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Neighbors in the House: How the Intelligence Services Took Over Russian Embassies — and Now the Foreign Ministry Itself

Russia's embassies run on two tracks: diplomats in front, SVR, GRU and FSB officers behind them, competing with each other. Also here: the Zaslon unit and its arsenals, three postings compared, and why Lavrov at the top of the Duma list marks the end point.

Sergey Konyashin · sergey@konyashin.com

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Russian intelligence in embassies is not an add-on to diplomacy but part of how a mission is built. This report, dated September 4, 2026, is written by a former Russian diplomat who served in Yemen, Sudan and Algeria between 2010 and 2021 and worked side by side with the *sosedi*, the “neighbors” from the SVR, GRU and FSB. It explains how the services share one building, compete for cases and budgets, and are now beginning to replace the diplomats they once only used as cover.

Russian intelligence in embassies, seen from the inside

The report describes the embassy as an operational base with a diplomatic shell. Each service keeps its own *rezident*, its own agent network and its own channel to Moscow. Coordination is weak and situational, and in the *referentura* officers of different agencies even write their drafts on separate notepads so that rivals cannot read the impression on the next sheet. The presence is uneven. In Yemen practically half the embassy was connected to the SVR, in Sudan there were no *sosedi* at all, and in Algeria every agency was represented.

“ Competition between the agencies is intense, and it is fought over resources and authority. By default, the services do not share sources with one another and do not help each other. On the contrary, they compete for influence, budgets, and the favor of the top leadership in the Kremlin. A telling example from my Algerian posting (2019–2021): a “reputationally rewarding” case came in — a real-estate fraud scheme through which Stalin’s great-grandson Selim Bensaad (an Algerian citizen) had been stripped of his Moscow apartment. Since a case like this promised bureaucratic points within the Russian power vertical, the FSB’s representatives quickly pulled it into their own hands — even though other agencies were present at the embassy, and the Foreign Ministry itself was the one that most wanted to handle it and, by the logic of its mandate, should have.

Sergey Konyashin, Neighbors in the House: How the Intelligence Services Took Over Russian Embassies — and Now the Foreign Ministry Itself
(From the Inside, DémarCHE, September 4, 2026)

The armed contour

The picture of Russian intelligence in embassies is completed by the units that guard the mission rather than run agents: the SVR’s Zaslou and the FSB’s Border Service. The author describes how Zaslou groups arrived on diplomatic passports for stints of three to four months, and how in all three of his postings they kept large arsenals unknown to the host country, brought in by diplomatic pouch.

From the embassy to Smolenskaya Square

The last part follows the same displacement to the top of the Foreign Ministry. Key posts are going to people from fields overseen by the SVR and FSB, and in August 2026 the Cairo embassy went to the director of the Department of International Information Security. At the very top, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was put at the head of the United Russia list for the September Duma elections. The report reads this as the end point of the ministry’s evolution into a propaganda vehicle, sets out two bolder readings of the minister’s own fate and names the indicators to watch after September.

What the report is based on

The first half rests on the author’s direct observation during three postings over eleven years, a rare first-hand view of Russian intelligence in embassies. The analysis of the Duma list draws on open reporting, and the author says so. Where a point is an assumption or was not verified, the text marks it as such.

ABOUT

I am Sergey Konyashin, a former Russian diplomat. I spent nearly a dozen years in the Russian Foreign Ministry, with postings in Yemen (2010–2013), Sudan (2014–2018) and Algeria (2019–2021), and left Russia in 2022, after Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

Démarche is my independent journal on Russian policy in the Middle East and Africa: analysis from inside the system, for readers outside it. I also write for *The Moscow Times*, *Republic*, *The Insider* and other independent outlets; see konyashin.com/elsewhere for that work.

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