieving a national security objective	Strategic error: Russian leaders fail to anticipate the target's reaction due to a lack of understanding of others' priorities or sensitivities
<b>Indifference</b>	Achieve a national security objective without intending to hide Russia's hand	Strategic intent: Send a deliberate political message, either to the foreign target or to a Russian domestic audience
<b>Incompetence</b>	Hide Russia's hand while achieving a national security objective	Operational error: Russian operators get caught due to poor tradecraft or operational security

**Figure 1.** Summary of ignorance, indifference, incompetence model.

invasion. But targets often choose to reveal Russia's hand publicly, hoping to dissuade Russia from acting so blatantly.

## Ignorance

One reason why Russian covert operations have become publicized may be Russia's inability to assess accurately how the world reacts to Russian aggression. The Russian belief in its own righteousness and the degeneracy of Western liberalism may blind Russian leaders to the reactions of other states who view Russian actions as belligerent.<sup>14</sup> They may make a strategic error by not understanding the intensity of other state's adherence to democratic principles and sovereignty, concepts that are malleable in Russia. Although there is plentiful scholarship about misinterpreting an adversary's actions as belligerent, there is less discussion about understanding another state's interpretation of one's own actions.<sup>15</sup>

As Hill and Gaddy describe, Putin has little education about how the United States reacts to Russian actions, and that same gap extends to other liberal democratic countries. Putin's innermost circle is made up of men with similar experiences as his: brief periods abroad as intelligence officers during the Cold War, but little more exposure to Western countries than that. Although Putin has often spoken to Western representatives during his tenure as president, his conversations are often characterized as pushing a Russian historical narrative rather than listening to others.<sup>16</sup> Putin's reflexive interpretation in the early 2000s of Western actions as hostile toward Russia, like the U.S. failure to align with Russia's views on terrorism in 2001–2002, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, NATO enlargement to include former Soviet states in 2004, and so-called 'color revolutions', is founded on a gap of knowledge about how the West thinks.<sup>17</sup>

Russian leaders do not seem to realize, for example, that elections are a sacrosanct part of a democratic system, and that trying to manipulate them will elicit a strong reaction. Because elections inside Russia are disingenuous and manipulated to give the appearance of democracy, and have been since the Soviet era, Russian leaders seem to believe that they can be manipulated abroad as well. To a Russian leader, liberal democracy is a dangerous phenomenon that leads to instability and chaos.<sup>18</sup> They see societal divisions, such as those manifested in democratic elections, as weakness. As Chekinov and Bogdanov emphasize, the cognitive domain is a venue for achieving political objectives, just as the physical battlefield is, and elections rely heavily on the cognitive domain.<sup>19</sup>

To avoid weakness inside Russia, the Russian government suppresses societal divisions, either claiming they do not exist or attributing them to an external hand bent on weakening Russia, rather than addressing them. Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov even stated in August 2023 that Russia's 2024 elections 'theoretically' would be an unnecessary expense because of the 'unprecedented'

unanimity surrounding Putin's presidency.<sup>20</sup> Conversely, Russian covert operations feed already existing divisions abroad to foster weakness inside an adversary's society. For Russian leaders, elections, as a part of a democracy, need to be manipulated both to prevent chaos inside Russia and to inflame divisions in other countries.

But that is not how Western democracies view elections. Elections are a pillar of democratic systems. Thus, the victims of Russian election manipulation are not inclined to ignore such operations, like those that occurred in the United States, France, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Montenegro, etc. When, for example, hackers, likely from the Russian military intelligence service (GRU), attempted unsuccessfully to influence the Emmanuel Macron presidential campaign in 2017 using a false organization that called itself the 'Cyber Caliphate' to attempt to hide the GRU's hand.<sup>21</sup> French officials claimed that the hack and leak portion of the operation was intended 'to sow doubt and disinformation' in the electoral process.<sup>22</sup> The operation in France followed a similar operation in the United States for a similar purpose the previous year, in which both GRU and SVR officers conducted intrusion operations into the U.S. Democratic National Committee (DNC) and the Hillary Clinton campaign offices.<sup>23</sup> Putin praised the exposure of the leaked DNC data and denigrated the investigation into the source of the leaks.<sup>24</sup>

The fact that the U.S. government went to the length of declassifying and publishing an intelligence assessment about the operation is an indication of the intensity of negative reaction by a Western democratic government to a Russian attempt to manipulate an election. The U.S. National Intelligence Council's public assessment of Russian election meddling in the United States began with the phrase, 'Russian efforts to influence the 2016 US presidential election represent the most recent expression of Moscow's longstanding desire to undermine the US-led liberal democratic order'.<sup>25</sup> The Russian government may also have been surprised by the U.S. government's willingness to admit publicly the gaps in its security structure that allowed Russian actors to operate, which is another form of democratic accountability unknown in Russia.

Putin's statements about the leaks were tone deaf and point to a blind spot in the Russian system by which Russian leaders are so immersed in their own stage-managed governing philosophy that they may not see the consequences of manipulating others'. This may be an indicator of ignorance about foreign countries' priorities, preferences, and governing principles. Russian mirror imaging and singlemindedness, assuming other countries will view Russian covert actions the same way Russia's leadership sees them, may at times obscure the reality of how Russia's covert actions are perceived abroad. Russian leaders today may simply not grasp the sanctity that democratic governments place on elections.

Russian leaders also seem to have been caught off guard when European countries responded in a remarkably unified way to the 2018 assassination attempt on the life of Sergey Skripal on British soil using a deadly chemical weapon. The unified reaction may partially be founded on repeated Russian covert assassination operations in Europe, especially the operation that killed Alexander Litvinenko in 2006 using a traceable radioactive substance. The Litvinenko and Skripal operations could fall into the incompetence category (see below), as operatives in both cases left trails that investigators could easily follow. Nevertheless, initial reactions to the allegation from Moscow were uncoordinated and contradictory and tried to point in all directions except Russia.<sup>26</sup> One could logically predict that using a highly toxic substance on the territory of a foreign country to assassinate a traitor to Russia could raise the ire of that country's national security establishment. In the Skripal case, the GRU used the nerve agent Novichok, an advanced military nerve agent only manufactured in Russia, which is prohibited under the Chemical Weapons Convention and classed as a weapon of mass destruction. Despite Russian claims otherwise, that substance left a Russian signature inside Great Britain. In so doing, the GRU operatives sickened multiple people including Skripal's daughter, and killed one British citizen.<sup>27</sup>

The Litvinenko and Skripal operations might not have been intended to remain covert – the Russian hand behind the assassination of former Russian officers was only shallowly deniable. But the Russian government did not seem to see the reaction coming after the Skripal case. Russian

leaders, which the UK government concluded were responsible for the Litvinenko assassination, were undoubtedly also briefed on the Skripal operation and approved it despite the risk of further irritating relations with the UK.<sup>28</sup> They did not, however, seem to have anticipated the unified reaction of over 30 countries, including most EU countries and several others around the world, expelling nearly 150 personnel from Russian embassies. That was the largest loss of Russian presence in Europe since the Cold War and a historically unusual example of sympathetic expulsions, meaning reactions in multiple countries to an event that occurred in one. The unified European response elicited by that the Skripal assassination attempt could hardly have been worth the benefit of eliminating a single traitor, no matter how damaging that traitor might have been.

That effect was compounded by the FSB's use of the same toxic substance inside the Russian Federation against anti-Putin activist Aleksey Navalny. Taking it even further, the Russian government allowed Navalny to travel to Germany for treatment, where competent medical personnel were sure to detect the presence of Novichok.<sup>29</sup> Just as in the Skripal case, Russian leaders did not seem to forecast the intensity of European reaction to the attempt on Navalny's life.<sup>30</sup>

The same could be said for the geopolitical reaction to Russia's February 2022 overt invasion of Ukraine, which has resulted in crippling economic and financial sanctions, bolstered NATO military forces in Eastern Europe, thirty-three countries expelling over 700 Russian personnel from diplomatic missions, and two new countries joining NATO. After Finland and Sweden had remained neutral throughout the Cold War, their decisions to join NATO in May 2022 were a direct result of Russia's actions. Finnish popular support for NATO membership skyrocketed in just a few weeks, and a Finnish lawmaker stated, 'Following the events in Ukraine and Russia's brutal invasion, we feel that it's just a logical situation now to join NATO and partner up with our friends and allies in the West'.<sup>31</sup> Although an overt invasion is not a covert operation, its initiation was at least partially based on the failure of Russian covert operations to achieve Russian interests in Ukraine and vis-a-vis NATO. In any case, Russia did not seem to foresee the intensity of the reaction.

Galeotti has asserted that Russian intelligence services either do not give their leaders sound advice about how foreign governments would react to Russian covert operations, or the leaders ignore the intelligence. If the latter, it would follow a historical pattern of Soviet/Russian political leaders refusing to accept intelligence advice that conflicts with their preconceived conclusions, as Garthoff discusses.<sup>32</sup> Even if Russian intelligence services did accurately forecast Western countries' reactions to events like election manipulation or an assassination operation, they may not have dared to communicate their assessments to Russian leaders, for fear of losing influence. 'Either way', Galeotti writes, 'this was an intelligence failure that appears not to have been a one-off but a reflection of serious systemic weaknesses'.<sup>33</sup>

## Indifference

Others have interpreted the Skripal assassination attempt not as a miscalculation, but as a deliberate move to send a message to would-be Russian traitors: 'you will pay'.<sup>34</sup> Gioe, et al, call it 'theatrical murder'.<sup>35</sup> Putin himself bluntly called traitors 'scumbags' worthy of death.<sup>36</sup> That suggests another possible reason why Russia's covert activities have become public: Russian leaders simply do not care how others react, but deliberately use aggressive activities to achieve their objectives and for signaling.<sup>37</sup> The Russian government can pay little attention to foreign condemnation or criticism if covert actions achieve Russia's objectives, which can be asserted to be: 1) protect the Putin regime; 2) control the post-Soviet space; 3) counterweigh the unipolar actor in the world; 4) portray Russia as an indispensable player in the world; and 5) divide and disrupt NATO and the European Union.<sup>38</sup> If an action achieves one or more of those objectives, it doesn't matter whether Russia's hand is visible. Russian operators may simply be indifferent to what other governments think – they are satisfied with the signal they send. This reason best fits Cormac and Aldrich's 'implausible

deniability'. In a Machiavellian sense, Putin portrays the view that it is better to be feared than loved, and fear can be inspired – both inside and outside Russia – by signaling strength through action.<sup>39</sup>

On 17 July 2014, a Malaysian Airlines passenger plane was hit with a Russian-manufactured Buk missile, killing all 298 people onboard. Initial suspicions, which a Dutch investigation later confirmed, pointed to Russian-supplied insurgent forces operating in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>40</sup> However, the Russian government, rather than accepting responsibility for supplying the missile, responded with multiple competing explanations for the event, apparently to draw attention away from Russia regardless of the ridiculous nature of the false explanations. Russian narratives included allegations that the aircraft was filled with corpses when it took off, that the Ukrainian military had shot down the aircraft as a false flag to blame Russia, and that the U.S. CIA had ordered the shootdown.<sup>41</sup> The explanations in some ways echoed those that followed the Skripal assassination attempt, but were more precisely timed to align with international reactions, such as just before the July 2015 UN Security Council vote to establish an international tribunal to prosecute those responsible for the shootdown. The blatant falseness of the Russian explanations left many in Europe appalled that Russia could be so callous and transparently disingenuous.<sup>42</sup> They gave the sense that the Russian government was more concerned about deflecting responsibility than about victims of the tragedy. But the themes of Russia's competing explanations all fit into one or more of Russia's national security objectives, and thus were sufficient in themselves.

That event was preceded by the now famous 'little green men', Russian soldiers wearing unmarked uniforms who took control of Ukrainian government buildings in Crimea in March and April 2014. The Russian government offered a thin cover story was that the soldiers were Ukrainians or Cossacks,<sup>43</sup> with Putin himself referring to them as 'self-defense forces'.<sup>44</sup> There was little doubt even while the events unfolded that the soldiers were Russian, despite denials from Moscow. A year later, Putin himself acknowledged that the forces were Russian, but by that time, deniability was no longer necessary – Crimea was firmly in Russian control.<sup>45</sup> Russian leaders were unabashed in their lies to the world, but they achieved their objective, so Russia could weather the world's reactions.

The same explanation might apply to assassinations in Europe and the Middle East, although some of these might also fit into the incompetent category (see below). The Skripal operation received broad press coverage; however, since 2004, the Russian government has also committed over 20 assassinations of Chechen militants and political leaders outside Russia.<sup>46</sup> The first such operation targeted the former President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, who was killed in a car bomb attack in Doha, Qatar. The Qatari government quickly identified the killers as three GRU-associated operatives, including an embassy-based officer. The diplomatically covered officer was expelled, but the Qatari government convicted the other two of murder. The Russian government demanded the return of the two jailed operatives to serve their sentences in a Russian prison. When the Qatari government complied, the two officers received a hero's welcome in Russia and disappeared, presumably freed immediately.<sup>47</sup> Russian leaders cared little for the world's reaction.

It could also apply to a hack-and-leak operation targeting the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA). In 2016, GRU hackers penetrated a WADA server and accessed a database that contained confidential athlete medical information. WADA quickly identified the Russian hand behind the hacking incident and announced it in a press release. GRU hackers had captured the password use by a Russian woman who raised public awareness of Russia's state-sponsored athlete doping program.<sup>48</sup> The hackers subsequently leaked the files of two U.S. athletes, claiming the International Olympic Committee was applying a double standard by allowing some athletes to use performance enhancing drugs but punishing Russian athletes for doing the same, ignoring the fact that the two U.S. athletes had gone through a formal approval process.<sup>49</sup> Although Russian spokespersons denied Russian government involvement, the Russian hand was clear and the act was a transparent retaliation for banning Russian athletes from international competitions.

Russian hackers disrupting the computer systems of Ukrainian infrastructure facilities used methods usually reserved for wartime.<sup>50</sup> In December 2015, a GRU computer intrusion team

known in the West as Voodoo Bear penetrated Ukrainian electricity generation companies and caused outages impacting 225,000 customers.<sup>51</sup> Malware was also found in Ukrainian companies in other critical infrastructure sectors, destroying data in hundreds of computers at media institutions, deleting or permanently encrypting terabytes of data on government computers, and paralyzing Ukraine's railway ticketing system. In December 2016, Russian-origin malware attacks again targeted Ukrainian electrical grids causing a power distribution station near Kiev to switch off, leaving the northern part of the capital without electricity.<sup>52</sup> The attacks were simultaneous with Russia's support to insurgent operations in eastern Ukraine and they are consistent with Russian military doctrine.<sup>53</sup> There was little doubt about a Russian hand behind the attacks as they displayed unmistakable ties leading back to Russia. But the GRU may have assessed that the fear and disruption they caused achieved Russia's objectives, nevertheless.

Russian leaders react to some world events with blatant hypocrisy, laying blame on others for supposedly conducting the very actions the Russian government conducts itself. The Russian government declares among its international priorities the doctrine of non-intervention in the affairs of other states. The March 2023 *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* reaffirms Russian adherence to that doctrine, while repeatedly accusing Western powers of interfering in other states' affairs through criticism of human rights policies and the 'imposition of destructive neoliberal ideological attitudes that run counter to traditional spiritual and moral values'.<sup>54</sup>

Yet, Russian operatives have been caught interfering in other states' affairs on multiple occasions by manipulating elections, disrupting investigations into Russia's aggressive actions, and supporting violent extremist groups.<sup>55</sup> Simultaneous with Russia's open claim of non-interference in the affairs of other states, Russia also claims special responsibility for Russian-speaking 'compatriots' in other countries, which gives Russia the right to interfere in the affairs of neighboring countries.<sup>56</sup> Russian arguments for annexing Crimea and supporting insurgency in the Donbas, and then for a full-scale invasion of Ukraine are the most extreme examples, although complaints about the treatment of Russians in Estonia and Latvia are similar. Russian spokespersons respond to allegations of Russian meddling with counteraccusations of other countries interfering in Russia, despite the lack of evidence of the latter.<sup>57</sup>

Elsewhere, Russian leaders trumpet NATO's antagonistic intent in the Arctic, while Russia spends billions of rubles to build up its own military capability there and has a far greater military presence than NATO.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Russian leaders claim that foreign powers are rewriting history, while Putin's administration has overseen the rewriting of history to make Russia appear stronger and more successful than it really is.<sup>59</sup>

This hypocrisy may be founded in Russian mirror imaging, which leads Russian leaders to assume that other countries view the world with the same cynicism and condescension that they themselves do. However, Russia's mirror imaging is often simply a smoke screen to justify Russia's actions and to ascribe mythical intent to the West that matches Russia real intent. Russian covert actions founded on the Russian perception of the world are often easy to unveil, at least partly because mirror imaging clouds Russia's interpretation of other states' reactions.

## Incompetence

The third explanation for why Russian covert operations become visible to the world is that they often exhibit poor operational tradecraft and security. Incompetence leads to Russians getting caught in the act.

Investigations by counterintelligence organizations and by journalists have identified multiple instances when Russian tradecraft was lacking. Less than six months after the Skripal assassination attempt, the British government identified the operatives through surveillance camera footage and GRU-linked communications.<sup>60</sup> Two of the GRU operatives went on Russian television a week later and claimed to be simple tourists in the UK.<sup>61</sup> The implausible nature of their claim may be an



indicator of Russian indifference. However, the fact that the British investigation forced them to make a public appearance to deny the allegations is an indicator of incompetence in the operation.

The Bellingcat investigative journalist organization went a step further identifying GRU incompetence. It reported in August 2022 that for nearly a decade, the GRU had furnished operatives with consecutively numbered passports, including those for two Russian operatives identified in the Skripal assassination attempt. But the Bellingcat revelation went even further. In 2022, Bellingcat also identified Maria Adela Kuhfeldt Rivera, whose real name is Olga Kolobova, a GRU illegal who used a passport in the same number series.<sup>62</sup> Kuhfeldt Rivera/Kolobova quickly fled Italy where she had operated for eight years just two days after the Skripal assassins appeared on Russian television, likely out of fear that her name might come out in the investigation. For Bellingcat, it did, showing a glaring lack of clandestine tradecraft.

Russian disinformation is not always well conceived or executed and the tradecraft involved in Russian disinformation is not hard to penetrate. As noted above, the European Union East Strategic Communications Task Force identified 4,500 messages as Russian disinformation in just a three-year period. The flurry of conflicting stories that followed the 2014 MH-17 shootdown included one that claimed that the U.S. CIA had coordinated with the Ukrainian military to explode a missile onboard the aircraft and then blame it on Russia. The account included an intercepted conversation supposedly between a CIA officer and a Ukrainian counterpart. However, the so-called American in the recording spoke with a British accent and used British slang, while the CIA officer who the report claimed to have recorded spoke with a distinct American accent.<sup>63</sup> Efforts to distract from Russian involvement in the Skripal operation were similarly implausible, with the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office counting 24 different noncredible Russian counter-stories in the month following the attack.<sup>64</sup> Sloppy tradecraft can unravel a covert operation.

Similarly poor tradecraft characterized the Internet Research Agency's (IRA) efforts in the lead up to the 2016 elections in the United States. Divisive Facebook ads were paid for in Russian rubles.<sup>65</sup> They contained English grammar mistakes and were often written in stilted language. Although there is evidence that Russian disinformation operatives are refining their tradecraft since then, applying convincing disinformation language is still a challenge.<sup>66</sup>

In April 2018, a team of four GRU signals intelligence collection operators arrived in the Netherlands to conduct a close-access technical collection operation. Dutch counterintelligence monitored their movements from the moment they arrived and quickly identified their mission. They had come to the Netherlands to target the Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which was investigating both the Skripal assassination attempt and allegations that Russian-backed forces had used chemical weapons in Syria. The group was traveling on Russian diplomatic passports, meaning they made no attempt to hide their connection to the Russian government. But several aspects of the operation showed a surprising lack of clandestine tradecraft.

Members of the team used their phones to photograph the OPCW building the day after they arrived, and when Dutch counterintelligence investigators arrested them, the photos were still there. One of the team members carried a laptop that contained information about similar past operations that the GRU had conducted in Brazil, Switzerland, and Malaysia. The Malaysia operation had also targeted an event in which the Russian government denied involvement: the downing of the Malaysian airliner over Ukraine in 2014. The laptop contained data showing it had traveled to Lausanne, Switzerland, where it was linked to the hacking of a laptop belonging to WADA (see above). One of the team members also had a receipt for a taxi ride in Moscow the day they had traveled to the Hague.

Most importantly, when Dutch counterintelligence investigators looked in the team's rental car, they found it filled with equipment designed to intercept wi-fi signals, which the team was planning to do at OPCW, and which it had previously done in Brazil, Switzerland, Malaysia. They also carried a train ticket for onward travel to Switzerland a week after their arrival in the Netherlands.<sup>67</sup> The team used few precautions to avoid being caught, and their only protection was their possession of diplomatic passports which allowed them to leave the country without going to jail.

The FSB is also not immune to lapses of operational security. In December 2020, Aleksey Navalny published an audio recording of a phone call he made to an FSB officer eliciting information about the poisoning operation directed against Navalny.<sup>68</sup> The officer, who had been directly involved in the operation, talked openly about it over the phone with Navalny, who gave a false name claiming to be phoning on behalf of the FSB leadership. An FSB officer discussing an assassination operation over the phone shows disregard for operational sensitivity, and Navalny's recording and publication of the conversation was highly embarrassing for the FSB.<sup>69</sup>

The FSB experienced an embarrassing moment the previous year when its operative was identified within a few months after the brazen daylight assassination in Germany of Georgian émigré and Chechen militant Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in August 2019. By December, the German government was sufficiently confident in its assessment of Russian involvement that it expelled two officials from the Russian embassy in Berlin.<sup>70</sup> Just after the story broke, German officials claimed to have received information that Russian operatives were planning another assassination targeting the arrested assassin in prison.<sup>71</sup> The easy identification of the Russian operatives and follow-on operation was likely an indicator that the assassin used poor tradecraft and left a trail that was not difficult to follow.

Even the heavily publicized hacking operation directed against the U.S. Democratic National Committee in 2015–2016 showed incompetence. Both the FSB in mid-2015 and the GRU in April 2016 compromised the same computer systems and separately stole user credentials to further penetrate the systems. There is no indication that the two agencies were aware of each other's operation, showing an extraordinary lack of internal coordination within the Russian system. According to Crowdstrike, 'while you would virtually never see Western intelligence agencies going after the same target without de-confliction for fear of compromising each other's operations, in Russia this is not an uncommon scenario'.<sup>72</sup>

These incidents should not be construed as meaning that Russian intelligence services experience no successes: the SolarWinds computer intrusion that was interdicted in 2021 took months to detect<sup>73</sup>; Russian interception of FBI counterintelligence communications lasted several years.<sup>74</sup> Those operations were likely run by the SVR, which appears to be more competent than other Russian services. However, multiple instances of failed and interdicted operations show a pattern of weak operational security. The fact that European countries could identify over 700 Russian officials, including SVR officers, to expel in the 18 months following Russia's invasion of Ukraine also shows that foreign counterintelligence services are aware of those weaknesses even in the more competent and professional SVR.

## Conclusion

At the same time as these actions are being unveiled around the world, the Russian government praises its own officers domestically, claiming they are the most patriotic, most effective of any intelligence officers in the world. The Russian government portrays its intelligence and state security services as the ultimate patriotic organizations that protect Russia's interests in the face of a constant onslaught from the outside.<sup>75</sup> However, the incompetent execution of covert activities, whether Russia was ignorant to foreign reaction or indifferent to it, has harmed Russian intelligence services' reputations and eroded the narrative of Russian intelligence and security services being elite and unstoppable. The Russian adulation of its intelligence and state security officers may even be to compensate to a domestic audience for their incompetence abroad and corruption at home.

Russia, like other countries, applies covert actions alongside its overt levers of national power, including diplomatic and economic measures, to achieve its priority national security objectives. However, if covert actions are quickly revealed and target countries' investigative organizations tie them incontrovertibly to Russia, they threaten to counteract the very objectives they were intended to fulfill. Covert actions can do more harm than good. Russia is not alone in that reality; as other countries' covert actions have been publicly attributed, such as the U.S./UK overturn of the Iranian government in Iran in 1953 and U.S. covert actions in Chile in the 1970s, that led to

foreign policy complications. The difference with Russia is that numerous covert actions in the past decade have been attributed to Russia in a concentrated time soon after their execution. Whether because of ignorance, indifference, incompetence, or a combination of all three, Russia has acquired a reputation for failed operations. The expulsions of Russian diplomats from mostly European countries following the Sergey Skripal assassination attempt, and then again after exposure of Russian atrocities in Ukraine in 2022, has obstructed Russia's ability to conduct diplomacy in Europe, leaving Russia with few other options than leveling open threats to use nuclear weapons instead. Revelations about Russia's covert operations can obstruct Russia's ability to use its overt levers of national power, especially when Western sanctions heavily reduce economic connections to Russia and Western states expelled large portions of Russian diplomats.

Ignorance and incompetence at times weaken the signaling effect of actions taken with indifference to foreign reactions. Although Russia could use 'little green men' in 2014 to facilitate the annexation of Crimea, Russia later acknowledged its hand, alerting Western powers to that method, leaving it less expedient to use it again. Although Russia conducted covert remote infrastructure attack in Ukraine in 2015–2016, those attacks prompted improvements to Ukraine's computer network infrastructure and drew international support against Russian covert actions, making it more difficult to repeat the operations.<sup>76</sup> Consequently, since the beginning of Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, Russia has increasingly resorted to physical attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure targets. That harms not just Russia's security, but the security of the West and the international political order overall. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has sent shocks around the world.

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