



**2021-2022**

# **Intelligence report**

STATE SECURITY



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# INTELLIGENCE REPORT

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Francisca BOSTYN  
Acting Administrator-General

When I took over from Jaak Raes as Acting Administrator-General of VSSE in May 2022, the Russian offensive against Ukraine had profoundly changed the face of the world. The war, which is still ongoing, has rocked Europe to its very foundations. This conflict will have a profound impact on geopolitical relations for months, if not years to come. It is already casting a dark shadow over Europe's economy and prosperity. The knock-on effect on the threats to our country cannot be overlooked.

In this context of constant and worrying developments, collaboration, both with **national and international** partners, has become more crucial than ever, and that is also true for the intelligence services. VSSE has therefore stepped up its existing cooperation with national partners, with the creation of front offices. They are the official representatives of the VSSE and secure an even freer flow of information among the chain of national partner services.

The VSSE has also entered into **collaborative agreements** with some of its partners. For example, a new protocol has been developed with the Immigration Office, ten years after the previous protocol (2011). This had become necessary to keep pace with the growing areas of cooperation in the wake of successive immigration crises. In the same vein, a cooperation agreement has been signed with the FPS Foreign Affairs in order to improve synergies. An agreement with the Prison Service regulates, among other things, the content and legal provisions governing the flow of information between the two services. Finally, a protocol has also been concluded with the State Archives, which, in the short term, will join forces with VSSE with a view to reorganising its archives.

# FOREWORD

At **international level**, the VSSE is currently liaising with some 120 partner services. VSSE is an intelligence service that historically focuses primarily on threats in its own country. However, radicalised groups, but also organised crime networks, operate across borders. The protection of the internal security of our country cannot be considered in isolation from events elsewhere in the world. Events taking place elsewhere inevitably have repercussions for the protection of our country's internal security. This is why the VSSE wishes to ramp up its intelligence foothold abroad, with the appointment of permanent liaison officers as a necessary step. The VSSE already has a liaison officer in the Netherlands and the United States. Next year, an additional liaison officer will be appointed in a third country, which remains to be determined. The VSSE also remains committed to deepening cooperation with strategic foreign partners. Contacts have already been established at the highest level with some of these and information is exchanged daily.

To make our country as safe as possible, our service must also be able to operate under optimal conditions of efficiency and effectiveness.

During his tenure, Administrator-General Jaak Raes, together with Deputy Administrator-General Pascal Petry, launched a number of **far-reaching reforms** that we are in the process of rolling out. The VSSE is currently actively working on the implementation of a **specialised investigative model**. This means a shift to a new way of working in the course of 2023. In concrete terms, all information (human and digital) will be collected centrally and then optimally exploited according to a specific method. On this basis, more targeted measures will be taken to reduce or eliminate the threats we face. This new method of working should make it possible to trigger a swift response to the increasingly fast-moving threats we are up against.

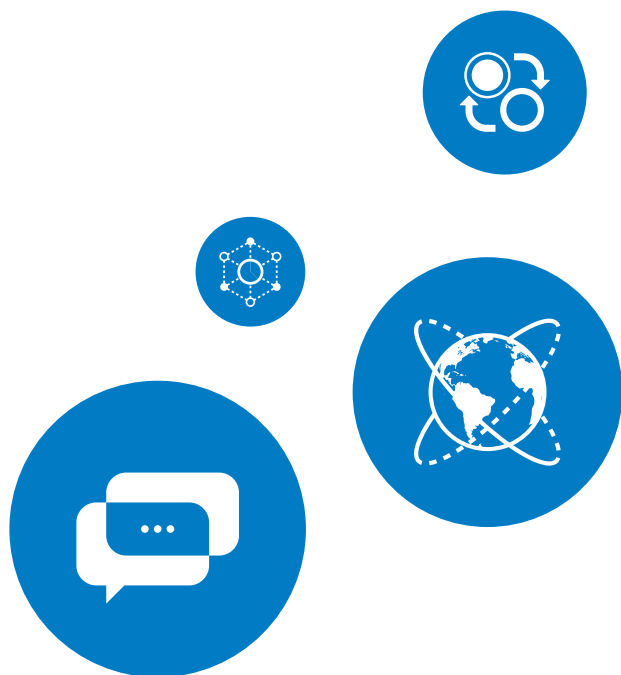
In parallel to the investigative model, **the ICT environment** is also being overhauled. New programs, tailored for VSSE, need to ensure that large amounts of data are entered, processed and cross-referenced more efficiently. The investigative model and ICT reform are the levers of change that will give a new impetus to the VSSE's work.

The VSSE has also embarked on **a number of other major innovations**, such as the introduction of the unified status the strengthening of the safety culture and the preparation of the move to a new building. The organisation's growth is also a major consideration in this respect. But more on this later on in this report, in the chapter "Focus on the internal organisation".

Major challenges therefore lie ahead for the VSSE. In this time of old and new threats, hand in hand with our internal team and external partners, we will make every effort to optimally protect citizens and democracy alike. That is our pledge.

We hope you enjoy reading about our work. ■

*Francisca Bostyn*





# THE 2021-2022 THREATS IN PERSPECTIVE

The threats to Belgium's interests, tackled by the VSSE in recent years in collaboration with its partners, cover a broad spectrum. Here is an overview of the most significant threats which we will explore in greater detail further on (see: Focus on some essential missions) in this Intelligence Report.

- **Russia's invasion** of Ukraine, which, for the first time in decades has exposed our country to a war on its own continent.
- **Espionage activities** by hostile powers, in Brussels, the seat of European and international institutions, which remain a priority concern for the service.
- **The latent terrorist threat**, persistent with a recent attack perpetrated by a "lone wolf".
- The ongoing activities of **jihadists in Syria** and potentially in new combat zones.
- **The worrying ideological radicalisation** of an increasingly young audience and a loathing of the government or the establishment.
- A renewed focus on **organised crime**.

## ► WAR IN UKRAINE

Out of European solidarity with Ukraine, and to stem the threat of Russian espionage, in 2022, several EU Member States, including Belgium, declared several Russian intelligence agents as *persona non grata*. The decision was politically driven; the VSSE provided intelligence identifying 21 spies who belonged to the Russian diplomatic corps in Belgium. The opinion of the VSSE was also requested with a view to the expulsion of 19 Russian intelligence officers who were active in the European institutions. These expulsions have severely affected Russian intelligence capability in Belgium.

## ► ESPIONAGE AND INTERFERENCE

The VSSE remains equally vigilant to other potential Russian intelligence activities and pro-Russian propaganda perpetrated through other channels. We are observing that some of those who, in 2021, challenged the anti-Covid measures, are now embarking on pro-Russian disinformation campaigns. Their ideas are driven by more of a general anti-government sentiment rather than any real ideology.

To represent its interests, China also continues to use a very broad spectrum of techniques to spread its influence, employed overtly or covertly in a grey zone between lobbying, interference, political influence, espionage, economic blackmail and disinformation campaigns, between which the boundary is often vague.

Undue interference perpetrated by other powers also continues to be a red flag for the VSSE. The recent interference scandal in the European Parliament is a case in point.

## ► NO LESSENING OF THE LATENT TERRORIST THREAT

In terms of terrorism, the attack of 10 November 2022 in Brussels, which claimed the life of a police officer, proves that individual actions, whether or not with terrorist connotations, cannot be ruled out. It is often more complicated to catch a “lone wolf” than an entire network.

When it comes to terrorism, the VSSE continues to monitor, among other threats, the movements of those who are still active in parts of Syria and other jihadist battlefields (for example in Yemen, the Sahel, or Afghanistan), as well as radicalised individuals leaving prison.

## ► RETURN OF CHILDREN AND THEIR MOTHERS FROM SYRIA

In the interests of the children and, in the longer term, of the security of our country, Belgium has decided to organise a mission to repatriate children and their mothers from camps in northern Syria. These repatriations took place in both 2021 and 2022. The VSSE supported each repatriation with its intelligence work. Information about repatriated women is exchanged within the appropriate structures of the security services (the “Terrorism, Extremism and Radicalisation Strategy” - STRAT TER).

## ► EXTREMIST AND RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGY

The VSSE works closely with its partners on phenomena such as Salafism or the threat posed by the Muslim Brotherhood, but also on the activities of figures from the extreme left and extreme right movements. In general, we are seeing a worrying rise in the number of increasingly young people falling into extremist radicalisation. This development looks set to continue in the coming years, alongside the trend towards (often legal) armament. Once again, ideology takes a back seat to a loathing of the government or the establishment. The risk is that a new health, energy or monetary crisis could worsen this trend.

## ► ORGANISED CRIME

Since 2015, the monitoring of organised crime and harmful sectarian organisations was no longer at the top of the VSSE agenda. With the means that the federal government has put at our disposal with a view to our further expansion, and through internal reorganisation, our service will also be able to address these issues to support the work of the federal police. The relevant incoming intelligence will be evaluated consistently and prioritised like any other intelligence (for example in connection with counter-terrorism or counter-espionage). In line with the threat assessment, the VSSE resources will be deployed where needed most, in close collaboration with our partners.

These are the integrated police and the prosecution service as far as organised crime, is concerned, and the CIAOSN information and documentation centre on harmful sectarian organisations. This gives us the possibility of briefing and supporting these partners as efficiently as possible without falling foul to competition or duplication. ■





## FOCUS ON SOME ESSENTIAL MISSIONS

### BELGIUM EXPELS 21 RUSSIAN SPIES

**Russian espionage and Russian interference are two potential threats to our country and to European institutions. Belgium expelled 21 intelligence officers in 2022, while the European institutions expelled 19.**

Espionage is one of the key priorities that the VSSE has once again highlighted in its strategic plan 2021-2024. Both the economic espionage where Belgian companies could see their latest technologies copied, and that of administrations which come across leaks of their internal and sensitive documents could have very harmful consequences for our country or for the international institutions based in Belgium.

As the capital of a country located in the heart of the EU and seat of international and European institutions, Brussels attracts many foreign intelligence agencies.





Just recently, our Austrian colleagues were investigating a former soldier who had passed secret information to a Russian intelligence officer. A search of his house found large bundles of banknotes still in their packaging, which allowed them to be tracked. Official packages have codes indicating the country in which the money was collected. The investigation revealed that they came from Belgium and that the Russian embassy seemed to have collected the bundles of banknotes in our country.

### ► EXPULSION OF INTELLIGENCE OFFICERS

Intelligence services can react in several ways to curb this espionage. The most effective way is to deport intelligence agents who collect information on behalf of a third country. In March 2022, the VSSE, in close collaboration with the FPS Foreign Affairs, drew up a list of Russian intelligence officers, all of whom worked under the cover of diplomats. 21 intelligence officers were then ordered to leave the country. Their presence represented too great of a security risk.

To prevent the expelled “diplomats” from being immediately replaced, the FPS Foreign Affairs decided to cut the Russian Embassy’s occupancy levels by 21 places.

### ► A STRING OF OTHER EXPLUSIONS

Belgium, in close consultation with the Netherlands, was one of the first countries to carry out these expulsions. This has served to bolster our country’s reputation as a reliable partner. In the wake of this historic decision, other countries haven taken similar steps.

The European Union has also expelled 19 intelligence officers, who were accredited to the Russian mission to the EU. In November 2021, NATO had already expelled eight Russian diplomats. Russia then decided to completely close the Russian mission to NATO.

### ► INTERFERENCE IN DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

In addition to espionage, Russian interference is another risk that our service is trying to contain. Belgian and European citizens must be reassured that democratic and decision-making processes are free and transparent. Whatever decisions are taken, they must not be the result of interference by another country.

In the recent past, there were strong indications of Russian interference, notably in the 2016 US presidential elections, the Brexit referendum that same year, and the e-mail leak during the 2017 French presidential elections. These are just a few examples, but each of them has contributed to further eroding citizens’ trust in their institutions.

This is why our service also devotes maximum effort to awareness-raising and resilience, of politicians and businesses, media and public opinion alike.

For example, together with its European colleagues, the VSSE organised an **awareness briefing** for the MEPs who sit on the INGE Committee (Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union). The briefing, which was well received, aimed to give parliamentarians who have a professional stake in the issue a better idea of the dangers and signs of Russian recruitment and/or interference. ■

## CHINA: A TANGLED WEB OF LOBBYING, INTERFERENCE AND ESPIONAGE

**China's activities in Belgium are not limited to the classic spy stealing state secrets or the hacker paralysing an essential industry or government department from behind his PC. In an attempt to influence decision-making processes, China uses a range of state and non-state resources.**

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, dependence on the Russian gas pipeline has sadly demonstrated that unilateral reliance on an undemocratic country in a strategic sector can have major consequences.



Yet our economic activities are closely intertwined with China - even in strategic sectors. This is one of the reasons why, in recent years, the VSSE has kept a close eye on China's efforts, openly and behind the scenes, to promote its interests in our country. Moreover, with the presence of a large number of major international institutions, Belgium is a very attractive target for Chinese espionage and influence peddling.

## ► GREY AREA

To represent its interests, China uses a whole range of techniques to spread its influence, employed overtly or covertly in a grey zone between lobbying, interference, political influence, espionage, economic blackmail and disinformation campaigns, and between which the boundary is often blurred. This makes for a tangled web of interactions, with many state and non-state actors harbouring ties with China. As a country managed with a firm hand, where very close ties are nurtured between government and business, this is a game at which China is extremely adept. The hold that the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party exert on companies allows them to make them part and parcel of their long-term strategy.

In addition to official Chinese diplomatic representations, appointed influence peddlers also play a role in this area, as do state media and lobbyists via their Chinese companies. The missions are doled out between these actors. And again, there is no strict boundary between who takes care of what kind of task. For example, Chinese officials are responsible for diplomatic contacts, but they also monitor certain friendship groups or scout for people who might be of interest to the Chinese intelligence services.

These so-called influence peddlers are often Chinese individuals who have built their lives here and made worthwhile contacts. Some provide their services to the Chinese government because they are sympathisers, while others may come under some subtle form of pressure.



## ► WELL CONNECTED

In addition, China also brings on board individuals working in and around the European institutions to look after its interests. These individuals cooperate because they truly see only benefits. The main benefit for China lies in the address book of these well-connected people. The European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Interference published a report in 2022 highlighting the delicate situation of former politicians or civil servants who suddenly find themselves on the other side of the table as lobbyists, for a sector they had themselves regulated during their term in office. In the case of Chinese companies, this is particularly problematic because, often, the people concerned are not aware of the close connections between the company or institution they work for and China's strategic geopolitical goals. ■

# THE FIGHT AGAINST FOREIGN INTERFERENCE: COOPERATION IN THE NAME OF EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

**Espionage and interference targeting international institutions on Belgian soil are generally associated with major global players such as Russia and China. However, as widely reported in the press since last December, the threat can also come from other regional powers that go to great lengths to infiltrate certain key institutions of our system.**

VSSE teams spent more than a year and a half investigating interference activities in the European Parliament, which have recently been the subject of press reports. This is the first case of interference on this magnitude transmitted by the VSSE to the Belgian judicial authorities. In connection with this case, the police carried out searches on 9 December 2022 in 16 locations in Brussels, leading to the arrest of 4 people. The case is still in the hands of the judicial authorities. The VSSE remains involved in the investigation to provide its technical assistance.



## ► REGIONAL POWERS

This case clearly demonstrates that the major powers are not the only ones to engage in interference and espionage. Past experience tells us that offensive activities against European institutions can also come from smaller regional powers. After all, the decisions of the European institutions can have huge repercussions. The foreign powers that go to these lengths know all too well that they can derive a real “benefit” in terms of information and influence. Brussels is a place teeming with diverse interests, thus justifying the VSSE’s close scrutiny in its attempts to prevent legitimate influential activities from crossing the Rubicon of illegality and turning into interference. Through its work, the VSSE, together with its national and international partners, secures the decision-making independence of these institutions that have their seats in our country.

## ► COORDINATED COLLABORATION

The VSSE enjoyed a smooth collaboration with its national and international partner services on this case. Coordination was open, intense and allowed for a particularly concerted joint action. Each stakeholder brought its tools, legal frameworks, angle of approach and specialisations to the table to secure the success of this mission. A wide range of methods were deployed to achieve a tangible result and bring a particularly solid case. An experience that proved both instructive and auspicious for even greater cooperation between the European members of the intelligence community in the field of counter-interference. ■



## 2022 IS A WAKE-UP CALL IN TERMS OF THE PROLIFERATION OF WEAPONS AND DRONES

24 February 2022 shattered any illusion we may have had that the threat of a nuclear Armageddon was a thing of the distant past. At the same time, the conflict in Ukraine illustrates the impact drones and missiles can have on the course of a conflict. That is why the VSSE is pursuing its efforts against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the technologies that support them, such as drones.

In the fight against proliferation, last year, the VSSE had its work cut out for itself in particular applying international sanctions against Russia. This came in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, when the international community announced sanctions aimed at preventing the export to Russia of goods and technologies that could contribute to the strengthening of the Russian military machine. Monitoring these sanctions against Russia is taking up an increasingly growing bulk of the VSSE's work.

Specifically, through its intelligence operations, the VSSE is striving to identify and disrupt mechanisms designed to circumvent the sanctions against Russia. This is done in close consultation with government authorities responsible for overseeing our country's exports.

However, the role of the VSSE is not limited to monitoring sanctions against Russia. As in recent years, the VSSE is continuing to track the threat of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their transmission systems, such as missiles and drones, from countries that pose a threat to our national security and that of our allies. These include states contravening international treaties signed by Belgium.

It has not escaped the VSSE that, in recent years, several countries have succeeded in modernising or further developing their existing programmes. This has prompted a drive by the VSSE, with the support of its domestic and foreign partners, to prevent the countries in question from acquiring materials, products,

goods or know-how likely to contribute to the production of biological, chemical or nuclear weapons of mass destruction, or other unconventional advanced weapons systems.



In practice, the VSSE endeavours to disrupt supply lines to the international offshoots of the countries concerned and to detect suspicious financial transactions. In addition, the VSSE keeps a close eye on scientists and students working in fields that are sensitive in the context of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The goal is to prevent knowledge obtained in our country from being misused.

Finally, in today's changing world, as part of its counter-proliferation brief, the VSSE is increasingly tackling the challenges associated with so-called emerging and disruptive technologies, such as big data, artificial intelligence, autonomous systems and quantum - or hypersonic technologies. ■

## ECONOMIC SECURITY IN AN OPEN ECONOMY

**The VSSE has made protecting economic potential one of the priorities of its strategic plan 2021-2024. Carried out in conjunction with other actors, this mission must be integrated into a more global vision of what economic security means for Belgium. The federated entities are responsible for determining Belgian economic policy, which can only be developed and protected by taking on board the three aspects of security, economy and diplomacy.**

### ► NOT A TIME TO BE NAIVE

Belgium has a very open economy. Its prosperity can, in part, be put down to this strategy. However, the latest geopolitical developments stemming from recent crises such as the covid-pandemic, armed conflicts and energy shortage, once again go to show that naivety has no place in such an open economy, which

must adopt resilient measures primarily designed to strengthen our economic sovereignty.

This has prompted Belgium to develop several control mechanisms to protect its economy, via a thematic platform in which the VSSE plays an important role.



## ► CONTROL OF FOREIGN INVESTMENTS

Not every economic investment is necessarily devoid of geostrategic ulterior motives. Safeguards must therefore be in place to regulate investments that could be detrimental to national interests. In this context, the adoption, in November 2022, of a cooperation agreement with a view to establishing a mechanism to filter foreign direct investment takes an important step towards shoring up economic security.

By the time it enters into force in July 2023, the VSSE will have already pre-empted matters and acquired the necessary internal expertise. For example, it has put together a training programme on the processing of economic and financial data and a specialisation in Finance Intelligence.

## ► PROTECTION OF PUBLIC PROCUREMENT

Some public procurement contracts can represent a security loophole when it comes to Belgium's national security. This is the case, for example, when these contracts give access to sensitive data, when there is a risk of espionage or strategic dependence of our critical or vital infrastructures on third countries with geopolitical interests that do not coincide with our own.

To equip public administrations along these lines, the VSSE and its partners contribute to the development of a risk analysis tool for these contracts and to a mechanism intended to reduce identified risks. Legislative and regulatory amendments are also currently under review.

## ► ACTION AND AWARENESS RAISING


One crucial step taken by the VSSE is to align its actions in the fight against espionage, proliferation and interference activities with the protection of economic and scientific potential. By combining these two essential missions, the VSSE makes a valuable contribution to bolstering the resilience of national authorities and economic actors by raising awareness, detecting offensive actions against them and joining forces with other partners to thwart these actions when intervention becomes necessary.





## SYRIA: TWO SUCCESSFUL REPATRIATION OPERATIONS

The voluntary repatriation of sixteen children and their six mothers in 2022 took place in the wake of a decision by the National Security Council (NSC). This is the second repatriation of children and mothers to Belgium. The first repatriation took place in June 2021. At the time, ten children and six mothers were repatriated to Belgium. Both repatriations met the criteria set by the NSC, based mainly on the best interests of the children and Belgian national security.



During an operation led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence, supported by the VSSE, the military intelligence service SGRS, the Belgian Coordinating Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA), the Integrated Police and the National Crisis Centre, on 21 June 2022, the Belgian government repatriated 16 Belgian children and their six mothers from the Al-Roj camp in northeastern Syria. This case illustrates the excellent cooperation between the Belgian security services.

### ► RECONNAISSANCE AND REPATRIATION MISSION

As with the 2021 repatriation, the 2022 operation was preceded by a preparatory mission to the conflict zone. The various Belgium security services provided support both in the run-up to and during the actual operation. For example, the FPS **Defence** ensured the security of the area and, together with the **SGRS**, liaised with the **National Crisis Centre** (NCCN) in Brussels, from where the operation was coordinated.

FPS **Foreign Affairs** maintained contacts with local authorities over several weeks. FPS Foreign Affairs also took care of the consular practicalities, the identification of the women and children by DNA testing and the issuance of travel documents. Throughout the operation, the VSSE and the SGRS provided all the support necessary to establish the ideological profiles (for example, to what extent the women still subscribed to the ideology of the

Islamic State). An individual threat analysis was prepared by the Coordinating Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA).

### ► RETURN

Information about the repatriated women is exchanged between the services. This work is carried out within the TER Strategy structures (the Extremism and Terrorism Strategy, which has replaced the Action Plan against radicalism since September 2021, Belgium's multidisciplinary Action Plan against extremism and the radicalisation process in Belgium). In concrete terms, this means that the women's situation is the subject of security-related discussions within the Local Task Forces (TFL) and comes under the scrutiny of the Local Integral Security Cells (CSIL) in relation to all socio-preventive matters and aspects touching on reintegration into our society. ■



## A CROSS-CUTTING FIGHT AGAINST ORGANISED CRIME

The world is changing, as is the environment in which the VSSE works, bringing with it new challenges. An intelligence service must also regularly question the priorities to respect when allocating its resources.

Is organised crime one of the priorities of the VSSE? Given the clear attempts made by large criminal organisations to trickle down into the very structure of our country, which would have a detrimental influence on the independence of Belgium's decision-making process, never has this question been more relevant. The rapid growth of organised crime in this country is a fact. The threat levelled against the Minister of Justice is an important example of the impact of this rapidly expanding phenomenon.

And, although organised crime was already enshrined as one of the VSSE's missions in our legislative framework (Law of 30 November 1998 on intelligence and security services), the terrorist threat had pushed this theme down the agenda in recent years.

It goes without saying, however, that the VSSE will assume its responsibilities and support the front-line players in this area. Nevertheless, our goal is clearly not to replace the police or the public prosecution service, nor for the VSSE to tackle organised crime on its own. The police and the prosecution service are and remain the central actors in this fight. The VSSE will roll out its specific expertise in harvesting and processing information. A complementary asset for the Belgian State in its response to this major threat.



### ► A CROSS-CUTTING APPROACH

How will the VSSE take on this work? The service follows a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, the VSSE will adopt an analytical approach to gain a global view of organised crime networks that threaten Belgium's interests. On the other hand, the VSSE will launch investigations into individual cases for which specific methods can be used. The VSSE will always seek to pinpoint the link between the activities of large criminal organisations and the threats under its surveillance: extremism, terrorism, interference or espionage.

Organised crime tries to find weak links in the rule of law with a view to infiltrating Belgian decision-making structures. The VSSE, together with its Belgian and foreign partners, will do everything possible to keep this systemic threat under control. Its expertise in the fight against interference by foreign intelligence services will be a valuable asset here, given that the same mechanisms are used for both phenomena. ■

## RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM IN BELGIUM IS ON THE RISE AND ITS SYMPATHISERS GETTING YOUNGER

**As elsewhere in the Western world, the threat of right-wing extremism is growing in Belgium and, with it, anti-government extremism. The radicalisation of young people is also a concern for the VSSE.**



Since the mid-2010s, the VSSE has seen an increase in potentially violent right-wing extremism in Belgium. After the attack on a mosque in Christchurch in the spring of 2019, the violence threshold of right-wing extremism also seems to have been lowered in Belgium – even if, for the time being, it hasn't gone beyond the stage of preparations, intentions or aborted plans.

At the same time, the VSSE has observed for several years that, in their rhetoric or actions, right-wing extremists are increasingly targeting the government or other symbols of the establishment: the press - which they call "main stream media" or "left-wing lying press" - academics, especially virologists, and, of course, politicians. More than ever, the government is made a 'scapegoat' by right-wing extremism, taking over from their other "classic" targets such as asylum centres, mosques or synagogues.

### ► COVID AS A CATALYST

Since the COVID pandemic burst onto the scene, anti-government extremism has become endemic in the Western world. The restrictions imposed to fight the virus only fuelled the unease and mistrust that was already simmering with regard to authority and the establishment. Deep-seated hatred of the government has been brewing in right-wing extremist circles for much longer. Over the past decade, right-wing extremists have blamed the government for its powerlessness and passivity in fighting what they perceived as an "Islamification" or "repopulation" of society. Some even see the government as a group that "sides with Islam" and that, in the context (or not) of a global conspiracy, is trying to replace "their own people" with overseas populations.

Sympathisers of these anti-government sentiments are not limited to right-wing extremism, but the right-wing extremist scene in Belgium has willingly seized on anti-government hatred to encourage protest, to persuade and radicalise other disgruntled members of society. Right-wing extremism thus played a major role in the mobilisation during anti-vax demonstrations, and in a number of cases, extreme right-wing groups played a major behind-the-scenes role in their organisation.

### ► THE ENERGY CRISIS

Since the outbreak of war in Ukraine and the resulting hike in energy prices, it seems that right-wing extremists are once again trying to stir up anger and hatred against the government.

Initially, the right-wing extremists felt torn over the war in Ukraine. They sympathised with the “white brothers” who were targeted by an armed attack. But at the same time, they could not throw off their traditional admiration for Russia’s ultra-conservative and authoritarian regime. Today, the VSSE finds that right-wing extremism is once again adopting increasingly pro-Russian positions, but without actually endorsing the Russian invasion. It attributes the rise in energy prices to a “useless war” “provoked” by NATO.

### ► IDEOLOGICAL SALAD-BAR

Deep hatred of the establishment could be a trend that will continue in years to come. It can pose a violent threat, as was seen in 2022 with the network of so-called “doomsday preppers”, who had built up large reserves of food, medicine, etc. to prepare for the end of society as we know it. They had also stockpiled large quantities of weapons and ammunition. The case is under judicial investigation.

Their world view is a mixture of elements of right-wing extremism, anti-government extremism, misogyny and conspiracy thinking. The network is an example of what we call a diffuse “salad-bar ideology”, each person putting together their own ideological menu.. ■

### ► RADICALISATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Another very real trend in right-wing extremism is the worrying radicalisation of young people. Belgium is no exception, as the VSSE notes that more and more young people are rapidly becoming radicalised behind their PC keyboard or via their smartphone, in some cases becoming hate propagandists and “keyboard warriors” inciting hatred and violence. The hate-mongering and outright violent graphic style and content of their posts on various social media platforms such as Telegram display some similarities with the glorification of violence by the Islamic State a few years ago.

Over the past two years, the VSSE has passed on several files concerning radicalised young people to the police and the prosecution service. In some cases, they were minors preaching hatred and violence from behind their screens, with radical Nazi and anti-Semitic views. In other cases, they were young people who were threatening to use violence themselves.

Detecting and preventing these impressionable and impulsive young people from turning to violence in good time will pose a serious challenge for the VSSE and other intelligence and security services going forward.



# VOLUNTEERS FOR UKRAINE: A POTENTIAL IMPACT ON BELGIUM'S SECURITY?

**Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and President Volodymyr Zelenski's appeal to Westerners to come to defend his country, approximately forty Belgians signed up to join the front line.**

It was difficult to predict the impact that such a phenomenon could have on the security of our country in the long term. For one, it is not illegal for a civilian to volunteer to fight in Ukraine. But it is part of the mission of the VSSE to anticipate potential threats. The service therefore analysed the phenomenon and examined the potential extremist and/or terrorist threat that could result from it on Belgian soil.



The potential risks for security in such an environment are diverse. A conflict is an ideal breeding ground for extremists to expand or strengthen their international networks, and is the perfect environment for gaining combat experience. Moreover, tactical and firearms training is easily accessible. A war environment also lends itself well to the establishment of future criminal and arms trafficking networks.

From an ideological viewpoint, participation in conflict can also have a radicalising impact: volunteer fighters come into contact with extremist individuals and groups whose ideas they can adopt. Trauma can lead to psychological instability in some individuals.

## ► FINDINGS

A combination of these elements could ultimately pose a considerable risk to the security of our country. To identify them, returnees were invited to a debriefing on a voluntary basis.

The VSSE was able to establish that the departures of volunteers to Ukraine had no impact on the global threat in Belgium. However, a very small minority among the approximately forty Belgians who left for Ukraine have come under particular scrutiny.

After reaching a peak at the beginning of the conflict, the phenomenon of voluntary departures has gradually dwindled. The number of departures and would-be volunteers has steadily decreased.

The Belgian authorities have been and are regularly kept informed of the VSSE's findings. ■



## LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES: ADAPTED POWERS FOR THE VSSE

In the period 2021-2022, new legislation was passed which equips the VSSE with new tools. This legislation includes measures allowing the service's agents to infiltrate and commit certain criminal offences, even in the virtual world as well as a law on declassification and legislation to better regulate the retention of telecommunications data.

### ► INFILTRATION AND CRIMINAL OFFENCES

A major development in 2022 concerns the introduction of a new legal basis for the activities of virtual agents. This allows them to commit offences in the course of their duties. The rapidly-changing threats and technologies required an update of the existing legal framework. Intelligence officers can already request permission to commit certain offences during an operation, but only in the real world. This was no longer adequate. In its recommendations, the Parliamentary investigation committee on the Terrorist Attacks stressed the need to extend the possibility of committing offences to a broader set of situations so that officers can be better equipped to infiltrate dangerous environments thereby reducing risk of detection. This is necessary to avoid being unmasked exposed online, to appear more credible or to gain access to the useful intelligence. With the modification of the organic law, agents are now allowed to develop infiltration operations in the real world as well as the virtual world. If necessary, this can be done using a false name, in a false capacity or under a false identity (via false official papers, a false credit card, etc.).

Another major development is that human sources will also be allowed to commit offences, either to improve their access to intelligence or for their own safety. Naturally, agents are not permitted to commit offences or infiltrate the virtual world without internal and external control, nor without explicit authorisation. As with the application of specific intelligence methods, the necessary control mechanisms have been set up. Here again, VSSE is therefore subject to double control. On the one hand, by the Standing Intelligence Agencies Review Committee. Infiltrations or the carrying out of offences may, at any time, be stopped if, for example, they are deemed disproportionate to the purpose of the action.

### ► DECLASSIFICATION MECHANISM

Until recently, Belgium had no specific legal procedure for the declassification of documents. A recently adopted bill now provides for such a mechanism.

The broad outline of the Act is as follows:

- For documents produced by a Belgian service, it is stipulated that at the end of a given period (20 years for a confidential document, 30 years for a secret document and 50 years for a top secret document), the author of the document shall evaluate on the basis of predefined criteria whether it is appropriate to declassify it, to retain the classification or to modify it. Either way, the documents produced by Belgium will be declassified after 100 years.
- Declassification rules do not apply to documents originating from a foreign government or supranational institution. Each government retains the sole authority to declassify its own documents.

### ► TELECOM DATA

In 2022, another legislative initiative concerned the reintroduction of the obligation for telecom operators to retain traffic and location data. Location data shows where the caller is physically located, while traffic data provides information about who is calling whom, when and for how long. In many police and intelligence investigations, these data have proven to be essential. They effectively enable these services to collect information and establish connections that are crucial for understanding networks and thus contribute to the security of citizens. As a result of the amended rules, operators will now be required to retain communication data in specific situations. This may be the case in places where crime rates are high or in crowded places, in areas where national security is threatened, in places of vital importance to the country or for the basic needs of the population or international institutions. This initiative will provide the right balance between privacy and national security considerations. ■



# FOCUS ON PARTNERSHIPS

## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS - A WIDER SCOPE FOR A BETTER INFORMATION GATHERING CAPACITY

**Threats on Belgian soil increasingly find their source abroad. To protect the country against these threats, the VSSE is looking further afield.**

The VSSE is an intelligence service that focuses on threats it faces at home and, historically, has gathered most of its intelligence within Belgium. However, the terrorist threat, has changed dramatically in recent years and taken on a more transnational character. Radicalised groups and networks operate across borders, both online and offline. In other words, we cannot consider the protection of our country's internal security in isolation from what is happening in the rest of the world: Belgium is not an island.

For several years, cooperation with the strategic services of foreign partners has been intense. Through these partners, the VSSE has received information in the past that has been of great importance for the timely identification of threats on Belgian territory. This has prompted the VSSE to develop its bilateral and multilateral cooperation and to also send its own liaison officers abroad.

### ► BILATERAL – WITH WHICH COUNTRIES?

The VSSE currently cooperates with some 120 partner countries. These partnerships range from formal contacts on the exchange of strategic analyses to - in some cases - operational cooperation. A directive of the National Security Council defines the framework within which cooperation with these partner services is possible. About 70 of these 120 partner countries have 'correspondents' in Belgium, liaison officers based in Brussels who provide a direct point of contact for the VSSE.

Moreover, in the medium term, the VSSE intends to deepen cooperation with partners considered strategic, depending on the priorities and objectives of the service and the issues being addressed.

### ► A STRONGER PRESENCE IN THE FIELD

In some areas, VSSE wishes to develop its information-gathering capacity abroad. This can be done, for example, by appointing permanent representatives abroad in countries that have a significant and direct operational or strategic impact on phenomena in Belgium. The first official liaison officers have already been appointed for the USA and the Netherlands.

In developing its international relations, the VSSE is seeking synergies with its direct partner, the military intelligence service SGRS (Belgian General Information and Security Service), both in terms of cooperation with foreign counterpart services and the appointment of liaison officers.

Consultations are also being held with the federal police and FPS Foreign Affairs on possible future cooperation. ■

### ► PLATFORMS FOR COOPERATION BETWEEN INTELLIGENCE SERVICES

During the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, State Security will chair two international intelligence cooperation platforms in 2023 and 2024. Although national security does not come under the Lisbon Treaty, this has not prevented the European intelligence services from creating, on a voluntary basis, permanent structures for transnational collaboration. The EU Council system of a rotating presidency has also been adopted for these structures.

For a service like the VSSE, these presidencies are important, because certain fundamental concepts in our ecosystem are put into practice and tested: trust, partnership, strengthening information exchange mechanisms and a vision for the future.

But what does this mean in concrete terms? Trust and partnership are basic requirements for close cooperation. In addition, it is also essential to have a good understanding of the ins-and-outs of our partner services' functioning. Holding a Presidency is not a simple task: Europe is diverse, as are the threats it faces. The VSSE is recognised as a reliable and serious partner in the world of intelligence, in Europe and beyond. We will ensure that we remain so.

We want to broaden our vision of the future based on the definition of strategic foresight provided by the European Commission: *"It is not about predicting the future; it explores different possible futures, alongside the opportunities and challenges they might present. Ultimately, it will help us act in the present to shape the future we want."* We will also apply this vision in the course of our exchanges.



## FRONT OFFICES: THE VSSE'S CALLING CARD

**The VSSE is keen to deepen relations with its traditional Belgian security partners and at the same time enter into new partnerships to further strengthen its links with the outside world. The key words are transparency and reciprocity.**



More transparency and openness, a more uniform approach to relations with new partners and a broader basis for the mutual exchange of information are the objectives pursued by the newly created Front Offices, which will henceforth be the faces of the VSSE. They will serve as the “diplomatic” service and be responsible for relations with partners. Alongside traditional partners (federal police, public prosecutors’ offices, CUTA, the SGRS), the VSSE also liaises with:

- The municipal, regional and provincial authorities;
- The business world (ports, sectoral federations, companies in sensitive sectors, etc.)
- The academic world: chancellors, spin-offs, etc.
- The Immigration Office, Fedasil (Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers), the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons
- Federal and regional administrations.

The demand for fixed contact persons within the VSSE - ambassadors - with whom information can be exchanged in confidence and to whom questions can be addressed, came from the field and was detected through a survey conducted among our partners. It was important for these partners to be able to approach the VSSE officially and openly.

VSSE staff members work mainly in the background, a modus operandi that is difficult to align with representative functions. The concept of Front Offices, which deal exclusively with official contacts, should change this.



## ► WHAT DO THE FRONT OFFICES (FOS) DO?

The Front Offices do everything in their power to raise the profile of the VSSE: by means of briefings explaining the ins and outs of the service and by raising awareness of specific threats, the Front Offices explain to potential partners what the service stands for. The aim is to make partners more familiar with the operations, limitations and priorities of the VSSE. What we do and what we don't do. This allows them to assess how the VSSE can help them and what they themselves can do for the VSSE. It also allows the VSSE to keep better track of what is happening on Belgian territory. These are not one-off contacts; the aim is to set up a solid and structural cooperation and a mutual exchange of information. Different threats such as espionage and interference, terrorism and radicalisation can be addressed. The cooperation should also help to improve our country's security culture.

Among the (new) partners of the FOs are universities. Our service already cooperates with universities and their spin-offs in the field of espionage. Universities can also support the VSSE with analyses of phenomena and, conversely, cooperation is possible for recruitment campaigns and training purposes.

There are also interesting possibilities of cooperation with the business community, mainly in the context of protecting the scientific and economic potential and countering the risk of proliferation. In the port sector, for example, via the FOs, our service works with the Local Maritime Safety Committee. Presentations and briefings will be given to federations across the sector.

In addition, the FOs are in contact with local and provincial governments, including governors in the context of anti-terrorism contingency plans. And in the context of the recognition of religious communities, local contacts can come in very useful.



### Traditional partners

The existence of the FOs will not affect the excellent relations nurtured over several years with our traditional security partners, such as CUTA, the Federal Police and the public prosecutors' offices. These are now integrated into a structural framework and the information flows, contact persons and liaison officers (also from our service) are clearly identified.

### Top of the agenda

In addition to recruiting new partners and developing synergies with existing ones, the FOs will also put certain threats or new phenomena on the agenda. In the case of a threat from a Salafist group, for example, the FOs can give awareness briefings to local task forces. Input from local partners can only help enrich the case.

## ► WHERE CAN WE FIND THE FO?

The Front Offices are largely annexed to the provincial posts scattered throughout the country: in Flanders - Antwerp, Bruges, Ghent and Hasselt; in Wallonia - Liège, Namur and Mons. There is also a Front Office responsible for Brussels, Flemish Brabant and Walloon Brabant. From these locations, the FOs can cover the whole territory. ■

# PSNR2022: A NEW MILESTONE IN THE COLLABORATION WITH THE SGRS

In 2018, the General Intelligence and Security Service (SGRS) and State Security (VSSE) drew up their first joint National Intelligence Strategic Plan (PSNR), defining synergies between the two services. Today, the plan has been updated to version PSNR2022.

The Counter-Terrorism Platform is undoubtedly one of the most visible expressions of the PSNR. This is a collaboration between members of both services, housed at the VSSE. The CT platform serves as a single point of entry for counter-terrorism partners.

The Platform has also shored up collaboration and coordination in other areas (processing human sources, international relations, legal services, etc.). The PSNR has also triggered a change of mentalities in the intelligence services, with the “need to know” reflex gradually evolving towards “need to share”.

## ► PSNR2022: FIVE AREAS OF FOCUS

The National Strategic Intelligence Plan, which has been approved by both Directorates, aims to take collaboration between the two services to the next level. Synergies will be nurtured in five areas:

- 1) A common platform on **confessional counter-extremism and counter-terrorism**.
- 2) A common platform on **ideological counter-extremism and counter-terrorism**.
- 3) The creation of joint centres of expertise, or **houses**, in counter-espionage and the fight against interference
- 4) A reinforced synergy in the field of **Cyber Intelligence**.
- 5) An interconnection of **ICT environments**.

## ► COUNTER-EXTREMISM AND COUNTER-TERRORISM

The existing counter-terrorism platform will be transformed into two new joint platforms: one for confessional counter-extremism and counter-terrorism, and the second for ideological counter-extremism and counter-terrorism. They will focus mainly on detecting, analysing, monitoring and thwarting activities related to both religious and ideological extremism.

In the light of recent findings that show that organised crime is not only widespread but also structurally entrenched, it was decided that both platforms would also explore possible links between organised crime and movements conveying ideological or confessional extremism.

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says Francisca Bostyn.

*“The aim of these platforms is to pool the specific expertise of the two services”, according to the Acting Administrator-General Francisca Bostyn. “Each service has its own identity, its own missions and responsibilities, and this creates complementarity. By working closely together, we want to achieve the best result to defend our Belgian interests”.*

Other synergies will also be developed, for example in terms of proliferation, training, instruction and permanent representation abroad.

## ► HOUSES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST ESPIONAGE AND INTERFERENCE

The synergy in the fight against espionage and interference will be organised within so-called Houses, or joint centres of expertise. They will consist of integrated teams that will devote their efforts to threats emanating from countries or entities.

## ► CYBER INTELLIGENCE

Cyber Intelligence is designed to contribute to the protection of Belgian interests and to provide reliable and actionable information on threats in cyberspace, whether obtained via intrusive means of collection or otherwise. Collaboration in this area must, among other things, also make it possible to define the global cyber threat, by identifying the adversary, its capabilities, techniques, tactics and procedures.

*“Thanks to the collaboration between the two services we will be able to apply a cross-cutting approach the actions of foreign intelligence services levelled against Belgian interests, regardless of the*

*“At the end of the day, both services defend the same interests: protecting the security and democratic freedom of each individual. A goal that we can better achieve together”*  
says Wim Robberecht.

*origin of the threat – military or civilian – or the target”,* aid Vice Admiral Wim Robberecht, head of the SGRS. *“At the end of the day, both services defend the same interests: protecting the security and democratic freedom of each individual. A goal that we can better achieve together”.*

## ► INTERCONNECTING ICT ENVIRONMENTS

To support the growing cooperation between the VSSE and the SGRS, the various digitalisation projects under development will still have to be synchronised. The final objective being to interconnect the IT environments of the two services. ■



A top-down view of several hands of different skin tones assembling large, colorful plastic gears (yellow, green, pink, blue, red) on a dark wooden table. In the background, there are some papers and a small bar chart.

# FOCUS ON INTERNAL ORGANISATION

## TRAINING VSSE OFFICERS

**Although the nature of the activities that intelligence services carry out is often discreet, it will come as no surprise to the general public that their officers also need to be trained.**

Some of these training academies have entered the collective conscience thanks to novels and films, just think of the CIA's 'The Farm' or the FBI's 'Quantico' in the United States, the premises of the DGSE on Boulevard Mortier in 'The Bureau' or James Bond retaking his aptitude tests in 'Skyfall'.

At the VSSE too, future intelligence officers are prepared to take on all the duties entrusted to them, although the infrastructure of our service is much more modest, to say the least. However, in-house training is crucial: most of the knowledge required to perform our duties is taught at the VSSE and only at the VSSE.

What kind of knowledge? Think for instance of the techniques needed to carry out surveillance on foot or by car, the required skills to install a technical device that remains invisible even to the most seasoned experts, the ability to convince human sources to cooperate with our service or the ability of analysts to integrate a significant amount of data using tried-and-tested techniques, among others.

Thanks to the Government's green light, in 2021 the VSSE received additional resources for staff recruitment. This has resulted in a far-reaching reorganisation of the in-house training department. The existing training programme has been thoroughly revamped to be more efficient and concise, some types of training that used to be outsourced are being offered in-house again, while other training courses had to be created from scratch.

This new approach allowed the VSSE to welcome five training sessions of officers and one training session of analysts in 2021.

As mentioned above, the courses are given by VSSE specialists. This requires a great deal of investment from the entire organisation, as these experts have to take time off from certain tasks in order to train the new generations.

In addition to basic and in-house training, more than 11,000 hours of training were provided to officers by academic institutions or private firms. ■



**The principle of a unified status common to the VSSE, CUTA and SGRS civilian staff was discussed for the first time by the parliamentary committee of inquiry into the terrorist attacks in Brussels. It recommended for that intelligence and security services working together on a daily basis (the SGRS, CUTA and VSSE on the one hand, CUTA and NCCN on the other) should be granted one unified status. The current situation hampers efficient cooperation, prevents mobility between services and even creates competition when it comes to recruitment or career development.**

This unified status is laid down in the government agreement of October 2020. The following month, the services concerned drafted a **mission statement**, a reference operational framework for the working group was set up subsequently. This working group brought together representatives from the VSSE, SGRS and CUTA, and HR specialists from FPS Home Affairs, HR Defence and BOSA. The National Crisis Centre (NCCN) has joined the talks since March 2021.

## ► TWO MISSIONS

The working group met some sixty times between January 2021 and July 2022, resulting in the proposal, on 11 July 2022, for a draft Royal Decree that draws the concrete outlines of a new unified status. The draft Royal Decree establishes a basic status for new employees and thus defines the rules that will govern all members of the services concerned. It introduces the following innovations:

- A single frame of reference for all staff, regardless of their parent service or current function.
- An identical classification of all staff in all the services.
- Broader career development opportunities for employees in the different services:
  - Via internal mobility;
  - Via mobility between the different services that share the unified status.

In terms of mobility, both the concrete opportunities and the corresponding training possibilities will clearly increase.

On 21 July 2022, the text, together with comments from the Directorates of the services concerned was transmitted to the strategic units of the Departments of Home Affairs, Defence, Justice and the FPS Strategy and Support BOSA. These political cabinets are currently seeking political agreement for a first discussion in the Council of Ministers.

Then the second mission can begin: to define the transitional measures for all staff already employed by the services involved. How will they be integrated into the new status? How will their careers develop in the short and long term? Answers will have to be found to all these questions. And these will also have to be negotiated with the trade unions.

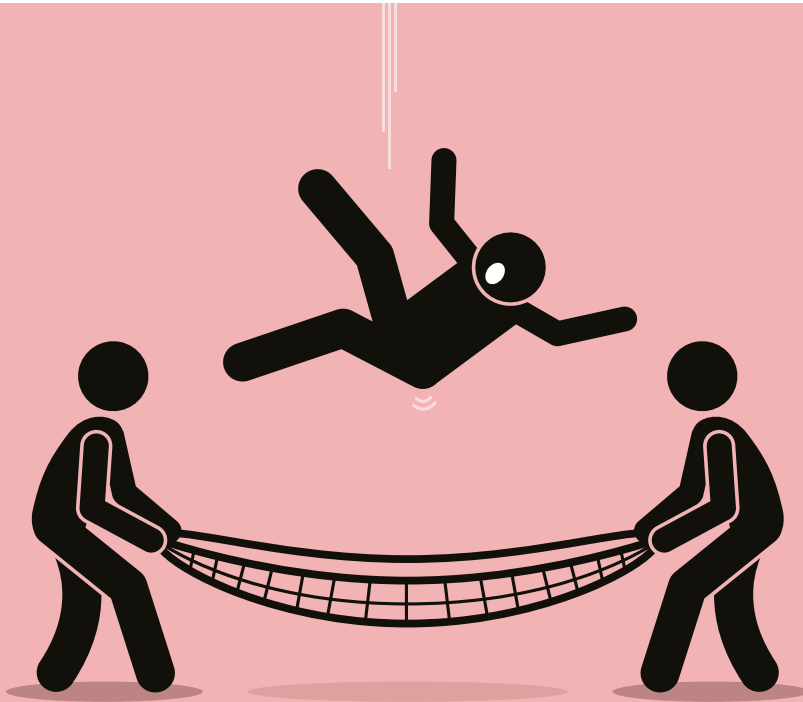
## ► WHAT'S NEXT?

There is still a long way to go before reaching a unified status. Formal negotiations with the trade unions are due to be held from the beginning of 2023 and different opinions still have to be obtained (from the Council of State and the Inspectorate of Finance among others).

According to the provisional timetable, the unified status should be technically and legally completed by mid-2023 and then enter into force as soon as possible. The goal is for the new statute to be put into practice at the beginning of 2024. ■

## THE VSSE AIMS TO IMPROVE SECURITY CULTURE

To meet all future security challenges, VSSE has set up a specialised “Security” pillar.



Since the Paris and Brussels attacks, awareness of the security risks and preventive role the VSSE can play in this area has reached another level. This finding was recently confirmed by a survey conducted among the VSSE's main partners. Moreover, there is a clear demand among some public bodies for a comprehensive security policy encompassing clear procedures for the security of classified and non-classified information.

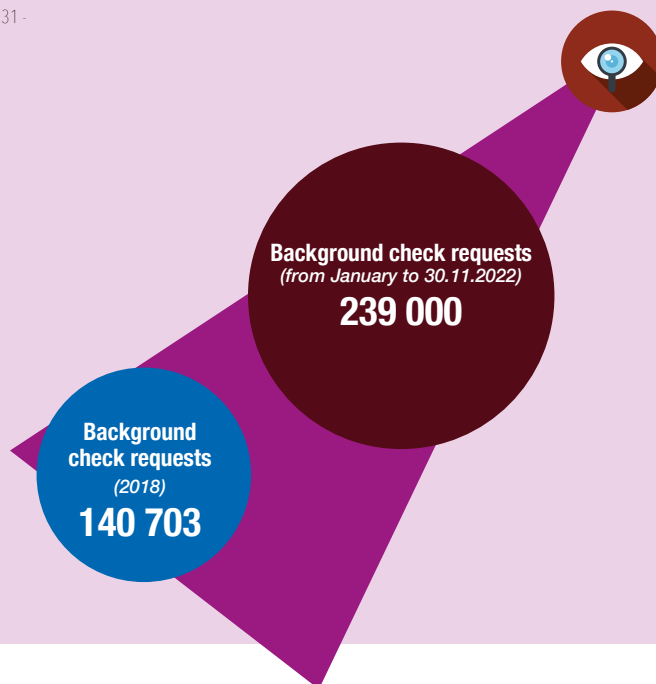
The VSSE has therefore made improving the security culture a priority of its 2021-2024 strategic plan. In response to the numerous initiatives aimed both at improving the internal security of its own service and at heightening security culture in Belgium overall, in June 2021, VSSE set up a specialised «Security» pillar. In concrete terms, the VSSE will broaden the scope of its existing activities, but also take on new ones. These tasks include:

### ► CONSULTATION AND PREVENTION

For years, the VSSE has been supporting public institutions with their handling of classified information. Starting in 2023, the service will also play a more proactive role in supporting its partners' security policies. In doing so, the VSSE will also boost its external communication. It will inform the general public of the threats it is monitoring, while respecting the discretion inherent to its work. The VSSE will also ramp up its technical expertise in order to provide tailor-made security advice to its partners.

## ► SECURITY CHECKS

For several years now, the VSSE has seen an increased demand for security checks. This trend is set to continue and may even grow. Before assigning a candidate to a sensitive role, some services are increasingly using due diligence to address certain vulnerabilities. Customs and Excise or SNCB are examples of services that submit systematic background check files. The figures speak for themselves: the total number of requests for background checks has increased from 140 703 in 2018 to almost 239 000 in the first eleven months of 2022.



## ► INTEGRATION OF THE ANS WITHIN THE VSSE

Building on the government agreement and the decision of the National Security Council (NSC) of 23 February 2022, the National Security Authority (ANS) will be reformed. The ANS is a collegial service currently composed of representatives of nine different services (FPS Foreign Affairs, the VSSE and the SGRS, the Federal Police (FEDPOL), the National Crisis Centre (NCCN), FPS Mobility and Transport, Customs and Excise, FPS Economy and the Federal Agency for Nuclear Control (AFCN). Day-to-day coordination is entrusted to a secretariat under the FPS Foreign Affairs. From January 2024, the ANS will be integrated into the VSSE.



From such time, the VSSE will be responsible for protecting all classified information in Belgium. The amendments to the law of 11 December 1998 will formalise the different dimensions of the protection of information, in accordance with the international guidelines applicable in Belgium.

The VSSE will thus be in charge of protecting classified information, with regard to both national and international partners - in particular through the approval or rejection of communication and information systems and cryptographic products. It will also be tasked with issuing, modifying, suspending and revoking security clearances. Ultimately, the VSSE will also be responsible for approving and rejecting physical facilities where classified information is stored.

Joining the ANS is an opportunity for the VSSE that will require a significant effort. The stakes are high.

However, the future National Security Authority will no longer be tasked with issuing or withdrawing security certificates and notices. These powers will be transferred to the Federal Police, whose decisions will be informed by the checks carried out by its own services, the VSSE and the SGRS. ■



## GROWTH, RECRUITMENT AND A NEW BUILDING THE VSSE AIMS FOR A WORKFORCE OF 1000 BY 2024

**In 2021, the VSSE launched a major recruitment campaign that has already resulted in 96 new employees being hired in 2021 and 150 in 2022. At the end of 2022, VSSE had a workforce of 810.**

On 10 June 2021, the Minister of Justice announced during a visit to the VSSE a substantial increase in the organisation's budget, allowing it to substantially increase its staffing levels.

On 29 September 2021, the VSSE launched a first recruitment process to create a generic pool of inspectors with various skills in different areas: technical, scientific, economic, IT, etc.

The call for applications was supported by an extensive information campaign that generated a lot of media interest. In addition, both the FPS Justice and Selor spread the word on their respective social networks and the VSSE even posted a quiz to its website. It tested the qualities that new inspectors need (e.g. visual and auditory memory).



As a result 4535 applications were registered (compared to 3894 in 2018) and a pool of 1231 applicants was created (746 FR and 485 NL).

In addition, the content of the generic tests was adapted to better fit VSSE's context (situational judgement test in particular). The objective was to build up a large pool in order to have a bigger base for the next phase, screening. This is the phase that assesses the **skills required** to be an officer.

### ► RECRUITMENT POOL

These specific screenings took place in 2022 for different functions: data officers, technical officers but also surveillance officers. Candidates from the general recruitment pool who expressed an interest in these vacancies first took PC tests. The top-ranked candidates then had to pass an interview with the jury and one or more specific tests (e.g. data mining, observation test, etc.).

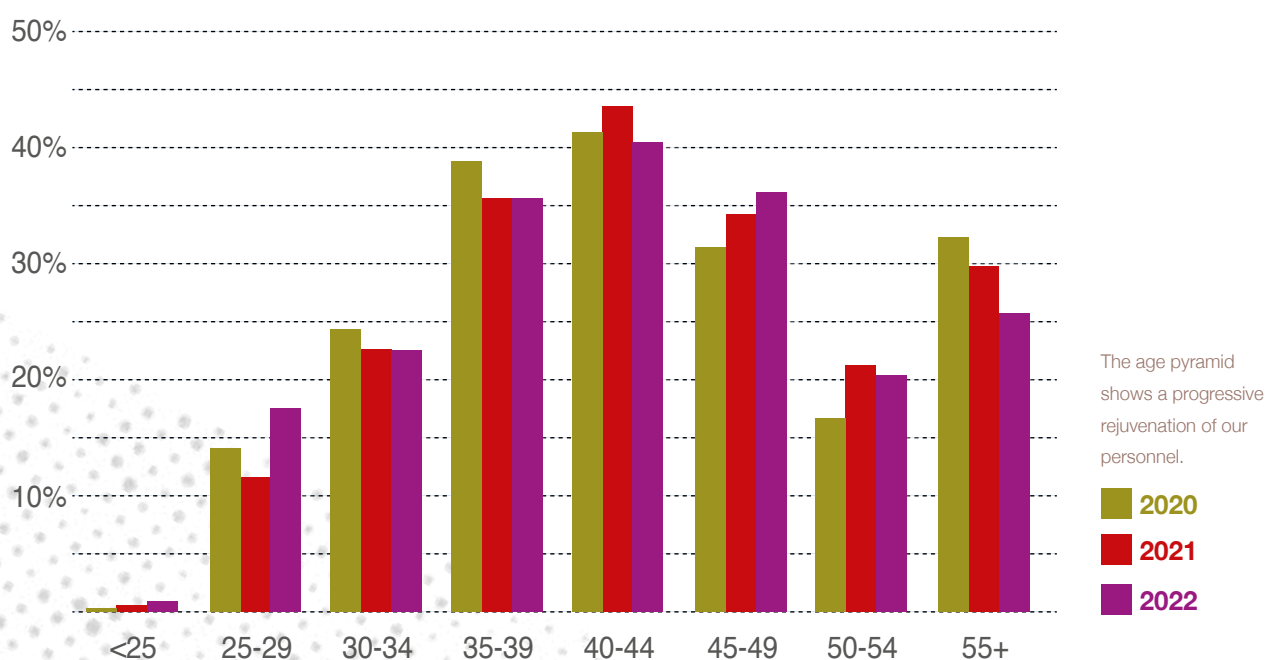
Between 1 January and 1 December 2022, 150 new staff members were hired. 96 of them were selected from the recruitment pool built up in 2021. The remaining 54 employees were selected from other Selor recruitment pools. In 2022, the intelligence functions were particularly strengthened, with 113 of the 150 people recruited taking up such functions. At the end of 2022, the VSSE had a workforce of 810.

These new employees started working for the VSSE in successive waves in 2022 in order to be able to welcome and train them in the best possible conditions.

### ► A CONSTANT SEARCH FOR NEW TALENT

**Recruitment will continue** over the next few years. A new drive to build up a generic pool will be launched **in 2023**. This will see the VSSE reaching its goal of **1000** employees by the end of 2024.

The new vacancies will be published systematically on our website [www.vsse.be](http://www.vsse.be). ■



## ► MÖBIUS II: THE NEW VSSE HEADQUARTERS

To keep pace with the growth of the VSSE, which will have 1000 employees by 2024, our service had to look for a new building. The choice fell on the Möbius II building.

## ► RETROFITTING

In the run-up to the government's purchase of the new building in December 2021, the future needs of each department were assessed and mapped. The final result was then submitted to the Building Authority, which studied the possibilities and made a proposal.



## ► NEW HEADQUARTERS IN 2025

The VSSE is expected to move to its new headquarters in 2025. In the meantime, the building, that is currently being completed, must be adapted in line with the requirements of international security standards to suit the specific needs of an intelligence service.

In collaboration with the Building Authority, every effort is being made to equip the building to make it a pleasant and safe working environment for our current and future employees. ■





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STATE SECURITY

