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Illegal, Latin America, Spain



Pax Consulting

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1. Summary

The KGB¹ and the GRU (military intelligence), throughout their history, have had a program of illegals. These were members of the services **without diplomatic cover, sent abroad with false identities**, often from neutral or allied countries (such as Mexico, Canada, Austria, Argentina, etc.). They were intensively trained to **assume a "legend"** (fabricated identity) and operate clandestinely for years.

These programs have been maintained despite the historical vicissitudes of Russia, reaching the present day. It must therefore be concluded that **these programmes have been and continue to be useful** for Russia.

2. Conditioning factors of an illegal

An **illegal agent**, once recruited, must undergo an intensive training process in which he is taught the **security techniques** that he must apply throughout his operational life. These techniques are not exclusive to illegals: they are part of the standard training of any intelligence agent. He must also receive training in **HUMINT recruitment techniques**, shared with other members of the intelligence apparatus.

The main difference is that the illegal will be provided with a **false identity**, which he must assume as his own. To do this, they will not only have to learn the language corresponding to their fictitious nationality, but they will also have to **internalize cultural and social behaviors** of the country to which they supposedly belong. This implies a deep knowledge of the physical and social environment that his legend describes as the scene of his life: hometown, places where he studied or worked, etc.

Speaking a foreign language can be learned, but **mastering a specific regional accent** is a difficult barrier to overcome. It is not spoken in the same way in Spain as in Colombia, not even within regions of the same country. For this reason, it is almost impossible for a Russian citizen to convincingly pass himself off as a Bolivian from Cochabamba, for example. To get around this obstacle, the Russian services used to construct legends in which the agent had **mixed family origins**: a New Zealand father, a Uruguayan mother, for example. In this way, any irregularity in his accent or expression could be justified by his "multicultural origin".

The **legend of an illegal spans all aspects of their life**, from their place of birth to studies, jobs and personal relationships. They must be able to narrate anecdotes naturally, remember the names of teachers or classmates, and physically identify the places they say they have frequented. Therefore, before starting his mission, the illegal must spend **some time in the areas where he**

¹ After the fall of the Soviet Union, Yeltsin decided to divide the KGB into two services: the FSB would be a (domestic) security service, while the SVR would operate abroad. A good option to take away absolute power from an organization that could endanger Russia's incipient democracy.

claims to have lived, to familiarize himself with the environment of his invented story. This preparation requires **significant time and resources**.

However, there is one cost that is less talked about: the **personal cost**. The illegal must be psychologically prepared to break almost completely with his previous life. Often, that means leaving your family, friends, and partner behind. Some enter the program **while already married**. Visits to Russia are rare, usually **once a year**, and involve special procedures: they cannot travel directly from their country of residence. The trip must be made through a **third country**, where they change their identity – recovering their Russian documentation to enter – and on their way out they change their identity again to resume illegal coverage.

Faced with situations such as the illness of elderly parents or the death of a loved one, the illegal person faces the **total renunciation of his previous life**. In addition, he must plan his **economic future very carefully**, knowing that, at the end of his mission, he will return to a country to which he has hardly been linked for years.

The commitment to the agency is deep, but it is not without risks. Emotional **disconnection from one's homeland**, isolation, and personal circumstances can weaken that loyalty over time.

Illegals tend to carry out **professions that give them mobility, social coverage and access to relevant information**, with occupations such as journalism or consulting being common.

3. Mitrokhin Archive

Vasily Mitrokhin was a KGB archivist who collected handwritten information from the organization for a decade to defect to the West. With their information, it was possible to identify illegal immigrants, sources and operations that the KGB was carrying out in the West.

One of the elements mentioned in the file indicates that, in 1976, during a high-level meeting in Havana between the KGB and Cuban intelligence (DGI), **it was agreed to train illegals** (undercover agents without diplomatic cover) **with Latin American identities** to act **against targets in the United States, Latin America, and also in Spain. as well as against Maoist groups**. Now it seems that we have forgotten that Russia and China have had their confrontations in the past and that their geostrategic objectives are not the same.

This indicates that, although no large-scale operations were planned in Spanish territory, **there was a residual operational interest**, especially linked to networks and agents with false identities. Cuba became a **training center for illegals** and the use of Latin American identities to operate in the West was the main resource.

Continuing in this Latin American environment, it should be noted that **order 0099/OV of August 7, 1972** (internal order of the KGB, issued by the First Main Directorate (PGU), the branch of the KGB in charge of foreign intelligence) **instructed the recruitment of illegals recommended by the Communist Parties of the United States, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Portugal,**

France and also Spain (although in 1972 the Spanish Communist Party was illegal and its leaders were abroad, also in Moscow).

3.1 Latin American identities according to Mitrokhin

According to statistics from the **StB (Czechoslovak intelligence)** given to the KGB:

- ❖ **327 illegals** passed through Czechoslovakia between 1962 and 1966.
- ❖ **Documentation used:**
 - **140 Venezuelan passports**
 - **70 Dominican passports**
 - **60 Argentine passports**
 - **50 Colombian passports**
 - **5 Peruvian passports**
 - **1 U.S. passport**
 - **1 British passport**

3.2 A specific case

Vladimir Vasilyevich Grinchenko, alias RON (later KLOD), was an illegal KGB agent specializing in **covert operations in Latin America and the Caribbean**. His legend was carefully constructed: he adopted the identity of Jan Bechko, the supposed **son of a Slovak father and a Ukrainian mother**. To reinforce this façade, **Grinchenko obtained in 1951 authentic Argentine citizenship and a passport, which allowed him to legally settle in Buenos Aires with his wife, Simona Krimker (alias MIRA)**. Under that cover, he carried out clandestine activities until his fingerprint was detected by the FBI, which compromised his operation in the United States.

As an alternative, he was transferred to **France**, where in 1955 he suffered a robbery that exposed **compromising documents**: his passport, residence permit, an encrypted letter and a message related to another illegal one, BORIS. This incident forced the KGB to urgently repatriate him to Moscow, **where his career as an illegal was suspended**. Despite the ruling, **Grinchenko played an important role later in Cuba, where he was sent in 1961 to advise the DGI on the training of new illegals**, contributing to the development of Latin American legends for joint Soviet bloc operations.

4. Evolution

The SVR has been the heir to the KGB's foreign activity since the fall of the Soviet Union. **Both the GRU and the SVR have continued with illegal programs** as has been evident in the twenty-first century on several occasions, the last one being last August 2024.

On that occasion, a Spanish journalist, **Pablo González Yagüe (grandson of a child from the war) and a family with an Argentine passport, arrived in Moscow**. They were Artem Viktorovich Dulcev and Ana Valerevna Dulceva, **Russian nationals who had entered Slovenia (where they resided) with Argentine passports.**

There have also been some recent examples of illegals with Brazilian passports:

- **Sergey Vladimirovich Cherkasov**, using the false identity of a Brazilian citizen named **Victor Muller Ferreira**, attempted to infiltrate the **International Criminal Court (ICC)** as an intern with the aim of obtaining information on investigations related to **war crimes committed by Russia in Ukraine**. He was arrested at **Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport** in June 2022 and later **deported to Brazil**, where he was arrested for using fraudulent documents.
- **Mikhail Mikushin**, acting under the Brazilian alias **José Assis Giannaria**, worked as a researcher in security studies. He was **arrested on his way to his workplace in Tromso, Norway**, in December 2022, on suspicion of being involved in **espionage activities in the service of Russia**.

It is clear that **the Latin American world continues to be of the utmost interest to Russian services**. Although the initial need for these services to cover up the Russian origin of their agents would have disappeared with the fall of the Soviet Union², they have maintained the illegal programs. The links with far-left movements that he cultivated in the past in Latin America have continued to serve him well.

It also has a political reading, since it can be deduced that **Putin always had in mind that Russia would be susceptible to raising suspicions for its foreign policy**, which is why these expensive and long-term programs have remained within the intelligence services.

² To avoid pointing fingers at the Cold War era and to avoid suspicions that would be counterproductive to their intelligence objectives.