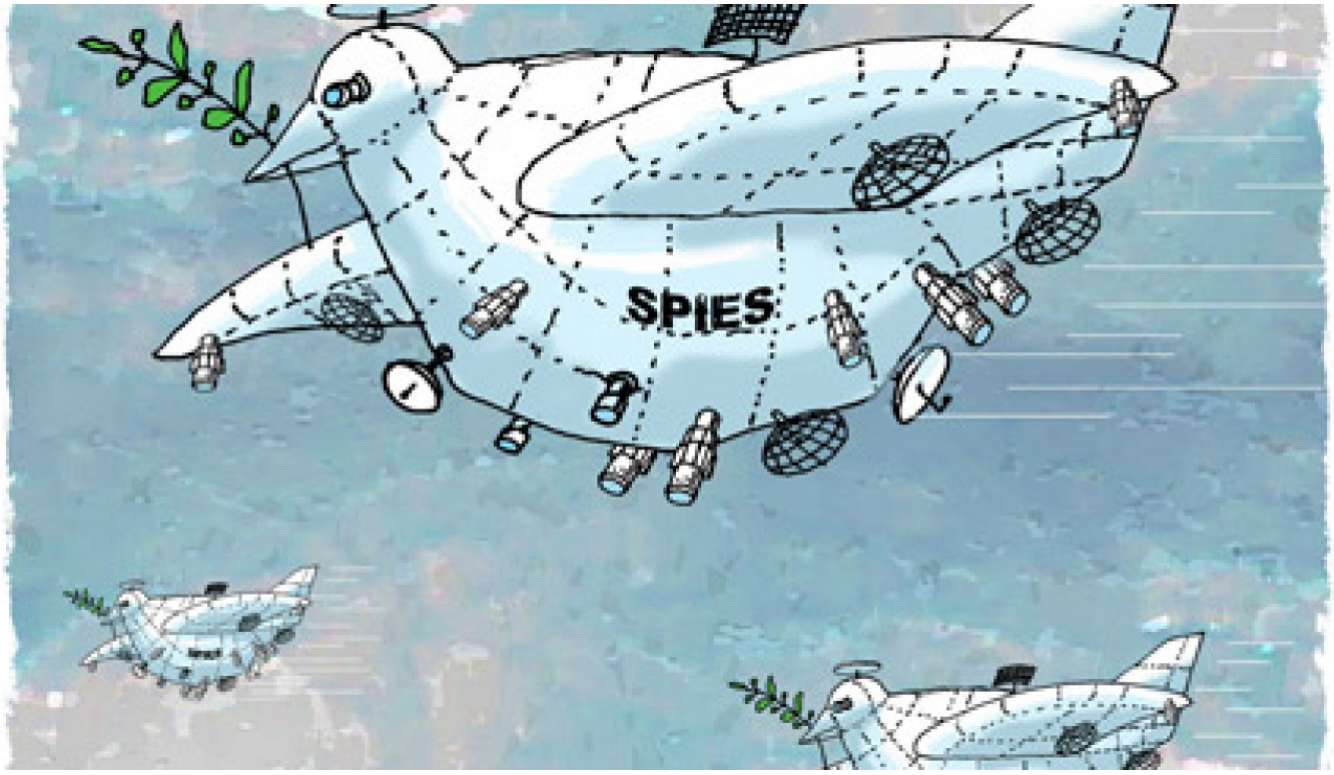
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Spying on Russia Is in Everyone's Interests

By Mark Galeotti

July 29, 2014



Everyone spies on everyone else. The United States spies on Russia, of course, and vice versa. As the Jonathan Pollard case proved, Israel spies on the U.S., its greatest backer, and as recent scandals have demonstrated, Washington spies on Germany, a key ally in Europe.

But far from being a harbinger of war, spying can actually make the world a safer place. As the West steps up its own intelligence activity against Moscow, it can reasonably hope to forestall surprises like Crimea and bring the fighting in Ukraine to a swift end. And, although perhaps counterintuitive, more spying by the West might actually be to the advantage of the Russian people.

Russia, so far, has considerably outpaced its intelligence adversaries. Russian intelligence operations abroad have reached a high point in recent years, with officials in both Europe and North America affirming that the scale and tempo of Moscow's espionage are at Cold War levels.

Some of these operations may have verged on the farcical, such as the ring of deep-cover "illegals" unmasked in the U.S. in 2010. Their main activities seemed to be listening to think tanks (do you ever need to spy on a think tank? Generally they will tell everyone exactly what they think) and enjoying the American lifestyle.

Others, though, are far more serious. Canadian intelligence analyst Sub-Lieutenant Jeffrey Delisle gave thousands of classified files to his handlers in Russia's military intelligence agency, the GRU, before his arrest in 2012.

Now, Russian intelligence assets appear deeply committed to Moscow's campaign in Ukraine, from the GRU officers leading the insurgency to the FSB (Federal Security Service) assets penetrating Kiev's military and security structures.

Western intelligence agencies have long since described Russia as a concern, sometimes even a threat. However, unlike the countries of Central Europe, those of North America and Western Europe have tended to prioritize other objectives, from fighting terrorism to building up assets in China.

Not only have they allowed intelligence-gathering capacities to decay, but they have neglected their analytic talent, the people whose job it is to make sense of often fragmentary and contradictory indications collected by the spies, the electronic intercepts and the spy satellites.

Instead, a culture of "analytic fungibility" emerged, based on the assumption that a smart analyst is a smart analyst and extensive knowledge of a particular country, let alone its languages and culture, is unnecessary. Analysts were thus rotated from one area to another as the needs of the moment demand.

This has been a pretty disastrous conceit and more than anything else a way of rationalizing budget cuts. After disbanding in 2010 its Research & Assessment Branch and associated Defense Academy Reserve Cadre — a first-class threat assessment center and pool of retired specialists, respectively — the British government is now trying to recruit former analysts to help cope. Likewise, inside the U.S. intelligence community, former Russia watchers who had been transferred to other areas are being brought back into the fold.

At present, after all, Russia seems to be easily outgunning the West. The neat seizure of Crimea by the "little green men" — Russian naval infantry marines and Spetsnaz special forces — caught the West by surprise. Knowing the scale of Western electronic eavesdropping capabilities, it seems the Kremlin made a point of keeping its pre-invasion chatter off the airwaves, sometimes even relying instead on old-fashioned paper documents and motorcycle couriers.

Not only is Russian intelligence arming and supporting the rebels in eastern Ukraine and undermining the government forces, it is also engaged in an informational struggle to divide, demoralize and disorient both Kiev and the West.

Back in February, the FSB leaked a telephone conversation between Victoria Nuland, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, and Geoffrey Pyatt, the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine. In the conversation, Nuland disparaged the European Union

in obscene terms and she and Pyatt appeared to be determining the complexion of the post-Yanukovych government. With one stroke, EU-U.S. relations were strained and it became possible to paint Washington as an imperialist power and the new government as American lackeys.

These days, Russia's intelligence services are working to minimize the damage from the MH17 disaster, from staging and sanitizing the crash site to planting all kinds of contradictory stories and rumor in the global information sphere.

It's not a completely one-sided struggle, though, and Western intelligence is fighting back as best it can. Of course, the lack of visible evidence to back U.S. claims that MH17 was shot down by a separatist missile remains a point of contention. However, the U.S. has tried to make up for this by publishing numerous satellite pictures of Russian troop concentrations and cross-border artillery barrages.

Washington is also considering feeding Kiev targeting information for rebel artillery and missile sites, while some European intelligence agencies are helping weed out Russian agents within Ukraine's security service, the SBU.

And intelligence support, realistically, is the best thing the West can provide to Kiev without the dangers associated with direct military assistance. Send military personnel and they may end up facing off against ethnic Russians, if not actual Russian soldiers. Send weapons and they may end up being implicated in attacks that kill civilians. But quietly send information, and it just helps the government forces do their jobs better.

It is tempting to see this as a zero-sum game, a West-versus-Moscow conflict heralding a renewed Cold War. However, the perverse truth is that in some ways a revival of Western intelligence capacities in and around Russia may work to the advantage of ordinary Russians, if perhaps not the Kremlin elite.

The real purpose of intelligence is usually not so much to inflict pain as to forestall it. Had the West been aware of Russia's designs on Crimea, then it could both have alerted Kiev and also warned the Kremlin off. Likewise, a clearer sense of Russian intensions in Georgia in 2008 might have allowed them to persuade the admittedly unruly President Mikheil Saakashvili not to respond to provocation and send troops into South Ossetia, giving Moscow the pretext it needed for its long-prepared invasion.

In other words, better Western intelligence might make further Kremlin adventures less feasible. Given that already their pension fund has been raided of $7.2 billion to cover the costs of Crimea, this is good news for ordinary Russians. And as financial sanctions widen, foreign financial snooping might also encourage more of Russia's billionaires to keep their money at home rather than send it out to play in the financial markets of London, New York, Singapore and Dubai.

In this way, perversely enough, more Western spying doesn't just preserve international security, it might even help ordinary Russians, too.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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