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Revealed: Putin has an agent in the Oireachtas

Irish politician's ego means he has 'let himself be used'

John Mooney Crime and Security Correspondent

The Irish military and security services have identified a politician in the Oireachtas who has been recruited by Russian intelligence as an agent of influence and whose clandestine connections to Moscow remain intact, The Sunday Times can reveal.

The existence of the agent, whom we are calling "Cobalt" for legal reasons, is one of the state's most closely guarded secrets.

The situation is known only to a handful of people in the country.

Sergey Prokopiev, a Russian spy, worked as a counsellor at his country's embassy in Orwell Road, Dublin, from 2019 to 2022. He was in charge of the intelligence operation that recruited the politician, who operates as an agent of influence inside parliament.

Prokopiev was among four Russian diplomats who were declared *persona non gratae* by the Department of Foreign Affairs two years ago for being undeclared intelligence officers. At the same time 600 of Moscow's diplomats were expelled from embassies across the West as a response to Russia's full invasion of Ukraine.

The alarm was raised after Cobalt and Prokopiev met outside Dublin. Their conversation was monitored.

The Irish parliamentarian is reported to have offered to help establish connections with paramilitaries in Northern Ireland at a sensitive time during the

HOW RUSSIANS SNARED AN IRISH POLITICIAN

Full story, page 6

Brexit talks. That is despite not having any known public or private political engagement with paramilitaries during his career.

Intelligence sources believe the Kremlin hoped to exploit tensions to undermine relations between the UK, Ireland and the EU and draw attention away from Ukraine. The agent has been watched by both the military and the gardai.

Cobalt was approached by garda special branch officers and formally warned that he was being targeted by the Russians. His dismissal of those concerns strengthened their suspicions.

While investigators have found no evidence of any payments into any of Cobalt's known bank accounts, they suspect he might have been personally compromised or his internet history intercepted during travels abroad, possibly in regions where Russian intelligence operate freely.

As part of the operation, the Russians are understood to have used a honeypot, an agent who seeks to entangle a target romantically, to meet Cobalt discreetly on numerous occasions in Dublin.

This was probably intended to further compromise the public figure although sources believe ego

played a significant role in his willingness to co-operate. "They used him but he allowed himself to be used," one source said.

The case is the first known infiltration of the Oireachtas by a hostile intelligence service in modern times but experts believe there may be others yet to be discovered as Russia and China have increased their spying capabilities in the EU.

Sources familiar with the case believe Cobalt's connections to Russia remain intact as the Kremlin looks to have taken certain actions to provide him with a cover should he be confronted.

Prokopiev is understood now to be a colonel in the military intelligence division of the Russian armed forces, known as the GRU – still widely known as the GRU, its Soviet-era initials. It is engaged in traditional espionage but also subversion and sabotage.

Prokopiev's recruitment of a politician – part of Russia's "active measures" strategy to destabilise western institutions – has been described by security experts as one of the most significant and audacious espionage cases in recent Irish history.

Mark Galeotti, a British historian and Russia expert, said using a politician to discreetly upset sentiments around Brexit and other political issues must have looked like a "fantastic opportunity" for the Russians.

"Wherever there are social fracture lines, some smart, ruthless, imaginative and morally bankrupt

RG SMILEMAN: SPRINGBOK IN WINNING LEINSTER DEBUT

PHOTO BY BRENDAN MORAN/SPORTSFILE



RG Snyman has good reason to grin after Leinster thrashed Benetton 35-5 in Italy. Next up will be Munster in a United Rugby Championship crunch match at Croke Park on Saturday. Match report, Sport

McDonald pressed on paedophile reference

Hugh O'Connell and Claire Scott

Mary Lou McDonald, the Sinn Féin leader, was last night urged to clarify the sequence of events over job references that her staff gave for a paedophile.

Yesterday McDonald's claim that the party only knew about the situation recently was contradicted by Michelle O'Neill, her deputy and the north's first minister.

O'Neill said a senior official had been contacted by the British Heart Foundation 14 months ago.

The controversy centres on references given for Michael McMonagle, a former press officer who has admitted trying to incite a child to engage in sexual activity.

McMonagle, from Derry, is to be sentenced next month.

The BHF agreed to take him on as its communication and engagement manager in September 2022, 13 months after his arrest.

Sinn Féin has been asked why it did not tell the charity that McMonagle was under investigation.

Last week two Sinn Féin staff quit after it emerged they had given job references for McMonagle to the BHF.

Micheál Martin, the tanaiste, said: "I think the leader of Sinn Féin should clarify the position of who knew what, when and where."

"At the moment, it's revelation after revelation. There is an onus on Sinn Féin leaders to clarify the exact sequence of events."

Sinn fail, page 5



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Fianna Fail could block snap election by dragging feet on budget legislation

Hugh O'Connell and Claire Scott

Micheál Martin, the taoiseach, could block Simon Harris, the taoiseach, from calling an election this year by refusing to agree to expedite legislation giving effect to the budget, The Sunday Times can reveal.

Harris has said the Finance Bill, which legislates for measures announced in last Tuesday's budget, must be passed into law before an election can be held. As it stands the Oireachtas schedule does not allow for that until the start of November at the earliest. The bill will be taken

through the Dail, Seanad and committee stage by Jack Chambers, the finance minister and Fianna Fail deputy leader.

This has led some senior coalition figures to point out that Martin, who has said he would prefer an election to be held next year, has an effective veto on Harris calling a snap vote in November or December.

The Finance Bill will go to cabinet on Tuesday and once approved will be published within a few days and then go before the Dail the following week. With the Dail in recess the week after that, the bill is not due before the Oireachtas finance committee until

November 5, and it will also need to pass the Seanad.

Senior coalition sources said the signal for a snap election this year would be if this timeline for the Finance Bill were compressed – a decision on which Harris will require agreement from his coalition colleagues.

At a Fianna Fail fundraising dinner in Dublin last night, Martin said the Finance Bill "has to happen" and that the Oireachtas would "want to scrutinise that". The taoiseach said he wanted to get several other bills over the line before an election, including on social welfare, gambling, defamation and planning.

He said that the three party

leaders had said they wanted "to go the full distance and until that changes I really have no further comment to make".

"The taoiseach and I and Roderic O'Gorman [the Green Party leader] meet on a weekly basis to discuss the Dail agenda and so forth ... So I'm sure this issue [the timing of the election] might arise at some stage in those discussions," Martin told reporters before the dinner.

"The taoiseach himself has said he wants to fulfil the mandate of government. I've said the same. The

Micheál Martin said the party leaders were set on seeing out their mandate



opportunity is there for any one leader, if they want, to raise a particular issue or new departure or whatever to indicate the need for a meeting, but that hasn't occurred."

Underscoring the point in his speech to attendees at the dinner, Martin said: "We have not completed our mandate yet."

"We have very important work to finish which cannot be rushed."

Amid fevered speculation in Leinster House about a pre-

Christmas general election, speculation that Harris will call a snap election upon his return from a two-day visit to Washington DC this week was categorically ruled out by a senior Fine Gael source last night.

Harris is in the United States this week to meet President Biden at the White House following an invitation issued last month.

The Sunday Times also understands that the taoiseach is not at present convinced by arguments that a snap election this year is in the interests of Fine Gael securing a fourth successive term in government.

However, a number of Fine

Gael and Fianna Fail ministers and TDs are anxious that the election be held this year with several telling this newspaper that they would be "very surprised" if it were not.

A minister said: "The Finance Bill, social welfare bill – all of that can be wrapped up as quickly as you want to get it done."

"He [Harris] could wait until after the US elections and have it at the end of November when people have received all their cost of living payments, they'll have felt the budget in their pockets."

"We've put our money where our mouth is at that stage."



The public expenditure minister is not as influential in the new taoiseach's era, but he remains a key player

Hugh O'Connell Political Editor
Claire Scott Political Correspondent

Last Saturday a hurt and unhappy Paschal Donohoe arrived at his department for a meeting with Roderic O'Gorman, the children's minister, and Anne Rabbitte, the disabilities minister, along with their respective advisers and officials. The public expenditure minister had grown increasingly frustrated with briefings against him in the days previous – and he was about to give his colleagues a piece of his mind.

Laying out a copy of the previous day's Irish Examiner on the table, Donohoe said he was "very disappointed", given his efforts to fund disability services, that his budget offer was being dismissed in the paper as "laughable" by anonymous sources. Donohoe had already been annoyed by a report in The Sunday Times the previous weekend that he had had a tense budget meeting with O'Gorman, a story that was said to have equally irked the Green Party leader.

Donohoe brought O'Gorman and Rabbitte into his office alone, without officials, where the trio are said to have cleared the air. Afterwards, government insiders blamed Rabbitte and her allies for the leaks, but allies of the outspoken Fianna Fail junior minister have hit back at such suggestions. In the end Rabbitte emerged with an extra €300 million in funding for disabilities, an 11.6 per cent year-on-year increase.

For Donohoe, the incident was just one of many sources of frustration during

budget talks this year – and worse was to come in the following 48 hours. On his ninth budget as public expenditure or finance minister, Donohoe is a veteran, now serving under his third Fine Gael taoiseach. This year, Fine Gael ministers say his attitude has been similar to previous budgetary cycles. "He's always going to push back on everything and that's what you want out of your public expenditure minister. You want them to be the cautious one, the careful one, and that's what he's meant to do."

But his relationship with Simon Harris is strikingly different to what he had with Leo Varadkar. They are not as close, and Harris seeks counsel from a wider group than Varadkar did. Whereas Harris has his own economic adviser in Stephen Kinsella, the University of Limerick economics professor, Varadkar largely deferred to Donohoe on fiscal and economic matters. Whereas Varadkar's tax and spending priorities were viewed as consistent, Harris, it is said by some coalition colleagues, is less predictable. "There is an element of Harris going where the wind blows," one senior coalition figure said.

It is also the case that the composition of the coalition's senior decision-making unit has changed substantially this year. Gone are Varadkar, Eamon Ryan and Donohoe's centrist ideological bedfellow in Fianna Fail, Michael McGrath, with whom he worked on many of the aforementioned nine budgets. Ryan has been replaced by O'Gorman, who is fighting to save the Greens from electoral annihilation, while Varadkar and McGrath have

“
We're going to win this election because Simon opened the taps

been succeeded by Harris and Jack Chambers, two young men in a hurry.

The election of Harris has, in the eyes of some observers and allies inside and outside Fine Gael, made Donohoe's position and status in the party weaker. "The Bertie [Ahern] effect of splurging the cash has marginalised the more fiscally prudent arm of Fine Gael, namely Paschal," said one person who knew him well. Another argued the events of last weekend – wherein the cost of living package swelled by several hundred million over the course of two days – served only to confirm Donohoe had been marginalised. The message this gave about Fine Gael under Harris was, a Donohoe ally said: "We're going to win this election because Simon opened the taps and we lost the last one because you didn't."

Allies of Harris and Donohoe acknowledge their relationship is different but dispute that the public expenditure minister has been in any way sidelined. Yet multiple sources involved in the final budget meetings last Sunday and Monday said it was clear Donohoe was not happy as the cost of living package grew in size. He was particularly concerned about a proposal for a second double child benefit payment before Christmas – a proposal first reported in last weekend's Sunday Times. Chambers shared these concerns, but Harris was an enthusiastic supporter of the proposition tabled by Heather Humphreys, the social protection minister, viewing it as more impactful than Micheál Martin's proposal to increase the core rate by €10. O'Gorman

“
I don't think this is his last budget, I hope he'd go back into finance

worried it would kill his baby boost proposal – a quadruple child benefit payment upon the birth of a child, which he was prepared to water down to a triple payment. Yet his idea would cost €15 million, modest by comparison with the nearly €200 million cost of the double double child benefit payment.

Whatever the respective views of ministers, advisers and officials in the room, the further briefing of the measure to political journalists last Sunday evening made it more difficult to row back. As one source recalled: "It was mentioned on Sunday and I thought, 'Jaysus, that's not a runner.' But then it went from being not a runner to part of the news cycle." By last Monday, whatever reservations Donohoe or anyone else had nursed had dissipated in the face of the political reality. "Every budget process is a balancing act – we are tasked with making difficult decisions and our choices have a real impact," Donohoe told the Dail in his budget speech last Tuesday.

For all the political jockeying last weekend and criticism of the government's supposedly spendthrift approach, 95 per cent of the overall €106 billion budget package was in line with the parameters set out in the summer economic statement in July. One Fine Gael minister said for all Donohoe's caution many of the spending demands were met. "There was plenty in there in the end for people," the minister said. At the Fine Gael parliamentary meeting last Wednesday, Donohoe's reservations appeared to have disappeared as he made the case for the

package. "He made the point himself that there needed to be supports for families, particularly through the winter months. That's why this budget is the way it is."

Donohoe was traversing the country late last week, hitting Galway on Thursday and Gorey on Friday, helping out new candidates before the imminent general election. He does not believe he has been sidelined or relegated to irrelevance in the Harris era.

Having missed out on the top job at the International Monetary Fund last March, he briefly toyed with challenging Harris for the leadership. He would have had support, but it is unlikely he would have won. It is clear now he will not be taoiseach, and he has no ambition to be.

He has over recent years had offers outside of public life but he is running for re-election in Dublin Central and doing so with a view to returning to cabinet. Two people who know him well say they think he could end up with the foreign affairs portfolio. Some ministerial colleagues hope he stays where he is. "I don't think this is his last budget, I certainly hope he'd go back into finance and I think he would be good at the Department of Infrastructure brief if that came up," one said.

Harris has told people privately that Donohoe has a "major role to play" as long as he is leader, while one cabinet colleague of the pair observed: "Paschal has enormous public credibility and I assume that will be important for Harris going forward. It is safer for Harris to keep him."

Alison O'Connor, Comment, page 19

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Revealed: Putin has agent in the Oireachtas

→ Continued from page 1
Russian intelligence officer is working out how to widen it a little further. Politicians are classic targets for Russian services. They have access, they have careers where they work on committees, and they have large egos. Ego is one of the most reliable ways of recruiting people," Galeotti said.

"Politicians have protection because who is going to go after them

without evidence? They are in contact with all sorts of people ranging from senior officials all the way through to paramilitaries. Generally speaking, Russian services would look at anyone with access as a valuable catch."

Cobalt cannot be arrested or charged as he has committed no crime. He lacks access to intelligence or classified information but he remains a person of interest to the security services.

Despite Prokopiev's expulsion, security experts warn Moscow increasingly makes use of criminal networks and paramilitary groups to further its covert agenda. Its agents have posed as Ukrainian refugees

This comes as Ireland moves to strengthen its security by significantly increasing its defence spending.

Ireland seeks to protect peacekeepers

John Mooney and Claire Scott

The United Nations and the Department of Foreign Affairs were last night engaged in intense diplomacy to ensure the safety of 30 Irish peacekeepers trapped in a small village in southern Lebanon.

The troops have been unable to leave a small observation outpost on the Lebanese-Israeli border due to fighting between Hezbollah and Israeli ground forces, who have crossed into Lebanon.

Micheál Martin, the taoiseach and foreign affairs minister, yesterday issued a statement criticising Israel for

breaching the Blue Line, the internationally recognised border dividing Lebanon from Israel and the Golan Heights. "This is an unacceptable violation of the UN security council resolution 1701," he said.

At a Fianna Fail event later, Martin said: "The current situation is one of the gravest concern, because there is conflict ongoing, and Israel is pursuing Hezbollah targets, and the peacekeepers are there in the middle, essentially, and in situations like that, the potential for missiles to go in the wrong direction, or for things to go horribly wrong, is always the key concern."

President Higgins earlier

criticised Israel for ordering Irish peacekeeping troops to leave one of their positions. Higgins said that as the supreme commander of the Irish Defence Forces he condemned threats to them.

"Members of the Defence Forces are risking their lives, and their families are making this sacrifice, on behalf of defenceless civilians in southern Lebanese villages," he said. "It is outrageous that the Israel Defence Forces have threatened this peacekeeping force and sought to have them evacuate the villages they are defending."

Military sources described the president's intervention as "deeply unhelpful" given the diplomacy taking place.

About 370 Irish soldiers are on secondment to various branches of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon in Lebanon. Two of the 25 UN outposts come under the Irish command.

The most significant issue facing troops is not the Israeli military, which constructed an operations base near a UN outpost last Thursday, but the potential of a Hezbollah rocket aimed at the Israeli position misfiring, according to multiple military sources.

The Defence Forces yesterday said that all Irish soldiers were safe and well at their encampments.

Middle East crisis, pages 8-9
Editorial, page 18



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INVESTIGATION

Despite his extensive counter-surveillance training, Sergey Prokopiev failed to notice the surveillance officers monitoring his activities at quarters. Officially, Prokopiev served as a counsellor at the Russian embassy on Orwell Road in Dublin, but this was a cover story.

Prokopiev was a spy: a high-ranking military intelligence officer sent to Ireland by Russia's armed forces to operate under diplomatic cover. His mission was to recruit and handle agents, sources and assets from the worlds of politics, business and media, but also to engage in what Russians call active measures: the modern iteration of the political warfare tactics employed by the KGB during the Cold War. At the time of his arrival in Ireland in March 2019, Prokopiev was focused on rebuilding Russia's intelligence network on both sides of the border. He was particularly interested in establishing contacts with loyalist and republican paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland, which had sprung to life during the Brexit negotiations between the European Union and Britain.

Loyalists were threatening violence over the negotiations, which proposed creating an invisible border in the Irish Sea to prevent the return of a land border. The Kremlin was interested in exploiting these tensions as part of its covert efforts to destabilise relations between Ireland and Britain and the West.

Russian intelligence officers are experts at recruiting what they call "useful idiots", people who act in their interests and can be easily exploited to make the right introductions or provide information. At the time, Ireland's intelligence services and the military knew Prokopiev was holding meetings with lots of people. Among them was a member of the Oireachtas, whom we shall call Cobalt. When a meeting held outside Dublin was monitored, their suspicions were confirmed: Cobalt offered to do whatever he could to assist the spy, despite never having engaged with paramilitaries in his career.

This revelation triggered a top-secret investigation, uncovering one of the most significant national security issues in recent history. Now, for the first time, following years of investigations by The Sunday Times, the story of how Russia cultivated an agent of influence inside the Irish political establishment is being told.

Prokopiev arrived in Ireland a year after the state expelled another Russian diplomat in response to the attempted murder of Sergei Skripal and his adult daughter Yulia by two Russians in Salisbury in England. The attack had involved a form of novichok, a lethal nerve agent that originated in Russia. One Russian diplomat was forced to depart Ireland but four left, possibly to provide cover.

Ever since that original meeting, Cobalt's activities have been of deep interest to both J2, the military intelligence branch of the Defence Forces, and garda intelligence. Initially, he was thought to be just another useful idiot. However, this assessment came into question after garda special branch approached him with a formal warning that he was being targeted by Russian intelligence. He dismissed their concerns, prompting further investigations. By this stage, military intelligence were already aware of Cobalt's willingness to assist Prokopiev with meeting loyalist paramilitaries.

The activities of Russia's intelligence services are not regulated by legislation or codes of conduct but by the possible outcomes of their operations. Russian spies study their targets, looking for any personal vulnerabilities they can use to convince a person to co-operate. But their active measures have become more ingenious as western intelligence services disrupt them. Russian assets now include everyone and everything from organised crime gangs to civil servants.

The four main issues that make people psychologically vulnerable to recruitment by spies are money, ideology, coercion and ego. Cobalt's finances were initially examined to try to establish whether he was receiving money, but these inquiries produced nothing suspicious. The security services later came to believe the Russians might have obtained *kompromat* (compromising information) on him, possibly during his travels abroad. According to flight data seen by The Sunday Times, Cobalt has travelled to countries, including outside the European Union, where Russian services operate without fear.

Andrei Soldatov, an authority on the activities of Russian spies, said organisations such as the GU, SVR and the federation's FSB internal security service had become more aggressive in targeting politicians across the West using such techniques.

"This all sounds very familiar," said Soldatov, who explained how Russia's spy agencies used an assortment of tactics to obtain *kompromat*. "If the surveillance teams see something compromising, they will use it. For example, if anyone important travels to Moscow or another Russian city, their hotel room will be monitored. If they see anything, they will alert their sister intelligence services to say they have identified someone who could be targeted. Why do they do these types of things? Influencing opinion in Ireland is very important to Russia," he said.

The Kremlin's recruitment of an agent within the Oireachtas happened during a period of escalating tensions between Moscow and Dublin. Until this point, Ireland was viewed as a permissive environment for Russia's intelligence services to operate in the European Union compared with countries such as France and Britain.

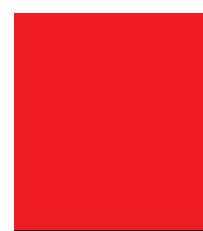
But that changed in 2018 when the government moved to stop Russia from expanding its embassy on Orwell Road following the publication of an investigation by The Sunday Times that disclosed



ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES COWEN

How a Russian operative snared an Irish politician

Classic Cold War tradecraft lured a sitting member of the Oireachtas to offer his services to a spy, writes *John Mooney*



“They will monitor hotel rooms

the federation was constructing an intelligence-gathering base inside the structure.

An analysis of the architectural plans submitted to Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown county council had disclosed the existence of underground rooms to house ventilation, storage and heating equipment – facilities that would normally be located elsewhere in a similar-size building project. The government was forced to introduce emergency legislation to revoke the planning permission.

Until then, Russian services had used Ireland as an operational base. For example, in 2011, a diplomat from the embassy was expelled after he cloned six passports from Irish people who had applied for visas. The passports were used by Russian spies to enter the United States.

And further back, in 1983, Guenadi Saline, a first secretary and press attaché at Orwell Road, and Viktor Lipasov, a second secretary, and his wife, Irona, were expelled after they were unmasked as KGB officers. Irona Lipasov had led a spy ring that tried to supply arms and ammunition to the IRA. Until that point, Ireland had never previously expelled a Soviet diplomat.

In all likelihood, Prokopiev's assign-

ment was more hostile than those of his predecessors, which explains why he used diplomatic cover as opposed to operating in Ireland as a Russian illegal, someone using a false identity. His diplomatic credentials provided him with immunity from arrest should he be detected.

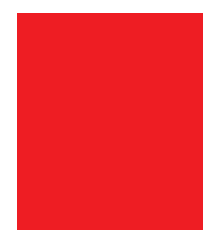
Prokopiev was expelled in March 2022 after Russian tanks started rolling towards Kyiv. Ireland was among the European countries that collectively expelled 600 diplomats, 400 of them spies, along with several Russian "illegals" – agents operating without diplomatic cover. At the time, Ireland expelled four diplomats, though six people left, identified as Colonel Igor Molyanov and his wife, Aelita; Prokopiev and his wife, Elena; and Vladimir Vasilchik and his partner, Elena Muraveva.

Vasilchik was a member of military unit 33949 – a branch of the SVR, Russia's foreign intelligence service – but later joined Russia's foreign ministry. He had trained at its military academy, according to information obtained by this newspaper. Prokopiev's background, if that was his real name, remains shrouded in mystery, however.

The removal of Prokopiev and Vasilchik from Ireland by the Department of Foreign Affairs didn't go unnoticed. It prompted an immediate response from the Kremlin, which moved to disrupt the operations of the Irish embassy in Moscow by placing its staff under intense surveillance and disrupting their activities. The bank accounts of the Irish embassy in Moscow were restricted, prompting the state to devise colourful ways of sending money to embassy staff so they could pay bills.

The expulsion of Prokopiev from the state did not halt his contacts with Moscow's intelligence services. The Russians at one stage are understood to have used a "honeypot" – a striking looking female agent – to entangle the politician romantically, thus compromising him further and encouraging him to co-operate. This woman was monitored entering the state on multiple occasions for short periods of time before leaving again, but no action could be taken as Cobalt was not breaking any law.

Cobalt could not be arrested or charged with espionage because he did not have access to any classified material, therefore could not disclose its contents



“They take pride in being subtle

to a hostile state. Instead the security services believe he was used as an asset: an easily influenced person who could make introductions, disrupt public discourse or air the Kremlin's views if and when prompted. There are still conflicting views on whether he was pressured to co-operate or agreed to allow the Russians to use him because they massaged his ego, according to multiple sources familiar with the affair. The full scale of Cobalt's activities is still a mystery.

Kevin Riehle, a lecturer at Brunel University in London who previously served in various counterintelligence roles in the United States, said the activity was consistent with Russian active measures.

"It's normal for Russian services to target people in political life. They rarely get a senior person but usually someone who is a friend of a senior person, or a supporter who has the ear of someone in power. Rarely does a Russian intelligence officer get the luck of recruiting a political representative," Riehle said.

"That's a win for any intelligence officer. As far as Russian intelligence is concerned, anyone who is an elected representative is a senior official. That's a big deal."

Riehle suspects the Russians who secretly interacted with Cobalt let him know they knew certain things about him.

"If a Russian intelligence officer studied a target and discovered they have a predilection for one thing or another that might be embarrassing, then it provides an angle to work on. Whether it is sex-related or being in debt, it gives an angle. And the intelligence officer will use this in conversations, sometimes overtly, saying, 'We know you do such and such,' or sometimes it's more subtle, they will mention something fleetingly. They tend to pride themselves on being subtle rather than putting a gun to someone's head," he said.

Russia's spies are likely to have learnt from their errors following Prokopiev's expulsion, and have adjusted their tradecraft and embarked on a new phase of political warfare against the West since the invasion of Ukraine. In recent years, they have become more inventive, sending spies posing as Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war to Ireland. They are also using criminal gangs, republican paramilitaries in left-wing fringe groups and far-right extremists as proxies. The threat is continuing to evolve.

Despite the ongoing investigations and recent diplomatic expulsions, Cobalt remains very much under the radar, with only a select few in the security services aware of his connections to Russian intelligence.

The Kremlin's infiltration into the core of Irish politics has been uncovered for the first time, prompting concern among senior officials in intelligence and defence services. Many now contend that the government must urgently implement new espionage legislation and other proactive measures to safeguard Ireland's national security.

For the time being, however, Cobalt remains in place.

KGB TACTICS STILL SERVE MOSCOW WELL TODAY

John Mooney

Russia's intelligence war against Europe is relentless. The recruitment of a person in the Irish political establishment as an agent of influence reveals what Moscow's spies can and will do.

It is also a reminder of our vulnerability to espionage and covert influence operations.

"Russia has a long history of active measures – what we in the West would call covert action – designed to inflame and aggravate grievances in target populations," said Calder Walton, a historian of intelligence and global security at Harvard University and author of *Spies: The Epic Intelligence War Between East and West*.

Given Ireland's history of sectarianism and paramilitary violence, the country is fertile ground for Russian operations, he said. "The same was true for the wedge issue of Brexit in

Britain. It's important to remember that many of the Kremlin's 'useful idiots' – a KGB term – in the West didn't even know they were being manipulated. Others, however, were willing assets."

Since the mass expulsion of Russian spies from the EU in 2022 after the invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has redoubled its efforts to recruit assets inside parliaments, police forces and militaries, civic organisations and universities.

This year spy rings have been uncovered in Britain, Germany, France and Bulgaria. Agents have even been found in the European parliament.

The Kremlin has not confined its malign activities to espionage: it is conducting sabotage and even murder. In February, Maksim Kuzminov, 28, a Russian air force pilot who defected to Ukraine, was shot dead in Spain, murdered by a unit whose members lived under deep cover.

The details of how Russian intelligence recruited someone in the Oireachtas, revealed by The Sunday Times today, echo the covert actions pioneered by the KGB in Soviet times.

Flattery and seduction, also known as honeypot traps, were used as inducements to entice Cobalt, the pseudonym

we have given an Irish politician who has assisted Russian spies.

In other cases, laptops, social media accounts and the smartphones of other targets have been used by hackers to steal compromising information. Families are also targeted.

John Sipher, a former CIA officer, said Russia had a long history of conducting such operations. "The Russian services would most definitely consider this person an asset, agent or source," he said.

"Politicians who take money or other inducements to make decisions that benefit the Kremlin can be considered agents of influence."

Sipher said: "Intelligence services seek people who can help them in some way, with some level of control – whether it's ideological, financial or through blackmail. "In the US, we usually look for sources that have access to information the US needs but cannot get any other way. Think of access to Kremlin decision-making or someone in Iran's missile programme."

"Russians, on the other hand, recruit intelligence sources for spreading propaganda, disinformation or sabotage. They call these active measures, and they

include not just collecting secrets but taking action: injecting chaos or false information into a country or company, supporting violent or fringe groups, and even assassination."

Sipher added: "It could be a politician who takes money to make decisions that benefit the Kremlin. It could be an editor that puts disinformation into their work, a person with a public persona that can make comments that help Russia, or a technician that puts something in a computer system."

Russian agencies aim to disrupt, which in part explains why they went to such lengths to penetrate the Oireachtas.

Agent Cobalt has engaged in many activities that have undermined public trust in institutions, though for legal reasons we cannot say how. To this day, Russia appears to be protecting him. Using an alleged honeypot to snare him was part of its toolkit.

Across the EU, the Russians are targeting politicians, civil servants and their families through cyberattacks, hacking smartphones, compromising communication. The families of Russian immigrants are urged to co-opt relatives. In Ireland, Russia forges links with paramilitaries, criminals and extremists.

Ireland, with its traditionally neutral stance, has long been considered a soft target compared with other EU nations because of official naivety – though that has changed as the government has wound down Russia's diplomatic presence to a handful of people, including its ambassador, Yuri Filatov.

The presence of Russian illegals, intelligence officers who operate under deep cover, is not known and hard to discover.

While countries such as the UK, Germany and France have frameworks in place to catch foreign agents, Ireland's legal and security infrastructure is unequipped to handle such threats. Politicians cannot be watched unless there is evidence to show they have committed a crime. Even then, there would be a reluctance to apply for a surveillance warrant.

Since discovering Cobalt, Ireland has stepped up its co-operation with partner agencies to catch Russian agents and their handlers. It has become a battle that is likely to intensify after Ireland's decisions to raise spending on defence and support Ukraine.

Both policies will draw President Putin's ire as the Russian leader becomes even more determined to undermine the West.