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RUSSIAN CLANDESTINE ACTION: BETWEEN EXPERTISE AND “UBERIZATION”

On August 1, 2024, a prisoner exchange between Russia and Western countries received significant media coverage: Vladimir Putin personally welcomed on the airport tarmac a man and a woman supposedly coming from Argentina, along with their two children, aged 8 and 11. Their peculiarity? These two individuals were in fact two “illegal” officers of the SVR¹, that is, clandestine operatives living abroad under false identities for several years, even several decades. Before their arrest, their immersion was such that their children knew nothing of their parents’ true identities and spoke not Russian but Spanish (which earned them a “*buenas noches*” from the Russian president as they disembarked from the plane²). Behind the publicity given to this prisoner exchange (certainly for domestic political purposes), it is worth questioning the relevance of clandestine action capabilities for the Russian state. What is this “tool” used for? Has it evolved within the Russian security apparatus?

I) Clandestine action, a valuable “tool” for states

For several centuries, clandestine action has served diplomacy: from the structuring of the first states, clandestine operations were already a common practice in international relations³. Indeed, clandestinity is the ability to carry out, with political authorization, actions that are non-attributable and may benefit from plausible denial⁴. In this framework, clandestine action may intervene during the political interactions of states and is notably used to mitigate information asymmetries, problems related to military engagement, as well as to improve a state’s position in negotiations or avoid their breakdown. Consequently, intelligence “fully contributes to the exercise of diplomacy”⁵, and all countries possessing intelligence services with significant capabilities, including technical ones, rely on them to gain an advantage, whether in the lead-up to international negotiations or on the battlefield in the context of a conflict⁶. This institutional permeability was highlighted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2008, which mentioned the useful support intelligence can provide to diplomacy⁷. Nevertheless, clandestinity is a *modus operandi* that may seem completely anachronistic in our society, increasingly eager for transparency regarding the activity of its administrations. Why do states risk maintaining this capability? It allows them to “[...] be able, when necessary and if needed, to free themselves from domestic or external legality or from their international commitments and, preferably, without being caught red-handed, which requires a certain level of technical

1 Sloujba vnechnej razvedki Rossiskoi Federatsi, or Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation.

2 BOUTIN, Gilles. Une famille « normale » : comment des espions russes ont fait croire qu’ils étaient un couple d’Argentins vivant en Slovénie. *Le Figaro*, 2 août 2024.

3 STREMPPEL, John D. « Covert Action and Diplomacy ». *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, vol. 20, n° 1, 2007, p. 122-135.

4 HAYEZ, Philippe. « Renseignement en France : quelles particularités ? » [en ligne]. *Areion24 News*, 24 mai 2019. Disponible sur : <https://www.arenion24.news/2019/05/24/renseignement-en-france-queelles-particularites/>

5 COUSSERAN, Jean-Claude, HAYEZ, Philippe. *Nouvelles leçons sur le Renseignement*. Éditions Odile Jacob, 2021, p. 298.

6 GIOE, David V., « Cyber operations and useful fools: the approach of Russian hybrid intelligence ». *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 33, n° 7, 2018, p. 954-973.

7 JUPPÉ, Alain, SCHWEITZER, Louis. *Livre blanc sur la politique étrangère et européenne de la France 2008-2020*. Rapport officiel, 2008, p. 67.

expertise”⁸. Thus, unlike public diplomacy or special forces operations, clandestine action is not intended to be displayed or acknowledged, and “[...] therefore corresponds to an exceptional capability that certain states decide to acquire”⁹. One absolute requirement remains: the link must be severed between those ordering the action and those actually carrying it out¹⁰.

Considering these elements, clandestine action responds to exceptional needs and requires the implementation of particularly advanced techniques, because it “involves only a limited number of agents who use specific and complex know-how, particularly linked to preserving the anonymity of the operation. In fact, its success is judged not only by the achievement of the intended objective, but also by preserving the identity of the sponsor”¹¹, namely the State. Indeed, in an article from issue 776 of the *Revue Défense Nationale* dated 2015, a contributor emphasized that “[...] the success of a clandestine operation rests on specific capabilities that allow the sponsoring state to deny its involvement”¹². Consequently, clandestine action must be planned and executed in such a way as to conceal the identity of the sponsor or allow for plausible denial on its part¹³. The objective of clandestinity is therefore to limit political risk as much as possible by preventing the establishment of a formal link between the sponsor and the executor, while allowing the state to free itself from legal or moral constraints.

Thus, clandestine action is “[...] a delicate adjunct to political action”¹⁴. Indeed, General Jean Heinrich¹⁵, adapting a famous phrase by Carl von Clausewitz, considers that “secret action is nothing other than the continuation of politics by other means”¹⁶. This modus operandi fits within the framework of coercive diplomacy, enabling state authorities to send a message or exert secret influence: “Unlike public diplomacy, it cannot be displayed, nor even acknowledged (plausible denial). In the age of influence diplomacy, it aims to secretly weigh on wills”¹⁷. Political authorities therefore possess the capacity to disclose or not disclose the operation, and possibly to claim responsibility for it, depending on the objectives pursued.

II) Clandestine action: a true expertise

The “illegal” agent (or “clandestine operative”) acts under non-official cover. Specially trained, the agent must establish themselves with absolute discretion in a specific country and environment in order to conduct influence missions, gather information, or carry out an operation. In such an operational context, cover is not intended solely to protect the agent and their activities: “It is also intended to protect the State or service employing them”¹⁸. Consequently, in the event of arrest or interrogation, neither the clandestine operative nor their employer is supposed to acknowledge any connection between them. The “illegal” therefore enjoys no protection and risks, in some cases, imprisonment, torture, or even death¹⁹. It should be noted that an operation under cover can be distinguished from a clandestine operation in the strict sense: in the latter case, the very hypothesis or existence of the operation itself must be concealed²⁰.

This is why the “illegal” must possess credibility legitimizing their presence in a location, environment, area, or country. Their activities must be consistent with the spectrum of their missions. Consequently, intelligence services may be required to deploy significant resources, such as assisting in the creation of companies or associations, in order to legitimize the “cover” of the “illegal.” However, the “most elaborate cover is the one through which an intelligence agent, after years of intensive preparation (to the point of being able to speak the language of the destination country without any accent, for example), poses as a peaceful citizen of the state in which they operate and invents a past for themselves”²¹. This was the case for the illegals mentioned above.

In Russia, traditionally, “illegals” are intelligence agents or officers who travel and work under the cover of non-Russian nationalities, with no apparent link to Russia or to any of its companies or governmental institutions. Vassili Mitrokhine²² defines a clandestine operative as “an individual specially trained who lives, according to the instructions of the intelligence services and with their assistance, in a specific country with identity documents containing newly assumed identifying data, generally in order to conceal from authorities and from those around them their national and state affiliation, their true

8 CHOUET, Alain. *La sagesse de l'espion*. Éditions JC Béhar, Paris, 2017, p. 16.

9 COUSSERAN, Jean-Claude, HAYEZ, Philippe, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

10 MARTIN, Pascal. *Le renseignement en France face au cyberspace et aux nouvelles technologies de l'information et de la communication*, thèse de doctorat en histoire contemporaine, 2022

11 *Ibid.*

12 Cf. GUISEL, Jean. Forces spéciales-service Action (DGSE) : moi d'abord !, *Le Point*, 6 février 2015.

13 UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE. *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 2014, p. 56.

14 COUSSERAN, Jean-Claude, HAYEZ, Philippe, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

15 General Jean Heinrich was head of the Action Service (SA) of the DGSE and former director of military intelligence (DRM).

16 « Les nuits de France Culture » program by par Philippe Garbit. Audio report entitled « Le Général Jean Heinrich : "L'action secrète n'est que la continuation de la politique par d'autres moyens" ». In : série « Les espions de la fiction à la réalité », episode 1/11, January 2017 .

17 COUSSERAN, Jean-Claude, HAYEZ, Philippe, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

18 MOUTOUH, Hugues, POIROT, Jérôme. *Dictionnaire du renseignement*. Éditions Perrin, p. 223.

19 MARTIN, Pascal, *op. cit.*, p. 622.

20 MOUTOUH, Hugues, POIROT, Jérôme, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 223.

22 Vassili Mitrokhine (1922-2004) was a former KGB officer who defected to the United Kingdom in 1992 with thousands of secret KGB documents nicknamed "the Mitrokhine archives".

surname, and their biographical data, thereby creating the conditions necessary to conduct intelligence activities from illegal positions”²³. Concealing national and state affiliation by operating under a non-Russian identity has always been an important element of clandestine activity, because it allows an agent to completely blend into society²⁴.

The actions of Russian clandestine operatives fit more broadly within the framework of a “hybrid” strategy, identified by the 2017 *Strategic Review of Defense and National Security*²⁵ and its 2021 update, namely one combining military and non-military, direct and indirect, legal or illegal modes of action, but always ambiguous, designed to remain below the estimated threshold of retaliation or open conflict²⁶.

The combination of all these capabilities forms part of a global strategy described by American strategists as a “*whole-of-government approach*”, in which all powers and capabilities under a state authority work in a coordinated manner, freeing themselves from bureaucratic constraints, in order to achieve a common objective²⁷. This strategy is notably said to be implemented by Russia²⁸, whose clandestine actions fit into a broader strategy of attrition, which therefore includes a set of complementary actions, including the infiltration of political decision-making circles²⁹.

III) The “Uberization” of certain actions by Russian intelligence services

While the press across the Atlantic remains fascinated by the “illegals” program, pointing out that these Russian professionals were mainly tasked with building networks and assessing spots³⁰, other, more rudimentary modes of operation can supposedly be attributed to Russian intelligence services. The selection, training, and deployment of clandestine operatives are extremely complex and time-consuming operations. Thus, the dismantling of an entire group of “illegals” in 2010 and 2011 probably caused significant damage to Russian intelligence capabilities, although Russia did not publicly acknowledge it³¹. Consequently, intelligence services appear to have opened themselves to simpler modes of action, fitting within a logic of intensifying hybrid operations following the war in Ukraine.

Two parallel but opposing processes seem to be implemented:

- the recruitment and training of professional “illegals,” corresponding to a genuine long-term strategy of the Russian intelligence services;
- the recruitment of “single-use” agents for low value-added operations, but whose media potential provides a powerful leverage effect.

Indeed, in October 2024, the German Federal Minister of the Interior, Nancy Faeser, declared that Vladimir Putin’s regime was becoming “*increasingly aggressive*”³² in a context where the actions of Russian intelligence services are multiplying across Europe. As part of its hybrid actions against Western countries, Russia is increasingly using auxiliary or “*disposable*” agents intended to be deployed across a broad spectrum of activities ranging from sabotage to destabilization operations. Most of these agents are young people who often have criminal backgrounds, are pro-Russian, and want to make money quickly. These saboteurs, recruited via social networks or encrypted messaging platforms such as Telegram, receive no training for their missions, but their actions fully fit into Russia’s hybrid warfare strategy³³.

Specialized media had already noted, as early as February 2024³⁴, that the Russian military intelligence service (GU, formerly GRU) had launched a *bot* on Telegram intended to recruit sources and field agents in Eastern Europe, before extending this *modus operandi* to Northern Europe and the Balkan countries. Through this *bot*, individuals can apply by selecting their country from a list expanded to include Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. In the south, the recruitment area covers Greece, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro, and Albania. Significant resources have been allocated to this recruitment method: after interacting with a *bot*, “*a solid team of handling officers quickly takes over from the bot and begins verifying applicants on a case-by-case basis. Throughout the exchange, the agency does not identify itself, but expresses its general needs: obtaining ‘information on European countries’ war preparations against Russia’ and*

23 RIEHLE, Kevin P., « Russia’s intelligence illegals program : an enduring asset ». *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 35, n° 3, p. 395.

24 *Ibid.*

25 The *Revue stratégique* is intended to set the strategic framework for the development of the Military Programming Law (LPM) 2019-2025. It was presented on October 11, 2017 to the President of the Republic during a Defense Council meeting, and then updated in 2021.

26 *Revue stratégique de défense et de sécurité nationale*. Actualisation stratégique, 2021, p. 19.

27 GIOE David V. « Cyber operations and useful fools: the approach of Russian hybrid intelligence ». *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 33, n° 7, 2018, p. 954-973.

28 *Ibid.*

29 RIEHLE, Kevin, *op. cit.*, p. 389.

30 KOZOVŮ, André. *Les Services secrets russes. Des tsars à Poutine*. Éditions Tallandier, 2022, p. 419.

31 RIEHLE, Kevin, *op. cit.*, p. 389.

32 REUTERS. « Faeser warnt vor zunehmenden russischen Geheimdienstaktivitäten » [online]. *Die Zeit*, 14 octobre 2024. Available at: <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2024-10/deutschland-geheimdienste-russland-nancy-faeser>

33 DPA NIEDERSACHSEN. « Verfassungsschutz: Akute Bedrohung durch russische Spionage » [online]. *Die Zeit*, 11 novembre 2024. Available at: <https://www.zeit.de/news/2024-11/11/verfassungsschutz-akute-bedrohung-durch-russische-spionage>

34 Le GU étend ses efforts de recrutement à la Scandinavie et aux Balkans. *Intelligence Online*, 28 février 2024.

'opposing the development of fascism in Ukraine and Europe.' It warns applicants that they may be contacted in the distant future, and that they will always have the option to refuse requests"³⁵.

This recruitment method is leading to an "uberization" of the actions of Russian intelligence services, some manifestations of which may potentially be identified in France:

- In October 2023, Stars of David were stenciled onto several building facades in the Paris region. A Moldovan couple was arrested, while French authorities attributed responsibility to the FSB³⁶;
- On the night of May 13–14, 2024, red hands were spray-painted on the Shoah Memorial in Paris, and police suspected three individuals who had fled abroad;
- On June 1, 2024, five coffins covered with a banner reading "French Soldiers in Ukraine" were discovered at the foot of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. The three identified men were respectively born in Germany, Ukraine, and Bulgaria. One of them was linked to one of the individuals suspected of having spray-painted red hands on the Shoah Memorial in Paris;
- On June 6 and 7, 2024, three Moldovans suspected of creating graffiti in Paris depicting coffins with the inscription "French Soldiers in Ukraine" were arrested the following day near the Ministry for Transformation and the Civil Service while in possession of spray cans and stencils similar to those used the day before;
- On the night of June 19–20, 2024, two Moldovans were arrested on suspicion of spray-painting six coffin images referring to Ukraine on the facade of the newspaper *Le Figaro* in Paris. The individuals stated that they had been paid around one hundred euros for the action.

In May 2024, Stéphane Séjourné, Minister of Foreign Affairs, considered that these were "sponsors paid to destabilize and exploit divisions within French society"³⁷. In the case of the five coffins, the three arrested men, who were unemployed, allegedly acted because they needed money. Furthermore, the driver reportedly explained that he was paid 120 euros to transport the five coffins to the Eiffel Tower and stated that he did not know the other two co-perpetrators, whom he had met the previous day merely to ensure that no bodies were inside the coffins³⁸. Although Russia stated through diplomatic channels that it would "not interfere"³⁹ in France, the simultaneity of the operations, their alignment with a specific political agenda, and the amateurism of the actors suggest coordination by an organized entity.

There is a real gap between the devotion, professionalism, and advanced training of Russian "illegals" and this type of modus operandi, which essentially amounts to entrusting a wide variety of operations to amateurs. Nevertheless, there is one common point between these types of operations: the possibility for the sponsor to deny direct involvement and benefit from plausible denial.

Finally, these low-intensity actions present two major advantages for the sponsor:

- A very low financial and logistical investment;
- They benefit from a powerful leverage effect due to the destabilizing potential generated by extensive media coverage of the acts. As General André Beaufre wrote in his work *Introduction to Strategy*, "an itch for sensational news, as the Western press is accustomed to, allows the adversary to multiply the psychological effect of modest and repeated actions."

Ultimately, the director of the SVR, Sergei Naryshkin, considers that the activities of "illegals" have not lost their relevance in the current context. On the contrary, they are becoming more valuable because of the increasingly complex operational environment in many countries and regions of the world⁴⁰. In this framework, "operating on a different timescale from that of the West, [Russia] seeks to reinvent warfare by targeting as effectively as possible the weaknesses of our democracies and exploiting our internal divisions and the fragilities of our social contract. Why invade us if we can collapse upon ourselves?"⁴¹

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35 *Ibid.*

36 Russian intelligence service, responsible for internal security matters.

37 FRANCE INFO. Ce que l'on sait de la découverte devant la tour Eiffel de cinq cercueils portant l'inscription "Soldats français en Ukraine". *France Info*, 3 juin 2024.

38 FRANCE INFO. Cercueils devant la tour Eiffel : un des interpellés était en lien avec un homme soupçonné d'avoir dégradé le Mémorial de la Shoah à Paris. *France Info*, 3 juin 2024.

39 FRANCE INFO. Cercueils déposés devant la tour Eiffel : la Russie assure ne « pas interférer » en France. *France Info*, 4 juin 2024.

40 « Sergey Naryshkin: Illegals are the Golden Treasure of Foreign Intelligence. » In : MARTIN, Pascal, *op. cit.*

41 LECORNU, Sébastien. *Vers la guerre ? La France face au réarmement du monde*. Éditions Plon, 2024, p. 270.