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The consequences of disclosing the activity of Russian intelligence in Western Europe

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The British investigative portal Bellingcat launched a campaign in September as part of which the identities of the Russian military intelligence officers responsible for aggressive diversionary moves are being gradually revealed; this has surprised the Russian side. The discreditation of the professionalism of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GU formerly known as GRU) turned out to be a successful information operation against Russia revealing the gaps in the system of protecting the personal data of the people working for the service or collaborating with it. The Russian side has been unable to question the reliability of the disclosed data in a convincing manner, making interim and unsuccessful disinformation moves, one example of which was the disastrous TV interview carried out by the TV station Russia Today with two GU officers who pretended to be ordinary tourists. The Russian side decided to employ a typical mode of information defence, once again building up an image of Russia as a 'besieged fortress.' On 3 October, President Vladimir Putin concluded that it would be best for all if the West's information campaign ended as soon as possible, and on 6 October the TASS news agency accused the West of waging an 'unwise coordinated information war' against Russia. Bellingcat continues to reveal further information concerning the identities of the Russian military intelligence officers, thus successfully undermining Russia's information moves.

Commentary

- The involvement of the Russian military intelligence in illegal operations has been unmasked on numerous occasions since 2014. This concerned, for example, the disclosure by Ukrainian media and services of the identities of Russian soldiers (including from Spetsnaz GU) participating undercover in the fights in eastern Ukraine and Syria. The presentation in May 2018 by the Joint Investigation Team of evidence proving that Russian military personnel had been involved in the shooting down of the Malaysia Airlines (MH17) aircraft over Donbass in July 2014 had a similar character. This did not influence the Russian government's stance, which consistently undermine the reliability of the evidence, at the same time taking action to protect the identities of the military personnel (for example, by imposing a ban on activity in social networks). The imposition of personal sanctions by the USA and the EU on officers of Russian secret services (in July 2018, the USA put one of the military intelligence officers who was

deported from the Netherlands in spring this year on the list) did not provoke a harsh reaction from the Russian government, either.

- The Russian government's nervous reaction to the materials published by the Bellingcat portal proves that the journalists have used gaps in the data security system. Sensitive data (passport data and addresses) originate from the computer system of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (including migration service). This means that either the computer system of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs has been successfully infiltrated or the data has been disclosed by a person who has access to them. Proof of this is found in the information from the Russian media that the FSB has initiated an investigation into the breach of information security in the Ministry of Internal Affairs.
- This is the first time in the modern history of the Russian military intelligence when it became possible to challenge the so far unquestioned opinion about the high degree of its professionalism and effectiveness of its operation. This undermines the image of this service which has been built for years in the information space, including its perception at home. The government has so been unable far to restrict access to the hard-hitting materials whose widespread publication has provoked the ridicule of military intelligence officers in Russian social media, a reaction unseen so far with regard to the GU.
- The recent prestige failure of one of the secret services does mean that the service has failed in operational terms. The Russian military intelligence since 2010 has conducted wide-ranging special operations on a global scale, from strictly military and intelligence operations, through diversionary or terrorist acts guaranteeing the security of Russia's economic interests, to activity in cyber space. The scale of these operations requires the engagement of great strength and resources. This might be the reason why reserve officers who have the status of so-called non-employed collaborators of the secret service have been engaged in carrying out certain operations.
- Characteristic features of the Russian military intelligence's actions include aggressiveness, rapid reaction and disregarding the international consequences. This manner of action is typical of operations of a military nature where identifying the enemy's potential by initiating diversionary actions is aimed at revealing the enemy's weaknesses, to disorganise or disorientate the agencies in charge of national security as regards the real target of the attack, and also to escalate the external audience's sense of the threat posed by Russia. One intended consequence of this strategy is that the attacked party believes that, regardless of the losses sustained, Russia will not withdraw its aggression. Given this context, information in the media that the Russian military intelligence is plunged in an organisational crisis seems to be lacking plausibility. Similar actions are likely to be continued.
- The repudiation of the GU which has dominated the media space has paradoxically distracted observers' attention from the activity of other secret services active outside Russia: the Foreign Intelligence Service and the Federal Security Service. The history of Soviet/Russian secret services proves that one of the favourite methods employed by Russian actors is masking their actions with the activity of another agency. This may mean that the visible intense activity of the Russian military intelligence may be masking operations of other Russian services active in political and economic areas.