

# The autocrat's intelligence paradox: Vladimir Putin's (mis)management of Russian strategic assessment in the Ukraine War

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## Abstract

Autocratic leaders rely on intelligence machineries for regime and personal security. They often manage large, powerful, unaccountable organisations, which they hold close. But, despite their close relationship with - and reliance upon - intelligence, autocrats also frequently struggle to use it to enhance decision-making and foreign policy, and consequently suffer avoidable intelligence failures. This article argues that Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is illustrative of this broader, though understudied, pattern of autocratic mismanagement of strategic intelligence. The invasion was both spurred and accompanied by a catastrophic intelligence failure, the responsibility for which rests with Vladimir Putin, the arbiter of a system with limited capacity to offer dispassionate strategic assessments. His failure is characteristic of autocratic regimes assessing foreign developments, including Putin's Soviet predecessors. This article contributes to the emerging scholarship on intelligence in autocratic regimes by examining Putin's use of intelligence in the Ukraine War in the context of the broader literature on intelligence and decision.

## Keywords

cognitive bias, intelligence failure, statecraft, strategic intelligence, Ukraine War, Vladimir Putin

## Introduction: The Chekist in the Kremlin

Vladimir Putin cut his professional teeth as a mid-level functionary in the Soviet KGB, the Kremlin's intelligence, counterintelligence, and security service. What precisely he did during his time in the organisation is unclear, but it is well established that he served in the German Democratic Republic performing tasks related to economic intelligence and supporting Russian illegals, those intelligence officers under nonofficial cover (Belton, 2020). This intelligence experience seems to have been the touchstone of his

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career (Hill, 2016). After the Cold War he had a brief career in the Saint Petersburg administration, but he soon returned to the fold. In 1998, President Boris Yeltsin appointed him head of the FSB (the Federal Security Service). He is undoubtedly a creature of the Soviet secret state (Hill, 2016). This was a point not lost on his domestic opponents from early on in his tenure. One of his most trenchant critics, the late, murdered journalist Anna Politkovskaya used to refer to him as ‘that strutting Chekist’ (Sweeney, 2022).

Most heads of state have little experience of using intelligence as a lever of state power before assuming office. Some adapt well; others do not (Lockhart and Moran, 2022). Like any other element of the bureaucracy, leaders must learn to utilise the system if they are to benefit from its fullest potential. For Putin, being both a KGB officer and, briefly, head of its primary successor service, the FSB, would have seemed to offer a major advantage in using intelligence for statecraft. Indeed, Putin’s formative experience and continued close engagement with the intelligence and security state has served him well in several senses. It allowed him to consolidate, retain, strengthen, and reward his power base. He has used elements of Russia’s intelligence and security machinery effectively to control and oppress opponents of his regime, at home and abroad. To repression add a penchant for espionage and aggressive active measures, some traditional and others with a modern digital twist in the cyber era (Gioe, 2018). Russia’s expertise in penetrating adversary computer networks to steal secrets or engage in more disruptive action is judged to be formidable (Devanny et al., 2021; Soldatov, 2017). Indeed, until his disastrous miscalculation in invading Ukraine, conventional wisdom held that Putin’s professional background conferred on him a perspective rarely enjoyed by senior political figures in great powers in matters related to secrecy and security.

However, the initial stages of the Ukraine War called many of the assumptions regarding Putin’s competence in the use of strategic intelligence into question. The invasion was preceded and accompanied by significant intelligence failures. How did a leader so steeped in intelligence use his organisations so ineffectively before such a major policy decision? This article explores the nature of Putin’s intelligence failure based on the evidence available through English and Russian language sources, and it considers Putin’s limits, despite his own professional experience, as an intelligence customer and manager. It features the Russo-Ukraine War as its major case study and offers an original perspective on the nature of the failures witnessed in 2022. In addition, by linking the emerging empirical evidence with the existing body of intelligence studies scholarship focused on the consumer–producer relationship and intelligence failure, it offers insights both into the factors that drove Moscow’s failure, and places them in a historical perspective, underlining them as both quintessentially Putinesque, and also typically autocratic.

This article contributes to three developing and interconnected fields of literature: intelligence and the Ukraine War, which has received a significant amount of media coverage but, despite some exceptions, (Dylan and Maguire, 2022; Gioe and Styles, 2022), remains in its infancy as an academic topic; Putin as an intelligence manager and consumer, which has received far more scholarly attention (for instance, Belton, 2020; Hill and Gaddy, 2015; Lewis, 2022); and authoritarian leaders and their intelligence systems, which, despite notable exceptions (such as Andrew, 2004; Hatfield, 2022), is a sparsely populated academic field. It is in connecting and working across these disciplinary silos that we make our contribution by analysing the events in Ukraine in reference to scholarship about Russia and Putin generally, and about intelligence and security in particular.

This article makes two main claims. First, that Putin’s approach to intelligence as a tool of statecraft is fundamentally flawed, focusing more energy on crushing dissent and

quashing political opposition than understanding the world around him. In many respects, his instrumental use of intelligence is reminiscent of Soviet leaders, many of whom secured the party's domestic interests but suffered similar problems in understanding foreign adversaries. However, despite being a product of the Soviet system, Putin has broken with his political forebears in significant ways. Specifically, he is a worse intelligence consumer, rules in a more personalised way, tolerates a more corrupt system, and thus sets the preconditions for mismanaged assessment. The implications are significant, for if Putin uses intelligence services merely as a form of institutionalised confirmation bias, any assessment of his likely future actions should downplay the impact of careful assessment of the information available to the Kremlin and focus primarily on his efforts at regime security and calculation of his personal self-interest and legacy.

Second, although the Ukraine failure is Putin's, as the arbiter of an intelligence system that is stunted in its capacity to offer dispassionate strategic assessments to political leaders, we argue that it is also characteristically authoritarian. As has been illustrated in extant studies of authoritarian intelligence failures, a key limit in their capacity to turn good intelligence into good policy is a frequent inability to accept dissenting judgements as being offered in good faith. Putin has increasingly isolated himself from countervailing intellectual currents, or analytical challenges. His paranoia and suspicion perhaps manifesting most apparently in his public appearances, with his lieutenants kept physically distant at the far end of an oversized conference table. But he is not the first autocrat to have operated in this manner; nor is he the first to suffer an intelligence failure because of his parochialism. One of his predecessors in the Kremlin, Joseph Stalin, descended into self-defeating paranoia before Hitler's invasion in 1941 (Andrew and Elkner, 2003). This dynamic, as we suggest, relates to threat perception in authoritarian regimes beyond these two examples. With no norm of secure retirement, nor, generally, a succession plan, autocrats tend to associate their personal survival with their regime's survival. Therefore they focus inwards, prioritising political enemies, and intelligence failure abroad can be the result. Thus, the early stages of the Ukraine War offer an illuminating contemporary case study of this limit of autocratic intelligence in practice.

To substantiate our arguments, first, we rely on contemporary Russia experts, scholars, and courageous journalists to briefly consider the structure and state of Russian intelligence as it was on the eve of the 2022 invasion before turning to assess the performance of Putin's intelligence efforts in Ukraine. Using a mix of Russian and Western sources we detail the failure's unfolding, and, like fruit of the poisoned tree, how it manifested initially strategically in Moscow before cascading to the operational and tactical levels of Russia's war in Ukraine. Finally, we reflect upon the Ukraine War as a vehicle to examine the autocrat's intelligence paradox and we consider whether these conclusions can be generalised while suggesting new horizons and case studies to complement inquiries of this type into autocrats and their use of intelligence.

## **Putin's intelligence machinery**

The granular details of Russia's intelligence machinery as of 2022 are somewhat opaque. But its contours are apparent, as are its limitations. The key agencies are the FSB, the Federal Security Service, which adopted the KGB's headquarters in the Lubyanka, and which is primarily responsible for domestic security intelligence, counterintelligence, the border guard, elements of signals intelligence previously managed by the Federal Agency of Government Communications and Information (FAPSI), and intelligence

operations and analysis covering the now independent states that previously were part of the Soviet empire (Galeotti, 2016). Second, the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), which manages intelligence operations internationally, and generally with a civilian focus. Its antecedent is the First Chief Directorate of the KGB, and like its predecessor it still manages networks of 'illegal' officers in target countries (Anderson, 2007; Corera, 2020). Tellingly, the domestic-focused FSB's Fifth Service has responsibility for the Russian 'near abroad', including Ukraine. This may seem counterintuitive given that Ukraine is a foreign country, but this odd division of organisational responsibility reveals something of the Kremlin's thinking about Ukrainian statehood. Third, the military Main Intelligence Directorate (commonly GRU, but now designated GU) conducts foreign intelligence operations and special operations for the General Staff. It maintains a larger foreign presence than the SVR, generally targets military relevant issues and secrets, online and offline, and has a reputation for risk-taking and is known for an element of brazenness (SJ, 2018). There are other organisations that deal to a lesser extent in intelligence and security, such as the Federal Protective Service (FSO), which manages the protection of government officials, including the president, but the main organisations are the aforementioned.

The capabilities of these services in terms of intelligence collection are broadly akin to comparable major-state intelligence services. Internationally, they have demonstrated a capacity to conduct espionage against key targets and attack enemies abroad. Digitally, they have demonstrated considerable capabilities both to gather information and to disrupt and exploit target computer networks (Whitaker, 2021). Their capacity to conduct active measures and paramilitary operations, at home and abroad, is advanced. Within Russia they have robust capacities to suppress dissent through a variety of means, violent and non-violent, as was illustrated with the suppression of Putin's ardent critic and most effective opposition unifier Alexei Navalny. Nominally, the services are guided and managed either by the Security Council or the Presidential Administration, but in practice they answer to Putin: he grips the shield and wields the sword.

Since assuming the presidency in 2000, Putin has held his *siloviki* (privileged leaders of the Russian military, intelligence, and security machinery) close. Under his leadership there have been several changes to the organisation, personnel, and disposition of the machinery (Agentura.ru, 2021; Galeotti, 2016; Lewis, 2022). But there is also notable continuity, particularly in terms of strategic culture, mindset and *esprit de corps*. Tradition is strong in the services, which view themselves as the keepers of core Russian identity. Putin embraces this legacy, but is not imprisoned by it. The security state's present characteristics are manifest either because he wants them or because he tolerates them. These characteristics have been identified by various observers, with little dissent about what is included, although discussion concerning their relative significance persists. They include inter agency competition and overlapping responsibilities, for example, the FSB, GRU, and SVR operated in Ukraine before 2014. The result is 'regular direct and indirect turf wars, and not just over the usual bureaucratic prizes of responsibilities, funding, and access to the leadership but also business opportunities for officers, and sometimes outright survival' (Galeotti, 2016: 4–6). Second, a persistent 'wartime mindset', manifesting in zero-sum thinking, an almost conspiratorial understanding of Western power and intentions, and a tendency to act and accept high levels of risk (Cottey, 2022; Wallace, 2017). This has been characterised by a level of brazenness following highly significant operations, such as the poisoning and attempted murder of former GRU officer Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom in 2018 (Chernobrov, 2022).

Third, as underlined by Antonova (2021), is corruption, manifesting in an endemic culture of using the privileges of the secret state to enrich themselves and also in close links with organised crime within Russia and internationally. Fourth, an awareness that their power and privileges are conditional on the approval of Putin; that his identification with the *chekisty* may be sentimental but is also ruthlessly utilitarian; and that falls from grace can be painful and, in cases like that of poisoned defector Alexander Litvenenko, lethal.

Russian politician Nikolai Patrushev called the loyal *siloviki* Russia's 'New Nobility' in recognition of their service supporting Putin as the master of the Kremlin, (Soldatov and Borogan, 2010). And while these new 'nobles' are, per Patrushev, driven by a sense of meaning over financial reward, they spend much effort preserving their privileges and status in Russian society. This arrangement is not without its utility. While the competition between the agencies potentially fosters innovation and aggressive operations to outdo each other, the organisations can steal secrets effectively, and theoretically this brings differing perspectives and options to Putin (Galeotti, 2016). Their 'wartime mindset' engenders not only aggressive active measures abroad, but even moreso domestically to undermine the Kremlin's enemies at home. The services links to organised crime offer both an additional vector for operations and ancillary operators, particularly but not exclusively online, and the opportunity for intelligence officers and political leaders to enrich themselves (Hodge and Ilyushina, 2018; *The Guardian*, 2010). The need to ensure Putin's approval generates a system that has an element of mutual (though not equal) dependence and benefit: as long as they can pursue the regime's priorities and fulfil its wishes – which, essentially, can be reduced to survival, and re-assertion of Russian geopolitical power – all sides benefit: the regime survives, the *siloviki* prosper.

If Putin's system is adept at disruption, active measures, and repressing dissenting voices, these characteristics have proven themselves problematic in terms of strategic decision support. Two primary emergent properties of the intelligence system and its characteristics underline this issue. First, its limited institutional capacity to generate dispassionate assessments, which many have argued is a direct consequence of the competition between the services and the need to deliver for Putin (see Stanovaya, 2018, 2020; Tefft, 2020, but Baev noted the phenomenon as early as 2007). Others, such as Lewis (2022: 74) contend that the information that he receives is filtered through a particular mindset, one that sees Russia consistently besieged by Western intelligence operations. However, the result is that this 'inevitably competes with the integrity of the information gathering and analytic process' (Galeotti, 2016: 4). Independent thinkers have long-since departed the system, the majority of those who are left are content to not rock the boat (Taylor, 2017). A clear example of this dynamic was visible in the aftermath of the Moscow apartment bombings in 1999, when many who questioned the official narrative that the perpetrators were Chechen extremists were silenced through various means (Knight, 2012). Since then, there is evidence that the services are becoming even more closed in terms of recruitment, often turning (literally) into family affairs (Stewart and Pleasance, 2021). Many of the FSB leaks that have surfaced since the 2022 Ukraine invasion have reinforced Galeotti's point, particularly on the need to meet manager's expectations in analysis and the requirement for loyalty (Osechkin, 2022b, 2022c; Soldatov, 2020b; Taylor, 2011). What the leakers underline has been a characteristic of the system since the Soviet period (Andrew, 2004). To change it would require political will. Putin, over his two decades in power, has demonstrated that he does not want a different system of assessment, comparable to the British Joint Intelligence Organisation, or the American National Intelligence Council, which, notably for our comparison, offers alternative analysis and intelligence community

coordination. In the matter of intelligence assessment, the comparison of Putin with Stalin and his management of intelligence is most apt (Gioe and Dylan, 2022).

The second property is the series of (perverse) incentives that the system generates which discourage the voicing of critical perspectives or dissent, either by individuals or organisations, or the maintenance of intellectually independent organisations. The struggle for influence among the agencies creates clear disincentives for delivering unwelcome news or contradicting the party line. Given Putin's clear, publicised, and deep-seated views on matters central to the Ukraine War's strategic intelligence failure – the existence of a distinct Ukrainian nationalism, the appetite of Ukrainians to join Russia versus their willingness to fight, the West's moral decadence and decay – few would have seen merit in advancing too contradictory a thesis. Indeed, there is limited evidence that this embedded assumption disincentivised basic attempts even to learn about contemporary Ukraine. It appears that Russian intelligence collection in Ukraine relied solely on Russian speaking informants, which was likely a methodological oversight or just plain lazy for Russian case officers who did not speak Ukrainian (Gabuev, 2022; Surnacheva, 2014). Emblematic of such a condescending approach to Ukraine, Russia posted an ambassador to Kyiv who was only learning to speak Ukrainian (*Lenta.ru*, 2022). Collection shortfalls aside, sundry active measures were implemented to undermine the legitimacy of the more Europe-oriented government in Kyiv since 2014, assuming that a more pro-Russia policy was an achievable objective (US Department of Treasury, 2022). Apparently the thrust of intelligence reporting reaching the Kremlin focused on the dissatisfaction of the Ukrainian population with the government in Kyiv and this reporting also highlighted their pro-Russia attitudes. Such issues amount to a form of intellectual corruption or politicisation.

An additional feature of the system, again rooted in the corruption, is the lack of oversight in authoritarian systems. In Russia, this manifests as a disincentive to audit or even question whether the significant sums of money expended on developing intelligence networks amount to anything. This is a particularly pernicious dynamic: it entrenches bad practice during the normal run of events, and it provides a convenient scapegoat for the (equally complicit) upper echelons in the aftermath of a failure, disincentivising any push for genuine reforms. Since 2014, the Russian intelligence agencies are reported to have spent significant amounts on agents and active measures within Ukraine, but recently, the head of the Fifth Service of FSB, tasked with intelligence collection in Ukraine, has been investigated for corruption (Soldatov and Borogan, 2022c), although this may also be a catchall charge to signal displeasure from the state. By May 2022, over 100 FSB officers had either been fired or jailed (SOFREP, 2022). This level of corruption is both endemic and paralysing. Crucially, for understanding the particularities of Putin's intelligence management, this level of state action against the security state is indicative of a deterioration even compared with the Soviet years (Keaten, 2022). During the Cold War, the services were under stricter party control, generally less entrepreneurial, and notionally subject to the rule of Soviet law (*Ogonyok*, 2011; Pringle, 2001; Stevenson, 2022).

Another difference between Putin's particular form of controlling and balancing his support base ('*Sistema*', see Ledeneva, 2013) and his Soviet forbears is that the distinction between the secret state and organised crime was clearer cut, with the opportunities for personal enrichment more limited. During the Cold War, the personal privilege that was part and parcel of being an officer of the secret police was a key feature, but the rot accelerated under Putin's leadership and personal example. As Donald Rayfield noted with only faint hyperbole, 'the government's just the uniformed version of the mafia'



(Sweeny, 2022b). Individuals have little, if any, incentive to highlight corruption that is enriching them and their organisations. Officers, journalists, politicians who have attempted to do so have lost their careers or been jailed, like Mikhail Trepashkin, a former intelligence officer involved in investigating the 1999 apartment bombings (Smith, 2004). Others met violent ends, as did Yuri Shchekochikhin, a Russian politician, also investigating the 1999 bombings (O'Halloran, 2007). Alexei Navalny was poisoned by the FSB, survived through a high level of medical care and good fortune, and is now imprisoned after returning to Russia (*Bellingcat*, 2020). During periods of stability and prosperity, this state of affairs in intelligence and security appears to have few negative consequences from the perspective of its leaders. But they constitute a key point of failure when the system is stressed or major foreign policy initiatives run aground.

To be clear, this article does not claim that Putin and his intelligence machinery are incompetent. There is ample evidence of their ability to effectively conduct complex human and digital intelligence collection operations and active measures, domestically and internationally (Gioe et al., 2019). There is also some evidence that Russian intelligence can, on occasion, astutely assess the nature of foreign target states. For instance, Russia's covert interference in the United States 2016 election displayed a nuanced understanding of which fault lines in US society and culture to exploit (Mueller, 2019; Office of Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), 2017). But this generally occurs when Putin's personal pathologies as an intelligence consumer do not compromise the process. There is a difference between intelligence systems providing insights and hard truths to a consumer and a capacity to implement active measures abroad. The dynamics of the intelligence system that has been shaped by Putin, as an increasingly authoritarian intelligence customer and manager, bears several hallmarks that, as we shall see in the case study of the Ukraine invasion, rendered it unable to perform effectively, or to deliver the type of decision advantage that a capable and professional intelligence service ought to provide to decision makers, especially with the resources available to it. It is to the invasion we now turn to assess the autocrat's intelligence machinery in practice.

## **Intelligence failures in the Ukraine War**

It was clear from the first days of the war that it was not proceeding as the Kremlin planned or expected. Russia was surprised in several ways: by the determined Ukrainian military resistance that blocked its march to Kyiv, by the resolute leadership of President Volodymyr Zelensky, by the sophistication of weapons and intelligence Western nations provided to Ukraine, and by the scale of Western outrage, mostly manifested in robust financial sanctions, but also indicated by leading brands withdrawing from the Russian market. Even Russia's typical allies provided only half-hearted support. These strategic surprises compounded Russia's own logistical confusion and self-inflicted problems at the operational and tactical levels of the war, including snarled logistics, confused command and control, lack of secure communications, and inability to conduct combined arms manoeuvre. That these martial abilities were in such disarray reveals that the invasion was predicated, at the strategic level, on fundamental assumptions about the true cohesiveness of a Ukrainian state and the robustness of Ukrainian national identity that were incorrect. These flawed assumptions both stem from and lead to flawed intelligence products, leaders ignoring advice, or leaders simply not asking for insight when planning and implementing their policies. In the context of Russia's attack on Ukraine, each can be

indicative of a flawed or dysfunctional process of strategic assessment in government, or of a system that fails to bring to bear all the intelligence at its disposal in the service of major national decisions. If intelligence agencies compromise the integrity of the process by not offering their best judgements, then they do their political and military masters a disservice. If policymakers do not ask for advice, ignore it, or manage a system where they only receive what they want to hear, they mark themselves as the weak link in the system. As Robert Jervis observed, strategic intelligence failures can come from flawed intelligence systems in the West (Jervis, 2011). In contrast, the sort of intelligence failure suffered by Russia in Ukraine owes much to its authoritarian nature.

Observers of Russian and Soviet intelligence may note that the Ukraine War's failures share characteristics with several episodes from Soviet intelligence and military history (DeBenedictis, 2022). Despite Russia and the Soviet Union's long and storied intelligence tradition, with its notorious triumphs, one area where they frequently struggled throughout the Soviet period was in intelligence assessment, in using their hard-gotten intelligence to enhance policy – to, as Sir David Omand, former director of the United Kingdom's GCHQ put it, 'improve the quality of decision making by reducing ignorance' (Omand, 2010). Following working closely with several Soviet intelligence defectors, the preeminent intelligence historian Christopher Andrew observed, '[KGB's] ability to collect intelligence from the West always comfortably exceeded its capacity to interpret what it collected' (Andrew, 2004). For all its work it frequently failed to reduce ignorance. Indeed, often Soviet intelligence was expressly prohibited from performing any assessment, and required to provide only raw data to the political leadership who would do with it as they pleased. This persisted throughout the Cold War; only at the end of the superpower standoff was the first analytical department created in the KGB, in 1989 (Soldatov and Borogan, 2022a). In his handling of intelligence assessments, Putin resembles a corrupted version of the Soviet model but generates similar results in failing to understand the adversary for reasons that, as we explain, are slightly different.

In the Ukraine case, Putin's main intelligence failure is at the strategic level, compounding what is widely understood to be an unforced strategic blunder (Freedman, 2022). First, there appears to have been a failure to assess the robustness of Ukrainian nationhood as distinct from Russia. The evidence suggests that Putin had planned on an operation that would be a rerun of his annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. This was a largely bloodless *fait accompli* that generated little blowback of concern from the Kremlin's perspective. According to post-invasion leaks from the FSB, both they and the advisors to the Russian Presidential Administration supported the core assumption that the 'special military operation' would encourage the concurrence or at least the acquiescence of the broader population (Osechkin, 2022b). Given Putin's oft-stated belief that Russians and Ukrainians are the same people and that Ukrainian national identity is unstable and fickle, most famously articulated in his essay 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', this assumption is not surprising (Putin, 2021). Indeed, in many ways his intelligence machinery served up what they knew their boss was inclined to believe because he had stated it so many times. Its impact, however, was apparent and significant in the operational design of the initial attacks, the poor plans for logistical support, the poor utilisation of airborne troops, the unprepared conscripts, the narrative propagated in the information war, the inconsistent briefings given to many of the invading troops, and, tellingly, in the editorial accidentally released to the media on 28 February 2022, days after the start of the invasion – although, presumably, in accordance with a rough preset timetable for the war – which stated that the Russian people were now (re)



united. The failure to consider the possibility of robust resistance, based on a distinct sense of nationalism and nationhood, constitutes a significant strategic intelligence failure, all the more glaring in light of the previous FSB failures in Ukraine, including their inability to forecast the Maidan events in 2014 (Soldatov, 2020a, 2021).

The second element of the strategic failure concerns dramatically underestimating the unity, rapidity, and directness of the West's response. Putin may have gambled that a rapid victory, yielding a new, pliant Ukrainian regime, and Russian control of the Donbas would have caught the West off-balance and, potentially, unable or unwilling to implement strong, coordinated sanctions. This assumption was not entirely without merit based on the relatively tepid responses to previous Russian provocations and aggression. But intelligence agencies should plan for contingencies and offer worst case scenarios, among a broader menu of potential outcomes that decision makers should consider. This applies locally, in terms of resistance in the territory being taken – as discussed above – but also, given the scale and significance of this operation, internationally. It is perhaps improbable that a high likelihood could have been ascribed to an analysis concluding that the West would have responded in some of the ways it did, particularly Germany's refusal to certify the joint gas pipeline project Nord Stream 2. But there were ample indicators that the West would view the invasion of Ukraine with the utmost seriousness, which should have, if not given the Kremlin pause, at least led to a consideration of the vulnerability of key national assets, like Russia's financial reserve, energy sector, or advanced weaponry sectors to sanctions.

Three key factors should have underlined these risks, via its intelligence machinery, to the Kremlin. The first was the example set following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the shooting down of flight MH-17 that same year with ample evidence linking the latter atrocity to Russia (Toler, 2018). These events prompted a response from the European Union, culminating in repeated sanctions packages targeting Russia's economy, and providing a clear example of a unified and robust response to Russian activities (European Council, 2022). Second, the sustained campaign mounted by the United States and the United Kingdom to publicise intelligence about Russian troop movements, its likely intentions, and its intent to generate a pretext for war via false-flag operations. Both states have deployed intelligence in public before in support of policy objectives; neither had engaged in such a sustained and detailed programme to 'pre-bunk' Kremlin disinformation (Dylan and Maguire, 2022). Intelligence officials, Cabinet Secretaries, and elected politicians all offered what amounted to a public campaign of commentary on Russian movements, repudiation of Russian denials, and encouragement to the open source community to bolster official sources. This clearly underlined the seriousness with which some key Western nations viewed Ukraine, and the likelihood that Russia would not be given a free hand as it enjoyed in Crimea. Third, Western countries had signalled their resolve beforehand with their supply of training and weapons. The United States and the United Kingdom supplied anti-tank weapons publicly, even as the crisis was escalating, leaving little doubt that it believed defending Ukraine and resisting Russia was an imperative, one that was being matched in deed as well as word.

Together, these developments ought to have indicated two things that had significant implications for Putin's decision. First, that his plan was reasonably transparent. The United States had publicised Russia's plan as early as November 2021 (Nardelli and Jacobs, 2021). The surprise he exploited with relative skill in 2014 was not forthcoming. Therefore, neither Ukraine nor its allies would be caught off-balance. And given the examples of coordinated targeted sanctions and expulsions against Russian diplomats and

intelligence officers following the events of 2014 and the attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom in 2016, it was highly likely that the invasion would be accompanied by similar internationally coordinated sanctions packages. This should have called into question the feasibility of any maximalist political and territorial aspirations and engendered some reflection about the rosy intelligence assessments of an easy invasion of a welcoming country, as offered by the FSB's fifth service directorate (Miller and Belton, 2022).

Second, Putin's armour and elements of his air campaign were likely to face not inconsiderable friction in the event of Ukrainian forces standing their ground. Putin's founding assumption appears to have precluded a conclusion or assessment of stiff resistance either being offered, or, if it was, from registering in the translation from intelligence assessment to calibration of military forces necessary to accomplish the task. Nevertheless, even if the understanding or perception of potential Ukrainian *intentions* was wanting, elements of Ukraine's *capability* were much more apparent, particularly the flow of highly effective anti-armour weapons from the West. (And resonant, of course, given the long shadow cast by the Soviet's experience in Afghanistan against a mobile irregular force armed with (far fewer) Man Portable Air Defense Systems, or the more recent experience of Azerbaijan's forces wreaking havoc on Armenian forces with its Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 drones, which Ukraine also possessed (Sabbagh, 2020).) A leader with a capable and competent intelligence service at their disposal is well advised to task and utilise it appropriately in service of a major national decision point. Not to do so is a significant failure.

Intelligence failures frequently cascade and compound as events unfold. Strategic failures lead to operational and tactical issues. The evidence suggests that such a cascade is visible in the case of the invasion of Ukraine. Four issues are salient in this study. First, Russia has suffered enormous casualties because of its relatively consistent underestimation of Ukraine's military capabilities. The potency of Ukrainian capabilities had still not been absorbed nearly two months into the war, when the Cruiser *Moskva*, the flagship of the Russian Black Sea fleet, was hit by Ukrainian coastal defence anti-ship Neptune missiles while patrolling perilously close to Ukraine's southern shore, and subsequently sank (*The Economist*, 2022a). Second was the assumption that the military campaign could have been supported by the tried and tested *maskirovka* – or deception and denial – techniques, long a staple of Russian (and Soviet) intelligence. Whereas Russian campaigns surrounding the annexation of Crimea, or the 2014 downing of the civilian Malaysian airliner MH17 achieved a level of success in obfuscation and sowing confusion for a limited time, the same techniques suggesting anything could be possible or true proved ineffective prior to the invasion of Ukraine. Western governments, civil society organisations, and open-source investigation outfits have been far more willing to spotlight Russian operations (Devlin et al., 2022). Third, Russian intelligence appears to have erred in anticipating and planning for intelligence support for anything other than a short operation. Several sources indicate that the FSB had planned for, 'organised', and paid for a network of pro-Moscow separatists in Ukraine, who would rise once the invasion began, and engage in fifth-column activities, such as sabotage and disruption, facilitating Russia's advance, and undermining Ukrainian defence. Following months of fighting in the war such a fifth column appears to have proven remarkably ineffective, if it existed at all (*The Economist*, 2022b). Several factors can account for this failure, but chief among them is a combination of determined counterintelligence work by the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU), and Russian corruption in which wishful thinking substituted for

intelligence analysis and local intelligence collection was stunted by the probable embezzlement of a significant proportion of funds that were earmarked for local agent development in Ukraine.

The fourth hallmark of intelligence failure is operational (in)security and counterintelligence problems. Russian forces have faced considerable difficulty in communicating securely owing to a paucity of encrypted radios. Troops were left communicating via a variety of means – including mobile telephones and off-the-shelf walkie talkies – frequently *en clair*. It left them vulnerable to signal triangulation and message interception, occasionally resulting in ambush and attack (*The Economist*, 2022b). Insecure communications also left Russia vulnerable in the war of narratives and public opinion. Easily gathered intercepts have provided the authorities in Kyiv ample incriminating or emotive material to publish on various platforms to embarrass and pressure Russia, such as tweeting radio intercepts that highlighted the shambolic communications systems of the invaders (ShadowBreak Intl., 2022), not to mention Russian troops speaking openly of committing war crimes to people back home. This renders Russian claims of ignorance over the death of civilians in occupied areas implausible. For example, Germany's foreign intelligence service (BND) has reportedly intercepted communications where Russian soldiers discuss the premeditated murder of civilians (Connolly and McKernan, 2022). Ukraine's capacity to intercept communications has been well known for years. It released elements of intercepted communications previously to underline Russian responsibility for MH17 (Roth, 2019). These failures are indicative both of an organisational failure, to disseminate operational intelligence and to learn from past engagements, and of the cascading consequence of the overarching strategic failure that was based on poor assessment of the target, and of the consequences of attacking it in insufficient strength.

The above is by no means an exhaustive list of the intelligence failures witnessed in the war. It is likely that over time the record will bolster the initial conclusion that there were failures at each stage of the intelligence cycle. Yet, other explanations have been considered by knowledgeable observers. One hypothesis holds that the extreme secrecy surrounding the planning of the war seems to have precluded systematic tasking of the intelligence machinery, or indeed the broader policy machinery, to garner insights into likely outcomes and consequences (Osechkin, 2022a). What is clear, however, is that intelligence collection in Ukraine appears to have been weak in several respects. This is partly a result of the cascading failures and partly a result of corruption. This is indicative of the lack of a robust process in the machinery of Russian intelligence: as one FSB leaker indicated, the characteristic requirement for analysis is to adjust the reports to the management's expectations (Osechkin, 2022b). The leaker goes on to note 'loyalty is valued above professionalism' (Osechkin, 2022c). Closing the intelligence cycle, the efficiency of any system of dissemination must be open to question given Putin's clear reluctance to broach any dissent or contradiction. As Soldatov and Borogan (2022b) suggest, in the current state of paranoia surrounding the ongoing failure of the war in Ukraine, the willingness of FSB officers to paint the true picture, and thus to draw attention to themselves is even more reduced. Thus, the evidence points to the intelligence machinery suffering from critical flaws: distorted assessment, spotty communication, lack of contingency planning, corruption and underdevelopment of human agent networks, and analysis to please policy. Although there is not space in this article to make detailed comparisons with other authoritarian regimes, even a cursory review of the elements of autocracies would reveal that many of these failures are systemic and pervasive in authoritarian regimes, rather than being related to the intrinsic difficulty of the task.

Intelligence services can be wrong but for good reasons. Putin's services may well have crafted an assessment forecasting that a rapid collapse of Ukraine was likely, especially if a decapitation strike was successful. (And there is increasing evidence suggesting that this was nearly the case, with Russian *spetsnaz* parachuting into Kyiv and engaging in battle perilously close to President Zelensky before being repulsed (Parsley, 2022).) Bold operations can work. A replay of Storm-333, the operation to storm the Tajbeg palace in Kabul on 27 December 1979, would have appealed to Putin. But, as innumerable studies of confirmation bias in practice show, there is usually some evidence to support any conclusion (Whitesmith, 2018). The critique of the Russian intelligence machine rests less on their being wrong but more on the matter of whether they would have been capable of offering anything other than a glass-half-full assessment on the question of such a geopolitically sensitive and risk-laden policy. Could they have noted that since 2014 Ukraine's sense of nationhood was increasingly potent, and a far cry from Putin's or his ever-smaller clique's assumptions, or that the invasion would likely get bogged down, or that significant portions of the investment in intelligence networks and military upgrades had been misappropriated, or that the international community would react quickly and forcefully? The evidence suggests that the answer is no, because Putin, given his clear biases and impatience with other views challenging his own, would have given such alternative assessment short shrift. Recalling the televised tense exchange between Putin and his waffling SVR chief Naryshkin on the eve of the invasion, when the latter seemed insufficiently committed to Putin's conquest, would support this view. And for this the responsibility rests with the system and the man at the top.

### **Putin and the autocrat's intelligence paradox**

There is no binary divide between the autocratic approach to intelligence and the democratic one. There is a spectrum. Different states move back and forth along it during different points in their histories, depending on leadership and political circumstances. The direction of travel towards the democratic model is by no means inevitable. One needs only to glance at former President Donald Trump's combative management of the US intelligence community to gain an insight into how well established and apparently entrenched norms of good practice and productive relations between intelligence producer and consumer can be corroded. But a glance at the history of autocratic intelligence systems yields critical insights about the significance, management, and mismanagement of intelligence. It points to a predictable paradox that we identify: autocratic leaders are more reliant on intelligence than democratic states in key areas, particularly domestic security and associated counterintelligence efforts, yet they appear to be less likely to identify and remedy the key features that constitute weaknesses in their apparatus, such as understanding other states, for fear of weakening their grip, and, in so doing, can commit unnecessary blunders that threaten their position. This construct applies well to Putin's mismanagement of Ukraine and intelligence.

Intelligence failures are inevitable for governments of all types (Betts, 1978). There is a growing body of literature focused on this phenomenon from a variety of perspectives, ranging from case studies to psychological factors, to analyses of leadership, and politicisation. Some authors suggest that the root to failure is found in the challenge of collection, others in the challenges of organisation, others in communication between producers and consumers (Dahl, 2013). There is nothing particularly autocratic about intelligence failure; democracies fail frequently enough. But democratic systems are also increasingly

prone to introspection, critical evaluation, oversight and accountability, lessons learned exercises, process development, more trusting liaison relationships with allies, and of course leaders face the threat of being voted out of office for major failures. Notable examples of major exercises in investigation and reform include the US Commission into the attacks of 11 September, 2001, and the myriad enquiries into the causes of, and potential solutions to, the failures in assessing Iraq's weapons of mass destruction infrastructure prior to 2003 (see Butler, 2004; Zelikow et al., 2004). This introspection, since Iraq, but also prior to that debacle, has been particularly pronounced in the matter of intelligence assessment. A great deal of effort has been expended into attempting to hone the analytical craft, certainly in the United States and the United Kingdom and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) more broadly, with the objective of empowering and enabling intelligence communities to maximise the utility of the raw intelligence that they gather in the all-source assessments they provide policymakers. This has been visible in the public academic discourse (Devanny et al., 2018; Dylan, 2021), and matched by moves in the secret world to increase training and resources for training the current and next generation of intelligence analysts, such as the National Intelligence University in the United States or the Intelligence Academy in the United Kingdom. Such developments, sentiments matched with resources and leadership, indicate that intelligence consumers have recognised that for their intelligence communities to fulfil their functions effectively they require tools, training, and the right environment to offer their best judgments, even when it may be uncomfortable for senior customers.

The foregoing self-analysis and considered reforms would be a foreign land for autocracies. Yet, autocrats, just like their democratic counterparts, rely heavily on intelligence and security agencies. Indeed, a strong case can be made that intelligence is one of the key ingredients in the survival of the average autocratic or dictatorial regime. Key here are three points: first, that autocratic rule is based, to a greater or lesser extent, on repression of rivals rather than popular legitimacy. Despite ruling in the people's name, and frequently claiming the mantle of expressing the popular will, the autocrat is generally removed from the populous. The wave of popular support may or may not have swept them to power having long-since crashed; all autocrats grow to fear their population at some level. Often with good reason, of course. Putin, reportedly, was for a time obsessed with the death of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, reportedly watching gruesome videos of the Brother Leader's final moments time and again (Iqbal, 2022). Intelligence, for them, is crucial for situational awareness, counter-subversion, and ultimately the very survival of their regimes and even their lives and the lives of their families. Therefore, it is generally focused inwards, on the population, on hunting dissidents (Andrew, 2004; Hatfield, 2022; Warner, 2009).

The obsession with regime stability occurs both at a breadth and a depth far beyond what a democratic system would be concerned with. In essence, the entire population is suspect and is thus monitored in some way to detect signs of dissent (CIA, 1985; *Human Rights Watch*, 2019; Mattis, 2012). Therefore, intelligence and security agencies become inflated in their size and unrestrained in terms of their reach. Even foreign intelligence is an extension of domestic security intelligence. This notion has been most clearly observed by scholars of the Soviet system, who have coined the notion of the 'counterintelligence state' (Dziak, 1991). But it is visible more broadly, for instance, in the terror of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, or China's suppression operations in Xinjiang. Similar characteristics are clearly visible in Putin's Russia, particularly the notion that dissent, however, voiced and from whatever point in society – be it the grieving mother in the wake of the Kursk



submarine disaster who confronted Putin in a press conference, or a former GRU officer, exchanged in a spy-swap and living in Salisbury – is disloyalty, an affront, and intolerable (Gioe et al., 2019; Traynor, 2000).

Second, and related, is the tendency to attribute any discontent, threat, or problems to external parties, often foreign intelligence services, and therefore to develop a siege mentality (See Lewis, 2022; Macfarquhar, 2016). Generally, the fear of external influence is both real and engineered. The West *was* intent on subverting Soviet rule during the Cold War. But, equally, not *all* internal discontent with Soviet rule was the work of Western agents and today much Russian opposition is authentic and organic. Nonetheless, the siege mentality develops into a self-reinforcing and paranoid mode of thinking. Intelligence becomes key to protecting the state and regime from hostile penetration, both in terms of being directly targeted in a traditional espionage operation, and in being the instrument used to ‘protect’ the population from foreign interference and subversion. Defending the Soviet citizenry from decadent Western influences like the BBC World Service, or from domestically derived challenges like Solzhenitsyn’s books or Erdman’s plays, became a key role for the KGB. Putin, maintaining and developing this pattern of blame externalisation, has sought to use legislation, particularly the ‘Foreign Agent Law’ (see European Parliament Research Service (EPRS), 2022), as well as his security apparatus, to ‘protect’ Russian citizens from western media sources, humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the open internet, and their subversive influence since well before the Ukraine War, and has reinforced his attempts to create an enclosed information ecosystem since launching his attack.

Third, the frequent relative isolation of authoritarian regimes in international relations, at times cut off from advanced technology and global finance, and, consequently, economically vulnerable leads to a premium on economic intelligence, or schemes to circumvent sanctions or restrictions. Putin knows this as well as any autocrat; one of his jobs in the GDR was managing front organisations that could earn hard currency for the cash strapped KGB (Belton, 2020). Oppressive regimes can develop their indigenous high technology (although often with the help of massive theft of Western intellectual property). Soviet and North Korean rocketry, or China’s booming tech sector, underline this point. Equally, there is a litany of western intelligence failures based, in part, on forgetting this, from the bomber and missile gaps of the early Cold War, to *Sputnik*, to, more recently, hypersonic missiles. But, from Iraq, to the USSR, to China and North Korea, economic intelligence, and related pursuits, are key elements of the activities of the intelligence services of the average authoritarian state (*The Economist*, 2022a). They fear their population and what it might do in the face of an economic collapse. Again, the intelligence services are in the business of propping up the regime, of papering over its systemic failures, as opposed to what might be considered the democratic model of supporting the state independent of the government of the day. The authoritarian makes no distinction between the state and the government. Intelligence is for the party, or in contemporary Russia, for the leader.

The confluence of these dynamics generates systems that bear particularly negative implications for dispassionate intelligence assessment. In such systems the security services are in a privileged position. (Indeed, often the fastest way to join the ‘elite’ is through the security service, as Putin himself knew perfectly well when he applied to join the KGB aged 16.) They are privileged because they are key to sustaining the illusory reality of the ruling clique. And because doing so is so central to the regime’s survival, a mutual dependence dynamic can develop. The survival of the intelligence



machine, as an elite with its perks and privileges, becomes intimately tied to the fortunes of the autocrat, and frequently to absorbing and sharing the leaderships siege mentality. Intelligence services thus develop what might be described as a corporate interest in the political and intellectual *status quo*. The Soviet variant of this phenomenon is well documented. Indeed, KGB officers were so disturbed by Gorbachev's modest reforms in 1991 that they attempted a coup (Bond, 2021). It manifests slightly differently in Putin's Russia, but the dynamic is common feature of Russian – and almost certainly other authoritarian – systems.

With this mutual reliance comes a form of unreality. The services are removed from society and placed in curious position at the intersection of two realities. KGB officers implicitly understood the nature of the Soviet regime, the specifics of the lies it insisted upon and which they enforced, and the reality of superior living standards in the West; they lived it, they were stationed there, and had to craft their propaganda to counter it. Maintaining the dissonance comes at a cost, that of the ability of the services to challenge their leaders robustly, for to do so immediately puts them in a position of collapsing the illusion (and with it their privileges) and becoming a dissident in danger. The leadership reaps the benefits of the system's capacity for enforcement, but suffers owing to the security machinery's necessary embrace of the regime's distorted worldview. The autocrat's intelligence paradox has, at its core, the inability of autocratic leaders to view criticism or challenge as in any way constructive, legitimate, or delivered in good faith (Andrew, 1999). This is consistent with the history of many such regimes, and thus predictably makes them poor customers of intelligence. Putin may have benefitted from a figure like Sir Maurice Oldfield, the former 'C', Chief of the British Secret Intelligence Service, who, during his first meeting with the British Foreign Secretary James Callaghan, noted that his job was to bring 'unwelcome news' (Hansard, 2003). But judging by how brusquely Putin dealt with Naryshkin during the infamous televised National Security Council meeting of 22 February 2022, such a figure does not exist and would hardly be tolerated even if they did (Moya, 2022). In an authoritarian intelligence system the weight placed on intelligence for regime security compromises its utility in assessment. Putin's behaviour before his attack on Ukraine appears to be an embodiment of the autocrat's intelligence paradox.

## **Conclusion: Limited prospects to escape the paradox**

This article has argued that Putin's intelligence failures in Ukraine have been intrinsically linked to the nature of his regime, and that they bear considerable resemblance to pathologies and trends observable in authoritarian systems more generally. These echoes of authoritarian intelligence mismanagement are visible through a comparison of Putin with previous occupants of the Kremlin, notably Stalin's inability to ingest information that did not conform to his worldview. Both managed services capable of repression, espionage, murder, and mayhem. Both exhibited a profound distrust, contempt, even paranoia, regarding the West. Both viewed intelligence as key to their regime's survival; neither had a concept of an intelligence service independent from politics, and, thus, neither could easily tolerate an intelligence assessment machinery that would offer robust critique of the leader's views or preferred course of action. Stalin threatened those who insisted upon bringing him intelligence on Hitler's imminent invasion in 1941 with the Gulag or the executioner. Putin browbeat his intelligence chief in public. (Both, of course, also inflicted brutal harm on Ukraine.) In Stalin's USSR and Putin's Russia the intelligence services

occupied the curious position of complicit enabler, brutal enforcer, and hostage, tied to the whims of a leader, come what may.

Beyond certain comparisons with Stalin, Putin is not unique in his mishandling of intelligence. We can almost certainly generalise this phenomenon beyond to Putin to other highly personalised autocratic systems, such as Kim's North Korea, Castro's Cuba or Saddam's Iraq. The insistence on total loyalty and disinclination to tolerate dissent limits both the breadth and the utility of strategic intelligence available to dictators like them. The utility of intelligence as a tool of statecraft is thus much diminished. In the particular Russian case at hand, Putin has built upon (and further distorted) the legacy of Soviet mismanagement in intelligence assessment by presiding over and tolerating endemic and pervasive growth of corruption within the machinery of state security. Putin is both its godfather and victim, but the prospects for a change to how an autocrat like Putin handles foreign intelligence assessment seem remote.

Indeed, how Putin uses intelligence reflects how he uses so many other things – as an opportunist above all else. Little seems likely to change because, as noted, the autocrat's intelligence bureaucracy is rarely a learning organisation. Furthermore, the corruption dimension generates significant incentives to maintain the *status quo*, either because people are benefitting from it or fear the consequences of challenging it. The intellectual dimension is apparent in the undermining of any incentive to maintain intellectual integrity of judgement in the interaction between intelligence and policy, partly out of fear as would have been the case with Stalin, but also because behaving otherwise would constitute an admission that the funds spent on intelligence projects have been mismanaged, or that past assessments had been over optimistic. This has generated inertia and undermined the utility of intelligence as a national asset. Intelligence can be used as long as it is in accordance with what the regime deems acceptable, making it both essential but, equally, of no real value at key points such as the case study of the invasion of Ukraine. In short, Putin has fallen into 'the dictator trap': the very strategies he has relied upon to seize and stay in power have contributed to his undermining his position by committing an unforced major strategic error (Klaas, 2022). The consequences of the autocrat's intelligence paradox have been devastating for both Ukraine and Russia itself.

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