

Russia At War

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On 15 February, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article titled, “A New Spy Unit Is Leading Russia’s Shadow War Against the West.” The article discussed an element that it called the SSD, the operations of which “[haven’t previously been reported.](#)” In reality, what the *Wall Street Journal* report is the continuation of over twenty years of history surrounding the Russian military intelligence service, the GU (formerly GRU until 2010). The GU is a warfighting organization and what we are seeing are its actions related to war.

The report claims the existence of something called the SSD. It does not break out the Russian phrase behind that acronym but calls it in English the “Department of Special Tasks.” That would not translate to SSD in Russian. It might be Служба Специальных Действий (Special Action Service) or Секция Специальных Действий (Special Action Section).

Either way, it is not new. A series of events over the past twenty years have combined to lead to what we are seeing now.

In about 2005, the GRU began to resurrect its illegals program, which had been moribund for decades. Russia’s civilian foreign intelligence service, the SVR, never stopped dispatching illegals. However, there is no public evidence that the GRU had been using that platform fully since the 1960s. The re-initiation of the GRU illegals program followed what Russian commentators call “color revolutions” in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, which they claim were Western, especially U.S., covert operations to reduce Russian influence. Although I cannot draw a firm cause-effect relationship between color revolutions and the resurrection of the GRU illegals program, [Russian commentators perceive color revolutions as a threat to Russia itself.](#) The timing is interesting.

In 2009, then-Minister of Defense Anatoliy Serdyukov created a special operations unit near a lake called Senezh northwest of Moscow. The unit ([military unit number 92154](#)) was colloquially called “Serdyukov’s army.” It was separate from the standard GRU Spetsnaz and designated for special operations outside the Russian Federation. The unit was initially created outside the GRU and subordinated directly to the General Staff. That decision caused anger within the GRU, leading to the [resignation of GRU Director Valentin Korabelnikov](#) in 2009. The unit later returned to the GU under the 346th Separate Guards Spetsnaz Brigade. The element was later called the [Special Operations Command](#) (KSSO in its Russian acronym), and was reportedly modelled after the U.S. Special Operations Command. It was initially commanded by an FSB Spetsnaz officer, general major Igor Medoyev, who was awarded the Hero of the Russian Federation medal in 2009. What the *Wall Street Journal* is calling the SSD might be a follow-on to this organization.

In 2010, the name of the GRU was changed to GU, “Main Directorate.” The change removed the word “intelligence” (the “R” in the acronym) from the agency’s title. There was no clear explanation for why that was done and [Putin has even questioned](#) the decision publicly. Most observers have ignored this change and continue to call the organization the GRU. But it probably meant the GU became the primary operational element of the Ministry of Defense beyond just collecting intelligence.

Beginning in about 2014, the [infamous GU military unit 29155](#) began operating aggressively across Europe, conducting a series of covert operations. That activity coincided with Russia’s annexation of Crimea and initiation of a separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine, suggesting that Russia has seen itself

as being at war since then. The GU was also implicated in [infrastructure attacks](#) (remote disabling electricity generation facilities, for example) in Ukraine in 2015 to 2017. Those types of operations are typically reserved for wartime in Russian military doctrine.

Between 2022 and 2024, the GU lost numerous (the exact number is unknown) embassy-based cover positions when [European countries expelled over 700 Russian personnel](#). Expulsions limited the GU's reach into Europe, forcing it to find alternative avenues to run operations. The timing of increased Russian-sponsored sabotage in Europe is not a coincidence: it took time for the GU to re-establish networks and recruit agents who could conduct wartime operations. Preparations appear to have been happening throughout 2022 and began to bear fruit in 2023 and 2024.

In July 2023, what was formerly the [Wagner Group was broken up](#) and pieces were incorporated into various Russian services, with the GU acquiring the external covert operations portions. That followed Prigozhin's unwise march on Moscow that ended with his death and the dismantling of the Wagner Group.

All of this is evidence that the GU is on a wartime footing, not that Russia has created a new intelligence service. It is what the GU does during wartime. I discussed this last year in a [blog post](#).

While all this was happening, there are also indicators of operations crossing over between the GU and FSB. It has been practically an article of faith in the West that Russian services [compete with each other and never cooperate](#). That analytic line may be incorrect, or at least overstated.

There are multiple indicators that the GU and FSB are working alongside each other to support the war in Ukraine. As noted earlier, an FSB officer was initially placed in command of the GU KSSO. Six Bulgarians arrested in the UK in 2024 were conducting a series of operations, some that fit the FSB's mission (dissident monitoring) and others that would normally be GU missions ([conducting surveillance on a military base in Germany](#)). They were connected to Jan Marsalek, who has both FSB and GU connections. [Pablo Gonzalez/Pavel Rubtsov](#) was reportedly a GU illegal, but was involved with oppositionists abroad, which would normally be an FSB mission. [Carsten Linke](#), a BND officer who was arrested for supplying information about German intelligence and military support to Ukraine, was reportedly run by the FSB but was collecting intelligence that could fall under the GU's mission. The FSB is the primary HUMINT collection agency in Ukraine and runs agents who collect military intelligence—a GU mission—although the GU collects HUMINT in Ukraine too. The rivalry that supposedly exists between Russian intelligence and security services may not be as impermeable as some commentators believe, especially during wartime.

None of this is new. In fact, it is reminiscent of the 1920s, when Soviet military intelligence was involved in covert political activities around the world. It does not indicate a new agency. It is the reality of Russia being at war.