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Unveiling Russian Intelligence Failures in the Ukraine Conflict: A Strategic Culture Perspective

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 demonstrated many limits in its military, planning and intelligence structures. The low combat readiness and preparedness of its forces were matched by inadequate logistics. And overarching everything was intelligence –more precisely an intelligence failure. As many preliminary assessments of Russia's intelligence work before the invasion have illustrated, despite extensive efforts at significant cost Russia's intelligence machinery failed to provide its leadership with key data or crucial insights. These included assessment of Western response, Ukrainian public sentiment, the military capacity of the Ukrainian forces. They were supplemented by tactical and operational intelligence failures, particularly space-based intelligence. Russian forces frequently used Soviet-era road atlases and struggled to navigate or to find key targets. In Russia it has been customary to attribute poor performance to two factors: roads and fools. Both factors were at play in 2022, no doubt. But this article argues that there is more to Russia's poor intelligence performance. It argues that in order to understand it we must consider strategic culture, that inherited by the current core agencies, the FSB and the GRU, from the Soviet days. It explores elements of this strategic culture, based on material from Soviet era archives, before moving on to argue that the endemic corruption visible in the intelligence system, and its incapacity to give its customers unwelcome news, have their root in this culture. This is something that Russia will struggle to resolve –even as it rather successfully adapts other elements of its military and intelligence –as its roots are deep.

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