

Christo Grozev

Lead Investigator at the Bellingcat Foundation

**House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the
Environment and Cyber**

“Understanding Authoritarianism and Kleptocracy in Russia

May 27, 2021

In the last 7 years, Bellingcat has investigated over 15 previously unresolved crimes involving Russian suspects or victims. In all these cases, our analysis has shown that the crimes - or unsuccessful conspiracies - were commissioned, planned and perpetrated by the Russian security services.

Many of the criminal incidents took place outside Russian territory, involving either attempted assassinations or acts of sabotage, sometimes with collateral fatalities.

GRU's Clandestine Black-ops Unit 29155

Most of these unlawful extraterritorial operations were conducted by Russia's military intelligence known as the GRU. They include the blowing up of ammunition depots in Czechia in late 2014 that left two Czech civilians dead, two assassination attempts on the Bulgarian arms manufacturer Emilian Gebrev and two other Bulgarian citizens in 2015, the explosions at a range of Bulgarian weapons depots storing weapons earmarked for export to the Republic of Georgia and/or Ukraine, and the Novichok poisoning of Sergey and Yulia Skripal, as well as Dawn Sturgess in the UK in 2018. All these assassinations and terrorist acts were the actions of a secretive sub-unit of GRU's Unit 29155, reporting directly to the Director of the GRU. The operatives of this unit received Russia's highest military awards in the immediate wake of these explosions and assassination attempts - the Hero of Russia medal. We identified more than 30 members of this black ops unit who in the past decade travelled on hundreds of trips across Europe and the world under government issued fictitious identities.

FSB's "Vympel" Black-ops

However, our investigations proved that the GRU does not hold a monopoly on Russian extraterritorial assassinations. In 2019 Bellingcat and its investigative partners Der Spiegel and Insider discovered evidence linking Russia's other security agency, the FSB, to the murder of Georgian citizen Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in Berlin in August 2019. This investigation allowed us to solve a string of earlier cold cases involving assassinations of three other victims, all Russian or ex-Soviet nationals, whom Russian authorities had previously labeled terrorists or separatists. In the course of these investigations, we uncovered a sprawling proxy structure conducting overseas operations on behalf of the Second Service of the FSB: non-ironically named "Service for Fight against Terrorism and Extremism". This proxy structure is hidden within the so-called Vympel group of companies, which masquerades as a private security group owned by former FSB spetsnaz officers, but in fact serves as a deniable assassination squad doing the FSB's bidding. Like with the GRU black-ops operatives, members of this assassination squad traveled around the world on government-issued fake identity documents.

FSB's Domestic Assassination Program

Apart from the extraterritorial sabotage and assassination program, we uncovered the existence of a domestic assassination program, run by that same 2nd Service of the FSB, often in

collaboration with the FSB's Technical And Scientific Service which provides assistance in deploying chemical weapons and masking traces of their use. It was these two FSB units which, based on multiple mutually corroborating data points, appear to have planned and perpetrated the Novichok poisoning of Alexei Navalny in August 2020.

Our follow-up investigations found that members of the same cross-functional FSB team that poisoned Alexei Navalny had been systematically tailing at least 5 other Russian nationals who were ultimately poisoned with unidentified chemicals - at least three of whom died. Members of this FSB unit were always in the vicinity of the victim in the hours or days before they fell into a coma or died from multiple organ failure in unexplained circumstances. The victims included political opposition figures like Vladimir Kara-Murza - who was targeted and poisoned at least twice - as well as other outspoken Russian journalists and human rights activists. Like in the case with the other two assassination units, these operatives traveled under government-issued fake identity documents.

The Poison Labs

Our investigations have also uncovered the existence of a clandestine Russian program for development and synthesis of banned toxins and nerve agents, carefully designed to circumvent and disguise Russia's non-compliance with its obligation to terminate its CW production program under the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention. The program, which we believe is centered around the government-run Signal Scientific Institute in Moscow, provides cover employment for Russia's leading military scientists who previously worked for Russia's military chemical weapons program. Dozens of these scientists continue working in a distributed manner under the guise of civilian research, in a cluster of state-owned and private labs. Telephone metadata obtained by us has established persistent communication between these labs and members of the GRU and FSB poison squads, which peaked before known poisoning operations such as the Skripal and the Navalny poisonings. Despite several rounds of sanctions imposed on a number of the state-run institutes that were deemed to be involved in development of chemical weapons, the Signal Institute and its leadership remains untouched by sanctions to this date.

Implausible Deniability

Based on analysis of travel and telephone data from the past decade, we believe that we have accounted for no more than 15% of all covert operations of these three clandestine units of the Russian security services.

While the Russian government has formally denied charges of complicity to any of the identified crimes, it has failed to make any serious efforts to present an alternative, innocent explanation for the facts disclosed. In fact, Russian propaganda has focused on discrediting the victims, and the investigators, rather than disproving the facts presented by us. Russian authorities have taunted German law enforcement who requested data on the real identity of the suspected assassin detained after the Berlin murder. "This is a real person", Russia's response read in

relation to the suspect's obviously fake identity that had no digital footprint before 2019, and continued: "He is known to the FSB as a good citizen". More recently, Dmitry Peskov trolled journalists who asked whether reports of the Kremlin employing the Skripal poisoners - who famously masqueraded on TV as sports vitamin salesmen - were true. "The Kremlin doesn't have a sports nutrition department," Peskov quipped.

The Kremlin's audacity belies what it knows to be a gaping hole in international law enforcement. In a global legal system where prosecuting cross-border crime depends on the good-faith cooperation of state parties, a state which happens to also be the perpetrator holds all the cards.