

Is Argentina Going Totally Blind?

Written by Thomas Bruneau and Florina Cristiana Matei

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THOMAS BRUNEAU AND FLORINA CRISTIANA MATEI, FEB 8 2015

The proposal by President Cristina Kirchner to abolish the Secretariat of Intelligence (SI) may make sense, at least to her, in the current political context of the Nisman death, but should be deeply considered before any action is taken. In neighboring Brazil, in 1990 President Fernando Collor de Mello, fulfilling a campaign promise, abolished the National Information Service (SNI) the intelligence service of the military that governed 1964-85, and it was not politically possible to create a new civilian intelligence service, the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (ABIN), until 1999. During that time the government was basically blind to civil unrest caused by the *Landless Workers' Movement* and to drug lords in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Once the ABIN was created, it was extremely limited in its sphere of action, and is prohibited, for example, from doing intercepts. Most of the scandals that ABIN has been involved in during the past fifteen years are due to its being illegally involved in intercepts, something that any intelligence agency must have access to.

Further afield, in Romania, at the end of the Ceausescu regime, in December 1989, the dictatorship's intelligence agency, the *Securitate* was abolished, and the country was without any domestic intelligence for three months. Once the government perceived that it was blind to unrest, in this case violent clashes between Romanians and Hungarian minorities, it created in short order the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI) as it was aware that its bid for NATO and EU accession was dead in the water if the country was unable to identify domestic threats in what has become a crucial strategic area.

It is no simple matter to create, from scratch, a domestic intelligence agency that is both under democratic civilian control and is effective. Romania has been successful and Brazil has not. For example, ABIN was unable to either anticipate the popular outbursts in June of 2013 which nearly scuttled Brazil's hosting the World Cup in Soccer or be aware of the activities of the U.S. NSA as revealed by Edward Snowden.

Argentina, under Mrs. Kirchner's husband, and continuing through her administration, has already emasculated military intelligence. Now, in promising to abolish the Secretariat of Intelligence, which is mainly domestic intelligence, Argentina will be totally blind. The country has already experienced two successful terrorist attacks, at the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992 and at the Jewish Cultural Center (AMIA) headquarters in 1994. Drug cartels are active in the country, not only for transit but also for domestic sales. And street crime is rife. This is probably not a good time to further self-enforced blindness.

* The views expressed here are the authors' alone and do not necessarily represent those of the Department of Defense or the Department of the Navy.

About the author:

Thomas Bruneau is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), Monterey, California. He taught at NPS for 26 years before retiring in 2013. He has conducted seminars throughout Latin America on democratic civil-military relations for the Center for Civil-Military Relations. His more

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recent books include *Patriots for Profit: Contractors and the Military in U.S. National Security* (Stanford, 2011), *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America* edited with Lucia Dammert and Elizabeth Skinner (Texas, 2011), and *The Routledge Handbook of Civil-Military Relations* edited with Cris Matei (Routledge, 2013). His recent articles deal with Latin American civil-military relations, Brazilian intelligence reform, and Central American street gangs.

Florina Cristiana (Cris) Matei is a Lecturer at the Center for Civil-Military Relations (CCMR) at the United States Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), which she joined as a Research Associate in 2003. Cris has researched, published and lectured on a wide range of issues concerning civil-military relations, democratization, Security Sector Reform (SSR), intelligence, countering/combating terrorism, organized crime, and street gangs. Cris earned a M.A. in International Security Affairs from NPS, and a B.S. in Physics (Nuclear Interactions and Elementary Particles) from the University of Bucharest. She is currently a PhD candidate in the Department of War Studies of the King's College (University of London). She is the co-editor (with Thomas Bruneau) of *The Routledge Handbook of Civil – Military Relations*, published in 2012.