# [***Spies keep busy as ever, quietly***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:47K2-KP20-005X-60JC-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Byline:** By Fred Weir Special to The Christian Science Monitor

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**Highlight:** On Friday, Russia banned US Peace Corps volunteers, accusing them of espionage.

**Body**

Following Russia's historic rapprochement with the West after Sept. 11, even celluloid superspy James Bond has forgiven his traditional nemesis in Moscow and gone in search of fresh enemies. The latest Bond flick, "Die Another Day," has the evergreen hero battling bad guys from the hermit state of North Korea.

That's fiction, but in the real world, actual spies appear to be busier than ever. In the past month alone, Canada and Sweden angrily expelled Russian diplomats for "activities incompatible with their status," the familiar code for espionage. Moscow announced Friday that it will no longer accept US Peace Corps workers, after denying visas to 30 of 64 volunteers, charging they were up to more than humanitarian work.

"The leading intelligence agencies of the world have strengthened their presence in Russia," complained Oleg Firomolotov, deputy chief of counterintelligence for the FSB security service, in a recent interview with with the government paper Rossiskaya Gazeta. "Russia is a priority object of their activity."

From the other side, the authoritative Jane's Intelligence Digest warns that "Russian intelligence operations in the West appear to be rapidly escalating." In London alone, the number of operatives of Moscow's SVR external spy service has jumped from just one in 1991 to 33 today, the journal estimates.

Russian President Vladimir Putin responded to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks by moving Russia into solid geopolitical alignment with the West. In the past year, Russian and US special services have cooperated closely in the war against terrorism, and Moscow has even forged an historic friendship pact with the Western military alliance NATO.

Experts say Mr. Putin's gestures were genuine, and that the Kremlin sees cooperation with the West as crucial, to overcome Russia's post-Soviet economic malaise and national identity crisis. "In the war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, Russia provided more help to the United States than all the countries of NATO combined," says Vyacheslav Nikonov, head of the independent Politika Foundation, and a former political adviser to the Soviet KGB security service. "We have a common enemy now, and such contacts are very much in the interests of both sides."

In the short term, however, Russia's political shift has not brought the hoped-for wave of foreign investment to revive its sluggish economy, particularly the crumbling military-industrial complex. One traditional solution, with which former KGB foreign agent Putin is personally familiar, is to ferret out Western technological and managerial secrets by means of espionage.

"Intelligence services will always exist," says former KGB operative Stanislav Lekarev. "It's a mistake to associate espionage with war. In fact, the less shooting is going on, the more spying there will be. Russia's secret services were much depleted in the post-Soviet era, so they're only now beginning to get back up to speed."

Two Russian diplomats expelled from Canada recently were reportedly agents of the GRU armed forces intelligence wing, seeking access to high-tech military secrets. Two Russians kicked out of Sweden in November were allegedly trying to penetrate Telefon AB LM Ericson, a company that makes ***cellphones*** and aircraft radar systems. Both cases resulted in old-fashioned tit-for-tat expulsions of Canadian and Swedish diplomats from Moscow.

The thirty American Peace Corps workers barred from Russia last month stand accused of "collecting information on the social, political, and economic situation in Russian regions, [on] staff members of bodies of power, [and] on elections," according to FSB director Nikolai Patrushev.

Russian security officials are understandably tight-lipped about their espionage abroad, but often publicly express pride in their Soviet heritage, which includes running a formidable spy network in the West. In a recent Rossiskaya Gazeta interview, the head of Russia's SVR external intelligence agency, Sergei Lebedev, suggested that tradition may not have died with the USSR. "Even now, many of our supporters help us out of political conviction," he said. "There are people abroad who sympathize with Russia and support our efforts to build a multipolar world, to ensure a global balance of forces."

Experts say the international spy game now seldom leads to splashy public scandals the way it did in cold war days. Today, leaders dance a careful two-step around their countries' shadow activities. "We've learned to spy and smile at the same time," says Mikhail Lyubimov, a famous Soviet agent who, since his retirement, has become one of Russia's best-loved writers of espionage novels. "Our presidents go on kissing each other, and have become very adept at pretending nothing is happening."

Mr. Lebedev, the SVR chief, also hinted that what the public sees of today's cloak-and-dagger world is just the tip of the iceberg. "I can tell you there are plenty of cases in which a spy is unmasked, and he is allowed by mutual agreement to leave the country quietly," he said. "Neither the press nor anyone else ever gets to hear about it."

But the continuing focus of Russian security services on catching spies, and the broad definitions of the term they seem to apply, has some experts and human rights advocates worried. "All reforms are coming to an end and we are returning to the past," says Konstantin Preobrazhensky, a former KGB colonel turned critic. "The same bitter and vengeful people are in charge, and they feel their chance to return has arrived."

"We see a lot of dubious accusations against journalists, environmentalists, human rights workers and scientists," says Otto Latsis, with the liberal daily Novoye Izvestiya. "This has nothing to do with ensuring national security, and a lot to do with intimidating people who commit themselves to political causes that are inconvenient for the state, or who associate too much with foreigners."

In October, the FSB raided the offices of Baikal Ecological Wave, a coalition dedicated to saving Siberia's fragile Lake Baikal, seizing maps, volunteer lists, and computers. Then, this month, the commander of Russia's north Caucasus military zone, Viktor Kazantsev, accused humanitarian agencies of supplying food to Chechen rebels. "All this aid activity should be taken under tough control," he said. "We all know perfectly well who works in the Red Cross: spies."

Some argue Russia's security services are using harsh domestic tactics in a misguided effort to prove their relevance to a population weary of old enemy stereotypes.

"Our secret agents are the last children of the cold war," says Yury Shchekochikhin, deputy chairman of the State Duma's security commission. "Of course the state must protect its secrets. But it's time for our special services to grow up and stop trying to divide the world into black and white, them and us. That time is gone forever."

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