

Andrei Soldatov is investigating the secret services in Russia.

PHOTO: VLADIMIR FILONOV, THE MOSCOW TIMES



Monitoring Russian secrets

Publishing stories on Russian secret services means that you always have to be on your guard.

By Hilde Marie Tvedten and Amund Trellevik

Investigating the secret services, and being able to publish stories on the subject, is not something to be taken for granted in Russia. The website Agentura.ru, created for monitoring the Russian secret service agency FSB, tries to do this in an environment still affected by the secrecy policy of the Soviet Union.

“In Russia, we do not have any types of public oversight of the secret services. FSB has decided to not respond to media requests even under threat of legal prosecution. That’s why we believe it’s important to have a web-site where all available information about the secret services is systemized and can be found easily”, say Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, founders of the website.

Interrogated several times

The two journalists now work in the Russian Novaya Gazeta. The newspaper is known for their critical view on the Kremlin, journalist Anna Politkovskaya was one of the staff until her

assassination in 2006.

Since starting Agentura.ru in 2000, both journalists have been forced to change their employer four times. They were also both nearly accused of revealing state secrets because of their coverage of the FSB siege by Chechen terrorists in October 2002. Both have been interrogated by the Moscow prosecutor’s office and FSB several times.

“We were both very nearly accused of revealing state secrets because our reportage of the FSB siege by Chechen terrorists in October 2002. We had the unusual experience of being interrogated by the FSB in its own Lefortovo prison”, say Soldatov, who was questioned four times, and Borogan, questioned two times.

Soldatov’s father was the president of the internet service provider “Relcom” when the project started in 2000. He first supported it, but was forced out due to political pressure. The project has received only sporadic financial support.

Their model for Agentura.ru was the Federation of American Scientists Secrecy Project’s website, but the journalists quickly discovered

that it was impossible to build a large database on the FSB.

“The legacy of Cold War is a level of secrecy higher than in the West. There are simply not enough documents available from the secret services. That’s why we decided to focus on journalistic job: to systemize information on Russian secret services in the media – regional and national – and to conduct our own investigations”, they say.

Large database impossible

Recent articles posted on Agentura.ru concern how state security allow other countries to execute special operations on Russian territory, the tense relationship between Russian and British secret services, and the British struggle with Russian mafia. Another feature is the updated description of the organization structure of the FSB, information that is not available on the FSB’s own website.

At the GIJC, the journalists will discuss how the Western media best can report on the Russian secret services.