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Francisca BOSTYN
Acting Administrator-General

PREFACE

IF YOU DO NOT CHANGE, YOU RISK BECOMING IRRELEVANT

The world is rapidly changing. Intelligence work has no choice but to keep pace.

Less than ten years ago, the State Security (VSSE) had one absolute priority: the threat arising from jihadist-inspired terrorism.

In 2023, the situation has changed completely. One year after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we have clearly entered into a Cold War 2.0. The mass expulsion of Russian intelligence officers since the start of the war has without a doubt greatly weakened Russia's capacity for action in Europe, while at the same time prompting Russia to review its operations in Europe, by working with informal agents who are not officially linked to the intelligence services, for instance. This poses new challenges for European intelligence services. In short, while espionage and counter-espionage never completely went away, they are once again centre stage. However, Russia is only one of the most visible players. In addition to state actors such as Russia and China, who try to gain a foothold in Belgium and to sow discord, by spreading disinformation for instance, we are also faced with interference from states that are not necessarily hostile toward us, but who at the same time carry out clandestine intelligence activities in our country in order to promote their own interests. One such example is the suspected interference in the European Parliament. These activities are currently the subject of a judicial inquiry.

In the meantime, the terrorist threat has not gone away at all. The attack on two Swedish football fans on 16 October 2023 served as a painful reminder. Unfortunately, this was not an isolated incident though. Over the last two years or so, our service has seen another increase in the number of files involving threats. As far as jihadist-inspired terrorism is concerned, there has been a real deviation from the trend. Centralised organisations have given way to lone wolves and to unstructured networks on closed discussion channels, whose members influence and incite each other to take action. While some come off as mere show-off keyboard warriors, the firm determination of others is unmistakable.

That is why deciding to commit resources to one keyboard warrior rather than another is an increasingly perilous exercise. Every decision can have far-reaching consequences.

At the same time, the VSSE faces other challenges. The Russian invasion of Ukraine served as a warning about what could happen if Belgium became too dependent on fickle foreign players. This is one of the reasons why we are now also working together to screen foreign direct investment in critical sectors.

Combating certain excesses of organised crime, which is increasingly undermining our social structures, is also a new challenge for our service. All this takes place in an increasingly interconnected world. The VSSE hardly ever conducts an intelligence investigation without receiving pieces of the puzzle from other services and – increasingly often – from foreign services. This is reflected in an ever growing number of incoming messages from foreign partners. One country on its own cannot deal with phenomena such as extremism, terrorism, espionage and interference. This is why the VSSE is constantly strengthening its international network and takes its role as the intelligence service of the host country of the European Union and NATO very seriously. The VSSE is also investing in the deployment of liaison officers to these multilateral institutions and abroad, in cooperation with its partners such as the General Intelligence and Security Service (SGRS) and the FPS Foreign Affairs.

To meet these challenges, old and new, the intelligence services also need to evolve. Seven years ago, my predecessor Jaak Raes described the VSSE as ‘Europe’s Lilliputian’. In recent years, our service has been considerably strengthened. On 31 December 2023, the VSSE had 908 employees. By spring 2024, we will be approaching the 1,000 mark. This is quite a challenge. Currently, one colleague in four is still completing their traineeship.

At the same time, the flow of information is constantly increasing. Just fifteen years ago, an address book was an unhopd-for mine of information. Today, reading the data from a single telephone already provides a wealth of information. What's more, the exchange of information with our national and international partners intensifies every year.

To manage this flow of information and process all the incoming jigsaw pieces objectively, accurately and in a timely manner, we have introduced a new investigative model. An investigative model that harmonises procedures, relies on specialised positions and allows us to prioritise major investigations on the basis of objectively verifiable criteria. At the same time as introducing this new investigative model, a new IT environment has been put in place. This environment should make it possible to link more information from different sources, in line with the new investigative model. However, the introduction of a major IT project is not without its challenges.

Change is certainly a difficult process, but it is necessary. If an intelligence service does not evolve, one thing is certain: this service will ultimately lose its relevance to society.

Finally, I would like thank all of the VSSE's members of staff. Each and every one of the almost one thousand people who work, out of the limelight, day in day out, to protect Belgium and its citizens. This report provides a rare insight into their work. This work can be demanding. The major changes that this service has undergone over the past year did not make the work any easier. The members of staff of the VSSE continue to do their utmost every day, sometimes in difficult circumstances, to tirelessly carry out their essential assignments. This deserves our respect. ■

Francisca Bostyn

A STRONG VSSE IS NOT A LUXURY BUT A NECESSITY

The Belgian State Security (VSSE) is a service that I have come to know well over the course of my career. I was appointed Director of the Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA) in 2016, during the most turbulent period our intelligence services had experienced in decades. The VSSE proved time and again to be a dependable partner. A service that can rely on professional, enthusiastic employees who have given a human face to the mythical aura surrounding the intelligence service. A service that is continuing to emerge from the shadows.



Jaak Raes, its Administrator-General at the time, and I participated side by side in the hearings of the parliamentary commission of inquiry, which led to important recommendations that we still consider today to be the guiding principle for how we organise our security systems. Together with Francisca Bostyn and Pascal Pétry, we are addressing the threats to our national security.

After the attacks, we witnessed a paradigm shift in the way data were managed, with secrecy giving way to information sharing. The attacks taught all stakeholders in the security chain how vital it was for information to circulate. The different pieces of the jigsaw must be put together to gain a clear picture of the threat. This is the only way of detecting and monitoring dangerous radicalisation at an early stage, of taking action in good time or, whenever possible, of putting people on a support pathway as a preventive measure.

Eight years on, we are living in a society that is constantly changing, as are its security needs. A society that is increasingly interconnected, where we move freely from online to offline, and vice versa. The pandemic only accelerated this process. Technological change and the use people make of technology have made society even more elusive. It could even be described as impalpable.

Today, given the geopolitical challenges we know only too well, the *Zeitgeist* is reflected in a polarising rhetoric that is undermining our democratic system. Social media are distorting the debate and algorithms are fanning the flames, in some cases spurred on by information campaigns run by third-party state actors intent on jeopardising our unity.

The traditional image of the threat of ideological extremism is becoming blurred. 'Single issue' extremists, anti-establishment thinkers, 'doomsday preppers' who fear the end of the world and are building up a military arsenal, to name but a few. Nowadays, we come across all of them. The wars raging in Ukraine and the Palestinian territories - conflicts that are taking place on our doorstep - exacerbate the uncertainty and are potential triggers for new waves of foreign fighters or attacks on our territory.

Recently, organised crime has also had an impact on national security: grenade attacks in Antwerp, settling of scores in our streets, and even the attempted kidnapping of my predecessor. When these actors use narcoterrorism to destabilise the state, the VSSE is also involved in the fight against this phenomenon.

Moreover, the systemic challenges posed by countries such as Russia and China are forcing us to reflect on the impact that economic cooperation and, in some cases, free markets can have on security. Our decision-making processes are also subject to the influence of many foreign powers. Our position as the capital of Europe and the presence of NATO on our territory further increase our exposure.

The VSSE has the legal mission of upholding the democratic and constitutional order. That comes with a huge responsibility! To enable us to carry out this important mission, the government takes the role played by our service seriously and has (finally) allocated the resources it needs. The number of staff has risen to 1,000, new headquarters have been acquired and the law has been amended to afford the service more powers. The government is also working hard to create unified staff regulations for the VSSE, the military intelligence service and CUTA. These are considerable efforts for a service that deserves it, for a society that needs it and for an important link in the chain of democracy.

However, given the ever-increasing need to share information, we also need to take greater account, and rightly so, of the need to respect privacy. The GDPR and its transposition into our legislation set out clear rules governing the protection and sharing of information. We have to adapt to them too. After all, the data held by the VSSE are extremely sensitive.

The increased focus on privacy is also having a huge impact on the way in which private players manage information. And this is precisely what makes the VSSE's mission even more challenging. The huge amount of information that could previously simply be obtained from the internet is now well-protected and more volatile than ever, driving us to constantly develop and seek out new data sources and flows. Encryption only adds to the complexity.

Hence the importance of the VSSE's new investigative model and digital transformation. The IT reform is a unique opportunity for the VSSE to utilise large volumes of information gathered from this impalpable society. In consultation with my office, the VSSE has drawn up a plan of approach to overcome the difficulties encountered during this implementation. I am fully aware that this requires the staff, who are already working hard to meet the many challenges mentioned above, to go that extra mile. However, I am in no doubt that we will get there. After all, a modern society needs a modern intelligence service. And this applies very much to the VSSE. A strong VSSE is not a luxury, but a necessity for the resilience of our democratic constitutional state.

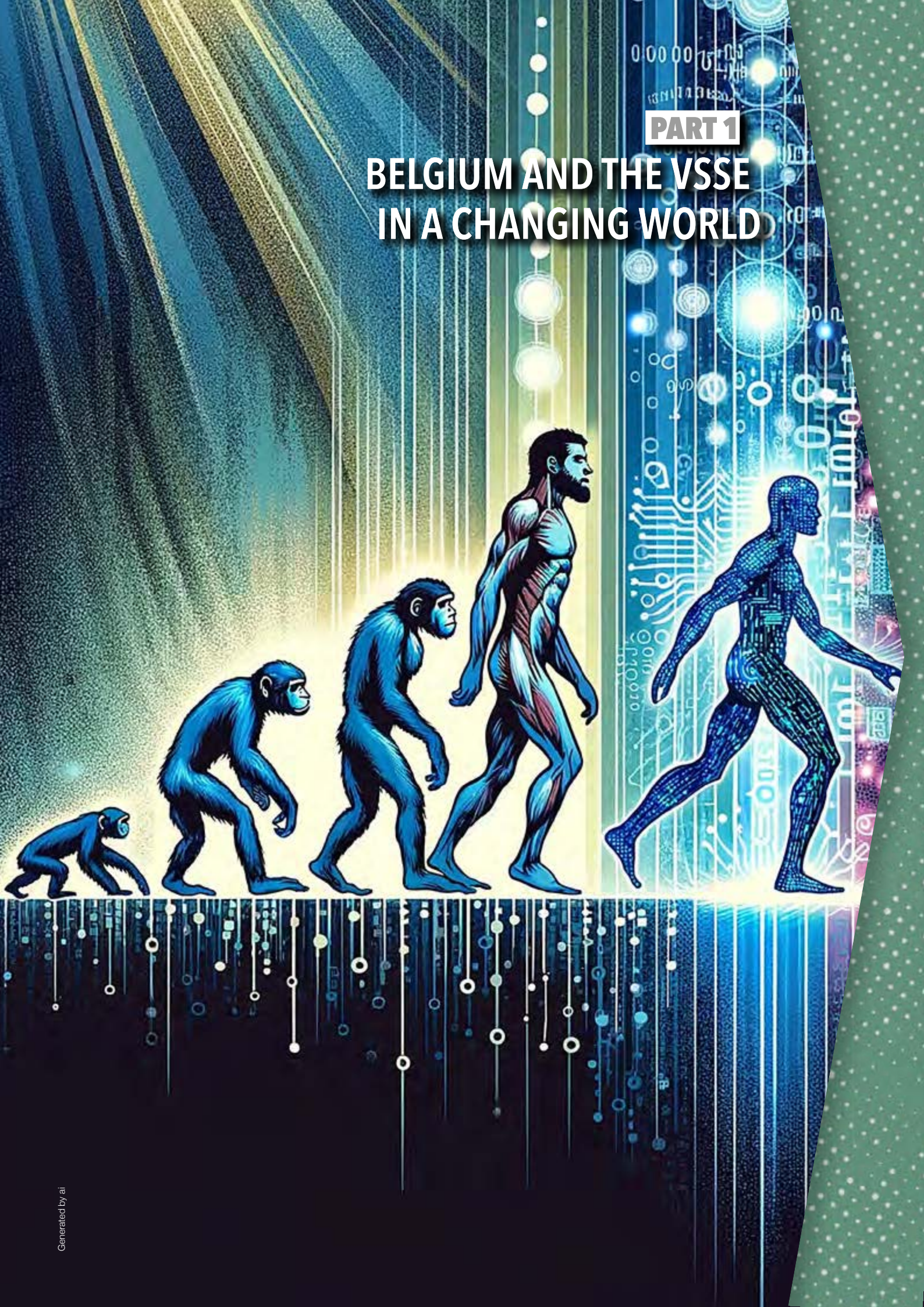
I would like to conclude by expressing my gratitude to those who work behind the scenes. I would like to thank the members of the VSSE and its partners who make such a valuable contribution to the intelligence work and security checks. They are the men and women behind the figures of the intelligence methods, behind the intelligence reports, behind the secrets. They protect our democracy. ■

Paul VAN TIGCHELT
Deputy Prime Minister
and Minister of Justice and the North Sea



PART 1

BELGIUM AND THE VSSE IN A CHANGING WORLD



THE JIHADIST THREAT IS GROWING AND DIVERSIFYING

The number of files relating to terrorist threats has been on the rise for some time and this phenomenon took on a new intensity in 2023. So the trend has reversed. Those involved are sometimes lone wolves or act in the context of fairly volatile online networks on chat channels such as Telegram. The origin of the perpetrators is also diversifying, with an increase in the number of people with roots in Central Asia. In short, the terrorist threat is once again present, but in a different form.



In terms of the number of reports of threats and files, the jihadist threat remains the main challenge for Belgium. Despite the fact that, since 2017, the Islamic State (IS) seems to no longer have the capacity to direct attacks in Europe and does not control any actual territory in Syria and Iraq, the organisation does remain active there. It continues to be a major source of inspiration for people involved in terrorist activities. Given the presence of Belgian Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) in the jihadist conflict zone, the VSSE cannot let its guard down in this respect. There are now also signs that a

group such as the Islamic State - Khorasan Province (ISKP) is not only becoming a new source of inspiration for jihadists, but that it also has the means to direct terrorists. This historic province of Khorasan is located in the Central Asian region bordering Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

The relative popularity of the ISKP and the finding that individuals from the Central Asian community now also have a central role in some files, widen the threat situation and make detection more difficult.

► A TREND REVERSAL

There has been a new increase in the number of cases linked to jihadist-inspired terrorism for some time now. This trend has been even more prominent since mid-2023. A number of recent international political developments have played into the hands of terrorist groups such as IS and al-Qaeda. The erosion of state power in Afghanistan and in the Sahel enabled IS and al-Qaeda to expand their sphere of influence there. In other words, the instability in these regions is creating a vacuum enabling terrorist groups to redevelop.

In addition, the sudden escalation of the conflict between Israel and Hamas after 7 October also increases the risk that individuals of the Jihadist-Salafist persuasion will be ready to take action. Moreover, there is a real possibility that terrorist groups such as IS and al-Qaeda will exploit the resurgence of the

Israeli-Palestinian conflict to perpetrate new terrorist acts in Europe and recruit new members.

Other events, such as the burning of copies of the Koran in Sweden, may be triggers for terrorist violence. One deplorable example is the murder of two Swedish fans in Belgium on 16 October 2023.

► FILES REGARDING ONLINE THREATS

The radicalisation process has undergone far-reaching change over the last decade. Whereas in the past, radicalisation often still took place physically on the street or through acquaintances (just think of Sharia4Belgium's Street Dawa system), today, in many cases, no intermediaries are needed to gain access to extremist material. The Web offers free access to pamphlets and manifestos from all kinds of terrorist groups. Today, people can be radicalised on their own through online access to terrorist material, but also through contacts with like-minded people, which are very easy to establish online.

Increasingly these are small (online) networks of contacts, which are ever more often of an international nature. During the COVID-19 period, the VSSE mainly dealt with files involving people (sometimes minors) who had been radicalised individually or in very small groups. In the latter case, this radicalisation took place mainly via online messaging apps, such as Telegram, where they worked together on possible actions or targets within their network of supporters. In recent cases, these networks have often become international in nature, with members from various countries.

► THE VSSE IS MINDFUL OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE WAR IN GAZA FOR BELGIUM

The resurgence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict leaves no-one indifferent, not even in Belgium. The VSSE is closely monitoring reactions in extremist circles, in Belgium, to the war in Gaza. There is a real possibility that the events in Gaza will incite extremists to resort to violence. IS and al-Qaeda are explicitly calling on their supporters to carry out attacks against Israeli, Jewish and American targets in the United States and Europe. The VSSE believes that the main terrorist threat to Belgium in this context comes from individuals of Jihadist-Salafist persuasion acting alone.

The VSSE's scrutiny of reactions to the conflict in Gaza has brought to its attention numerous expressions of support for the Palestinian cause in extremist circles, but comparatively few direct calls for violence.

► POTENTIAL VOLUNTARY DEPARTURES

In addition, the VSSE is keeping a close eye on potential voluntary departures by freedom fighters wishing to make their way to Gaza and/or the West Bank. However, the blockade of Gaza makes it virtually impossible to reach the scene of battle at present. The VSSE is also screening people with links to our country who are being evacuated from the Gaza Strip to Belgium.



► **FORMER TERRORISM INMATES: A KEY CONCERN FOR THE VSSE**

Since 2018, 239 terrorism inmates have left prison. The majority of them have complied with their conditions, and the framework in which they were monitored has proved sufficient.

However, former inmates with a radical profile remain the focus of our attention. On 10 November 2022, the radicalised former inmate MAHI Yassine attacked two police officers in Brussels, killing one and wounding the other.

Other European countries are facing the same problem, as demonstrated by the recent terrorist attack in France on 2 December 2023. The perpetrator was a radicalised 26-year-old Frenchman of Iranian origin and former prisoner. In 2016, he was sentenced to 5 years' imprisonment for participation in a criminal organisation with a view to preparing a terrorist act. He was released in March 2020 after four years in prison.

The above-mentioned examples illustrate the absolute need for consistent monitoring of radicalised former inmates, and not only those jailed for terrorism. It is essential that we are able to identify which former inmates make the leap from extremist beliefs to acts of violence in the name of those beliefs. This is why the VSSE focuses its activities on radicalised inmates and inmates convicted of terrorism who are nearing the end of their sentence. The VSSE examines on a case-by-case basis whether there is a threat from these prisoners as they approach the end of their sentence. Prisons are still considered to be a key action area under the joint strategy to combat extremism and terrorism. Foreign terrorist fighters, potentially violent extremists, and convicted terrorists are discussed at district level by 'Local Task Forces' (LTFs), in which the various parties involved in security are represented.

Detecting these online networks is no easy task, for the simple reason that millions of messaging groups are closed to the outside world. It is also difficult to take action against this type of online contact network. Firstly, because taking action against one protagonist does not prevent the other people involved from continuing their actions and, secondly, because arresting one protagonist can also act as a trigger for the other members of the network.

Although some files have been found to be nothing more than online bluster (by so-called keyboard warriors), there have also been a number of cases involving threats where the protagonists were taking preparatory steps with a view to resorting to violence at a later date. Distinguishing between cases involving a real threat and those where this is not the case remains a difficult exercise for an intelligence service.

► **MINORS**

Over the past year, the VSSE has forwarded several files concerning radicalised minors to the police and the prosecution service. In some cases, these were minors who preached hatred and violence from behind their screens, adopting radical positions, while in other cases they were young people who themselves threatened to resort to violence. Detecting and preventing these impulsive and impressionable young people from turning to violence in time will be a serious challenge for the VSSE and other players in the security chain in the years ahead. ■



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ESPIONAGE AND INTERFERENCE: A MULTIFACETED ISSUE



Belgium is sometimes referred to as the ‘espionage capital of Europe’. Its status as host nation of the EU and NATO does make our country a big draw. To defend Belgium’s national interests and protect both its reputation as a host country and our own international relations, the VSSE has a duty to devote the necessary attention to preventing, detecting and hindering attempts at espionage and interference.

The fact that Belgium is home to a number of international institutions, in particular the EU and NATO, naturally arouses the interest of many intelligence services, which seek to obtain strategic information not accessible to the public and attempt to manipulate certain decision-making processes to their advantage.

Recent events have shown that, when it comes to espionage and interference, we need to look beyond the usual suspects. In its approach to the phenomenon, the VSSE makes a distinction between systemic and non-systemic actors. Systemic actors are countries that are totally opposed to the foundations of

our Western societies, namely a democratic political system that bides by the principle of separation of powers, free and fair elections and the constitutional protection of fundamental rights and freedoms. Systemic actors see these principles as irreconcilable with their own systems because they are detrimental to their own geopolitical interests, their dominant position and the interests of their political elites. Their aim is therefore to weaken democratic countries as much as possible, in particular by sowing discord both between these countries and within them.

Non-systemic players, on the other hand, are countries which, in principle, are not hostile to us and which even cooperate (deliberately) with our country in many areas, while at the same time deploying intelligence activities in areas which they consider to be priorities: keeping an eye on their diaspora in Belgium, monitoring or even intimidating opponents living in our country, defending specific economic or political interests, etc.

► INFORMAL INTELLIGENCE AGENTS

‘Spies’, by their very nature, are a motley crew. The main distinction is between intelligence officers and informal intelligence agents. The former are officially linked to an intelligence service and can therefore be considered as ‘career spies’. They are sometimes active abroad under diplomatic cover. Although they are officially diplomats attached to a diplomatic representation of their country, in practice they carry out (mainly) intelligence work.

The main advantage of diplomatic cover is that it offers a certain degree of protection: if an intelligence officer is caught carrying out clandestine (intelligence) activities, it is more difficult to prosecute them by virtue of their diplomatic immunity. However, they may be declared *persona non grata* and compelled to leave the country.

Intelligence officers can also operate under other, non-diplomatic, cover, such as that of journalist or sales representative. This enables them to come into contact with politicians, business leaders, etc. without arousing suspicion.

However, not all clandestine intelligence activities are carried out by professional intelligence officers. Some intelligence services delegate specific tasks to individuals or organisations without any formal links to the intelligence world, which we can describe as ‘informal intelligence agents’.

► NEW METHODS FOR RUSSIAN INTELLIGENCE OFFICERS

Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, many European countries have expelled dozens of Russian intelligence officers who were operating under diplomatic cover, generally by declaring them *persona non grata*. This joint operation, in which Belgium also took part, had a major impact on Russia’s capacity to conduct espionage and interference activities in Europe, at a time when intelligence-gathering had become an essential tool for Russia, in particular to gather information on military support for Ukraine or to drive a wedge between European countries in the run-up to the European elections in June 2024.

► EVOLVING TECHNIQUES

As a result, the Russian intelligence and security services have had to change tack and diversify. Intelligence officers now try to access useful information in other ways. In addition, the use of hybrid warfare tactics by the Russian services, including the orchestration of disinformation campaigns, is a secret to no-one.

The need for the Russian intelligence and security services to diversify their approach is at the same time a challenge for European and Western intelligence services who, in turn, have to adapt to Russia’s new *modi operandi*.

► ESPIONAGE AND INTERFERENCE IN THE CRIMINAL CODE

If the Federal Parliament gives the go-ahead, Belgium will have much greater scope to combat espionage and interference by foreign countries. Until now, these activities were only punishable if they occurred in a military or war context. The new Criminal Code, which was examined by the Parliament's Justice Committee in December 2023, will finally bring about change in this area.

This development is hardly inconsequential. Until now, the only method of intervention available was to bring suspects to court for other criminal offences. One example was the much-discussed case of suspected interference in the European Parliament.

► STATE SECRET

In practical terms, the new Criminal Code will make it possible to prosecute espionage activities, be it for the transmission, disclosure, reproduction or reception of a state secret. The same will apply to attempted espionage and activities carried out in preparation for the transmission of a state secret. To this end, the notion of 'state secret' has also been defined by law. In addition to classified information, this term refers to any information that is not accessible to the public.

In addition, anyone who actively engages in interference activities with the intention of influencing democratic decision-making processes (election results, voting in Parliament, awarding of a public contract) may be prosecuted if these activities are carried out clandestinely, i.e. without the knowledge of the Belgian authorities and with the aim of seriously harming national interests.



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The advantage of this indirect approach lies in the possibility of plausible deniability: if intelligence activities are detected, the intelligence service or state concerned can deny any involvement. In some cases, for example, members of the diaspora are recruited to keep a discreet eye on other members of the diaspora (opponents or minorities). The intelligence service in question can also invite/oblige diplomats or 'clean' employees of other bodies to cooperate with them on an occasional or regular basis.

All this complicates the task of the target of espionage or interference. When dealing with a diplomat or lobbyist, the target can, naturally, be on their guard, using critical thinking and the necessary dose of scepticism. This is far less straightforward when you are dealing with intelligence agents without overt ties to foreign actors. And even more so when the covert intelligence agent is part of your circle of friends or your family.

The methods used by intelligence services vary significantly. While, in the fields of interference and espionage, they make extensive use of a full arsenal of sophisticated technical resources (e.g. listening devices, cyber operations, hacking), the traditional method of finding,

approaching, recruiting and controlling human sources still plays an important role. This is why the VSSE has an active policy of raising awareness among institutions and individuals likely to be the target of infiltration or recruitment attempts by intelligence services. ■

► BELGIUM ON THE RADAR OF THE CHINESE INTELLIGENCE SERVICES

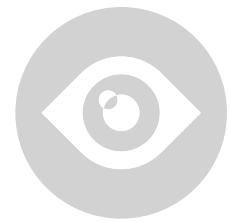
China considers its intelligence services to be an instrument entirely dedicated to the regime’s domestic and foreign policy priorities, which are set by the Chinese Communist Party’s efforts to maintain and strengthen its own dominant position. In other words, clandestine intelligence activities are an extension of Chinese policy and diplomacy, and serve the same objectives. This is why our position as host country to NATO and the EU institutions is of particular interest to the Chinese intelligence services.

ARREST

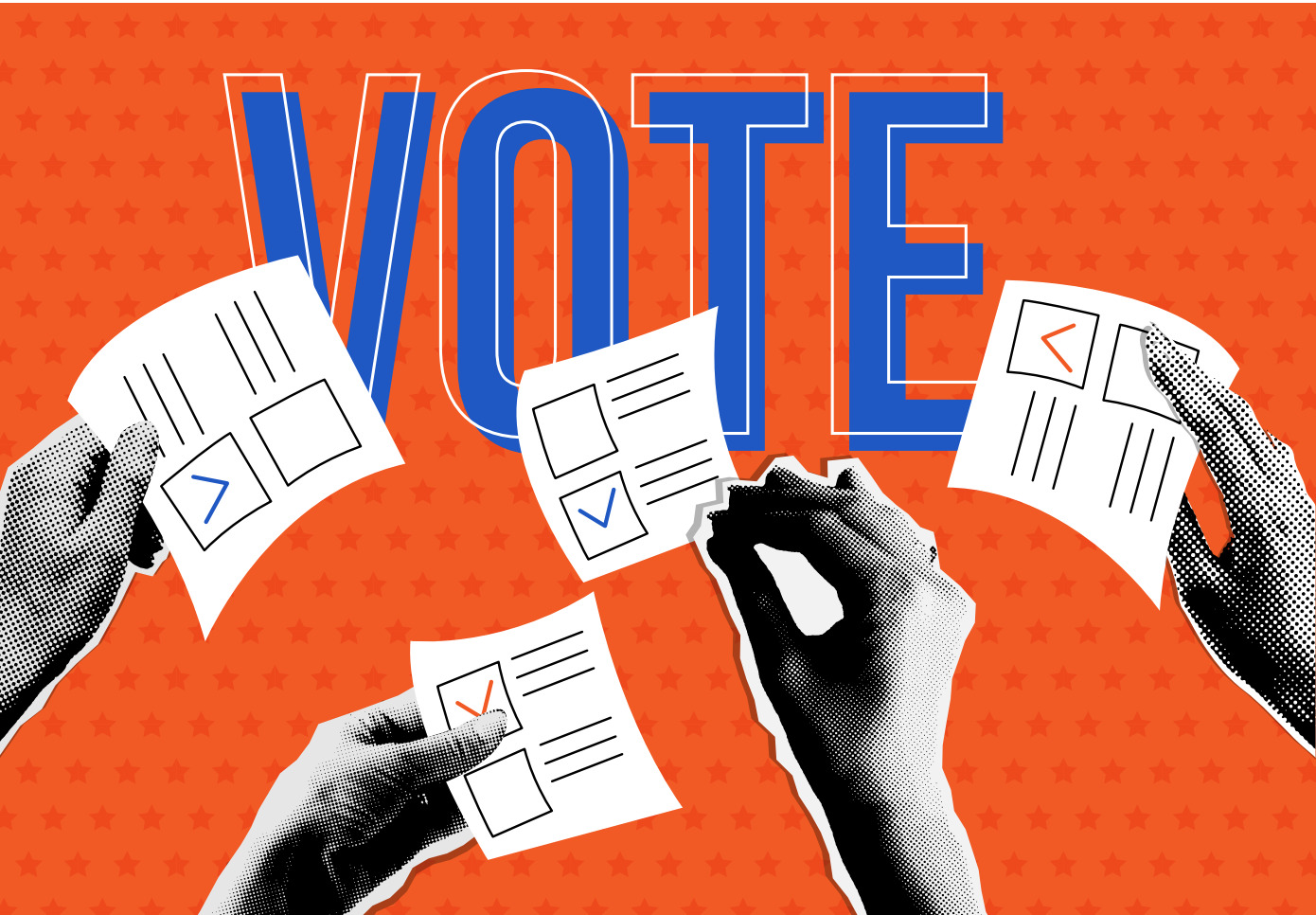
The way of working of the Chinese intelligence services has fundamentally changed in recent years. On the one hand, this is linked to the arrest of a Chinese spy in Belgium in 2018 and his extradition to the United States. On the other hand, strict travel restrictions imposed as part of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic also played a role. Travelling between China and Belgium was very difficult for a number of years. This prompted the Chinese intelligence services to review their approach. Since then, many of the intelligence activities that could threaten Belgium’s interests have been directed from within China itself. To avoid risks, the focus is on cyber operations, covers and the recruitment of informal agents. The articles published in the international media in mid-December about how China had recruited a Belgian politician are a perfect illustration of this approach. Offensive services such as China’s play on ego and use ideological or financial motivations to persuade individuals to cooperate with their interference activities.

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

China is also particularly active in the field of economic espionage. The intellectual property of Belgian companies is the target of Chinese intelligence services. The VSSE finds that hackers linked to the Chinese intelligence services are intent on stealing our companies’ secrets. As an important gateway to the European market, Belgium also attracts interest from Chinese economic giants. The VSSE is endeavouring to raise awareness among the relevant players in our country of the risks involved in doing business in (or with) China. Our service does so by informing them of the readiness and capacity of Chinese intelligence to coerce Chinese companies established in Belgium into cooperation.



DISINFORMATION AND THE 2024 ELECTIONS: WHAT DOES THE VSSE (NOT) DO?



Disinformation is an appealing weapon for anyone seeking to covertly influence our political decision-making process, stir up tensions or undermine confidence in our elections and democratic institutions. The costs and risks are low, but the potential impact is high, even more so at election time. In the run-up to the 2024 federal, regional, European and local elections, the VSSE is taking the necessary steps to detect concrete threats, warn our partners and counter the attacks if necessary.

Disinformation is not simply fake news, erroneous information or propaganda. It can be defined as clearly false, incorrect or misleading information disseminated with the deliberate aim of misleading public opinion or harming Belgian interests.

► UKRAINE, EVRAS AND ISRAEL-HAMAS

Despite historical examples of complex and sophisticated campaigns, disinformation is often remarkably opportunistic in nature. The individuals or institutions that spread this disinformation readily exploit existing frustrations or fault lines in society, or are quick to seize on, distort and exploit incidents. What's more, the rapid rise of generative artificial intelligence risks making their lives much easier.

There have been several spikes in misinformation in recent months. For example, a great deal of erroneous information and disinformation have surrounded the French Community's EVRAS decree on sex education in schools. The decree has been blamed for inciting excessive sexualisation and of being a propaganda tool for homosexuality and even paedophilia. The conflict between Israel and Hamas has also proved to be the subject of disinformation on numerous occasions in Belgium. After the attack in Brussels on 16 October 2023, our country was at the mercy of global online disinformation, with many actors distorting or misrepresenting the facts for their own purposes. These were often racist, extremist or anti-democratic messages. The ongoing war in Ukraine and the West's support for Kyiv also led to a large part of the disinformation from the outset of the conflict.

However, it is clear that the use of disinformation is not limited to certain actors or ideologies. It is also used by state and non-state actors from a variety of backgrounds. When anti-establishment sentiments are involved, it is interesting to note the surge in ideological flexibility. This can lead to violence, as shown by recent examples of isolated actors planning attacks with no link to a terrorist organisation. These lone wolves can be spurred into action by disinformation widely disseminated online and frequently reinforced in so-called echo chambers with people sharing the same ideology, as was the case after the murder of the teacher Samuel Paty in France.

► WHAT DOES THE VSSE (NOT) DO?

Combating disinformation is one of the VSSE's essential assignments when used by actors for the purposes of interference, extremism or incitement to terrorism, or when it constitutes a threat to our democratic order. At the same time, the right to freedom of speech remains a cornerstone of our democracy. So the VSSE is not a thought police, a fact checker or a troll hunter.

However, we do step up to the plate when domestic or foreign players abuse our freedoms to pursue their own strategic objectives. This attempt to manipulate our

information landscape undermines the very freedom of speech of those who wish to speak out and participate in elections or public debate with a legitimate voice.

The VSSE aims to gain an insight into the threat of interference through disinformation. Who is involved? What are their capabilities? What are their intentions? How do they operate? The VSSE will inform its partners and the authorities about its findings. To this end, the VSSE works together with its military counterpart SGRS and the other Belgian security partners. In the run-up to the elections, this work will be further intensified. In addition, as Belgium holds the temporary presidency of the Council of the European Union and hosts a number of EU institutions, the VSSE is also keen to actively develop international cooperation at European level.

► SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

No single service can combat disinformation on its own. Intelligence services are only one link in the chain when it comes to the battle against disinformation. Education, the media and civil society also have an important role to play in boosting societal resilience. Transparency, encouraging critical thinking and media education are crucial elements in this respect.

At the same time, it is incumbent on the VSSE to have a clear perception of the threat and to actively inform the authorities and partners. In the specific context of the elections, the VSSE is also committed to raising awareness among different stakeholders in future elections. ■



ACCELERATIONISM AND THE ONLINE COMMUNITY: BREEDING GROUNDS FOR RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM

The threat posed by right-wing extremism is also evolving and poses a challenge to the VSSE. The terrorist threat from these circles still comes mainly from lone actors and small informal groups. However, they are increasingly inspired by the phenomenon of accelerationism. Associated with right-wing extremism, this ideology is spreading like wildfire because of online networks.



► ACCELERATIONISM

The emerging phenomenon of accelerationism has been influencing right-wing extremists for some years now, and has even triggered a number of terrorist attacks abroad.

Within right-wing extremism, accelerationism is a strategy based on the idea that a race war is inevitable and should be precipitated (or accelerated) through terrorist violence. According to the theory's proponents, the alleged 'superiority' of the 'white race' will inevitably lead to victory. This

is why violence and terrorism are encouraged and glorified among accelerationist groups, which are almost exclusively active online. The resulting chaos is expected to provoke the collapse of society and precipitate the race struggle.

In recent years, this particularly virulent phenomenon has also gained ground in Belgium. At the beginning of November 2023, searches and arrests were carried out in six European countries, in addition to Belgium, in

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► INCREASE IN INTELLIGENCE FILES INVOLVING MINORS

As reported last year, the VSSE has noted a steady increase in recent years in the number of minors featuring in intelligence investigations relating to ideological extremism. The same applies to other issues, such as religiously-inspired extremism and terrorism.

Not only are minors featuring more frequently in the VSSE's files, but they also appear to be getting younger. While only a short time ago 17-18-year-olds featured in investigations, they now also involve 16- or even 15-year-olds in a limited number of cases.

Most intelligence files on minors concern young people who become radicalised online or incite others to hatred and violence. In a number of cases, these young people make threats using anonymous social media accounts. After identification and investigation, it often turns out that these individuals had no intention of resorting to violence themselves. In a limited number of cases, however, the intention was very much present and the VSSE informed the relevant judicial authorities.

connection with an accelerationist network. These were Belgian right-wing extremists who were in contact with foreign extremists on closed social networking platforms. Our service considers that, given the extremely violent nature of this phenomenon, the potential terrorist threat in the field of right-wing extremism mainly originates from this movement.

In mid-December 2023, in another case, five so-called preppers were sentenced to up to five years in prison by the court of Antwerp for preparing terrorist acts, belonging to a terrorist group and/or possessing prohibited weapons. These preppers wanted to prepare for the outbreak of a possible civil war by stockpiling large quantities of weapons, medicines and food. According to the court, this group of preppers not only made preparations for themselves, but also plotted to provoke a conflict through violent action, which concurs with the accelerationism described above.

However, it is not always easy for intelligence services to decipher the intentions of such actors from the outset. For the vast majority of them, the aim is not to use violence or carry out terrorist attacks, but to share violent fantasies and try to encourage other individuals. The VSSE is keeping a close eye on this phenomenon.

► THE CHALLENGE OF ANONYMOUS ACCOUNTS

Accelerationism is not the only movement influenced through online platforms. Other actors and groups linked to right-wing extremism tend to disseminate their ideology on the internet rather than at actual 'physical' meetings. This phenomenon was already very visible during the COVID-19 pandemic and now seems to be established. This is because of its formidable effectiveness: the use of anonymous accounts, which create a false sense of impunity, facilitates the dissemination of radical content. At the same time, 'pseudo-humorous' memes make it easier to join extremist discussion groups, where newcomers are sometimes quickly radicalised and incited to violence.

This trend challenges intelligence services to detect these radical discussion groups, identify their members and warn partner services before violent intentions can be put into practice. ■

THE PARADOX OF LEFT-WING EXTREMISM

Although left-wing extremists in Belgium have committed fewer violent acts in recent years, they still regard violence as a lawful and even necessary means of achieving their ends. At the same time, left-wing extremists are caught up in efforts to overcome in-fighting within their own movements.

In recent years, there have been fewer violent acts in our country that could be attributed to left-wing extremist groups or activists. Today, their actions are mainly limited to recruitment, demonstrations, the dissemination of their ideology and minor acts of violence. Telecommunications infrastructures are also sometimes sabotaged. Left-wing extremist groups still see these infrastructures as a means of oppressing the population. Another threat comes from the Black Bloc groups that sometimes infiltrate peaceful demonstrations and try to turn them into riots, leading to acts of destruction and direct confrontations with the police.

The absence of large-scale violent action in no way means that left-wing extremist groups do not consider violence to be a lawful or even necessary means of achieving their ends. They consider violence and intimidation against alleged fascists, 'the oppressive class' and the institutions or symbols associated with them to be legitimate.

► CONVERGING STRUGGLES

Left-wing extremism is a very diverse ideological phenomenon, essentially characterised by two dominant currents: revolutionary communism and insurrectionary anarchism. Revolutionary communism advocates a strong egalitarian state. Anarchists, on the other hand, see the government as an oppressive force.

Both currents reject the rules of parliamentary democracy, unlike the parties and groups of the radical left, which operate in a democratic context.

In recent years, clashes between the revolutionary communists and the anarchists seem to be gradually

petering out. The main reason for this lies in current topics such as anti-fascism, ecology, anti-racism and feminism. The advantage of these topics is that they appeal to a much wider audience, allowing left-wing extremists to attract a broader following. Support for the cause of Kurdistan in northern Syria and the Palestinian question also remain major topics exploited by left-wing extremists to disseminate their ideas.



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► INFILTRATION

The convergence of the two currents is also reflected in the push by left-wing extremist activists to establish links with each other across ideological boundaries. They also make no secret of their intention to infiltrate mainstream left-wing activist organisations in order to 'unite revolutionary forces' as much as possible. To date, the infiltration attempts have shown no real signs of being structured, organised or successful. ■



PROLIFERATION IN AN AGE OF DISRUPTIVE TECHNOLOGIES



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The spread or proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems, such as missiles and drones, poses a major threat to international security. Belgium has made international commitments to combat the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and it is important that we continue to honour these commitments. Moreover, the fight against proliferation is made increasingly complex due to new disruptive technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI).

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and the prospect of a new nuclear escalation that has thus resurfaced, the fight against the proliferation of nuclear, radiological, chemical or biological weapons and against delivery systems such as missiles and drones has suddenly returned to the top of the intelligence and security services' agenda.

Alongside Russia, other state actors, such as North Korea and Iran, are also working to modernise or develop programmes focused on weapons of mass destruction. Together with its national and international partners, the VSSE is making every effort to prevent these actors from acquiring the materials, technologies, know-how and knowledge needed to develop programmes linked to these systems.

► DUAL USE AND AI

So-called dual-use goods are also on the VSSE's radar: these are goods that can be used for both civilian and military purposes. This category also includes disrupt-

tive new technologies (artificial intelligence, quantum systems, biotechnology, nanotechnology, big data and autonomous systems). Alongside civilian applications, these technologies will also have a major impact on future military programmes and will probably also be used to develop weapons of mass destruction.

The VSSE also attaches importance to the risks associated with the intangible aspects of proliferation, such as the dispersal of know-how and knowledge useful for the development or production of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems.

► CIRCUMVENTING SANCTIONS

In addition, together with its Belgian and international partners, the VSSE continues to actively monitor compliance with the international sanctions against Russia, in particular by identifying mechanisms for circumventing the sanctions against this country and by obstructing them. Furthermore, the fact that Russia has withdrawn from various non-proliferation treaties and agreements forces us to remain vigilant. ■

THE VSSE'S ROLE IN THE FIGHT AGAINST ORGANISED CRIME



The VSSE decided in 2022 to get involved in the fight against organised crime. The aim? Increase the resilience of crucial sectors to infiltration by criminal circles.

In 2023, Belgium stepped up the fight against organised crime. Not only was the National Drugs Commissioner's Office (CNDC) set up, the VSSE also continued to combat organised crime. The VSSE does not intend to replace its partners, such as the police and the judiciary, which are on the front line in the fight against organised crime. The VSSE focuses on those aspects of organised crime that undermine the state.

Violence is not only aimed at those involved in the criminal underworld and their competitors, but in recent years has increasingly targeted people working in vulnerable sectors, such as logistics processes, customs services at ports, or even in the world of politics or law.

Escalating violence and the infiltration by the criminal underworld can lead to a loss of public confidence in the government's ability to put a stop to organised crime. This can lead to political or socio-economic destabilisation. This destabilisation is part of the VSSE's field of activity.

The VSSE will therefore focus primarily on a strategic analysis of the vulnerabilities in our country's system that are likely to be exploited by organised crime. This analysis will be carried out in close consultation with the National Drugs Commissioner and the federal police. By identifying these weaknesses in the system, the VSSE can raise awareness among its national partner services and make them more resistant to infiltration by organised crime. The VSSE has appointed a liaison officer for the ports, who will be the first point of contact for all parties in the port community and who can also play a role in raising awareness.

This analytical and awareness-raising approach is complemented by the traditional and proportional use of intelligence methods to better identify organised crime networks. These investigations focus on threats such as violence and intimidation or cases of corruption.

Finally, the VSSE also works closely with its international intelligence network to identify transnational criminal organisations. Obviously, this cooperation is carried out with even more intensity with countries facing similar drug problems. ■



PART 2

**THE VSSE'S ACTIVITIES
IN A CHANGING WORLD**

THE VSSE EXPANDS ITS INTERNATIONAL NETWORK



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Intelligence work is, more than ever, a global business. In many intelligence investigations, pieces of the puzzle are supplied by foreign partners. That is why the VSSE is strengthening its international network.

Belgium is a country at the crossroads of Europe. Extremists, terrorists, and foreign intelligence agents come and go as if there were no borders. This means that there are fewer and fewer cases in which the VSSE conducts an intelligence investigation without receiving pieces of the puzzle from abroad. Sometimes this may be just a detail, at other times it may be crucial information. Even in the case of investigations where the threat is mainly on Belgian territory, international cooperation is essential to protect our national security. This cooperation is not only important when it comes to sharing factual information, but also for exchanging best practice or learning from other services.

► THE VSSE AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES

The Olympic Games, scheduled to be held in Paris in the summer of 2024, are not only a global sporting event, but also, unfortunately, a potential target for terrorists, among others. Given the French capital's experience of cross-border terrorism, France's intelligence and security services are poised for every possible scenario. Many European intelligence and security services have been asked to send a liaison officer to Paris to shorten the lines of communication and get to the heart of the matter.

The VSSE will therefore also be sending a liaison officer to Paris in July and August 2024, so that it can respond as effectively as possible to requests for information or urgent investigations. The potential threats to the Olympic Games do not stop at acts of terrorism, as espionage, cyber-threats and extremist protests cannot be ruled out either.

A liaison officer temporarily posted to Paris has the advantage of being able to promptly inform and involve the right person and the relevant entity within their own department as well as within the partner service.

▶ INTERNATIONAL LIAISON OFFICERS

This is what drives the VSSE to systematically develop a network of liaison officers who maintain short lines of communication with our bilateral or multilateral partners. This is done in close cooperation with the FPS Foreign Affairs, the military intelligence service (SGRS) and the Federal Police, who have more experience in this area and whose foothold abroad is already stronger.

For instance, the VSSE now also has representatives in the United States, the Netherlands and, in collaboration with our colleagues of the SGRS, in Jordan. In 2024, a foreign liaison officer will be posted to Morocco.

▶ NATO AND THE EU

Thanks to its excellent collaboration with the FPS Foreign Affairs, the VSSE has an office at the Belgian diplomatic representation at NATO headquarters in Evere and a member of staff at our country's permanent representation to the European Union. This allows the VSSE to further consolidate its role as the intelligence service of the host country of NATO and the European Union.

▶ RAISING THE PROFILE OF THE VSSE

The permanent physical presence of the VSSE abroad or in multilateral organisations in Brussels is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the international relations maintained by the Belgian intelligence service. In addition to exchanging several thousand messages a year, VSSE staff have made several hundred trips abroad to discuss specific files, as well as for training and international benchmarking purposes. Meanwhile, the VSSE continues to play a leading role in multilateral cooperation between intelligence services. ■

▶ THE VSSE TAKES THE LEAD IN EUROPEAN COOPERATION

During Belgium's European Presidency in the first half of 2024, the VSSE will also take the lead in multilateral cooperation between European intelligence services.

Belgium has held the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union since 1 January. This also has implications for the VSSE. Although, as stipulated in the Lisbon Treaty, national security is not a European competence, the intelligence services nevertheless intend to further develop the mutual exchange of information. Experience shows that, in a growing number of investigations, some sometimes crucial information comes from exchanges with foreign partner services.

Like the official structures of the European Union, the multilateral platforms of the European intelligence services operate according to the rotating presidency system. Until now, the presidency of one of these platforms - the Counter Terrorism Group - has rotated concurrently with the presidency of the Council of the European Union. Since 1 January, the VSSE has held the presidency of the Counter Terrorism Group. This is a partnership between European intelligence services in the fight against terrorism.



For the VSSE, the presidency represents a unique opportunity to take the lead in multilateral cooperation. Our service intends to put relevant security issues on the agenda and, above all, strengthen mutual trust between European intelligence services. At the end of the day, one country alone cannot win the fight against terror or extremism.

THE VSSE'S 'AMBASSADORS' ENDEAVOUR TO RAISE SECURITY AWARENESS

It is often claimed that 'Belgium does not have a security culture'. The VSSE's Front Offices and liaison officers are doing everything they can to raise security awareness across many parts of Belgian society. They do so by organising briefings on a wide range of subjects.

MAIN TOPICS

- > Awareness of espionage and interference <
- > Travel security: security during missions and business trips <
- > How the VSSE works <
- > Ideological extremism <
- > Religious extremism <

Raising security awareness in Belgium has long been one of the VSSE's objectives. This is the task of the VSSE's Front Offices and liaison officers. These VSSE 'ambassadors' or representatives work in Brussels and in the main provincial capitals, where they keep their finger on the pulse. They are the point of contact for national partner services, federal, regional and local authorities, the police and public prosecutors, as well as companies, universities and colleges. Not only do they operate as an intermediary for the VSSE, they also organise dozens of awareness-raising and thematic briefings every year. VSSE Front Officers often give these briefings themselves. In some cases, they invite a specialist from the service to give a presentation.

The VSSE is increasingly asked to share its knowledge and expertise. Over the past two years, the business and education sectors, as well as local, regional and federal authorities, have been the ones that have most often asked the VSSE to organise briefings on how to behave during service missions or business trips to problematic countries. These briefings focused on the theme of Travel Security, with advice and tips on the



use of electronic devices, a topic on which the VSSE also published a brochure. Other questions from the academic and commercial sectors relate to dealing with doctoral students or researchers who might intend to leave Belgium with certain sensitive knowledge. However, there is also considerable demand for general briefings on what a civilian intelligence service does and does not do. Finally, we regularly receive requests for briefings on topics such as right-wing and left-wing extremism, religious extremism or terrorism, mainly from our usual partners in the field of security and from the authorities. ■

MAIN TARGET AUDIENCES

- > Federal and local police <
- > Political figures: federal, regional and local <
- > Local Task Forces <
- > Commercial sector <
- > Magistrates and public prosecutors <
- > Universities and colleges <
- > Aliens Office, Fedasil (Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers) <
- > Foreign Affairs <
- > Prison administration <

THE VSSE AND THE SGRS JOIN FORCES

In order to tackle the various threats we face, the VSSE and the SGRS continue to join forces. Thematic cooperation is being stepped up by creating joint platforms on extremism and religious or ideological terrorism. Staff from both services work side by side on these platforms.



As mentioned elsewhere in this report, intelligence services are faced with increasingly diverse and complex threats. To counter them effectively, the VSSE and the SGRS have joined forces as part of the National Strategic Intelligence Plan (PSNR in French). The Counter-Terrorism Platform, or CT Platform for short, is one of the most concrete and visible forms of cooperation. For several years now, staff from the VSSE and the SGRS have been working side by side within this CT Platform to combat terrorism, hereby creating a 'single point of entry' for national and international counter-terrorism partners. This platform produces joint analyses and intelligence briefings, which it sends to partner services at home and abroad. It can use each intelligence service's own data-gathering resources on a daily basis.

At present, this joint platform is evolving into two new platforms: one dedicated to ideological extremism and terrorism, and another one on religious

extremism and terrorism. These two platforms will work respectively as a single centre of expertise on terrorist and extremist threats of ideological or religious origin. Regardless of the origin of the threat, whether its objective is military or civilian.

► ESPIONAGE AND INTERFERENCE

Monitoring threats related to espionage and interference is becoming increasingly complex and requires ever greater specialisation. This is why the SGRS and the VSSE are also seeking to create synergies in this area. In the near future, hostile action by foreign intelligence services against Belgian interests will be addressed using a cross-cutting approach, within what are known as 'houses'. These are thematic areas of cooperation between the two services. In this context too, cooperation will take place regardless of origin (military or civilian) or target (military or civilian). This should enable a more coordinated and coherent approach to threats that could potentially undermine our democracy. ■

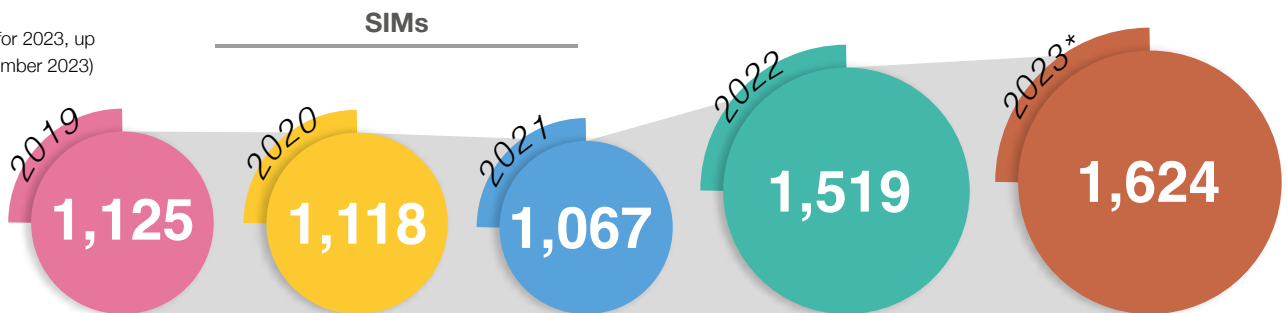
RAPIDLY EVOLVING THREATS RESULT IN AN INCREASED USE OF SPECIAL INTELLIGENCE COLLECTION METHODS

In 2023, the VSSE used an increased number of special methods compared with previous years. This is the result of, although not exclusively, threats from networks that are mainly active online using anonymous accounts.

In the first eleven months of 2023, the VSSE applied 1,624 special intelligence collection methods (SIM). This is already more than those carried out over a twelve-month period in all previous years. It should be stressed, however, that the number of SIMs in itself is not an accurate benchmark for assessing intelligence work: in cases or matters with an extremely well-placed human source, there will be less need to use special intelligence collection methods. In a world where threats are constantly evolving and targets are proving to be early adopters of technology, special intelligence collection methods can offer real added value.

For the record: the VSSE cannot use special intelligence collection methods at will. For specific methods, the VSSE must always inform the SIM Commission, which is made up of three independent magistrates, beforehand. For exceptional methods, the SIM Commission must give its prior approval after checking that the request is lawful and that it complies with the principles of proportionality and subsidiarity. In other words, for each request submitted, the VSSE must demonstrate that the intrusion into an individual's privacy is lawful, proportionate to the threat, and that there is no less intrusive means of achieving the same result.

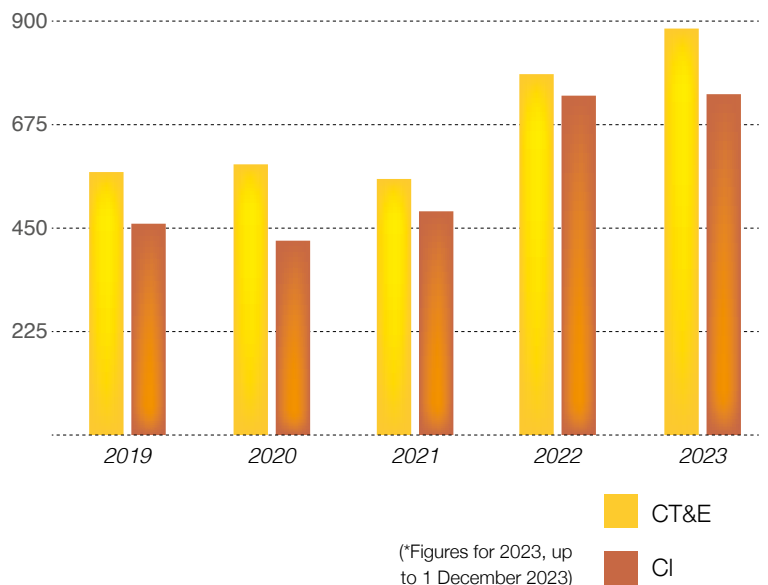
(*Figures for 2023, up to 1 December 2023)



Thematic breakdown of the SIMs

A thematic breakdown of the special intelligence collection methods used shows that, in recent years, a systematically higher number of SIMs has been used for counter-espionage and interference (CI), while the use of SIMs for extremism and terrorism (CT&E) has also increased.

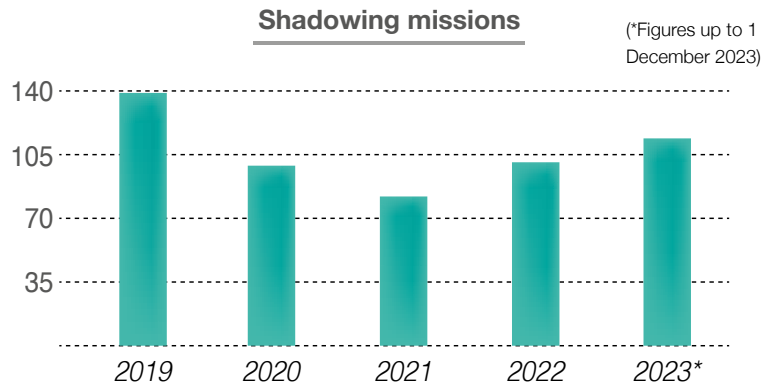
There is a significant difference between the SIM figures supplied by the VSSE and those reported by the Standing Committee I. The VSSE counts SIMs per operation. The Standing Committee I, on the other hand, provides figures for each article of the relevant Act that is applied. So 1 SIM by the VSSE could be counted as 2 or more SIMs by the Standing Committee I. ■



JOINT VSSE-SGRS SHADOWING TEAMS

When a foreign intelligence officer or a potential terrorist needs to be shadowed, this is done by a joint team of civilians and military personnel. The VSSE and the SGRS merged their shadowing teams several years ago. These mixed teams carry out missions on behalf of both services.

Observing people in public places - and especially if a camera or any other equipment is used for this purpose - is a special intelligence method requiring prior consent from an independent commission, the SIM Commission. In the first eleven months of the year, joint VSSE-SGRS teams carried out 114 shadowing missions at the request of the VSSE. This figure does not include the missions carried out at the request of the SGRS. One mission does not necessarily mean that the 'shadow' (the term used by the service to describe the tailing teams) only goes out once. Some missions can last several days, or even several weeks, if necessary.



With 114 missions over eleven months in 2023, the number of missions performed by the shadowing teams at the request of the VSSE is almost back to what it was before the COVID-19 crisis.

► LABOUR-INTENSIVE

It is worth pointing out that shadowing is particularly demanding in terms of manpower. Observing a person of interest 24 hours a day requires the mobilisation of three teams of 12 people each, i.e. 36 full-time equivalents per 24-hour period. It therefore goes without saying that tailing a person of interest over the long term is an almost impossible task.

The VSSE and the SGRS combined their shadowing teams for the first time in the spring of 2016, in the wake of the Zaventem and Brussels attacks. The teams of both services have effectively been merged since the autumn of 2018, and have been carrying out missions on behalf of both services ever since. ■



INCREASE IN SECURITY CHECKS CONTINUES



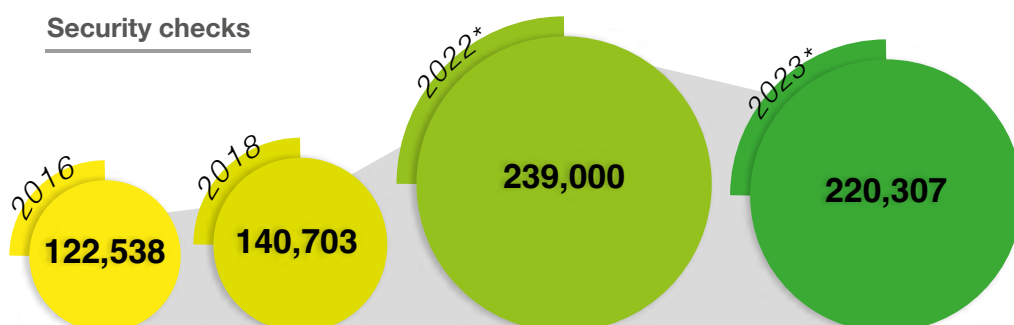
The VSSE is increasingly being asked to carry out security checks. Although there was a slight decrease in 2023 compared with 2022, it should be noted that the figures for 2022 were exceptionally high because of the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

In the first 11 months of 2023, the VSSE carried out a total of 220,307 security checks. These are generally background checks designed to rule out vulnerabilities of people who will carry out sensitive duties.

Compared with the first 11 months of 2022, this represents almost 20,000 fewer checks; however, the 2022

figures were exceptionally high because of the checks carried out on some 60,000 Ukrainian refugees. Leaving aside this one-off influx, the figures again show an increase in 2023. By comparison, in 2018, 140,703 security checks were carried out over a full year.

What is behind this rise? More and more services request the VSSE to carry out security checks and, in a number of cases, the frequency of these checks has also increased. Checks on airport personnel are now carried out every year, instead of every five years, as used to be the case. Similarly, the number of checks required in the nuclear sector and for people wishing to acquire Belgian nationality has increased. The VSSE will also carry out security checks on port staff. ■



(*Figures for an 11-month period)

THE VSSE TAKES THE LEAD IN EXAMINING FOREIGN INVESTMENTS

Since 1 July 2023, major foreign investments in certain sectors have been examined to ensure that they do not harm our national interests. The VSSE plays a leading role in this screening mechanism.

Because it is not always possible to separate economic investment from geopolitical considerations, and in response to European regulatory initiatives, the various levels of government in Belgium signed a cooperation agreement in November 2022. Major foreign direct investments have been subject to a screening mechanism and assessment by the Interfederal Screening Committee since 1 July 2023.

For the sake of clarity, this mechanism is not intended to curb foreign investments in Belgium. On the contrary, it is intended to ensure that such investments enable our country to develop and innovate further without being overly dependent on other countries. This is why screening only applies to certain specific investments that meet three criteria:

- The investments must be made in a Belgian company, by individuals or companies from outside the European Union.
- Only investments in certain critical and strategic sectors, such as critical infrastructure, cutting-edge technology or defence suppliers, are subject to screening.
- Finally, investments are only subject to screening if there is a risk that at least 10 to 25% of the shares (depending on the sector) in the Belgian company could end up in foreign hands.

After assessing the foreign investment, the Interfederal Screening Committee (which includes representatives from the federal authorities as well as the regional authorities) makes a final decision, either in favour or against, or in favour but subject to corrective measures.

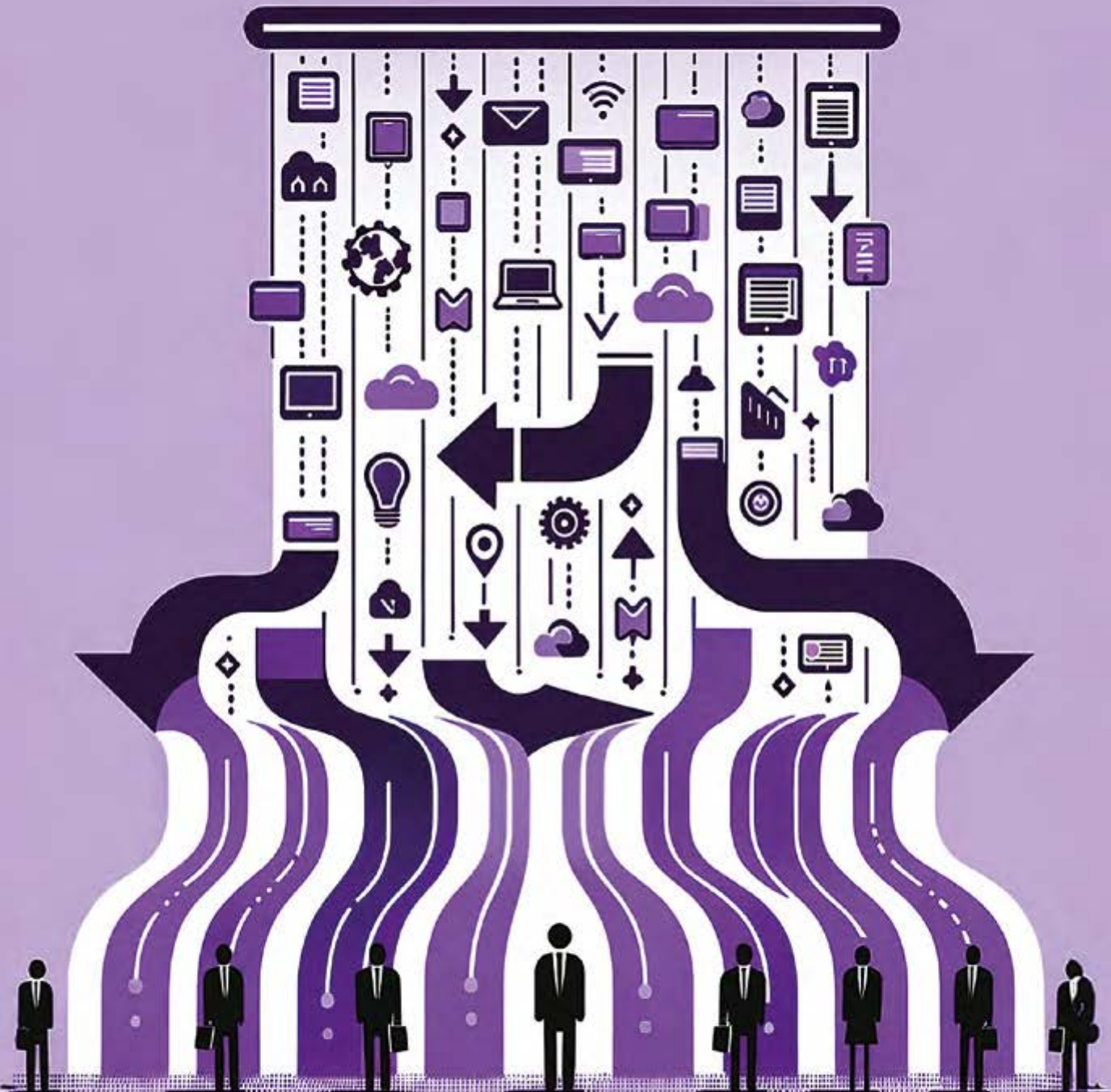


The VSSE plays an important role in this new screening mechanism. The November 2022 cooperation agreement stipulates that the Coordination Committee for Intelligence and Security (CCRS in French) must be consulted on any foreign investment under review. The VSSE, which chairs the CCRS, is therefore tasked with checking that new foreign investments do not threaten the interests it is supposed to protect.

Since the new screening mechanism came into force in July 2023, the VSSE, in cooperation with the other members of the CCRS, has already issued opinions on more than twenty foreign investments. ■

PART 3

THE VSSE: A SERVICE UNDERGOING CHANGES



A NEW INVESTIGATIVE MODEL IN THE FIGHT AGAINST 'INFOBESITY'

The VSSE has to deal with an ever-increasing flow of intelligence. To control this flow and process all these data accurately, quickly and on the basis of objective criteria, the VSSE has had to thoroughly rethink its operations. On 12 June 2023, the VSSE adopted a new investigative model.



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This is not a recent trend. In the space of just ten years, the amount of intelligence received by the VSSE has almost doubled. Ten years ago, in 2013, the VSSE received just over 17,000 intelligence messages from national and foreign partners, such as the SGRS, the Federal Police, CUTA, the NCCN, Foreign Affairs, the Public Prosecutor's Office, the administration of the prison service and foreign intelligence services. By the end of November 2023, the 33,000-message mark had already been exceeded. This is more than the peak recorded in 2016, the year of the terrorist attacks in Belgium. Some of these intelligence messages are short, one-page notes, while others are reports running to tens of pages or more, containing a huge amount of data. Last year, the VSSE carried out an overhaul to ensure that this flow of data, which borders on 'infobesity', is processed in a timely and accurate manner.

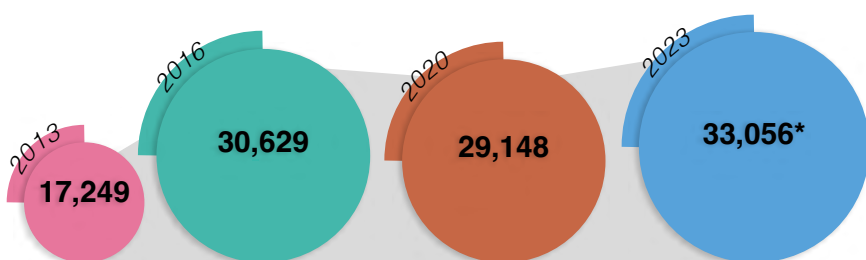
On 12 June 2023, the VSSE adopted a new investigative model in order to be able to process an increased volume of intelligence in a uniform manner and to respond more flexibly to changing trends. This model should also help the VSSE to objectively decide whether or not to open

an investigation. The implementation of the investigative model also comes in the wake of the recommendations of the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry into the 2016 Zaventem and Brussels attacks.

▶ WHAT DOES THIS NEW INVESTIGATIVE MODEL ENTAIL?

- Specialisation of jobs. Whereas, in the past, VSSE inspectors and analysts took on a number of different tasks in their area of expertise, since the new investigative model came into force, jobs and tasks have been more clearly defined. This is due in particular to the ongoing specialisation required by certain investigative techniques - particularly at a technological level.
- An objective approach to the decision-making process. Streamlining the way we work and standardising procedures make it easier to adopt an objective approach to difficult decisions about the use of resources.
- Uniform assessment of incoming information. Since 12 June 2023, all new incoming information has been carefully examined by one and the same team, in a standardised way: what is the extent of the threat indicated by the incoming information? How credible is it? What are the options to investigate? ■

Incoming messages



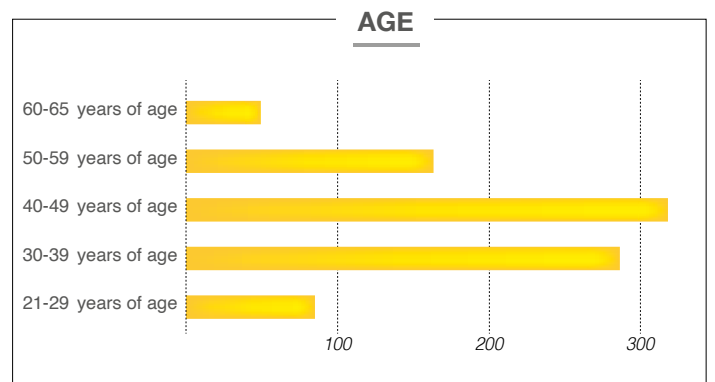
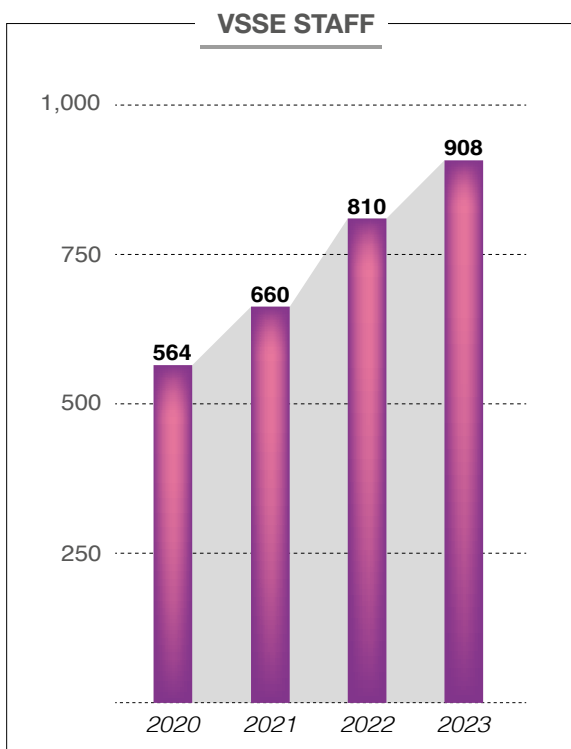
(*Figures for 2023, up to 24 November 2023)

JUST SHY OF 1,000 EMPLOYEES IN 2024

On 31 December 2023, the VSSE had 908 employees. The symbolic milestone of 1,000 members of staff will be reached in the spring of 2024. To have attracted and trained so many specific profiles in-house in the space of just a few years was altogether a formidable performance. One in four VSSE employees is currently undergoing training or completing their traineeship.

It is no secret that, for years, the VSSE's workforce fluctuated between 550 and 600 employees. Modest figures that saw the Belgian civilian intelligence service dubbed 'Lilliputian' compared with its European counterparts. More importantly, the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attacks of 2016 in Brussels and Zaventem also found that the service was too small to be able to carry out all its missions properly.

the VSSE had a 908-strong workforce. This amounts to some 100 additional members of staff compared with last year. 130 new colleagues joined in 2023, and, as is the case every year, others retired or left the service. With a recruitment drive planned for 2024, the milestone of 1,000 employees will soon be reached.

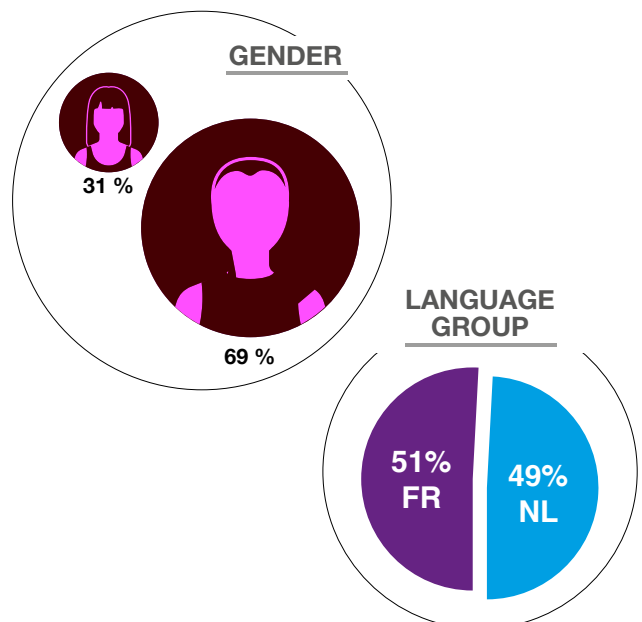


► 1 IN 3 IS A WOMAN

Currently, 31% of the VSSE's employees are women. There are almost as many Dutch-speaking (49%) as French-speaking employees on the payroll. People in their thirties and forties make up the biggest age groups among VSSE staff. Another striking fact is that the VSSE currently has 226 trainees, i.e. 25% of its staff. ■

In 2021, the then Minister of Justice announced a substantial increase in the VSSE's budget, therefore enabling it to almost double its staff to 1,000. The operation is now virtually complete, which is quite a 'tour de force' to say the least. It is true that it is not always easy to attract young talent to an environment where teleworking is (almost) out of the question. Those who do apply to the VSSE do so out of a personal belief in the social value and missions of the domestic intelligence service.

In 2023, the VSSE once again welcomed 130 new members to its ranks. In 2022, this figure stood at 150, while 96 more joined in 2021. At the end of December 2023,



A SINGLE SET OF STAFF REGULATIONS FOR THE INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY SERVICES FROM 2025



The VSSE, CUTA and the civilian staff of the military intelligence service (SGRS) will have the same set of staff regulations. This historic step should prevent competition between these three services in the war on talent and encourage mutual mobility.

Trade union and political discussions on this single set of staff regulations are still ongoing at the start of 2024. The aim is to conclude by the spring of 2024, so that the single set of staff regulations can officially come into force on 1 January 2025. So why do we need a single set of staff regulations?

► CLARITY

The goal is to move away from the multitude of provisions and derogations in existing staff regulations and to devise one standardised set of staff regulations for civilian staff working in the same intelligence and security branch, which will be known as the intelligence and security staff regulations. Once they have come into force, the same rules will apply to all employees of CUTA, the VSSE and the civilian staff of the SGRS.

► MOBILITY

The possibilities for mobility between the different services will be clearly defined and encouraged. In a break with the past, staff movements between intelligence and security services will no longer be the result of mutual competition. From now on, the aim of the new mobility will be to strengthen cooperation

and harmonisation. Whether the mobility is temporary or permanent, the services will have a single set of staff regulations governing all the procedures for exchanging staff, resulting in more attractive career pathways. The principle of the new single set of staff regulations is to encourage regular job changes in intelligence work. In the interests of professional and objective information production, it makes sense for employees to be regularly challenged and to not always do the same work throughout their career, keeping in mind that retaining knowledge and expertise remains extremely important.

► COOPERATION

It goes without saying that, in time, cooperation in the area of training will also become a matter of course. Staff from all three services will have to meet the same training requirements, and the easiest way to achieve this is to organise training jointly. In this regard, cooperation between the services will be given a major boost and, depending on the outcomes achieved, could be extended to more and more areas (in addition to HR and training, we could consider cooperation in ICT and in other areas). ■

THE VSSE DECLASSIFIES ITS RICH HISTORICAL ARCHIVES

Over the past two years, the VSSE has embarked on a major project to declassify its particularly rich historical archives in order to transfer them to the State Archives of Belgium, where they can be consulted by researchers and other interested parties. This operation is a result of new legislation on declassification.



Since 7 October 2022, the VSSE has been legally obliged to declassify its particularly rich historical archives. This involves checking whether the classification levels 'Confidential', 'Secret' or 'Top Secret' of the documents can be removed, allowing them to be consulted even by people who do not have security clearance. The VSSE also has an obligation to report to the Belgian Chamber of Representatives every year on the progress made in this area.

► THE ARCHIVES OF THE 'SÛRETÉ CONGOLAISE'

In 2022, VSSE archival staff and other colleagues declassified more than 400 boxes of archives from the archive collection of the 'Sûreté Congolaise' (Congolesse Security Services). These are the archives of the VSSE's sister service in the Belgian Congo up until the Congo's independence in 1960. More than 400,000 documents were examined sentence by

sentence to check whether the information met the pre-defined declassification criteria. Declassification is actually not possible in a limited number of cases: for example, when the identity of a human source is at risk of being compromised, or because the document was produced by another service, in particular a foreign intelligence service. In this case, the decision to declassify rests with the latter. In all, that year more than 400 boxes were transferred to the State Archives of Belgium. In 2023, the VSSE handed over another thirty boxes from the ‘*Sûreté Congolaise*’ archives.

Our staff also began declassifying the historical archives of Rwanda and Burundi in 2022. Members of the VSSE Archives & Documentation department have already declassified 50 of the 60 boxes of this archive collection. Three boxes in this collection remain classified, either because they contain documents from a foreign government, or because of source protection. This collection will be ready for transfer to the State Archives of Belgium in 2024.



► **‘INCIVIQUES’**

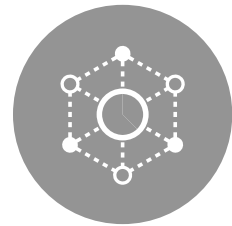
In 2023, more than 40 boxes of the ‘*inciviques*’ archive collection were declassified. This collection, comprising a total of 80 boxes of archives, relates to the so-called ‘*inciviques*’, people who, after the Second World War, were accused of collaborating with the German occupying forces. The transfer of this collection to the State Archives of Belgium is also planned for 2024.

In response to an external request, the VSSE was also able to declassify the archives relating to a major political crisis in Belgium known as the ‘Royal Question’ (15 boxes of archives). The transfer of this collection to the State Archives of Belgium is scheduled for early 2024. Once this is completed, the collection containing documents relating to the German occupation will be addressed.

In 2023, two specialised members of staff were seconded from the State Archives of Belgium to the VSSE Archives & Documentation department to provide day-to-day support with archive management: drawing up archive selection lists, assisting with document management and giving advice on digital archiving. A clear sign that the VSSE is very much intent on opening up its archives. The seconded members of staff of the State Archives of Belgium have access to all of the department’s documents and advise the VSSE on a daily basis on how to manage its archives. ■

THE VSSE: THE NEW GUARDIAN OF CLASSIFIED INFORMATION IN BELGIUM

The National Security Authority (ANS in French) was officially integrated into the VSSE on 1 January 2024. As a result, the VSSE has become responsible for protecting all classified information in Belgium. A new responsibility that is not to be underestimated.



► WHAT IS THE ANS?

Until the end of 2023, the National Security Authority (ANS) was a collegiate body made up of 9 services: the FPS Foreign Affairs, the VSSE, the SGRS, the Federal Police, the NCCN (National Crisis Centre), the FPS Mobility, the FPS Economy, Customs & Excise, and the FANC (Federal Agency for Nuclear Control). The ANS had a permanent secretariat, responsible for day-to-day coordination, with 10 to 15 staff members reporting to Foreign Affairs. This ANS was mainly responsible for issuing and checking security notices and security clearances for individuals and companies.

► WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE ANS FROM NOW ON?

On 23 February 2023, the law split the powers of the ANS between the Federal Police, which is responsible for issuing and withdrawing security notices, and the VSSE, which will exercise the remaining powers as an autonomous entity within the VSSE. These include issuing and withdrawing security clearances for individuals and companies. Other tasks include checking

that services that process and store classified information comply with security standards. This applies to IT networks and to the premises where classified information is stored.

► WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE VSSE?

Since 1 January 2024, the VSSE has been monitoring the IT systems, physical infrastructures, people and companies that handle classified data. Colleagues from the General Military Intelligence Service (SGRS) will continue to be responsible for Defence, NATO and companies working for Defence.

In other words, current ANS colleagues have been administratively integrated into the VSSE since 1 January 2024, although the ANS remains an autonomous entity that sets its own policies. The ANS will also be significantly strengthened within the VSSE. Some thirty new employees have already been recruited, and this number is set to increase over the coming years. ■

