



## Chapter 14

# Active Measures: Russia's Covert Global Reach

*By Mark Galeotti*

### **Introduction**

*Aktivnyye meropriyatiya*, “active measures,” are covert and deniable political influence and subversion operations, from corruption and disinformation through to outright assassination and even sponsorship of coups.<sup>1</sup> They have a long and inglorious tradition in Russian foreign operations and reflect a permanent wartime mentality, something dating back to the Soviet era and even Tsarist Russia.<sup>2</sup> The term was used by the Soviet Union (USSR) from the 1950s onward to describe the gamut of operations, often carried out through front organizations, and frequently entailing the spread of disinformation. Indeed, the Committee for State Security (KGB)’s Service A, its primary active measures department, was originally Service D, meaning disinformation.

In many ways, active measures reflect the wartime mentality of the Soviet leadership, as similar tactics were used by the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during the Second World War, but much less frequently thereafter. For the KGB, however, active measures increasingly became central to its mission abroad in the postwar period, something made explicit by then-KGB chair Yuri Andropov in his Directive No. 0066 of 1982.<sup>3</sup> Tellingly, the KGB’s official definition of “intelligence” was

a secret form of political struggle which makes use of clandestine means and methods for acquiring secret information of interest *and for carrying out active measures* to exert influence on the adversary and weaken his political, economic, scientific and technical and military positions.<sup>4</sup>

KGB defector Maj. Gen. Oleg Kalugin called subversion and active measures “the heart and soul of Soviet intelligence.”<sup>5</sup> There has been heated debate as to quite how central active measures were either to KGB activities – the most extreme example was defector Yuri

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Radin, Alyssa Demus, and Krystyna Marcinek, “Understanding Russian Subversion Patterns, Threats, and Responses,” *RAND* (2020), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE331.html>.

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (London: Profile Books, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive: The KGB in Europe and the West* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 316.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Ivo Jurvec, *The Resurrection of ‘Active Measures’: Intelligence Services as a Part of Russia’s Influencing Toolbox*, Hybrid CoE Strategic Analysis (September 2018), <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Strategic-Analysis-2018-4-Juurvec.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Interviewed on *CNN*, June 27, 2007, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070627183623/http://www3.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/21/interviews/kalugin/>.

Bezmenov, who claimed that they accounted for eighty-five percent of its operations<sup>6</sup> – or Soviet foreign policy overall. Nonetheless, it was a central instrument of Soviet activities when trying to divert and subvert powerful antagonists and also to undermine the strength of powerful narratives and ideas to which they found themselves opposed.

This helps explain the utility of active measures in the post-Soviet era. While Putin’s Russia does not seek to export any specific or coherent ideology, its determination to assert its status as a “Great Power,” even at the expense of the sovereignty of its neighbors and the rules and norms of the international order, necessarily places it at odds with the West. The Kremlin’s aim is thus to divide, distract, and demoralize the West, leaving it unable or unwilling to maintain its solidarity and resist more direct and overt Russian actions in areas of greater immediate interest to it, such as in Ukraine.

### ***Active Measures in the Putin Era***

Active measures became increasingly less commonly employed during Gorbachev’s reform era in the latter 1980s and then in the chaotic 1990s, in part because of a desire to improve relations with the West and in part due to the collapse of Soviet and then Russian covert networks abroad.

However, under President Vladimir Putin, Russia’s foreign intelligence services have been restored to their old levels of funding and activity, and early hopes of a *modus vivendi* with the West soon foundered, hampered by unrealistic expectations and mutual suspicions. By the mid-2000s, active measures were no longer confined to the immediate neighborhood of the post-Soviet “Near Abroad” countries, but were again being seen as a central component of Moscow’s wider strategy. This change reflected a broad shift in strategic perspective best encapsulated by Alexander Vladimirov, a retired major-general who then chaired the military experts’ panel at the Russian International Affairs Council, an influential think tank close to the Russian Presidential Administration (AP). In 2007, he wrote that “modern wars are waged on the level of consciousness and ideas” and that “modern humanity exists in a state of permanent war” in which it is “eternally oscillating between phases of actual armed struggle and constant preparation for it.”<sup>7</sup>

This perspective owes much to a strategic culture heavily predicated on the belief that the world is a demonstrably hostile place full of covert attempts to undermine Russia’s power institutions and roll back its international influence, and which is driven by rival interests, ideological divisions, and outright “Russophobia.” This culture has deep historical roots, in Tsarist “conspirology” that saw the country under threat from Jewish, Masonic, and Bolshevik plots as well as British, German, and Ottoman subversion;<sup>8</sup> through Soviet counter-revolutionary theory predicated on what the *Red Army’s Officer’s Handbook* called a “vast system of anti-Communist propaganda... now aimed at weakening the unity of the socialist countries... and undermining socialist society from within.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In an interview on YouTube, accessed March 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqSV72VNnV0>.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Vladimirov, *Концептуальные основы национальной стратегии России. Военно-политический аспект* [Conceptual Bases of Russian National Strategy: Military-Political Aspects] (Moscow: Nauka, 2007), 105, 130.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Léon Poliakov, “The Topic of the Jewish Conspiracy in Russia (1905–1920), and the International Consequences,” in eds. Carl F. Graumann and Serge Moscovici, *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy* (New York: Springer, 1987); Marouf Hasian, “Understanding the Power of Conspiratorial Rhetoric: A Case Study of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” *Communication Studies* 48, no. 3 (1997).

<sup>9</sup> Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive*, 324; S. N. Kazlov (ed.), *The Officer’s Handbook: A Soviet View*, Translated by the U.S. Air Force (Moscow: Soviet Defence Ministry, 1971), 32.







south-eastern Ukraine, it was expanded and professionalized as a means of sending ground troops to Syria without alarming a Russian population with little enthusiasm for the conflict. In this respect, it was “deniable” both to the outside world and even the Russian people. It performed adequately well, but by some time in 2017, the Russian defense ministry decided it did not need Wagner’s services.

Yet the Kremlin was reluctant to see it disbanded, thinking it might have further value, and so charged businessman Evgeny Prigozhin with keeping it alive. To cover its costs, Prigozhin’s Concord Group holding company secured a deal with the Assad Regime in Damascus that granted it a share in the profits from any oil and gas fields it helped recapture in Syria, which led to the debacle of their assault in the Deir ez-Zor region and subsequent decimation at U.S. hands – something the Russian military did nothing to deter. In other words, a pseudo-mercenary force seamlessly transitioned into a genuine mercenary force, and looking at Wagner’s later engagements, from Venezuela and Libya to the Central African Republic and Mozambique, it is clear that while some operations may be directly in support of Kremlin interests, others are primarily motivated by private enterprises. Wagner’s status as both deniable state instrument *and* private commercial venture underscores this “hybridity” of modern Russia.

It also makes a virtue of the way that Putin’s state system is not the ruthlessly-disciplined and rational “power vertical” that many believe, but rather a loose and flexible deinstitutionalized “adhocracy” in which powers and responsibilities are often assigned and reassigned with little direct connection to individuals’ and organizations’ formal roles.<sup>22</sup> A corollary of this is that all kinds of actors and agencies are using active measures to compete and demonstrate their value to the Kremlin, just as Andropov’s Directive No. 0066 made active measures the responsibility of all the KGB, not just Service A. Everyone—from businesspeople to clergymen, students to scholars—can generate their own initiatives that would often be considered covert acts of subversion and disruption.

Many operations are thus neither conceived nor directed by the Kremlin. Indeed, they may not even be known to the authorities, unless and until the prime mover brings it to their attention. Major operations carried out by government agencies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the intelligence services, obviously are subject to such oversight. However, many of the smaller-scale active measures, especially those involving disinformation, cyberattacks or other low risk “arm’s length” means, are carried out by businesspeople, hackers, media pundits or other individuals either out of a sense of patriotic duty (which the Kremlin has sought to mobilize) or in the hope of future reward from the regime if they prove successful.

### ***The Limitations of the Model***

This approach has many advantages – it is often deniable, requires no or little up-front resourcing, and capitalizes on the imaginations and ambitions of numerous autonomous actors – but carries with it some serious weaknesses, too. Because of the lack of central coordination, operations can often be small-scale, contradictory and amateurish.

More seriously, what the Kremlin does not order or bankroll, and which it cannot acknowledge, it also finds it harder to control. Many of the individuals and agencies concerned are working to their own personal ideological agendas or else their assumptions about what the Kremlin “wants.” They may well get that wrong, or simply fail to adapt to tactical changes in the government’s position. A case in point has been the response to the coronavirus pandemic. The

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<sup>22</sup> For more on the concept of Russia as an “adhocracy,” see *Business New Europe*, 18 January 2017, <https://www.intellinews.com/stolypin-russia-has-no-grand-plans-but-lots-of-adhocrats-114014/>.

Kremlin tried to use it to regain some of its lost political ground since 2014, pushing a narrative of common endeavor against a common threat, agitating for a moratorium on sanctions, and launching controversial “From Russia with Love” medical aid missions to Italy, Serbia, and the United States. Setting aside the limitations of such nakedly opportunistic efforts, the Kremlin was unable to prevent the activities of many low-level disinformation outlets and creators. Although there is little evidence of the kind of coordinated, multi-platform magnification of narratives that marks a Kremlin-sponsored or -sanctioned disinformation campaign, the mere presence of these malign narratives helped undermine any attempts to mount a pandemic charm offensive.

Active measures, when unmasked, can often poison diplomatic relations: the attempted Skripal and Navalny assassinations, the “Lisa Case,” and interference in the 2016 U.S. elections all created serious strains in relations with London, Berlin, and Washington, respectively. However, when poorly-managed, they can also lead to a more subtle blowback. Disinformation around coronavirus, for example, may have been directed at the West, but given the two-way flow of ideas, has also contributed to the sizeable body of myth, conspiracy theory, and quack remedies inside Russia.

In general, the reputation of being an enthusiastic user of active measures can sometimes give Russia disproportionate “dark power” – the coercive counterpart to soft power, the capacity to intimidate<sup>23</sup> – but in the longer term it is deeply problematic, contributing to a perception of Russia as “rogue state” and potential international pariah.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Different Theaters, Different Plays***

While much is made sometimes about a supposed “Russian playbook,” in practice, active measures are by definition opportunistic and flexible, responding both to the Kremlin’s needs of the moment and also to what scope there is for covert political operations. Active measures against China, for instance, are not wholly ruled out – although largely confined to jousting for influence in third countries – but they are severely constrained. This is in part because one of the Kremlin’s primary concerns is not alienating Beijing and also given the practical and operational constraints of mounting such missions in China.

Opportunities for their use are thus most commonly found in theaters which are both relatively uncontrolled – whether democracies or simply less effective authoritarianisms – and also the subject of particular Kremlin initiatives and interests. In the “Near Abroad,” for example, relative weak structures of governance and rule of law mean that Moscow can often rely on outright corruption and the use of so-called *kompromat*, compromising materials, to exert

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<sup>23</sup> Mark Galeotti, “Russia pursues ‘dark power’ and the West has no answer,” *Raam op Rusland*, March 15, 2018, <https://www.raamoprusland.nl/dossiers/kremlin/894-russia-pursues-dark-power-and-the-west-has-no-answer>.

<sup>24</sup> Something also being recognized in Russian research, even if often framed as an unfair and Orientalizing perspective. See, for example, O. A. Solopova and M. Yu. Pyushkina, “Russia as a target domain in American, British and Canadian political discourses,” *Вестник Южно-Уральского государственного университета*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2017); Ekaterina A. Repina, Marina AR. Zheltukhina, Natalya A. Kovalova, Tatiana G. Popova, and Conchita Garcia Caselles, “International media image of Russia: trends and patterns of perception,” *XLinguae* vol. 11, no. 2 (2018); Galina Melnik, Boris Misonzhnikov, and Evgeniya Vojtik, “The Image of Russia in the Western Media as a ‘Military Threat,’” *Ariel*, vol. 1. no 2. (2019).

covert influence. It almost goes without saying that they are a constant feature of the Russian campaign against Ukraine,<sup>25</sup> but they also range from alleged election meddling in Moldova<sup>26</sup> to cyberattacks on Georgia.<sup>27</sup>

Conversely, in Western and Central Europe, while such measures are not unknown, they are at once more risky and less usable. Instead, as in North America, greater use is made of disinformation and support for extremist and divisive movements and voices, whether leftist or rightist, separatist or nationalist. At a time when the West is in any case experiencing something of a crisis of confidence and a wave of interconnected challenges to the status quo, with constituencies questioning everything from existing borders to the democratic model, the Russians have ample opportunities to exacerbate existing divisions. After all, the evidence is that they cannot create such fissures, but can widen them. It appears that Moscow has backed away from attempts to directly influence polls, seeing them as unpredictable and prone to backfire, and instead seeks to capitalize on the tensions and disagreements they inevitably create.

In Africa, active measures have become a central component of a campaign to acquire status, favorable economic deals, and leverage through quick, cheap initiatives.<sup>28</sup> As well as trying to hasten a general Western retreat from much of the continent, the Russians are in effect becoming active measures mercenaries, with covert political operations part of a package of measures they offer regimes in return for economic and political stakes. Thus, Prigozhin's Concord Group markets not just armed force but also "political technologists" willing to deploy disinformation in support of a regime.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, persistent allegations of commercial espionage and bribery have dogged *Rosatom*'s efforts to sell nuclear power stations across the continent.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike the Soviet Union, Putin's Russia does not have a long-term ideological objective in Africa – indeed, in many ways there is a stark absence of any real strategy.<sup>31</sup> Instead, it looks to the continent for quick, transitory gains that both support the narrative that Russia is a global rather than just a regional power and could be used as bargaining chips in the future. Besides which, China is seen as a much more serious and deep-pocketed rival for African influence, and ultimately Moscow neither believes it can compete on the same terms as Beijing, nor does it want to.

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<sup>25</sup> Alya Shandra and Robert Seely, "The Surkov Leaks: the Inner Workings of Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine," *RUSI Occasional Paper* (2019), [https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201907\\_op\\_surkov\\_leaks\\_web\\_final.pdf](https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201907_op_surkov_leaks_web_final.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> "Senior Official Accuses Russia Of Meddling In Moldovan Politics," *RFE/RL*, February 10, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-russia-election-meddling-dodon-candu/29031766.html>.

<sup>27</sup> "UK says Russia's GRU behind massive Georgia cyber-attack," *BBC*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-51576445>.

<sup>28</sup> Jidefor Adibe, "What does Russia really want from Africa?" *Brookings Africa in Focus*, November 14, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2019/11/14/what-does-russia-really-want-from-africa/>.

<sup>29</sup> "The Chef's Global Footprints," *OCCRP*, December 17, 2019, <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/the-chefs-global-footprints>; "Master and Chef. How Evgeny Prigozhin led the Russian offensive in Africa," *Proekt*, March 31 2019, <https://www.proekt.media/investigation/evgeny-prigozhin-africa/>; "A Private Army for the President: The Tale of Evgeny Prigozhin's Most Delicate Mission," *The Bell*, January 31, 2019, <https://thebell.io/en/a-private-army-for-the-president-the-tale-of-evgeny-prigozhin-s-most-delicate-mission/>.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Weiss and Eugene Rumer, "Nuclear Enrichment: Russia's Ill-Fated Influence Campaign in South Africa," *Carnegie Endowment Paper*, November 16, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/12/16/nuclear-enrichment-russia-s-ill-fated-influence-campaign-in-south-africa-pub-80597>.

<sup>31</sup> "Arms, Oil and Influence: What You Need to Know About Russia's First-Ever Africa Summit," *The Moscow Times*, October 24, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/24/arms-oil-and-influence-what-you-need-to-know-about-russias-first-africa-summit-a67885>.



Conversely, both Latin America and Asia are seen at present as less suitable and interesting arenas for active measures. These operations are, after all, largely connected with efforts to sway or subvert governments that are either antagonists or else potential clients. In these continents, the perception is that while Russia has some friends such as Cuba, Venezuela, and Vietnam, the scope for expanding its influence is minimal, not least because of the presence of the U.S. and China, respectively. Given that Russia lacks the resources to outbid either and is essentially looking for cheap and easy wins, the environment is uncongenial. Instead, active measures are only really employed when there is a very specific goal in mind – such as the campaign to try to prevent the extradition to America of arms dealer Viktor Bout in 2010 – and even then largely confined to disinformation campaigns.

### ***Conclusions and Implications***

Active measures are both an expression of Russia's strategic culture, with its propensity to see the world as full of covert challenges, and the operational code of the Putin regime, which considers the best defense against such threats to be good offense. A central element of this code is that responsibility for active measures has become diversified, even universalized, linked with the way Russia has become an "adhocracy" of competing, semi-autonomous actors expected to generate their own plans to work toward the state's broad objectives.

Of course, this does not mean that every Russian individual or institution is necessarily involved in active measures. Most are not, and furthermore, most of the initiatives generated should not be considered active measures, as they are often overt and well within the usual norms of political activity.

However, the crowning irony is that it has become very easy for foreigners to see the Kremlin's hand behind every reversal, every trip, and every Russian initiative. Ironically, at a time when ordinary Russians' perceptions of the West are increasingly favorable,<sup>32</sup> Westerners are more negative about Russia. According to a study by the Pew Research Center, only eighteen percent of Americans, twelve percent of Swedes, and twenty-six percent of Britons have a positive view.<sup>33</sup> More broadly, the mistaken perception, even in policy circles, that Russia's active measures are simply part of a nihilistic hunger for chaos, to "watch the world burn," is not only inaccurate but also dangerous, as it inclines other powers to regard the country simply as a threat.<sup>34</sup>

All this has an undeniably baleful impact on international relations, for while it may seem to suit Putin well, crediting him with more influence and impact in the world than he and his Russia truly deserve, his country ultimately can neither sustain an open-ended strategic competition with the West, nor does it largely want one. Putin is undoubtedly more than just a KGB veteran in terms of his experiences, attitudes, and approach to the world. Nonetheless, the KGB's penchant for active measures, an instrument adopted when Moscow had far fewer options for more positive engagement with the West, is one of the more pernicious of its lasting legacies for him.

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<sup>32</sup> "4 in 5 Russians View West as a Friend – Poll," *The Moscow Times*, February 18, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/02/18/4-in-5-russians-view-west-as-a-friend-poll-a69322>.

<sup>33</sup> "Russia and Putin receive low ratings globally," *Pew Research Center*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/07/russia-and-putin-receive-low-ratings-globally/>.

<sup>34</sup> Kasey Stricklin, "Why Does Russia Use Disinformation?" *Lawfare*, March 29, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/why-does-russia-use-disinformation>.

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