
KGB COMEBACK STIRS FEAR, DREAD IN RUSSIA

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By freelance contributor Thomas Lowe in Moscow

So, the reforming of the feared Soviet security service — the KGB — is being hotly denied by sources close to Russia's President and former KGB operative Vladimir Putin.

But security specialists strongly suspect the much-feared and all-powerful security bureau is making a comeback.

Ever since an authoritative report appeared in Kommersant newspaper in late September, quoting multiple — but unnamed — sources, pieces have fallen into place.

It has revived terrible memories in people who suffered at the hands of the ruthless Committee for State Security (Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti) known globally as KGB.

For unlike Western spy outfits, whose duty is to protect a country and its citizens, the KGB's primary purpose was to protect the Kremlin regime.

"Inmates had no rights — they were non-persons like in Orwell's 1984," Viktor Davidoff, a political prisoner tortured in some of the USSR's most horrific institutions in the early 1980s after being targeted by the KGB, said.

"They could violate your rights in any way — taking your clothes, starving us by stealing food which was sent by relatives. Doing anything. And of course the beatings."

The secret police outfit was set up in 1954 to be the "sword and shield of the Communist party".

It went about the task with gusto, crushing dissent at home, infiltrating targets and carrying out spy missions.

Mr Davidoff felt the full brunt of it. He was arrested after writing two papers critical of the Soviet system while at university.

At 18, he had secretly taped excerpts of the banned book, The Gulag Archipelago by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and painstakingly transcribed and published them.

He was thrown into the Blagoveshchensk psychiatric institution on the Soviet-Chinese border.

There, the worst part was the drugs he was forced to take. He said he saw sane men go mad.

"There's a strange feeling that something is trembling inside you and it only stops when you're walking," he said.

"It's very unpleasant. It's like all your blood is saturated by gas — something like Cola. It's very difficult to explain because it's a very unusual feeling."

"You start talking about something but by the middle of the sentence you forget what you started with."

Russian elite keeps Putin up at night

As the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, the hated KGB was dismantled, and its duties split among different bodies: foreign intelligence — the SVR, security protection for high-ranking officials — the FSO, and the FSB — the domestic intelligence service.

For years, Mr Putin was more than happy for these different agencies to fight amongst each other as they competed for influence — and in their sideline businesses, both legal and shady. But those inter-agency tussles weakened the system.

Experts say the President senses a new threat and wants a new, strong and reliable tool to confront it.

Mr Putin is not worried about popular unrest, it is the rattled Russian elite that keeps him up at night. With elections looming in 2018, he is centralising control and shoring up his power-base. Senior political and business figures have long enjoyed power and the material benefits of limited integration with the West, Russian security specialist Mark Galeotti says.

But that has changed as Mr Putin's politics become increasingly ideological.

He has repeatedly called for the country's rich to bring back to Russia the money they have stuffed into overseas bank accounts.

Earlier this year, he asked state officials to have their children schooled in Russia rather than the West.

"They're left thinking this is not the Putin we signed up with," Mr Galeotti said.

"Putin is aware of that and he is increasingly suspicious of an estrange from the elite, just as the elite are feeling to a considerable extent that their interests are not being protected by Putin."

To watch this troublesome crowd, reports suggest the security services will be folded into one service, much like the old KGB.

Once again, a super-agency could have overarching powers to prosecute political cases as well as carry out wide-ranging operations both at home and overseas.

'We're not far from Soviet Union': dissident

However, not everyone within the security sector supports consolidating the agencies.

Vladimir Yeleseyev is a veteran security operative. He was a member of the KGB's elite anti-terror Alpha unit in the tumultuous last years of the USSR in the 1990s.

He believes a large, strong military is necessary to defend Russia against enemies — particularly the United States — and feels the security services should be better funded.

But he is not in favour of fusing the agencies together. He is worried about the concentration of power that seems to be now underway.

"Each person has their plusses and minuses," Mr Yeleseyev said.

"It wouldn't be right to put all power in just one pair of hands".

Memorial gathering opposite the former headquarters of the KGB

Mr Putin worked for the KGB for 16 years, reaching the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He was based in the East German city of Dresden when the Berlin wall came down in 1989.

When angry crowds marched on the city's secret police headquarters, Mr Putin called for back-up — and Moscow did not respond. It was a formative lesson.

As President, he has been intent on strengthening the security forces to ensure Moscow will always have an answer.

Fears abound that with a KGB-style agency on the way back, the concentration of power and the repressive tactics it is famed for, will also return.

Soviet dissident Mr Davidoff is keenly aware of the threat and fears greater political violence and more political trials are on the way.

"We are not far from the Soviet Union right now," he said.

Kaynak/Source: