

COVERS USED BY RUSSIAN INTELLIGENCE SERVICES

Russian intelligence services widely use covers to hide the connections between intelligence operatives and their real employer – the intelligence service.

On Russian territory, intelligence services can use almost any institution, company, or organisation as cover.

Anyone communicating with Russian federal or regional authorities, research institutions, or strategic companies should remember that their international relations, especially with Western countries, are largely controlled by Russian intelligence services.

COVERS IN INTELLIGENCE

A cover (Russian *прикрытие*) is used to obscure the true identity of a person or organisation and hide their affiliation with an intelligence agency.

The most common type of cover used by officers of the Russian intelligence services operating abroad is a diplomatic position in an official Russian mission: an embassy, consulate, or trade mission. The Vienna Convention protects intelligence officers operating under diplomatic cover. If caught, they are declared *persona non grata* in the host country and sent back to their home country.

In addition to “diplomats,” operatives active abroad also include “illegals” who may pose as citizens of Russia or another country and work under an assumed identity, for example, in business, research, journalism, or the arts. “Illegals” are not protected by international conventions and can be arrested and prosecuted in the host country if discovered.

In addition to diplomats and illegals working abroad, whose activities have been reported quite often in the international media, all three Russian intelligence services – the internal security service FSB, the foreign intelligence service SVR and the military intelligence service GRU – also use undercover intelligence officers on Russian territory. This chapter is about these officers.

COVERS USED BY RUSSIAN INTELLIGENCE SERVICES ON RUSSIAN TERRITORY

The FSB, SVR, and GRU regularly use covers for intelligence activities carried out on Russian territory.

As one of the pillars of the current regime, Russian intelligence services enjoy extensive support from the authorities and considerable freedom of action. The FSB, SVR, and GRU can use almost any state authority, company, or organisation as a cover when necessary. As a rule, a cover is created in one of two ways.

1. The cover organisation does not engage in intelligence work but pursues its statutory activities (governance, research, business, journalism, etc.) and has one or more positions staffed by intelligence services officers. Most undercover officers work in such positions and, to avoid exposure, must at least partly perform the tasks that would normally be prescribed for their job.
2. An entire organisation is established as a cover for an intelligence service. It does not pursue the activities listed in its articles of association or only does so to a minimal extent to avoid suspicion. Since such organisations are largely fictitious, the officers working there can fully focus on intelligence activities.

The Russian intelligence services have a broad scope of activities – they collect intelligence information but also engage in counterintelligence and fight economic crimes, terrorism, extremism, domestic democratic opposition, drug trafficking, etc. Thus, they also use very different cover organisations and positions. The covers described here have a common denominator – they can all be used to establish contact with foreigners.

Russian intelligence officers work undercover in Moscow and elsewhere in Russia; their number depends on the region and how many foreigners visit it. For example, up to half of the officers of the FSB intelligence units can work undercover at any given time, spending a large part of their working time outside the FSB and visiting the agency only episodically to report back and receive instructions. A cover can be permanent or temporary. An officer working under temporary cover will pose as an employee of an organisation for a short time to carry out a specific task, for example, attending an international conference as a member of a think tank or research institution.

On paper, the identity of intelligence officers should be secret. Still, in many cases, the other employees of the cover organisation can identify them because they just show up with an unknown educational and professional background and have different work duties than the rest of the staff. Intelligence officers are also often discovered when a cover position within an organisation is used continuously, regularly rotating officers in and out.

EXAMPLES OF UNDERCOVER WORK

The covers described here are used by undercover intelligence officers who are responsible for recruiting foreigners.

The FSB often uses the Federal Migration Service (FMS) as a cover. This provides a legal opportunity and a plausible pretext to communicate with foreigners arriving and staying in Russia and ask them questions about themselves, their families, and the purpose of their visit to Russia.

Intelligence officers also hold positions in federal institutions that coordinate cooperation with so-called Russian compatriots living abroad. Russian compatriots are under heightened scrutiny by the FSB's main intelligence unit, the Department for Operational Information (DOI) of the Fifth Service. This scrutiny is characterised, among other things, by the fact that the government committee for Russian compatriots living abroad – the body that coordinates the handling of compatriot-related issues in the state institutions – has always included a DOI senior officer, most recently General Dmitry Milyutin, the deputy head of the DOI. What does the FSB have to do with Russian compatriots, and why should an intelligence unit curate this field within the FSB? The answer is obvious: the FSB needs Russian compatriots living abroad to recruit collaborators from among supporters of the “Russian world”

ideology and have them gather intelligence from their host country and spread propaganda glorifying Russia and discrediting their current homeland and other Western countries.¹ Effectively, the DOI coordinates the preservation and renewal of a fifth column, especially in countries bordering Russia with a large Russian-speaking community.

Russian intelligence services play an integral role in developing and implementing Russian foreign policy in the Baltics, including policies pertaining to so-called Russian compatriots.

The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (*Rossotrudnichestvo*) and its representatives abroad – Russian research and cultural centres – are regularly used by the FSB and SVR as cover for their officers. FSB officers “work” at the Moscow House of Compatriots (*Moskovskii Dom Sootechestvennikov*) of the Government of Moscow. In the Presidential Administration of Russia, the country’s most important domestic and foreign policy body, Russia’s Baltic policy has long been made under the supervision of SVR and FSB officers working undercover.

All three intelligence services use the international cooperation departments of Russia’s central and regional authorities (incl. city and oblast governments) as cover for their intelligence officers. However, the intelligence services also use trustees working there to gather information about the authorities’ foreign contacts and international cooperation projects. We can say that the intelligence services largely control the international cooperation of Russian federal and regional authorities.



Spot the spies! On 16-19 November 2022, the 10th forum for so-called Russian compatriots living in the Baltic states was held in Roshchino, Leningrad Oblast. The forum participants included several individuals with ties to the Russian intelligence services; however, they all represented some other institution or organisation.

Source: Vyborg TV (screenshot)

Intelligence officers often work undercover at universities and research institutions, usually in the institution’s management or international relations unit, in positions allowing them to keep up with the institution’s international contacts, including being informed about students and delegations arriving from abroad. They also recruit researchers travelling abroad to carry out intelligence tasks, such as participating in conferences and research projects to establish contacts with foreign researchers or gathering research and technology-related information, including stealing scientific discoveries. Officers of the Russian intelligence services work undercover in the Russian Academy of Sciences and major universities both in Moscow and elsewhere in Russia.

As “employees” of public and private think tanks and “research institutes,” intelligence officers can participate in conferences and seminars attended by foreigners. In addition

¹ It should be emphasised that the FSB also recruits people who do not have access to classified information. Such persons are mainly used in influence operations against foreign countries and their population.



The badge of the FSB 5th Service DOI. The badge displays common symbols for the FSB – a sword and a shield. The globe on the forefront is a common symbol for Russian intelligence services units that are responsible for gathering information on foreign countries.

Source: forum.faleristika.info

to profiling foreign participants, they have a significant opportunity to spread views aligned with Russia’s political interests through the think tank’s publications and personal communication with foreign guests. In other words, they conduct influence operations.² Here are some examples:

The Institute of Diaspora and Integration (Institute of CIS Countries)³, founded in 1996 and headed by Konstantin Zatulin, a member of the Russian State Duma, studies Russia’s “near abroad” (which also includes the Baltic countries) and spreads views justifying Russia’s aggressive foreign policy. The institute has long had close ties with the FSB and especially the DOI, whose officers have regularly served as aides or advisers to Zatulin. Among them is Valery Solokha, described by the *Dossier Center* in October 2022 as the head of the DOI’s sub-unit for Moldova.⁴ Solokha was succeeded as Zatulin’s aide by DOI officer Maxim Sapunov, who previously held posts in the Government of Moscow and the Moscow House of Compatriots. Another aide to Zatulin was DOI officer Maxim Lobanov, whose duties included protecting the interests of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine.

The official mission of the Eurasian Cooperation Development Fund,⁵ established in 2012, is “spreading the idea of a Eurasian Union formulated by Russian President Vladimir Putin in the post-Soviet space.” In addition to residents of the CIS countries, attempts have been made to involve activists from the Baltic states in the organisation’s activities. An FSB

DOI officer has regularly staffed the position of vice president of the foundation.

The Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI)⁶ operated under the SVR until 2009 and was designated as Military Unit 61360. Although it has since been officially subordinated to the Presidential Administration, RISI has always been led by former high-ranking SVR officers, currently by former SVR director Mikhail Fradkov. Among RISI employees, including the director’s team, are SVR officers participating in the institute’s foreign communication and international cooperation projects. An example is a conference on the relations between the Eurasian Economic Union and China’s Belt and Road Initiative, held in Moscow in April 2021 with the participation of SVR officers.

In our public threat assessment in 2021, we described the organisations established by the GRU for intelligence and influence activities, including the Russian Foreign Institute and the Inforos information agency.

The FSB and SVR also use the organisations of Russian industrialists and entrepreneurs as well as industrial and financial companies’ foreign relations departments as cover. This provides Russian businessmen with international business contacts and allows them to spread the message about the importance of good relations with Russia and the necessity of “separating business and politics.” of “separating business and politics.”

² In Soviet terminology, influence operations involved influencing key figures and ordinary citizens in other countries in the interest of the Soviet Union. Similar to their Soviet predecessors, Russian intelligence agencies consider influence operations as equally important with intelligence gathering.

³ <https://i-sng.ru>

⁴ <https://fsb.dossier.center/mld/>

⁵ <https://fondres.ru>

⁶ <https://riss.ru>