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Unit 29155 & Russia's Hybrid Warfare in Europe

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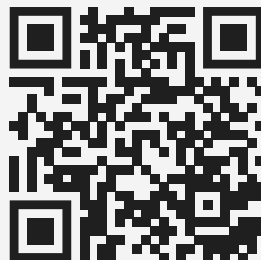
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Unit 29155 & Russia's Hybrid Warfare in Europe

October 2025,

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Summary

Unit 29155 is a highly active element of the *Spetsnaz*—the special operations component of the Russian Armed Forces' Main Directorate. Widely referred to by its Cold-War-era abbreviation, GRU, the Main Directorate is Russia's military intelligence agency. As an advanced GRU kinetic element, Unit 29155 utilizes a high caliber of specialization and versatility in executing a wide range of direct action in support of Russia's strategic goals. Operating abroad can be dangerous for Unit 29155 members, who rely on a network of privately owned or leased safe houses. The unit also recruits 'disposable agents', seemingly to protect its officers or to compensate for its inadequate staffing. These agents are typically recruited online and compensated via cryptocurrency. They rarely know who employs them and do not usually have ethnic, ideological, or political affinities with Russia. European governments must respond to these specific forms of Russian hybrid warfare by better recognizing their patterns and modes of operation as well as adapting security measures for critical infrastructure.

In Brief

- GRU Unit 29155 pursues Moscow's hybrid-warfare strategy.
- It seeks to disrupt foreign aid to Ukraine, eliminate Russian defectors or dissidents, and subvert Western governments.
- Its operational scope reflects the Kremlin's long-held view that Russia is already at war with NATO and the European Union.
- Its tactics include targeted killings, physical sabotage, and political influence operations.
- These pose an increasing threat to international security and to European states in particular.



Overview

For nearly 20 years, GRU Unit 29155 has conducted kinetic operations in Europe, ranging from targeted killings and physical sabotage to political actions and influence operations. Its officer cadre is small, tight-knit, and utilizes a variety of covers to hide its tracks. Some unit operatives act under diplomatic protection, while others pose as Russian travelers, or citizens of other countries. They are recruited from Russia's military academies and cyber schools, while many have backgrounds in military toxicology, a skill they use to poison their targets. After the 2014 invasion of Ukraine, Unit 29155 emerged as the spearhead of Russian hybrid warfare.

History and Context

The GRU's roots date to the tsarist period. Russia's post-Soviet transition left the agency diminished but relatively intact, unlike its now-defunct civilian cousin, the Committee for State Security (KGB). The GRU's mission has remained constant throughout its existence: support Russian military objectives through kinetic strikes and by collecting critical intelligence through espionage and—more recently—cyber operations¹. Through such activities, the GRU has built a reputation for undertaking high-risk operations in pursuit of strategic gains. A core weapon in the GRU arsenal is its Special Forces Department, referred to as *Spetsnaz*, an abbreviation

of the Russian term for 'Special Purpose Forces'. *Spetsnaz* technical units offer clandestine or covert support to conventional military operations. At times GRU *Spetsnaz*'s strategic guidance comes directly from Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has been known to publicly praise the department².

GRU Unit 29155 and Hybrid Warfare

A highly active GRU *Spetsnaz* component is Unit 29155. Tasked with subverting Russia's adversaries without using direct military force, it carries out kinetic operations, such as physical sabotage and targeted killings. It also recruits assets, maintains safe houses, provides support to proxy forces, and conducts a wide array of political influence operations. Known previously as the 161st Center, in 2023 Unit 29155 was amalgamated into a new Department of Special Tasks—referred to by its Russian acronym, SSD. The SSD is rapidly emerging as the leader for coordination and deconfliction of all Russian direct-action operations³.

Since the 2022 escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the unit has expanded its use of cyber operations. Its targets align with the Kremlin's overarching strategy of disrupting aid to Ukraine, eliminating defectors, separatists, or dissidents, and subverting NATO's cohesion and expansion. This also reflects Russia's conception of hybrid warfighting, which denotes a multi-faceted coordination of statecraft tools aimed at weakening targeted populations by eroding their socio-cultural cohesion⁴.

Targeted Killings

Targeted killings date back to Unit 29155's formative period in the mid-2000s and remain one of its signature tactics. Our research database includes 20 instances of targeted killings and attempted killings, eight of which can be directly associated with Unit 29155. Another 11 are likely linked to Unit 29155, and one has possible links to the group. Unit operatives have plotted or carried out targeted killings—with various degrees of success—in England, Germany, Spain, Bulgaria, and Mexico, as well as inside Russia. Among the unit's past targets are arms industry executives Emilian Gebrev (Bulgaria) and Armin Papperger (Germany), whose firms have provided Ukraine with much-needed war materiel. Other targets, such as Sergei Skripal (United Kingdom) and Maxim Kuzminov (Spain), were Russian defectors who sought refuge in the West. Gebrev, Papperger, and Skripal survived. Kuzminov did not.

Physical Sabotage

Unit 29155's sabotage operations have primarily targeted NATO member states. Most attacks aimed to disrupt military supplies to Ukraine. The earliest case in our database dates from 2011, when unit operatives used plastic explosives to destroy a munitions depot in Bulgaria, following a complex campaign that included surveillance and cyber operations. The unit would go on to conduct at least six more kinetic operations in Bulgaria, including three explosions in 2015. Two more explosions occurred in 2014 in the Czech Republic, destroying a Ministry of Defense facility used to store war materiel destined for Ukraine⁵.



Fig. 1: Emblem of the GRU (Главное Разведывательное Управление).⁶

More recent cases demonstrate a tendency to employ sophisticated attacks with lengthy planning timelines, as well as relatively crude small-scale attacks involving arson or the vandalism of symbolic targets⁷. European transportation infrastructure has been a major target of Unit 29155 after 2023. European authorities have foiled at least one plot to place incendiary devices on commercial cargo planes. In the past year, Unit 29155 has demonstrated proclivity for using local assets in unsophisticated physical sabotage. These 'disposable agents' are typically recruited online and paid with cryptocurrency, cash, or gems. This may signify Unit 29155's efforts to augment its limited staff resources and protect its professional cadres from exposure.

Political and Information Operations

Unit 29155 has progressively refined its information operations against current and aspirant NATO member states. Unit operatives have been directly linked to at least two attempted *coup d'états* in Europe—in Montenegro (2016) and Moldova (2023). NATO member states like the Czech Republic, Spain, Germany, England, and the United States (US), have also been targeted by Unit 29155 information operations, most commonly during election cycles or politically tense periods. The techniques used have been near-identical, involving the creation of fake news sites, using phony online identities to spread misinformation or disinformation, and targeting senior political and government officials.

Cyber Operations

Unit 29155's cyber capabilities are nascent but growing in sophistication. Its cyber specialists are active-duty GRU officers who develop expertise through criminal and espionage operations involving techniques such as email phishing and scamming, identity theft, running bot farms, trolling, illegal gathering of information, deactivating accounts, and deploying viruses. Unit 29155 has conducted cyber operations in countries such as the Czech Republic, Sweden, Spain, Ukraine, Germany, England, Estonia, Greece, and the US. Over time, Unit 29155 cyber operators have become progressively discrete and harder to detect. As with sabotage operations, Unit 29155 cyber operatives have been known to recruit mercenaries in Russia or abroad and compensating them through cryptocurrency. These assets are often unaware they are working for the Russian state⁸.

Recruitment, Specializations, and Structure

Unit 29155's recruiters favor candidates with prior experience in Russia's military academies, intelligence services, or with a background in various scientific disciplines. Military personnel make up much of Unit 29155 and include its commander, Major General Andrei Averyanov⁹. Unit 29155 medical and toxicology specialists provide critical expertise in biochemical warfare, which is utilized in poisoning operations¹⁰. Some Unit 29155 members operate under diplomatic cover, using official assignments to carry out covert missions and at times use diplomatic pouches to transport toxins internationally¹¹. The unit also employs experts in international business, who are instrumental in recruiting and training operatives to launder money, perform international financial transactions, and curate operational covers.

Unit 29155 appears distinctive in its organizational structure, containing subunits with specializations that include cyber operations, human intelligence (HUMINT), and training. Subunits appear to be horizontal in structure with close internal communication and direct access to the leadership. They are also small and tight-knit—for instance, its clandestine subunit contains only around 20 known members¹². The latter utilize a variety of different covers to carry out missions, including official-cover, non-official-cover (NOCs), and illegal (NOCs using non-Russian passports). To carry out attacks abroad, unit members travel incognito in teams of two or three. If larger teams are needed for an operation, members will travel independently to surrounding countries before convening in the target country¹³. Communication between team members occurs through encrypted cellular devices or through couriers.



Fig. 2: President Vladimir Putin addresses the GRU on its 100th anniversary.¹⁴

Targeting and Surveillance

Unit 29155 does not deploy specialized surveillance subunits. Rather, members of the clandestine subunit will often travel up to a year in advance to surveil their targets' patterns of life and return to execute the mission. In the case of Gebrev's poisoning in 2015, Unit 29155-member Vladimir Moiseev visited Bulgaria ahead of the poisoning, traveling there in March, September, November, and December 2014, before being joined by other subunit members days prior to the attack¹⁹. When traveling in preparation for an attack, subunit members may also rehearse the attack. Despite operatives training and planning up to a year in advance, operations often go awry. Such was the case with Gebrev, who survived the initial poisoning, prompting unit operatives to return to Bulgaria in May 2015 and attempt to kill him again.

Proximity to the Kremlin

Unit 29155 members are frequently praised by Vladimir Putin, and many have received prestigious awards. Unit members Andrei Averyanov, Alexander Mishkin, Anatoly Chepiga, and Elena Saposnikov have been recipients of the Hero of Russia award—the country's highest honorary distinction. The Order of Courage, also highly regarded, was awarded to unit members Egor Gordienko and Ivan Terentyev in 2015. Unit members have also been rewarded with free apartments for their service. Notably, General Averyanov, who heads Unit 29155 and the SSD, is reputed to have assumed command of the Wagner Group's Africa section—arguably its most lucrative area of operations¹⁵—following the death of Wagner strongman, Yevgeny Prigozhin. On the other hand, unit members have at times appeared to operate on a limited budget, traveling on low-cost airlines and sharing inexpensive accommodations¹⁶.

The Austrian Connection

Although scientific consensus remains elusive, there are reputed links between Unit 29155 and the 'Havana Syndrome'¹⁷, known officially as 'Anomalous Health Incidents', or AHI. The term refers to a cluster of unexplained neurological symptoms, including dizziness, cognitive dysfunction, and hearing loss, potentially linked to directed pulsed energy exposure, allegedly by Russia. Austria is among the countries where US diplomatic personnel or their family members have reported experiencing AHI symptoms¹⁸.

In a more concrete example of Russia's clandestine operations, forensic investigations into the 2014 Czech Republic arms depot explosions showed that the Unit 29155 operatives who conducted the operation transited to Moscow via Vienna, which they used as an operational staging post. Furthermore, Austrian authorities have been notified of at least one plot by Unit 29155 to kill the Bulgarian investigative journalist Christo Grozev, who consequently left Vienna in 2023¹⁹. The unit cell that plotted to kill Grozev is also connected with Austrian citizen Jan Marsalek, the former chief operations officer of Wirecard, who fled to Moscow in 2020 amid a €1.9 billion fraud scandal. Marsalek is suspected of being a Unit 29155 asset²⁰.

Recommendations

There is no evidence that the return to power of Donald Trump in the US has had any measurable impact on the mission of the GRU or Unit 29155. European intelligence and security services should operate on the assumption that Unit 29155 will continue to pursue Moscow's hybrid-warfare strategy, which includes disrupting aid to Ukraine, eliminating Russian defectors, separatists, or dissidents, and subverting NATO and EU member states by every means possible.

Considering these continued threats, European governments should:

- 1) increase security measures at critical infrastructure facilities, especially those relating to military exports to Eastern Europe, including Ukraine. All incidents of material or property damage, asset impairment, operational disruption, or vandalism occurring at such facilities should be carefully examined in light of Unit 29155's mission and known operations.
- 2) Russian expatriates perceived as 'traitors' or 'enemies' by the Kremlin are primary targets of Unit 29155. Its operatives have shown they will strike when the opportunity arises, irrespective of diplomatic ramifications. Russians living in Europe, especially defectors with prior intelligence or military service, vocal critics of the Kremlin, or other protected persons, should severely limit their online visibility and seek augmented physical protection without delay. Instances of detected surveillance, intimidation, or death involving such persons, should be promptly examined by European authorities in light of Unit 29155's mission and known tactics.
- 3) The expulsions of over 700 Russian diplomatic personnel from Western countries since 2022²¹ have made it difficult for the GRU to maintain a permanent operational presence in Europe. Its activities are therefore largely transitory in nature, but its operatives likely rely on a network of privately owned



Fig. 3: Logo used by the Special Forces of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces.²²

or leased safe houses throughout Europe. Such facilities have been recently uncovered in Greece and France²³. European authorities should operate on the assumption that more such facilities exist on European soil.

4) Unit 29155 continues to recruit 'disposable agents' to carry out sabotage, vandalism, and physical violence. These agents tend to be locals who are recruited online and are compensated via cryptocurrency. They rarely know who employs them and are unlikely to have ethnic, ideological, or political affinity with Russia, even though some may be Russian speakers. European authorities should assess the possibility of Unit 29155 operatives recruiting European citizens, who often have violent extremist tendencies or criminal backgrounds.

Ultimately, the activities of Russia's GRU Unit 29155 add further pressure on the intelligence and counterintelligence capabilities of Western security services, including those of Austria.

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