INTELLIGENCE TRANSFORMATION IN POST–SOVIET RUSSIA: ATTEMPTING TO RECONCILE THE IRRECONCILABLE

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ABSTRACT

Fundamental political transformations such as a revolution or coup d'état often leave a country's security and intelligence agencies in an existential crisis. Following such a change, the security and intelligence apparatus suddenly have to structurally transform in order to suit the newly-defined needs of the recently established government, oftentimes in contrast to the needs of the previous regime, as illustrated by the breakdown of the Apartheid regime in South Africa, for example. However, patterns of continuity within a country's security and intelligence apparatus following a political transformation can also be observed, especially when the underlying bases of power and security paradigms persist. Accordingly, following Russia's recent intelligence failures surrounding the ongoing war in Ukraine, this paper analyzes the transformation of Russia's post-Soviet security and intelligence apparatus. It argues that the dissolution of the Soviet Union failed to bring structural change to Russia's post-Soviet intelligence apparatus: despite removing the KGB's ideological umbrella, the KGB's successor organizations remained equally influential in the Russian Federation, making them bound to repeat the patterns of the past.

Keywords: Intelligence, Security, Soviet Union, Russia, Political Transformation, KGB

INTRODUCTION

There is no such thing as a former chekist.
Vladimir Putin, 2005

In 2005, Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly used the above phrase, quoting an aphorism inherited from Russia's Soviet legacy. The term 'chekism' finds its origins in the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission (VChK), the first Soviet secret police organization, which was commonly known as the 'Cheka.' Chekism is therefore used as a concept describing the situation in the Soviet Union in which the security and intelligence apparatus controlled all spheres of society (Anderson, 2007). In turn, a 'chekist' refers to an officer of a Soviet or post-Soviet Russian state security and intelligence service. The above phrase had been popular within the KGB for decades to illustrate the organization's pride and elite nature, similar to how the United States Marine Corps uses the phrase "there is no such thing as a former Marine" (Riehle, 2022: 61). Putin's public use of this Soviet-era phrase, therefore, suggests a certain historical continuity surrounding the position of security and intelligence agencies within Russia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As a result, questions arise regarding the ways in which this fundamental political transformation affected the security and intelligence apparatus within Russia in the post-Soviet era.

Fundamental political transformations often leave a country's security and intelligence agencies in an existential crisis. For example, following the breakdown of the apartheid regime in South Africa (1994), its intelligence sector had to completely transform from a militarized and highly repressive instrument of internal control into a more transparent, civilian-led, and democratically accountable intelligence community designed to inform policy-makers (Dombroski, 2006). Indeed, South Africa's experience highlights how the reform of the intelligence sector can be considered a vital element of a country's democratization process following a fundamental political transformation. The dissolution of the Soviet Union–where the Committee for State Security (KGB) deeply penetrated both state and society–therefore brought hopes of democratic reforms, which would ultimately

translate into less power for the security and intelligence agencies that succeeded the KGB.

This paper analyzes how the dissolution of the Soviet Union affected the intelligence agencies of post-Soviet Russia in order to identify the general lessons learned from this particular experience, which Putin termed the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th-century." After briefly defining the intelligence apparatus of the Soviet Union, the paper considers the transformation process surrounding the KGB following the August 1991 coup attempt. By analyzing these developments concerning the subsequent disintegration of the KGB, the paper argues that the KGB's partitioning into separate agencies failed to bring structural change to Russia's post-Soviet intelligence apparatus due to the persistence of the underlying security paradigms. In doing so, the paper uses a qualitative methodology based on historical content analysis.

THE KGB: AN ALL-ENCOMPASSING INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

The origins of the KGB can be traced back to the 20th of December 1917, a date still celebrated in present-day Russia, when the Bolshevik regime established a political police system that quickly built a reputation for its skillfulness, comprehensiveness, and brutality. In fact, the system was so effective that even the Soviet's arch-enemies carefully studied it, mirrored it, and refined it in order to help them seize power, consolidate their control, and ultimately remain in power (Waller, 2004). To describe the security and intelligence apparatus of the Soviet Union – chronologically known as the Cheka, GPU, OGPU, NKVD, MGB, and ultimately the KGB – Dziak (1991) coined the term 'counterintelligence state' due to its all-encompassing nature. He described a counterintelligence state as a state where the security and intelligence apparatus penetrates and permeates all societal institutions, including the military (Dziak, 1987). As a result, although the KGB was responsible for various security and intelligence tasks that would usually be separated in western security and intelligence agencies, such as foreign and domestic intelligence, counter-intelligence, operative-investigative activities, and border security,

among others, it was mainly concerned with neutralizing threats to the regime itself (Riehle, 2022).

The KGB possessed a high degree of penetration, which Gill defines as the ability of any security intelligence service to "gather information and exercise power with a particular context of law and rules which facilitate the state's efforts to maintain security and order" (Gill, 1994:80). This, in turn, translated into its organizational structure as well. Estimates of the KGB's size range significantly, with official reports from 1991 stating a strength of 490,000, while Yevgenia Albats estimates a true size of around 720,000 officers (Albats, 1994). Consequently, when subtracting the 12,000 officers working for the First Chief Directorate (foreign intelligence) and the 220,000 border guards, the remaining personnel concerned with domestic security range between 258,000 and 488,000 (Muldoon, 1999). Thus, there was a drastic difference between foreign and domestic intelligence, illustrating the priorities of the KGB.,

Moreover, while the KGB had a considerably larger overseas presence than other countries' primary intelligence services, its analytical component was relatively small and weak. Within the intelligence cycle, the analytical component refers to the stage that succeeds in the collection and exploitation of raw intelligence material, in order to establish the significance and implications of the processed intelligence. Although the KGB's operational branches had thousands of employees, its main analytical branch, the Directorate of Intelligence Analysis, had a staff of around 250 people, primarily responsible for completing and editing intelligence reports from the field instead of producing finished analyses. This does not only highlight the inefficiency of the KGB's analytical component but also the KGB's culture of ignoring analyses altogether (Pringle, 1998; Ates, 2020). Instead, important intelligence information was passed directly to the Central Committee staff to be analyzed and consumed by the leadership without any input from intelligence professionals. This weakness within the intelligence cycle was historically inherited from Stalin's tendency

to read intelligence reports directly, instructing his intelligence officers not to bother him with analyses. This practice continued unabated into the Gorbachev era, with some senior KGB analysts merely flavoring their few finished intelligence analyses with ideological statements about the west (Pringle, 1998).

As a result, the KGB cannot be considered purely as an intelligence agency but rather a secret police agency with foreign intelligence capabilities. It was an ideologically-infused organization that operated as a guardian of the ideology and regime of the USSR. Consequently, the KGB was more concerned with party interests instead of national security interests (Walther, 2014). The KGB only answered the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), which was not a purely governmental institution but supra-governmental (Muldoon, 1999). As a result, the KGB lacked formal oversight mechanisms besides the Party and acted as a semi-autonomous actor within the Soviet Union. The fact that Yuri Andropov, the fourth chairman of the KGB, succeeded Leonid Brezhnev as General Secretary of the CPSU highlights the KGB's influence within both the state and society.

THE TRANSFORMATION: FROM THE SOVIET UNION TO THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Gorbachev's liberalization of the Communist Party within the context of perestroika and glasnost did not sit well with the ideologically-infused KGB. It feared a destabilization of the whole country, which would also affect the KGB's powerful position (Walther, 2014). These tensions culminated in the August 1991 coup attempt, in which Soviet hardliners failed to forcibly seize control from Gorbachev. The KGB was one of the primary actors in the failed coup attempt, leading to anti-KGB protests and the toppling of the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Cheka. Consequently, the reform-minded Vadim Bakatin was appointed as the new director of the KGB, with the mandate to dismantle the KGB (Muldoon, 1999).

Dismantling the KGB

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the rise of Boris Yeltsin as President of the Russian Federation, calls for reforms regarding the intelligence apparatus emerged. In doing so, Bakatin, with the support of Yeltsin, devised a three-point program: (1) 'disintegration' or vertical dismemberment of the KGB to break its monopoly of power by splitting it into separate organizations along functional lines – foreign intelligence, domestic intelligence, counterintelligence and internal security, presidential security, electronic intelligence, and border security; (2) 'decentralization' to partition the KGB horizontally along geographic lines to decentralize the counterintelligence and internal security sections among the Soviet republics; and (3) 'de-ideologization,' what Bakatin defined as the 'repudiation of the ideology of chekism' (Waller, 2004: 343). Indeed, due to the sudden dissolution of the Soviet Union, and specifically the part played by the KGB in accelerating this process following the August Coup, there was a realization among the Russian leadership that the KGB presented a dangerous, ideologically-motivated, and ultimately ineffective intelligence agency that needed to be dismantled. During the Soviet era, Yeltsin himself had been the target of KGB surveillance and harassment; he, therefore, promoted the idea of having several smaller intelligence agencies rather than the all-encompassing KGB (Muldoon, 1999; Ates, 2020).

Accordingly, the KGB dissolved into three separate organizations: the SVR, foreign intelligence; the Ministry of Security (MB); and the Main Administration of Protection (GUO), tasked with protecting senior leaders and government facilities. The MB included the majority of the former functions and personnel of the old KGB, leading to concerns among reformers like Yeltsin about the potential threat it could pose to the governing power. As a result, the MB was separated into three different agencies: the Federal Counterintelligence Service (FSK), which inherited the counterintelligence functions; the Federal Agency for Government Communications and Information (FAPSI), tasked with communications security and signals intelligence; and the Federal Border Guard Service

(FPS) (Riehle, 2022). Thus, the KGB was ultimately dismantled into five independent Russian agencies.

The breakup of the KGB seemingly undermined the KGB's omnipotence, depriving it of its unique role in the country's domestic and international affairs. Western observers regarded the reorganization of the Russian security and intelligence apparatus as a significant improvement and a step towards democratization. As independent agencies, with foreign and domestic intelligence tasks separated, the new arrangement seemed to indicate a less penetrative and oppressive Russian security and intelligence apparatus (Muldoon, 1999). The Russian intelligence agencies, therefore, directly mirrored western-style intelligence communities. There were even efforts to democratize the oversight mechanisms over the intelligence agencies, with the Russian parliament agreeing that the services should be under parliamentary control (Muldoon, 1999). However, simultaneously, a spirit of competition arose among the five agencies, and failures, such as the failed Budyonnovsk hospital hostage crisis of June 1995, left the services looking incapable and weak (Riehle, 2022). Consequently, following the Budyonnovsk debacle, the FSK was renamed and reorganized into the Federal Security Service or FSB, which still exists today.

Old Patterns Resurface

Despite Yeltsin's genuine efforts to reform Russia's intelligence apparatus, he faced the same dilemma that every Soviet leader had faced. While he wanted to bring the security and intelligence agencies under the rule of law, he also desired a powerful (but not too powerful) and personally loyal intelligence apparatus. These contrasting objectives, therefore, frustrated any chance of true reforms (Waller, 1994). By 1993, Yeltsin had already sought the support of the state's intelligence organs in his constitutional conflict with the parliament, which was ultimately resolved by force, illustrating the first cracks within the promising reform efforts (Walther, 2014). Moreover, the reform-minded leadership and the chairmanship of Bakatin intensely embittered many conservative chekists, who often remained in top

positions within the newly established agencies (Walther, 2014). For example, the first Head of the FSB, Sergei Stepashin, was replaced by Mikhail Barsukov in 1995, who was replaced by Nikolai Kovalev in 1996, who Putin eventually replaced in 1998. All of these men were seasoned KGB veterans and therefore molded in a 'KGB mindset,' unlikely to initiate or welcome change in the structure of the intelligence apparatus (Pringle, 1998). The bureaucratic history of these structures and the deep-rooted chekist culture and psychology were instilled among their personnel. Some bureaucratic reshuffling, therefore, failed to change this mentality of impunity (Waller, 2004).

Furthermore, Yeltsin reorganized the FSK into the FSB, giving it more penetrative authority, partly to combat the rampant corruption and crime that characterized the formative years of the Russian Federation. Yet, these policies proved ineffective and even counterproductive, allowing the intelligence agencies to win influence and increasingly dictate their terms. Instead of grounding anti-crime campaigns in the rule of law and judiciary process, Yeltsin's campaigns proved politically motivated, with his political rivals coming under scrutiny while his allies were overlooked. These efforts, therefore, contributed to the failure of implanting intelligence within the rule of law (Muldoon, 1999). Moreover, while the ideology that empowered and motivated the KGB was admittedly gone, this also removed the restraint that ideology put on the KGB, meaning that corruption, which was somewhat regulated under the Soviet system, became rampant (Muldoon, 1999). Indoctrinated in Soviet ideology for most of his professional career, Yeltsin could not come to terms with the inefficiencies of democratic governing within the rule of law. Thus, while Yeltsin genuinely wanted to combat crime and corruption, his approach inadvertently empowered the intelligence agencies, specifically the FSB, allowing them to increasingly undermine the reform efforts.

As a result, when Putin became Head of the FSB in 1998, he witnessed the coordinating problems that the dismantling of Russia's intelligence and security apparatus had created. After being elected

President, Putin gradually re-accumulated the state security functions that had been separated during Yeltsin's time. First, the Federal Border Service was subordinated to the FSB in 2003, followed by the dissolving of the FAPSI, with most of its functions transferred to the FSB and a few to the SVR and Federal Protective Service (successor to the GUO). By 2005, the FSB had regained nearly all but a few specialized functions that the KGB previously controlled, including the return of functions and practices that resembled those of the KGB's Fifth Directorate–censorship and internal security against artistic, political, and religious dissension (Riehle, 2022). Accordingly, old patterns resurfaced under Putin's leadership, which is highlighted by the parallel between Andropov and Putin, who both managed to become heads of state through their influential positions within the intelligence apparatus.

LESSONS LEARNED: OLD CHEKIST HABITS DIE HARD…

Besides removing the ideological umbrella of the Soviet Union and replacing the all-encompassing KGB with the SVR and FSB, respectively, the political transformation failed to structurally reform the culture underpinning the intelligence apparatus of post-Soviet Russia. In the early 1990s, reformers such as Albats emphasized that without accounting for the past, the new security and intelligence establishment would recast itself in the model of Soviet intelligence, which proved to be an accurate prediction (Pringle, 1998). This particular experience, therefore, highlights the difficulty of restructuring a country's intelligence apparatus when the underlying paradigms remain in place.

Unlike the deNazification and subsequent de-Stasification in Germany, which grounded its democratization process, Russia failed in its de-Bolshevization (Knight, 1996). In fact, the new leadership in Russia came straight from the Communist Party or even the KGB. Uprooting the chekists was, therefore, never a priority in post-Soviet Russia. On the contrary, in post-Soviet Russia, due to the hard times following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, leaders such as Yeltsin and Putin needed their loyal KGB/FSB hardmen, just like Brezhnev needed Andropov before (Waller, 2004). Moreover, unlike other former Soviet bloc states, Russian services suffered from the absence of a historical culture of legality and the rule of law (Waller and Yasmann, 1995). Additionally, while other former Soviet bloc states experienced the breakdown of occupation, Russian leaders emphasized the breakdown of an empire (Knight, 1996). Accordingly, the chekists had no interest in democratization or establishing a legal framework within the rule of law, as this would be incompatible with their former functions and methods under the Soviet Union, creating a vested interest to preserve the former system essentially. As the first FSK Director stated on Russian television: "I am in favor of the violation of human rights if the person involved is a bandit and criminal" (Knight, 1996: 97). Thus, with such leadership rooted in the old chekist paradigm, it proves extremely difficult to reform a country's intelligence apparatus structurally.

As a result, these similarities can also be recognized in the present. As in the past, a drastic size difference between domestic and foreign intelligence capabilities continues to exist, with an estimated 200,000 employees in the FSB against the mere 12.000 employees of the SVR (Muldoon, 1999; Riehle, 2022). In fact, when combining all the agencies, present-day Russia boasts more security personnel per capita than the Soviet Union–nearly three times the number of people working in KGB successor organizations per capita than state security had in the Soviet Union – again indicating a penetrative service and a 'weak state,' according to Gill (1994, pp. 69-70). Moreover, the SVR descends directly from the KGB's First Chief Directorate. Accordingly, foreign intelligence is primarily looking for, sometimes fabricating, connections between domestic and foreign threats, echoing a typically chekist modus operandi (Riehle, 2022). However, the Main Intelligence Directorate (GU) or GRU, Russia's military intelligence agency, is reportedly the largest foreign intelligence agency within Russia. Yet, unlike the KGB, the GRU remained intact following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, illustrating further continuity (Reuters, 2009). Finally, Russia's current intelligence

apparatus remains heavily invested in information collection with typically poor analytical capabilities. This stems from the intelligence apparatus's historic legacy, with the leadership often acting as their own intelligence officers, preferring their personal judgment over that of intelligence analysts, besides the already-existing pressure to provide favorable information because of the individual and professional risks of doing otherwise (Davies and Steward, 2022).

CONCLUSION

While western intelligence has experienced an 'intelligence revolution,' – consisting of (1) open government; (2) shifting from 'need to know' to 'need to share'; and advances in collection and processing capabilities in both (3) intelligence surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), and (4) in open-source intelligence – Russia has failed to keep up, with its leadership deeply invested in an outdated intelligence and security paradigm (Davies and Steward, 2022). As a consequence, Russia's political transformation failed to bring structural change to its intelligence apparatus because the sources of power remained the same. While Yeltsin admittedly removed the ideological umbrella from the intelligence services, he nevertheless retained the mentality of a party bureaucrat that simply could not imagine a governing system without a KGB-like apparatus supporting it.

Thus, unlike South Africa's example, Russia's leadership remained rooted in a chekist paradigm, which could not come to terms with the principles of democratic government and the rule of law, as this would be incompatible with the intelligence apparatus that controlled the bases of power. While the chekists previously operated under the control of the CPSU, in Putin's administration they essentially became the ruling elite themselves (Matthews, 2016). The case-study of Russia, therefore, highlights the difficulty of reforming a country's intelligence apparatus when the former paradigms remain in place. As a result, Russia's current intelligence agencies are bound to repeat the patterns of the past. This can partly explain Russia's underwhelming performance in its war in Ukraine (2022) which is

dogged by intelligence failures at every command level. This, among other aspects, includes the poor assessment of the likelihood and shape of a unified western response and the extent of Ukraine's determined resistance to Russian military force (Davies and Steward, 2022).

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