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Putin Has Finally Reincarnated the KGB

Twenty five years after the end of the Cold War, the Soviet Union's most infamous spy agency is back in all but name.

By Andrei Soldatov

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This past Sunday, as most of Russia focused its attention on parliamentary elections, the country's most popular daily, *Kommersant*, broke news of a story that, if true, could have consequences that last far beyond this latest round of Duma reshuffling.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, according to *Kommersant*, is planning a major overhaul of the country's security services. The Russian daily reported that the idea of the reforms is to merge the Foreign Intelligence Service, or SVR, with the Federal Security Service, or FSB, which keeps an eye on domestic affairs. This new supersized secret service will be given a new name: the Ministry of State Security. If that sounds familiar, it should — this was the name given to the most powerful and feared of Joseph Stalin's secret services, from 1943 to 1953. And if its combination of foreign espionage and domestic surveillance looks familiar, well, it should: In all but name, we are seeing a resurrection of the Committee for State Security — otherwise known as the KGB.

The KGB, it should be remembered, was not a traditional security service in the Western sense — that is, an agency charged with protecting the interests of a country and its citizens. Its primary task was protecting the regime. Its activities included hunting down spies and dissidents and supervising media, sports, and even the church. It ran operations both inside and outside the

country, but in both spheres the main task was always to protect the interests of whoever currently resided in the Kremlin. With this new agency, we're seeing a return to form — one that's been a long time in the making.

There was a time, not so long ago, when Russian leaders sought to create a depoliticized security structure. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the reform of the KGB became an immediate, pressing issue. The agency was not reliably under control: The chairman of the KGB at the time, Vladimir Kryuchkov, had helped mastermind the military coup attempt aimed at overthrowing Mikhail Gorbachev that August. But new President Boris Yeltsin had no clear ideas about just how he wanted to reform the KGB, so he simply decided to break it into pieces.

The largest department of the KGB — initially called the Ministry of Security; then, later, the Federal Counterintelligence Service (FSK); then, even later, the FSB — was given responsibility solely for counter-espionage and counterterrorism operations. The KGB's former foreign intelligence directorate was transformed into a new agency called the Foreign Intelligence Service, or SVR. The division of the KGB responsible for electronic eavesdropping and cryptography became the Federal Agency of Government Communications and Information, or FAPSI. A relatively obscure directorate of the KGB that guarded secret underground facilities continued its functions under a new name: the Main Directorate of Special Programs of the President, or GUSP. The KGB branch that had been responsible for protecting Soviet leaders was renamed the Federal Protective Service, or FSO, and the Soviet border guards were transformed into an independent Federal Border Service, or FPS.

The main successor of the KGB amid this alphabet soup of changes was the FSK. But this new counterintelligence agency was stripped of its predecessor's overseas intelligence functions. The agency no longer protected Russian leaders and was deprived of its secret bunkers, which fell under the president's direct authority. It maintained only a nominal presence in the army. In its new incarnation, the agency's mission was pruned back to something resembling Britain's MI5: to fight terrorism and corruption.

Yeltsin's team never formed a clear strategy for how to transform what had once been the secret services of a totalitarian state into the intelligence community of a democracy. In a 1993 executive decree, Yeltsin lamented, reeling off a list of acronyms for various incarnations of the security agencies, that “the system of the Cheka-OGPU-NKVD-MGB-NGKB-KGB-MB turned out to be incapable of being reformed. Reorganization efforts in recent years were external and cosmetic in nature.... The system of political investigation is preserved and may easily be restored.”

It was a prescient comment: By the mid-1990s, various component parts and functions of the old KGB had begun to make their way back to the FSK, like the liquid metal of the killer T-1000 android in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, slowly reconstituting itself after having been blown to bits.

First to return was the power to conduct domestic investigations. In November 1994, Yeltsin restored the investigative directorate of the FSK and placed the infamous Lefortovo prison, which had once held political prisoners and had been used for interrogations that involved

torture, back under its remit. The next year saw a crucial name change: The FSK was rechristened the FSB. The shift from “K” (*kontrrazvedka*, or counterintelligence) to “B” (*bezopasnost*, or security) was more than cosmetic; with the new name came a broad mandate for the FSB to become the guardian of “security” for Russia.

Over the course of the next five years, the FSB would win back many of its old functions. It would once again be given responsibility for pursuing dissidents, who were now branded “extremists,” and would be given its own foreign intelligence directorate, duplicating the SVR’s.

When Putin came to power in 2000, he initially appeared to follow the route laid out by his predecessor, Yeltsin. His main concern, at least at first, seemed to be minimizing competition between the secret services; as a result, in 2003, he allowed the FSB to absorb responsibility for the border troops and FAPSI — the electronic intelligence agency — and gave the service expanded powers over the army and police.

But the president, himself a former KGB officer, was too taken in by KGB myths about the role of the Cheka in Russian society to be satisfied with the FSB being a mere security organ. He was determined to see it become something bigger. Putin encouraged a steady growth in the agency’s influence. The president began using the FSB as his main recruitment base for filling key positions in government and state-controlled business; its agents were expected to define and personify the ideology of the new Russia. When FSB Director Nikolai Patrushev, in December 2000, called his officers Russia’s “new ‘nobility’” — a nickname that agents in the KGB could have hardly dreamed of being applied to them — he was taking a cue from his boss.

By the late 2000s, it was clear that Putin had bigger changes in store, but it wasn’t yet clear whether those changes would elevate the FSB or destroy it. Putin began making it apparent that he wasn’t happy with the agency’s effectiveness. In 2007, he asked another service, an antidrug agency led by his personal friend Viktor Cherkesov, to look into the FSB’s dealings, in the hope, it seems, of bringing it down. The attack on the agency failed utterly — and Putin was forced to fire his friend. Then Putin launched a new agency and gave it enormous powers: The Investigative Committee, a sort of Russian FBI, was tasked with conducting the most sensitive investigations, from the murders of Kremlin critics like Anna Politkovskaya and Boris Nemtsov to prosecuting political activists. This was accompanied by an expansion of the Internal Troops — army units charged with operating within the country — and the launch of a new Department to Counter Extremism, housed within the Interior Ministry. Finally, this year, Putin created the National Guard, which is a massive and armed-to-the-teeth military force tasked with fighting internal dissent.

Throughout the 2000s, and for much of the 2010s, it looked as if Putin’s response to concerns about FSB ineffectiveness would be simply to create new agencies. With this weekend’s news, that strategy appears to have come to an abrupt end. If the *Kommersant* story is true, it would mean Putin has finally made up his mind about the fate of the FSB: It is to once again be restored to its former glory, as the most powerful security organ in the country by far.

There’s some method at work here. It’s been clear for some time that Putin is getting nervous about his political future. With elections pending in 2018, he’s started selective repressions,

placed governors and officials in jail, and removed old friends from key positions, in moves seemingly aimed at what his role model Yuri Andropov once called “improv[ing] labor discipline.” Efforts to strengthen the security services fit within this pattern of centralizing control; what’s new is that he’s decided the best way to strengthen them is to merge them into one gigantic service, with a fearsome name and a reputation that reminds any would-be dissidents of the most frightening days of the Soviet era.

At the same time, the FSB has lost a certain something in this transition: Gone is any talk about a “new nobility,” and the agency is no longer being used as a recruitment base for other sectors of the government and economy. Putin has made it clear that what he needs is an instrument, pure and simple, to protect his own regime — just like the Politburo had its instrument in the KGB.

Ironically, however, it seems likely that the announced reforms will not actually improve FSB effectiveness — if anything, they’ll do the opposite. The agency will now be forced to spend resources to eliminate duplication (over the years, the FSB developed its own strong foreign intelligence branch, and it’s not clear how it will merge this with the SVR’s, for instance), to find new positions for generals who are out of jobs, and to deal with renaming departments, rewriting regulations, and the various other forms of bureaucratic chaos that accompany big mergers. That could paralyze the new mega-siloviki for an undetermined period — just at the time Putin needs it most.