
veiligheid van de staat
sûreté de l'état
VSSE
ANNUAL REPORT
2020
.be

# ANNUAL REPORT




D/2021/7951/EN/1240
Responsible editor: Jaak Raes - Koning Albert II laan, 6 - 1000 Brussels
Photos : ©fotolia (P1-4-6-8-10-15- 16-18-20-21-22-23-31-32-33-35-36) & ©alamyimages (P6-25-27-34)

# FOREWORD

*Jaak Raes, Administrator General of the VSSE*

At the outset of 2020, no one could have predicted that a virus called COVID-19 would bring the whole of society to its knees in no time at all and that a few months later, with working from home having become the norm, the buildings of some national, international and European institutions would be sitting almost completely empty.

The primary concern of the State Security Service was to determine the best way of adjusting to this new situation to ensure the security of our country. The challenge we faced in ensuring the continuity of our work, which is largely carried out via secure networks, was huge. All the more so as we also had to put in place the appropriate practical measures to avoid an epidemic within the service.

Fortunately, the impact of the virus on our colleagues was contained. Outside the State Security Service, however, the lockdown spawned a new situation, as potentially violent extremists - religious or ideological - were themselves affected by this measure. In other words, the lockdown also restricted their freedom of movement and compelled them to use the Internet. The threat did not disappear, but was simply propagated by other means.

Social media gave rise to many conspiracy theories about COVID-19. Even though the groundwork was already laid, the pandemic proved to be the perfect excuse to further pit population groups against each other. One of the greatest threats of 2020 may therefore well have been the increasing polarisation of society.

State Security also continued to focus on counter-terrorism and counter-intelligence. At the same time, our service has to proactively act and effectively liaise with the General Intelligence and Security Service (SGRS), the Coordination Unit for Threat Assessment (CUTA), the federal and local police, among others, within a legitimate and closely knit Belgian intelligence and security community. It must play a leading role and forge partnerships that allow for a more effective response to threats. The “need to know” must gradually give way to the “need to share”.

These considerations are paving the way for our ambitious future projects. Examples include the concertation with the SGRS and the CUTA so as to arrive at a single staff status, as set out in the government coalition agreement. This is an essential step to further develop the synergies already initiated between the services and to optimise the available resources and the expertise in place in the fight against threats. Once adopted, this single status will facilitate the secondment of staff to meet temporary and specific needs, for example in times of crisis. Mobility between the various services will also improve our understanding of the working culture of long-term partners. It will also make it easier and more efficient to identify opportunities for even closer cooperation.

In the meantime, the State Security Service continues to actively work on the priorities set out in a Strategic Plan approved by the National Security Council, and made necessary by our changing society. In this report, particular attention goes out to extremism, for instance. We are made to find that the extreme right is and remains an important threat and we explore some of the expressions of religious extremism and extremism of foreign origin that are prevalent in Belgium, so-called ‘endogenous extremism’.

I hope you enjoy reading this report!

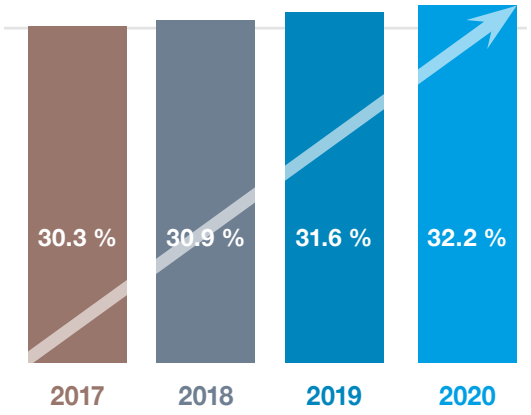
Jaak RAES
Administrator General

# FACTS AND FIGURES

*In 2020, the number of security investigations carried out by the VSSE continued to increase. The figures also show that the share of female staff at the VSSE has been growing steadily for a number of years. The number of incoming and outgoing messages to and from the VSSE stayed high in 2020.*

## THE NUMBER OF FEMALE STAFF AT THE VSSE IS INCREASING

In its recruitment policy, the VSSE values diversity. As a result, the number of women has gradually increased in recent years.





| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 16,992 | 2016 | 4,950 |
| 31,946 | 2020 | 7,361 |

## THE INFORMATION FLOW TO AND FROM THE VSSE

The VSSE processed about 32.000 incoming messages and more than 7.000 outgoing messages.

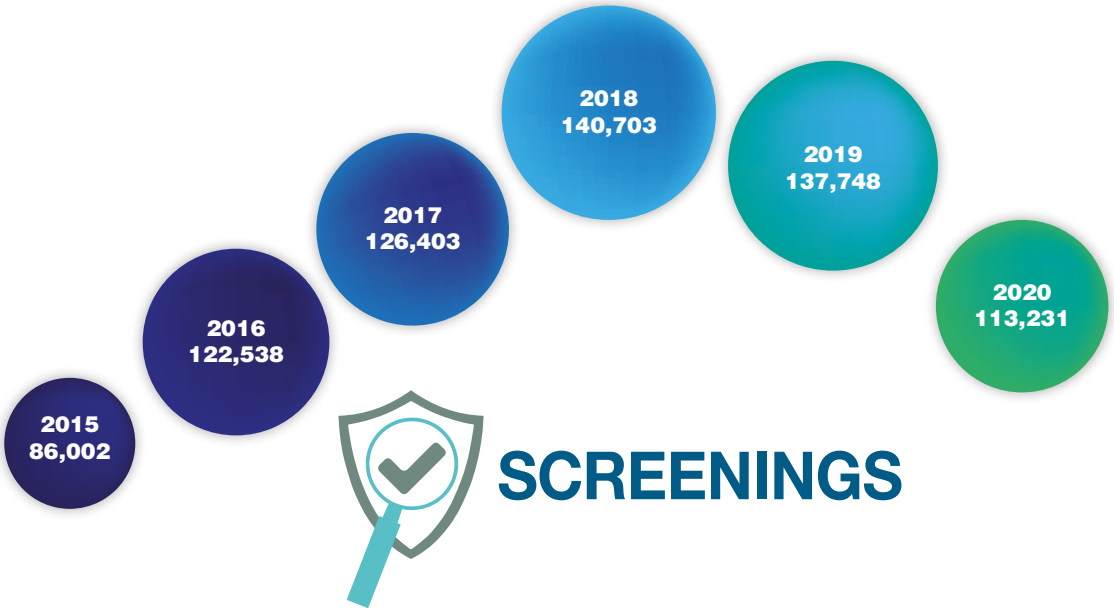
The incoming messages come from the Belgian administrations (police, CUTA, SGRS, prosecutors' offices, prisons, Crisis Centre, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, …) and from foreign partner services.

The outgoing messages are destined for the Belgian (political, administrative and judicial) authorities and partner services, and international partner services.

## TEMPORARY DECLINE IN REQUESTS FOR SECURITY SCREENINGS

When carrying out a security screening, the VSSE checks whether the person for whom the screening was requested appears in its databases. The screenings are commissioned by the National Security Authority (nvoans.be).

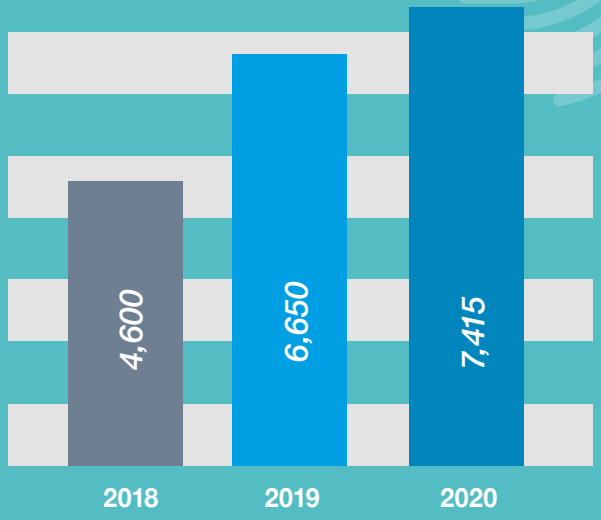
The demand for security screenings increased every year since the 2016 attacks. In 2020, however, the number of requests dropped by 19.52% due to the COVID-19 crisis. As a result of the pandemic, hardly any European summits were held, air traffic came to a standstill and the number of asylum applications fell sharply due to the drastic restrictions on mobility.




## INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF SECURITY INVESTIGHATIONS

In 2020, 7 415 security investigations were carried out. That is an increase of 11.5% compared to 2019. The upward trend of recent years continues, despite the COVID-19 crisis.

A security investigation is carried out at the request and under the supervision of the National Security Authority (NSA). The investigation examines whether the applicant is trustworthy, loyal and a person of integrity, and whether and to what extent they could be vulnerable to external pressure. The security investigation is a necessary step in the process of issuing a security clearance. The security clearance is necessary for those who come into contact with classified information in their profession or who work in a sensitive environment.



# INTRODUCTION

***2020 was a year like no other. Covid-19, our country's number one enemy, has succeeded in disrupting our lives in ways we could never have imagined.***

***For the State Security Service too, the pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges. The work of an intelligence service, which takes place mainly on secure and classified networks, makes working from home on a large scale impossible. At the same time, it is our duty to our staff to enable them to work in the safest possible conditions. The State Security Service is also an essential service. In order to be able to continue our work and ensure the safety of our citizens, we have therefore adapted to this new situation as best we can.***

***The State Security Service's mission: We discreetly protect a free and safe Belgium with intelligence to serve democracy.***

## DISINFORMATION IS ON THE RISE

The global health crisis also served as a catalyst for a threat that has been worrying us for some time: disinformation. According to one European definition, it is "verifiably false or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and which can cause public harm".

Intelligence services are well aware that disinformation is used by "hostile" powers or groups. Propaganda in every shape and form has been used since times immemorial, with information being manipulated in various ways. Foreign actors have been using the same techniques for years to influence the decision-making processes of other countries, as have certain extremist groups or individuals.

However, the exceptional circumstances of 2020 have provided the perfect breeding ground for an unprecedented disinformation boom. The use of social media too has grown exponentially as source of news. The ways and means to manipulate information and the impact this is having on society at large have consequently become infinitely greater than ever before. Although the State Security Service does not act as a pure fact-checker - this is not part of its legal remit - it does play a role in the fight against disinformation, especially when it is used as a tool in the context of a wider threat of interference or extremism (from the left or the right).

The State Security Service intends to focus primarily on raising awareness among politicians and various authorities, and by extension the general public, to arm them against the deliberate dissemination of disinformation. Our efforts to counteract this threat are described in greater detail elsewhere in this annual report. On our website (www.vsse.be), you will also find the "The hidden danger behind Covid-19" brochure, in which we warned against this danger as early on as the first few months of the public health crisis. Since then, this issue has remained firmly on our radar and we regularly inform our governments of our findings. The State Security Service also finds it reassuring that policy-makers are well aware of the problem of disinformation, as illustrated by the various initiatives recently launched at federal and regional level in this regard.

In 2020, our service was invited by the **Flemish Parliament's Committee for Combating Violent Radicalisation** - together with our colleagues from the Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA) - to outline our views regarding this threat. The State Security Service had the opportunity to put across its views on the threat which, in our opinion, still comes from Islamic terrorism and ideological and religious extremism.

## TERRORISM IS STILL A DANGER

The Islamic terrorist threat is currently in a restructuring phase. The military defeat of the so-called Islamic State has given the impression that the danger of terrorism has been warded off. However, this is a hasty conclusion, as several factors that contributed to radicalisation are still very much present. In addition, the desperation of Belgian and European terrorist fighters and their families in prisons and camps in Syria and Iraq has led to a great deal of frustration. As a result, attempts to help them escape have increased. We also observe that the so-called Islamic State continues to have a structural presence on several continents and is trying to re-organise itself. Its ideas continue to inspire other groups and individuals in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, the Caucasus and the West. As a group that has always had a foreign policy agenda, Al-Qaeda too remains active on several continents, albeit generally on a somewhat longer-term basis. The threat may seem more latent and less significant, but it is far from over.

At home, we face the challenge of reintegrating a substantial number of convicted terrorists who are nearing the end of their sentences into society. Many of them no longer pose a terrorist threat, but a number of them will need to be monitored by the security services even after they have been released. The crisis in Syria and Iraq caused an increase of asylum seekers from this region. Most of them do not pose a risk to our security. But the VSSE has found that some of them have committed misdeeds in their home countries on behalf of IS or other terrorist organizations. Good co-operation between the different services, both at local and national level, remains essential. In 2020, co-operation was further intensified. This is exemplified by the success of the Joint Intelligence and Joint Decision Center and that of the Fora CT (new structures for information exchange and decision-making created after the attacks in Brussels in 2016) and the Task Forces at local level.

## GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS AS TARGETS

As stated above, the public health crisis of 2020 also served as fertile ground for ideological extremism. In addition to a greater trend towards people taking to arms, mainly among right-wing extremists, we see that the government and the world of politics are increasingly held up as legitimate targets for both extreme right and extreme left wing groups. This obviously creates an explosive cocktail in which violence is increasingly tolerated and 'justified'.

Abroad, as well as at home, violence - behind closed doors - is increasingly seen as a legitimate way to oppose the 'influx of refugees' or the 'Islamisation' of society. When the anger turns against the authorities or the world of politics in general, it is again the issues of 'repopulation' and 'Islamisation' that inflame passions. In 2020, this hatred of the authorities was further exacerbated as a result of the corona measures. Against this background, politicians, democratic institutions or government representatives may also become major targets of right-wing violence, as several examples in Europe show (the murder of the German politician Walter Lübcke in 2019 is a case in point).

## RESISTANCE TO THE STATE

The public health crisis has not only fuelled the anger of right-wing extremists. Calls for violence also increased again in far-left circles in 2020. Again, the world of politics and the authorities are seen as the main culprits and therefore as legitimate targets for violence. Resistance to "the state" is strongest among insurrectionary anarchists, who are trying to paralyse society through vandalism or incendiary tactics. The self-styled revolutionary communists are less likely to initiate violence in their own country, but they provide moral and sometimes financial support to political or revolutionary prisoners or international fighters in conflict zones (e.g. northern Syria). Finally, there is a wide range of other anarchist groups who mainly manifest themselves at demonstrations where they deliberately confront the police or even counter protesters or resort to vandalism.

The polarisation and disgruntlement in our country has now reached such proportions that it can no longer be regarded as a temporary phenomenon. In 2021, our country will still be under the influence of the public health crisis for some time, so extremists from all quarters will continue to vent their anger, online and in public, often fuelled by disinformation campaigns by domestic and foreign actors.

In addition to disinformation and conspiracy theories, 2020 was also marked by the potentially unknown economic consequences of the public health crisis. Many companies, including those in critical sectors, are in trouble, making them attractive prey for hostile takeovers by foreign players. We must not be blind to this. The protection of our country's scientific and economic potential (SEP) is one of the key duties of the State Security Service. The State Security Service regularly consults with the other agencies through the SEP platform, which was established under the aegis of the Intelligence and Security Coordination Committee, on measures to protect our scientific and economic potential from espionage and foreign interference. In 2020, work also continued on a law to introduce a screening mechanism for foreign direct investments. Such a mechanism is already in place in many Western countries and protects the creativity and independence of innovative companies. If properly developed and provided with the necessary means, this mechanism can offer effective protection against possible hostile actions that could target our economic players.

## A LESSER KNOWN MISSION

In addition to this comes another element of the State Security Service's remit which generally receives less attention: the fight against the proliferation of nuclear, radiological, chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction, generally referred to as counter proliferation. Here too, on the strength of its expertise and contribution to the development of advanced technologies Belgium is such that it makes for an interesting target for offensive foreign services. Once again, the answer is good co-operation between the intelligence services and the other pertinent government services (customs, licensing services, treasury, etc.). Below you will find further details regarding this lesser known, but no less important, task of the State Security Service.

Which brings me to the end of my introduction. I hope that I have given you a foretaste of the topics that came to our notice in 2020 and encouraged you to read the rest of this annual report. All that remains for me is to wish you an enjoyable read!

Peter Lanssens
Director of Analysis

# EXTREMISM

***Any mention of the work of an intelligence service spontaneously conjures up images of counter-espionage or counter-terrorism activities. One part of our work is less obvious at first glance: the fight against extremism, which is, however, one of the statutory remits of the State Security Service.***

Extremism is a source of a wide range of very diverse threats. On the one hand, extremism may arise from the dissemination of anti-democratic, polarising or radical views, which may pose a danger to society. On the other hand, extremism may also lead to terrorism: violence against people or property interests for ideological or political reasons. By resorting to terror, intimidation or threats, people seek to achieve these goals.

There is a clear link between extremism and terrorism. Religious and ideological extremism may lead to terrorism or violence. A terrorist can be seen as a radicalised extremist who will commit acts of violence, driven by his or her ideological or religious conviction and fuelled by a process of radicalisation.

## WHAT DOES THE STATE SECURITY SERVICE DO?

The State Security Service will gather information in order to:
> identify individuals and groups showing extremist behaviour;
> disrupt the spread of their ideas;
> prevent extremists from becoming terrorists.

The State Security Service will of course take into account the fact that everyone has the right to build an identity according to his or her own convictions, but with respect for those of others.

In what follows below we provide examples of how extremism manifests itself in Belgium, whether this be religious extremism, exogenous extremism or left and right wing extremism.

# SALAFISM

***Salafism remains the most dynamic and violent ideology of Islamic extremism (see also the "Salafism in Belgium" brochure at www.vsse.be). In Belgium, the Salafist discourse is spread through religious centres, online platforms and social media. But it is also propagated in educational institutions abroad where Belgians attend courses.***

> «In Belgium, almost 40% of the graduates of the Saudi centres hold a leadership position in their local communities after their training»

## SALAFIST EDUCATIONAL CENTRES IN THE MIDDLE EAST ATTRACT BELGIANS

For several years, the State Security Service has observed that certain Salafist educational centres in Egypt and the Gulf region play a key role in the propagation of Salafism in Belgium. Their influence is spread through the students they manage to attract from Belgium.

The Arabian Peninsula is a prime destination for those who wish to develop their religious knowledge in the Middle East. Above all else, this attraction is explained by the prestige of its Islamic education centres and their recruitment policy. They cover almost all study costs for international students (scholarships, free accommodation, airplane tickets). In return, they expect their students to become religious 'ambassadors' when they go back to their country of residence and to engage in proselytising. In this sense, these centres are fully-fledged "Salafist propaganda factories". The State Security Service has observed that about 50 (or nearly 40% of all graduates) of their graduates go on to hold leadership positions in their local communities in Belgium (e.g. as imams, teachers, lecturers, editors of online religious content, etc.).

Alongside the Gulf region, Egypt is another major magnet destination. However, the recruitment dynamics and proselytising policy there differ from those of their Gulf counterparts. Cost of living is low and the educational offering is flexible. For example, Egyptian centres do not subsidise their students. Furthermore, while the Gulf institutions encourage their students to return to their home countries to preach, the Egyptian centres value the concept of *'hijrah'* (emigration to a country or territory considered 'Islamic'). Once settled abroad, some of these Belgian emigrants set up their own Salafist schools. Others are recruited within local Salafist entities in order to attract new European students or to adapt the content of these centres to a European audience.

# THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

***In addition to Salafism, other currents of Islam can also lead to anti-democratic behaviour, polarisation or the violation of fundamental rights. Ticking all of these boxes, the Muslim Brotherhood for example is a threat.***

## THE INFLUENCE OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD IN BELGIUM

The Muslim Brotherhood, which has only a limited number of members in our country, has a long-term vision that is contrary to the proper functioning of the constitutional order and of democracy.

Among the Islamist movements, the Muslim Brotherhood is the oldest and also one of the most influential, with worldwide branches in more than 90 countries, each of which has developed its own dynamics over the years. Although the Egyptian parent organisation has clearly grown in importance and influence, there is a clear coherence and a certain degree of co-ordination especially at European level. The ideas and vision of the movement's founder, Hassan al-Banna, and influential thinkers such as Qutb and al-Qaradawi, act as ideological cement.

## SHARED VISION

The shared vision encapsulates various elements, including the notion of Islam as a universal and comprehensive system, superior to all other belief and political systems. Moreover, this conviction serves as the foundation for the social and political activism of the Muslim Brotherhood.

*The Muslim Brotherhood flag*

Proselytism ('dawa') is the most appropriate way to achieve this, through preaching and (religious) teaching in amongst other activities. Against this background, the Muslim Brotherhood sees itself as an elite vanguard, called upon to bring together and lead different Muslim communities. It aims to occupy influential social positions in order to change Western society "from within" and also try to influence government policy through various ways and means.

The Muslim Brotherhood believes that Western and Islamic values and lifestyles are fundamentally incompatible. In its view, the West is hostile to Islam and is not inclined to accept Sharia law. It therefore opts for a pragmatic and progressive approach. It endeavours to cultivate a moderate image, hiding its true intentions and convictions. Language and discourse are adapted to the target audience.

## SITUATION IN BELGIUM

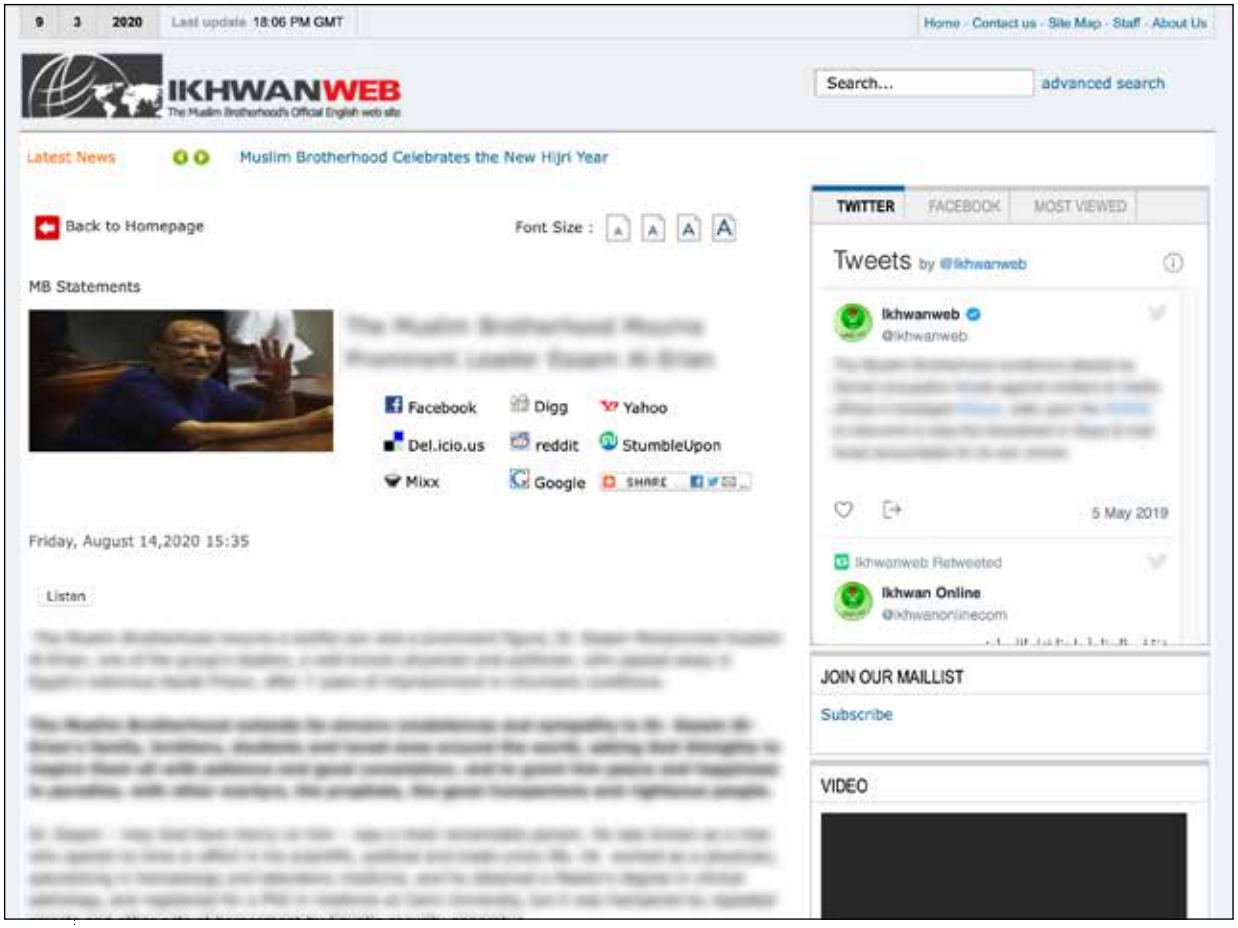
In Belgium, the 'International Muslim Brotherhood' is represented by an organisation called *La Ligue des Musulmans de Belgique* (LMB, the League of Belgian Muslims), which reportedly has only around 50 members and around 100 supporters or sympathisers. Belgium is also home to the Council of European Muslims (CEM, formerly the FIOE), a European umbrella organisation that represents the interests of the Muslim Brotherhood with the European institutions.

In recent years, the Muslim Brotherhood has organised a wide range of free activities, mainly in Brussels. These include launching new schemes in the field of education and training (for primary and secondary schools), setting up specific sections for young adults and students. They have their own scouting movement and other social activities for children.

The Muslim Brotherhood and its often highly-qualified members are found in many non-profit organisations and other groups in all areas of society. This makes it more influential and important than one would expect from its limited membership.

The Muslim Brotherhood respects democratic rules and the law, and pursues supposedly legitimate goals in the short term. However, the discourse, beliefs and vision adopted internally in the longer term are contrary to the proper functioning of the constitutional order and democracy. To the State Security Service, the Muslim Brotherhood is an extremist movement.

« The Muslim Brotherhood and its often highly-qualified members are also found in many non-profit organisations and other groups in all areas of society »




*Muslim Brotherhood official web site*

## EXOGENOUS EXTREMISM

# PKK ACTIVITIES IN BELGIUM

Both ideological and religious extremism can have a strong radicalising effect and may pose a threat. It is an endogenous threat when it develops in Belgium. But exogenous extremism too is a threat nowadays: it is extremism that occurs in Belgium, but whose roots and objectives are mainly situated abroad.

Some of these extremists fight against the authorities in their home country and are considered terrorists: their main targets and objectives are in their countries of origin. They may not pose a direct threat to Belgium, but our country serves as a base of operations for their activities and this is problematic. These organisations can pose a real extremist or even terrorist threat to their country of origin, or to the interests and nationals of that country in Belgium.

### PKK

The activities of the PKK (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan), the Kurdish autonomous group founded by Abdullah Öcalan in 1978 in Turkey, comes under the header of exogenous extremism. The PKK, which has been waging an armed insurgency against the Turkish state in various Kurdish areas since 1984, has recently focused its efforts on northern Syria and the Kurdish autonomous areas of Rojava, as well as on Iraqi Kurdistan, where they have guerrilla camps.

The organisation is on the European list of terrorist organisations and has a military wing which sometimes uses severe violence to achieve its goals. However, in Europe and Belgium, home to large Kurdish diaspora, the PKK promotes non-violence as a principle to protect its image and influence the diaspora. Its main **political objective** remains to be removed from the European list of terrorist organisations. The PKK wants to be accepted by the international community as a legitimate and leading actor in the Kurdish issue.

### SUPPORT CENTRES IN BELGIUM

Belgium plays a central role in the European structures of the PKK. The organisation, traditionally based in our country, has political support centres such as the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK - *Kongra Netewî ya Kurdistan*) in Brussels. The KNK is the main basis of PKK political activism in Europe.

The PKK also operates a network of local associations (*dernek or merkez in Kurdish*) made up of grassroots activists from the organisation. Their activities are political (demonstrations, hunger strikes, etc.), social (hosting Kurdish refugees), financial (collection of the revolutionary tax) and cultural (conferences, language courses, festivals, commemorations). All of these organisations come under the umbrella of a national federation (NAV-BEL).

The PKK also owns several media companies in our country which produce propaganda for their TV and radio channels.

The PKK mainly uses Belgium:

- for demonstrations or solidarity actions related to current developments in the Kurdish conflict and to gain political influence;
- to recruit new supporters;
- for logistical and financial support of the organisation;
- as a fall-back base for injured militants.

### EXTREMISM: THE MAIN THREAT

The main threat posed by the PKK in our country is extremism. This is a consequence of the organisation's hierarchical structure and authoritarian ideology, which has a strong hold on the Kurdish diaspora. In Belgium, the PKK also has links with other Turkish extremist movements and with various far left groups.

The organisation is capable of mobilising large groups of supporters at any time. This may lead to public order disturbances and tensions with the Turkish community, and even end in violence.

### PKK INTERFERENCE

The presence of many PKK structures and bodies also poses a threat of interference. Brussels, which is home to many international institutions, is an important political arena for the PKK. To achieve its political goals, the PKK sets out to build on the support it enjoys from civil society in our country. In doing so, it hides its true purpose and uses false names and covers, claiming to represent all Kurds.

## EXTREMISM IDEOLOGICAL

# VIOLENT FAR LEFT

Located everywhere in Belgium, but especially in Brussels, the ultra-left, or violent far left, includes groups that resort to violence or justify the use of violence for the purpose of overthrowing the democratic and constitutional order, which is considered authoritarian - even fascist -, racist, sexist, capitalist and imperialist.

**THE FOLLOWING TRENDS CAN BE DISTINGUISHED:**

- **Insurrectionary anarchists,** around fifteen activists, incite people to commit attacks, here and now, against the state security arrangements, electronic surveillance measures, telecommunication infrastructures and infrastructure for the transportation of people, goods and energy. On 12 November 2020, four insurrectionary anarchists formerly operating in Brussels were given suspended prison sentences on appeal.

- Convinced of the need for an armed struggle, the **revolutionary communists,** whose core group also includes around fifteen militants, censure the fate of so-called "political prisoners" in Western democracies, whose criminal offences they justify, and they support the cause of the revolution in Rojava in northern Syria. Some of them have even undergone military training and gained frontline experience in this Kurdish-controlled region of Syria.

- Members of anarchist and anarcho-communist groups tend to come together in the form of **"Black Blocs"** during anti-authoritarian, anti-fascist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist or environmentalist demonstrations. Their objective, by joining protest marches, is to reach the "critical mass" necessary to trigger urban riots. A "Black Bloc" can attract up to a hundred individuals. By "infiltrating" legitimate demonstrations, they often discredit their organisers and participants through the use of force. In doing so, they erode what are de facto legitimate protests.

- Finally, alongside these three trends, a fourth trend is emerging: **radical eco-activism,** as illustrated by the occupation, from October 2019 to March 2021, of the "zad" (*"Zone à Defendre"* (fr.), the Zone to be Defended, of Arlon, where a wood is to be cleared to make way for an industrial estate. As part of this action, artisanal means of defence were used to resist the police.

- The public health, social and economic crisis linked to the Covid-19 pandemic provided the Belgian ultra-left scene with an opportunity to expose, in their view, both the failure of the liberal state and the freedom-curbing measures taken against the general population. However, violent activities that could be attributed to these radical eco-activists remained limited in 2020, despite calls to destroy mobile phone masts and high-voltage power line pylons, and to attack police and prison officers.

# RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM

## PANDEMIC

Although the number of victims of far right-wing violence in 2020 was considerably lower than in 2019, the threat has unfortunately not diminished. The attack in the German town of Hanau on 19 February, in which nine people were killed, is a sad testimony to this.

Germany has recently been hit hard by extreme right-wing terrorism. In 2020, the number of deaths caused by far-right violence exceeded the number of deaths caused by Islamist terrorism. As a result, our eastern neighbours view right-wing terrorism as the main threat.

In Belgium, we noticed individuals have fewer and fewer qualms, especially online, about expressing hate speech and glorifying right-wing violence, via social media, especially in private discussion groups. A rising number of extremists view violence as the only answer to the problems they believe the government and politicians cannot, or will not, solve. As such, the risk of 'keyboard warriors' resorting to violence is also a reality in Belgium.

Most attacks linked to the far right in the Western world involve 'lone actors', some of whom have been active within organised extreme right-wing groups in the past. This also seems to be the case in Belgium. Again, these can be either lone actors unknown to the security services or people who have popped up on the radar at some point.

*Hanau, Germany, 20 February 2020. Flowers and candles at the site of the Hanau shooting in memory of the victims.*

Fortunately, our country has not yet experienced a far right-wing attack that has resulted in casualties. It is clear that the threat of right-wing extremism in Belgium is not as substantial as that of jihadist terrorism.

## THREE TRENDS

We may distinguish three broad categories among Belgian right-wing extremist groups, although they often show a mixture of characteristics from different groups.

**Neo-Nazis and skinheads** fit the cliché of the far-right and are the most easily identifiable. This phenomenon is clearly evident in the organisation of neo-Nazi concerts. Over the past decade, the number of such concerts has been in decline. In 2019, however, we observed a slight increase with the organisation of a few large-scale concerts. In 2020, not a single neo-Nazi concert was organised in our country. This is doubtlessly due to the corona crisis.

2019 saw the emergence of a handful of new neo-Nazi groups. They were vocal in expressing their disappointment with the world of politics by demonstrating in the streets in 2020.

Since the refugee crisis of 2015-2016, the predominant mobilising factor within the far-right groups remained **anti-asylum and anti-refugee** activism. Existing groups have shifted their focus from nationalism and separatism to anti-Islam and anti-refugee activism. Many new groups have emerged as well. At best, they blame the government for remaining passive in the face of perceived problems of "overpopulation" or the "Islamisation" of the present society.

This idea of a "Great Replacement" forms the ideological basis of the **identity movements** inspired by the French *Génération Identitaire* and the American *Alt-Right.* In Belgium, too, there are groups that disseminate, intentionally or otherwise, the concepts of a «Great Replacement» of

Western Christian civilisation among a broad spectrum of society. The fact that these theories are regularly disseminated by 'white-collar' far-right voices adds to their credibility in the eyes of the average citizen. Furthermore, identitarians attach great importance to physical fitness and the possession of (legal) firearms in order to be ready to protect their 'own people' in case of need.

## VIOLENCE AND HATRED

The recent far-right attacks in the Western world have clearly shown that violence is no longer off limits. This is also evident in Belgium, where various attacks have been met with cheers and where manifestos by far-right terrorists and images of the attacks are circulating on social media as a source of inspiration. Violence is increasingly seen as a legitimate means of opposing the 'influx of refugees'. Some far right-wing circles accept violence as an acceptable means of action, discuss concrete targets and practise handling firearms and explosives.

In addition to the threat of violence, the threat of hate preachers is increasing. Examples of right-wing extremist attacks in Western Europe show that the consumption of online hate speech on social media has often been a decisive factor in the transition from 'keyboard warrior' to terrorist. These messages are an ideal breeding ground for the radicalisation of individuals. The State Security Service, in association with the national security partners of the so-called Plan R (Plan Radicalism, in which the VSSE and other security forces participate)", has therefore intensified its monitoring of online hate speech.

## WEAPONS AND WEAPONS TRAINING

In 2020, the trend among the far-right to arm themselves and join shooting clubs continued unabated. It is part of the preparation for a civil war or race war which the far-right sees as inevitable. Some groups even organise weapons training for their members. Legal and illegal (fire) arms have been confiscated from several far-right activists and gun permits have been withdrawn.

Last year, paramilitary training courses abroad, mainly in Eastern Europe, were widely publicised. Some 20 Belgians, adherents of an extreme right-wing ideology, for the main part individuals, took part in such training courses. Some training centres operate clearly on a far-right ideology others have a straightforward commercial nature.

## GOVERNMENT IS MOSTLY TARGETED

While the far-right has in the past always targeted refugees, the Islamic community or Jewish community, today government and the political class in general are increasingly added to this list. After all, they are seen, consciously or otherwise, as complicit in the 'Great Replacement' or Islamisation of society. Outspoken individuals and groups have already indicated that they no longer expect anything from the government or democratic elections. The results of the last elections and the ensuing difficult formation of a coalition government have reinforced this belief. In addition, some extremists feel that the right-wing populist parties have also let them down.


Dissatisfaction with public authorities has increased because of the measures established to respond to the corona crisis, which they consider to be liberticidal. In addition, right-wing extremists have seized the COVID crisis to accuse Muslims and refugees of not complying with the measures and thus spreading the disease (see the "The hidden danger behind COVID-19" publication at www.vsse.be). Some of the fiercest conspiracy theories about the origin and spread of the virus are to be found within the right-wing extremists scene, such as the fear of DNA-altering effects and its potential use as a tracking device, resulting in a refusal to be vaccinated.

## COMBINING FORCES

Whereas in the past, far-right groups often led separate lives, partly due to their sometimes very different sociological backgrounds, last year we witnessed these groups increasingly joining forces. In the autumn of 2019, the large-scale protests against the formation of the federal coalition government attracted all sorts of far-right groups. Such gatherings of disparate groups demonstrating in unison were again observed during protests against the corona measures, gatherings in support of the police last summer at the seaside or in support of young native Belgians who had been assaulted by non-native Belgians, such as in Puurs or Kortrijk in autumn 2020.

## INTENSIFIED FOCUS

In recent years, the State Security Service has invested in monitoring the threat of right-wing extremism. As a result the number of right-wing extremists listed as 'hate preachers' or 'potentially violent extremists' in the joint database has increased.

# DISINFORMATION

## ORONA CRISIS FUELS DISINFORMATION

The growing amount of disinformation surrounding the corona pandemic has encouraged extremism.

The corona pandemic has had an impact on various aspects of society, including the dissemination of information. Disinformation was rife, encouraging extremism and making it difficult for the government to manage the risks associated with COVID-19.

## WHAT EXACTLY IS DISINFORMATION?

The manipulation of information is not new. Propaganda by foreign actors or the dissemination of biased or distorted information by extremist groups or individuals has always been a method of interference and exerting influence. In recent years, however, the context has changed: social media have fundamentally altered our relationship to information. At the same time, the sense of insecurity has increased due to the succession of crises: the attacks, the corona pandemic, etc. Confidence in [classical] media has also diminished. All of this combined acts to create a breeding ground for online manipulation, with an unprecedented impact which poses a new challenge for democracy.

## DISINFORMATION AND RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM

Some individuals and groups on the far right have seized the pandemic and its consequences to spread divisive messages. These messages feed on fears and frustrations, reinforced by conspiracy theories and other disinformation mechanisms. They use manipulated information to undermine the credibility of the government authorities and to polarise society.

For some, the aim is to see their own beliefs reaffirmed. In a typical scenario, hate messages are directed towards specific groups labelled as 'contaminated', such as Muslims or refugees. In another, distrust for political leaders and their actions is cultivated (SOS Vrijheid en Recht, NATION). This phenomenon is very widespread online. In contrast, demonstrations which call the pandemic into question in 2020 were limited to only a few dozen activists.

The ideas and beliefs most often propagated are the following:

- anti-globalisation
- opposition to open borders
- denial of the existence of the pandemic
- the "anti-vax" position labelling any vaccine as a "deadly vaccine", a "DNA modification", inoculation is felt as "subjugation"
- government mismanagement of the pandemic
- an anti-authoritarian discourse (scientific as well as political)
- rejection of mainstream media and the 'system'.

Some groups focus more on the so-called 'totalitarian' approach and compare European governments to World War II collaborators. To them, the perceived management of the pandemic calls to mind the atmosphere of '1984', George Orwell's dystopian novel. They condemn "the surveillance society" (notably via the Coronalert application), censorship and dogmatism, the deliberate contamination of the population by Chinese initiatives and their accomplices such as the WHO, the CIA, the Pasteur Institute, etc. And finally, some are convinced a new world order is being established by new elites, etc.

Left-wing extremism has also sought to exploit the fears and frustrations of citizens to generate distrust and suspicion with regard to government authorities. Stories were spread about a link between the existence of the corona virus and the development of 5G (e.g. the 'Virus Madness' collective). However, the impact of these stories has been limited.

To a lesser extent, foreign powers have also exploited the crisis to promote their interests in our country. Examples include the diplomatic operation orchestrated by China, which distributed millions of face masks in Latin America, or the reports in the Russian media, giving the impression that Europe was unable to cope with the situation. Similarly, in March 2020, a convoy of Russian military aid was sent to Italy with great fanfare. Although the vast majority of aid supplies proved useless.

## DISINFORMATION

# THE ROLE OF THE STATE SECURITY SERVICE

Disinformation can be defined as the deliberate creation or dissemination of patently inaccurate or misleading information with the aim of undermining or changing opinions and behaviour. It influences individual or collective decision-making and in this respect shows parallels with **interference** ("the attempt to influence decision-making processes by unlawful, fraudulent or clandestine means", see the Intelligence and Security Services Act 30/11/1998).

Disinformation is also common among **extremists.** Extremist individuals and groups often play on fear and frustration - feelings that are fuelled by conspiracy theories or other disinformation mechanisms. As such, manipulated information can go on to increase societal polarisation and facilitate radicalisation.

**Interference and extremism** can also reinforce each other. We are seeing that foreign powers often instrumentalise extremist individuals or groups in order to stir up distrust against public authorities, elites or the media in order to destabilise the current situation. Sometimes these extremist individuals or groups are directly or indirectly supported by foreign powers.

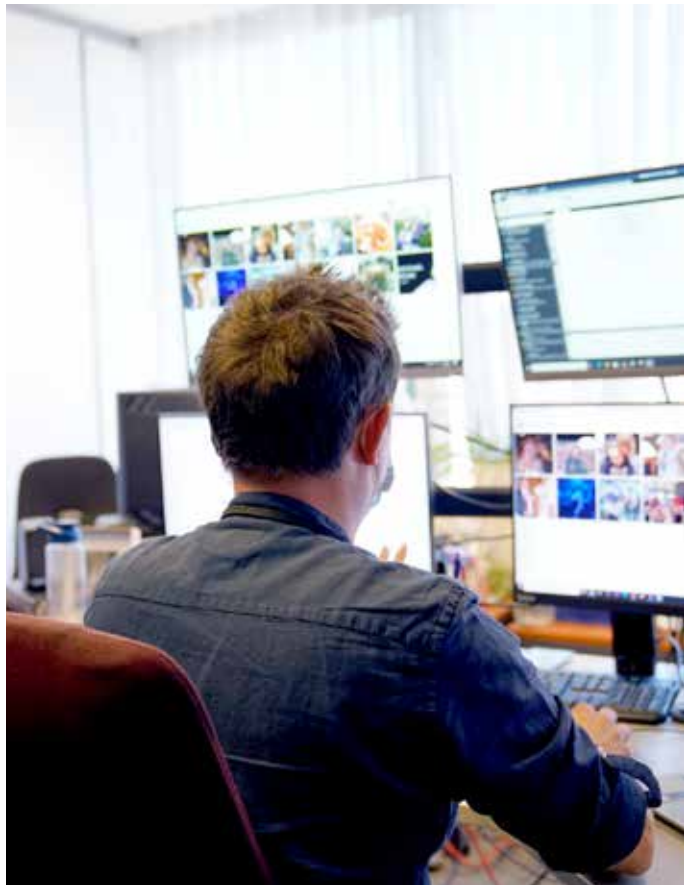
### UNDERSTANDING, DETECTING AND DISRUPTING

As with other threats, we try to gain a general understanding of the phenomenon whilst identifying the main actors and their modus operandi. To detect them, we use the usual resources backed up by specialist social media intelligence tools and techniques.

Typical supporters are often supporters of conspiracy theories in the first place (e.g. in respect of 5G or microchips in COVID vaccines) turning away from government and its institutions. Their distrust of the mainstream media makes them more susceptible to such conspiracy theories.

We inform the government and stakeholders about this phenomenon. In addition, we contribute to awareness-raising activities to strengthen social resilience (see also the publication "The hidden danger behind COVID-19" on vsse.be).

On the subject of disinformation, VSSE is working closely with its military counterpart, the Belgian General Information and Security Service, the SGRS, as we did in the run-up to the 2019 elections. At the time, we worked shoulder to shoulder to identify any interference attempts by foreign powers. The partnership continued and deepened in 2020.

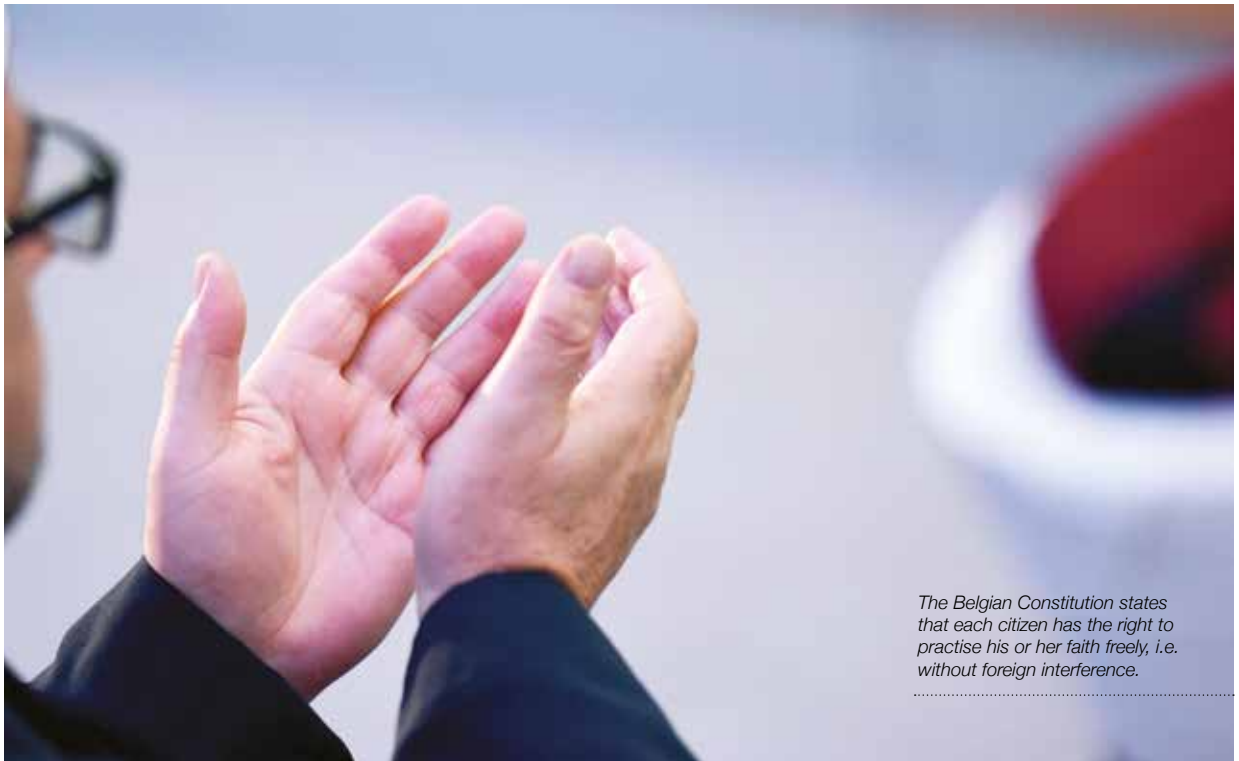


# FOREIGN INTERFERENCE IN BELGIAN ISLAM

***Islam in Belgium not only needs to guard against religious extremism. Some countries are also trying to take over Belgian Islam through interference.***

For decades, a number of states, have successfully undertaken actions to set the agenda of Belgian Islam. While their aim is not primarily to harm Belgian interests, their aggressive foreign policy has a negative impact on both the rights of individual believers and on national security. Within the confines of its statutory framework, the State Security Service puts in place the appropriate measures to monitor and combat this phenomenon.

In the first place, this form of foreign interference undermines the rights of citizens: the Belgian Constitution states that each citizen has the right to practise his or her faith freely, i.e. without foreign interference. In addition, a privacy issue may arise when the intelligence services of these countries clandestinely collect information regarding the management of mosques, imams and believers.



*The Belgian Constitution states that each citizen has the right to practise his or her faith freely, i.e. without foreign interference.*

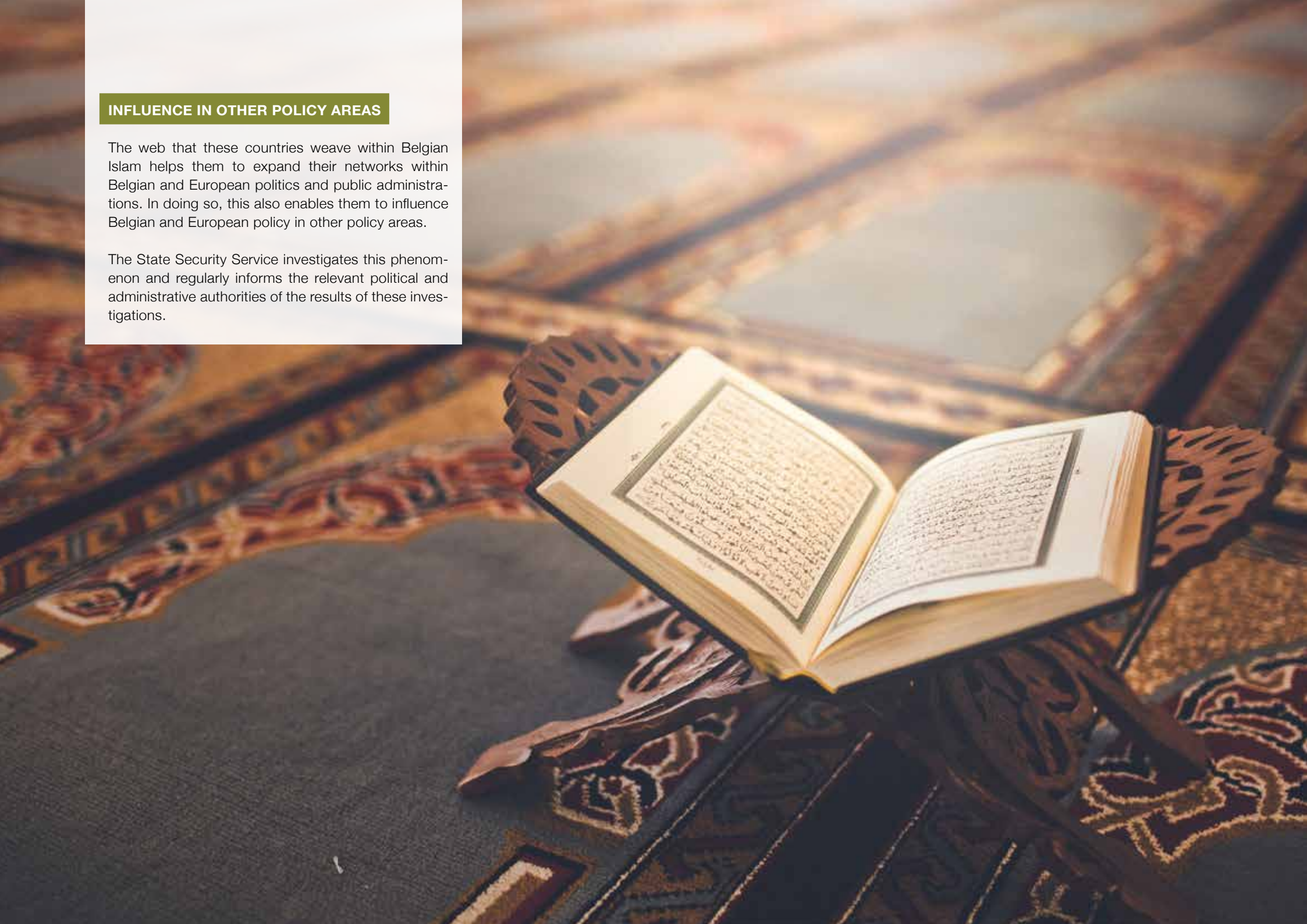
At the heart of the issue is the fact that the organisation and ideological line of Belgian institutional Islam is determined by third countries, thereby indirectly controlling the process of official recognition of mosques and the appointment of religious personnel. These choices do not serve the interests of Belgian Muslims, but those of foreign powers.

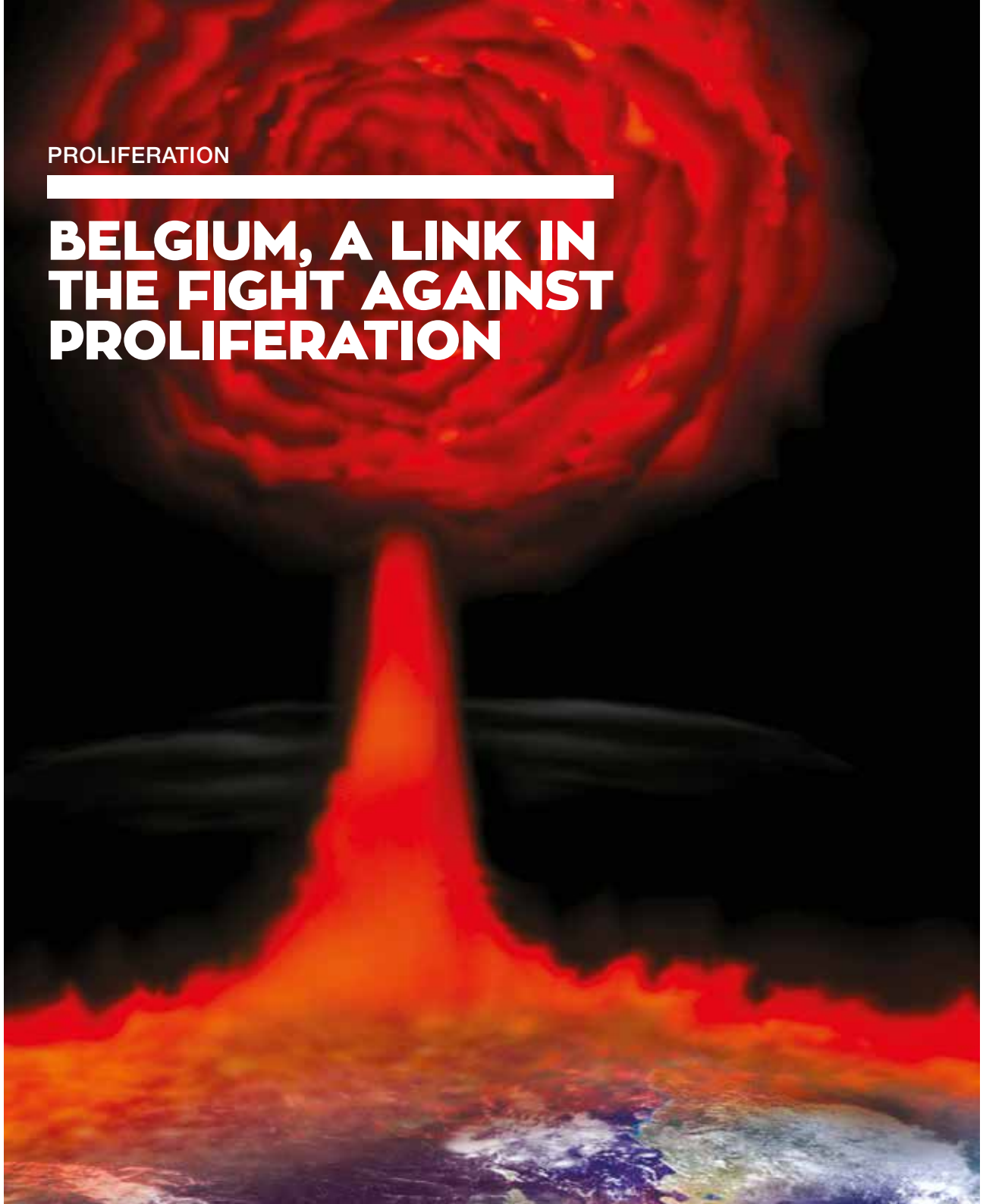
Moreover, these countries are both directly and indirectly involved in the propagation of radical or very conservative Islamic movements. This is carried out in a very direct way: by actively promoting these currents.

## INFLUENCE IN OTHER POLICY AREAS

The web that these countries weave within Belgian Islam helps them to expand their networks within Belgian and European politics and public administrations. In doing so, this also enables them to influence Belgian and European policy in other policy areas.

The State Security Service investigates this phenomenon and regularly informs the relevant political and administrative authorities of the results of these investigations.





PROLIFERATION

# BELGIUM, A LINK IN THE FIGHT AGAINST PROLIFERATION

**BELGIUM MAKES AN INTERESTING PROLIFERATION TARGET.**

Proliferation of nuclear, radiological, chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their means of delivery by state and non-state actors is a considerable threat to our security and that of our allies. Preventing certain actors from acquiring the equipment, materials, technologies, knowledge and know-how necessary is an international priority. The State Security Service keeps a close eye on developments in this area.

Our logical location and the presence of leading expertise and technologies lend Belgium an interesting profile as target. As such, our country has signed up to the international sanctions regimes imposed on certain high-risk countries because of their sensitive proliferation activities.

## LINK IN AN INTERNATIONAL CHAIN

In the fight against the proliferation of WMD, which by definition extends beyond the borders of individual countries, international co-operation is essential. Contrary to all expectations, suspect transactions do not necessarily pass through criminal networks, but seep into legitimate trade flows. Hence the importance of having up-to-date and accurate intelligence in order to properly assess the proliferation risk in terms of end-user or end-use. The State Security Service therefore works with the various federal and regional authorities involved in this field, amongst them Customs, licensing authorities, the Treasury, FPS Foreign Affairs, the Immigration Office and the military General Intelligence and Security Service. It shares relevant information and takes measures to thwart worrying attempts to acquire or transfer knowledge.

## GOODS, KNOWLEDGE AND KNOW-HOW

The work of our service covers both the material and intangible aspects of proliferation, i.e. goods on the one hand and knowledge and know-how on the other. In particular, we monitor the implementation of certain control mechanisms and international treaties. This generally includes so-called **dual-use** goods and related knowledge or know-how. Both civil industry and the world of academia can make use of **dual-use** items. However, dual-use items can also have a military purpose as well, for example in the development of WMD or their delivery systems. Think of missiles or drones.

## SCREENING AND AWARENESS RAISING

Within our universities and research institutes, there are certain research areas that are sensitive in terms of proliferation. The State Security Service screens students from countries with a particular interest in this context.

In addition, the State Security Service works to disrupt proliferation networks and to identify entities and persons involved in illicit procurement, transit or export. In doing so, the service works to support the authorities in charge of verification and licensing. It also provides advice at the request of various federal, regional and other agencies involved in the fight against proliferation. Furthermore, it shares information with international export verification platforms (nuclear weapons, missiles, chemical and biological weapons). Finally, the service invests in preventive and awareness-raising work reaching out to private companies and academic institutions. Proliferation risks, especially in the aerospace sector, claimed special attention in 2020.

# ISLAMISM AND INTERFERENCE AMONG NORTH CAUCASIANS

***2020 put the spotlight on the Chechen community, particularly so following the murder of the French teacher Samuel Paty by a young radicalised Chechen in France.***

Since the early 2000s, Belgium has been a host to North Caucasian communities, primarily composed of Chechens fleeing violent conflict in their country. Like Austria, France, Germany, Norway, Poland and Sweden, Belgium is home to large groups scattered across its territory: from Arlon to Ostend, through Verviers, Kortrijk, Ghent or Antwerp, the total number is estimated at around 20,000.

Little known to the general public, the Chechen community is characterised, among other things, by a strong sense of solidarity and collective responsibility, a high degree of mobility - North Caucasians travel easily from one city to another and from one country to another - and a significant distrust of public authorities - particularly inherited from the Soviet past and the two Chechen wars. From the mid-2000s onwards, there has been a gradual increase in religious awareness and parallel to this an increase in certain extremist currents.

## THE CAUCASUS EMIRATE

On the one hand, some Chechens are or have been influenced by jihadist Salafism, a result of support for the insurgency in Chechnya, which was embodied by the Caucasus Emirate from the mid-2000s. Loosely linked to al-Qaeda, at the core of this organisation was its hostility towards the Russian Federation. On the other hand, the Chechen government has progressively put in place policies which some describe as “Sufi Islamisation”, notably in order to counteract Salafism. These policies, conservative in nature, revolve around the Muslim religion, even if it means flouting the rights of women and minorities or going against the laws of the Russian Federation.

This two-fold development per force is having an impact on part of the Chechen communities in Europe, the Syrian conflict serving as a catalyst. As early as 2012, Chechens, often inspired by the Salafist jihadist ideology, travelled out to Syria to join the hostilities. Their numbers consistently increased until 2015.

*Chechen Republic Flag*

Although initially present mainly in North Caucasian groups, the majority of them later joined Islamic State, while others moved into the sphere of influence of the *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* group.

Among this vast contingent of several thousands of individuals, there are Chechens from Belgium. More discreet and less known than other Belgian foreign fighters, they nevertheless represent 10 to 15% of the fighters who left from our country. A handful of them are still active in North-West Syria, but many have died or disappeared. Others have returned to Belgium, where the State Security Service is assisting the judicial authorities with their prosecution.

This rise of extremist currents and the attraction of Syria has also inspired attacks in Europe. The murder of the teacher Samuel Paty in France by a young Chechen was highly publicised and although the number of attacks is very limited, the murder of Paty is not an isolated incident. In Belgium too participation in terrorist acts by members of the North Caucasian diaspora has to be considered as a realistic scenario, as illustrated by the arrest of a young man of Chechen origin in November 2020 for planning a violent action targeting police officers.


«Since mid-2019, several assassinations have taken place in Europe targeting opponents of the regime»

## CHECHEN INTERFERENCE

On the one hand, there is the terrorist threat within the Chechen diaspora. On the other hand, there is the danger of interference. When Ramzan Kadyrov became the leader of Chechnya in the mid-2000s, his primary mission was to stabilise the small autonomous republic with the support of Moscow. Over the course of the 2010s, with this first objective largely achieved, his regime made efforts to gain a foothold outside its territory, actively promoting Islam and Chechen identity. Kadyrov is labelling himself both as Russia's Muslim standard bearer abroad, whilst also seeking to regain control of a community that includes many opponents.

Since mid-2019, several assassinations have occurred in Europe targeting opponents of the Chechen regime, reigniting worries that Chechnya aims to control its citizens in Europe through brutal aggression tactics. Belgium has not been spared: on 30 January 2020, a Belgian resident of Chechen origin was murdered in Lille (France). His death can be added to those of other members of the diaspora in Europe. Although the profiles of the victims vary, ranging from a former rebel commander to a more or less well-known blogger, their common denominator is their opposition to the Chechen regime. This has rekindled fears that Chechnya is trying to control Chechens in Europe by way of fear tactics.

As part of its activities in the fight against extremism, terrorism and interference, the State Security Service is monitoring a number of North Caucasian actors. The service also develops its national and international contacts to better understand, inform and take appropriate measures against Islamism and interference within the Chechen community in Belgium.


*Ramzan Kadyrov*

# EVOLUTION IN JIHADIST TERRORISM:

The fall of the Syrian enclave of Baghuz in March 2019 is seen as the end of the Islamic State as a territorial unit. The so-called caliphate as such has disappeared and international jihadist terrorism has lost a key draw. Slowly but surely, the issue is no longer in the public eye, creating the impression that this form of terrorism is fading away.

However, this is a false impression: the threat has diversified; it is more diffuse. The consequence for society is a series of new challenges, which our country has had to face on several occasions.

## FEATURES

**> No end to the breeding ground for radicalism**
Jihadist terrorism has not just come out of nowhere. It is an extreme and rather exceptional expression of the radicalism that is present in some parts of our society. The breeding ground in our country has not fundamentally changed since the time before the crisis in Syria and Iraq. The picture has only become more complex.

**> Consequences of the conflict in Syria and Iraq**
The war in Syria and Iraq attracted people from all over the world. The aftermath will be felt in the region for a more years to come. This also applies to Belgium, which has had one of the highest rates of migration per capita to the conflict zone.

## WHERE ARE THE (FTFS) LOCATED?

• ***Foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) on the ground and their networks***
A limited number of Belgian FTFs are still present in Syria in areas controlled by al-Qaeda-linked organisations, such as in Idlib. Some of them have not been heard from for a long time and most of them are probably dead, without the Belgian services or partner organisations being able to gather information to confirm their death. It is therefore possible that some of them are still alive.

In 2020, most Belgian FTF survivors in the conflict zone are already in prison (as regards the men) or in camps run by the Syrian Kurds (the women and children). The instability and insecurity of this region requires the Belgian services to remain vigilant in order to detect in time movements, releases or escapes of Belgian nationals and to prepare for their possible return (in 2020, this did not happen).

• ***Returnees***
Since the beginning of the conflict, over 130 people have returned to Belgium. Most of them were members of a terrorist organisation or at least resided in territory controlled by such groups. Our country's intelligence and security services are constantly on the lookout for these persons. However, most have not come forward since their return. A small minority, however, have reappeared in cases concerning radicalism or terrorism. In the meantime, a number of Belgian women and their children have been repatriated from the camps to Belgium.

• **Convicted terrorists and radicalised persons**
The Belgian justice system has convicted many returnees to prison sentences. In addition, in recent years a large number of people in Belgium have also been convicted for terrorist offences such as dissemination of terrorist propaganda, engaging in recruitment activities, providing financial or logistical support, or even conspiring to prepare attacks. In 2020, our service also dealt with several cases in each of these categories, a trend that seems to continue in 2021.

• **The consequences of convictions**
the high number of terrorist prisoners in Belgian prisons creates new risks for the future. On the one hand, some

of these prisoners influence other prisoners, which might lead to radicalisation. On the other hand, there is the issue of their release and whether or not the risk they pose can be properly assessed. Although the prosecution/legal follow-up stops at the end of the sentence, when fully served, the various security partners remain attentive. Most prisoners convicted for terrorist offences remain on the CUTA list as hate preachers, potentially violent extremists or others (see box). Each case is also discussed at the meetings of the local task forces (LTF) or the local integrated security units (LISU).

## REFUGEES

The crisis in Syria and Iraq has led to an increase in asylum seekers from that region, most of whom do not pose a risk to our security. However, in recent years, our service has discovered that some of these individuals have committed reprehensible acts on behalf of Islamic State or other terrorist organisations in their home countries. Other refugees have committed terrorist crimes after arriving in our country and are therefore on the radar.

## THE ENDURING LEGACY OF PROPAGANDA, MANUALS AND NETWORKS OF SYMPATHISERS

Islamic State, and to a lesser extent al-Qaeda, have disseminated massive amounts of propaganda in recent years and have built a strong online presence. Despite all measures put in place, this propaganda remains widespread and easy to find. The so-called caliphate may have been defeated, but it is alive and well on the internet and its extremist message still reaches a wide audience. In fact, we are increasingly seeing this propaganda, as well as online manuals, playing a role in threat cases. In addition, it is still easy to reach like-minded people via chat apps and social media, creating closed networks.

### > The impact of the pandemic

The corona lockdown and other measures have led to a further shift away from the real world to the online world. This is also true of the jihadist milieu. Closed networks and social media, including algorithms, act to reinforce radical messages, which in some cases seems to accelerate the process of radicalisation. This widens the operational scope of the field in which we endeavour to assess the threat.

### THE FIVE CATEGORIES OF THE COMMON DATABASE (CDB)

The Common Database (CDB) contains the names of all known extremists and terrorists in our country. At present, there are five categories of extremists with close ties to Belgium (see ocam.belgium.be):

> **Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF):** persons who have left for a conflict zone with the aim of joining a terrorist group, or who have returned from a conflict zone, as well as persons who have been prevented from leaving or who intend to leave;

> **Homegrown Terrorist Fighters (HTF):** persons who do not intend to leave to join a terrorist organisation abroad, but who choose to commit terrorist acts in Belgium or who provide support;

> **Propagandists of Hate (PHs):** persons who want to justify the use of violence for ideological purposes, as well as exert a radicalising influence on those around them and harm the rule of law;

> **Potentially Violent Extremists (PVEs):** persons with extremist views who intend to use violence, but have not taken concrete steps to do so

> **Persons Convicted of Terrorism (PCTs):** persons convicted, interned or subject to a protection measure for terrorism in Belgium or abroad.

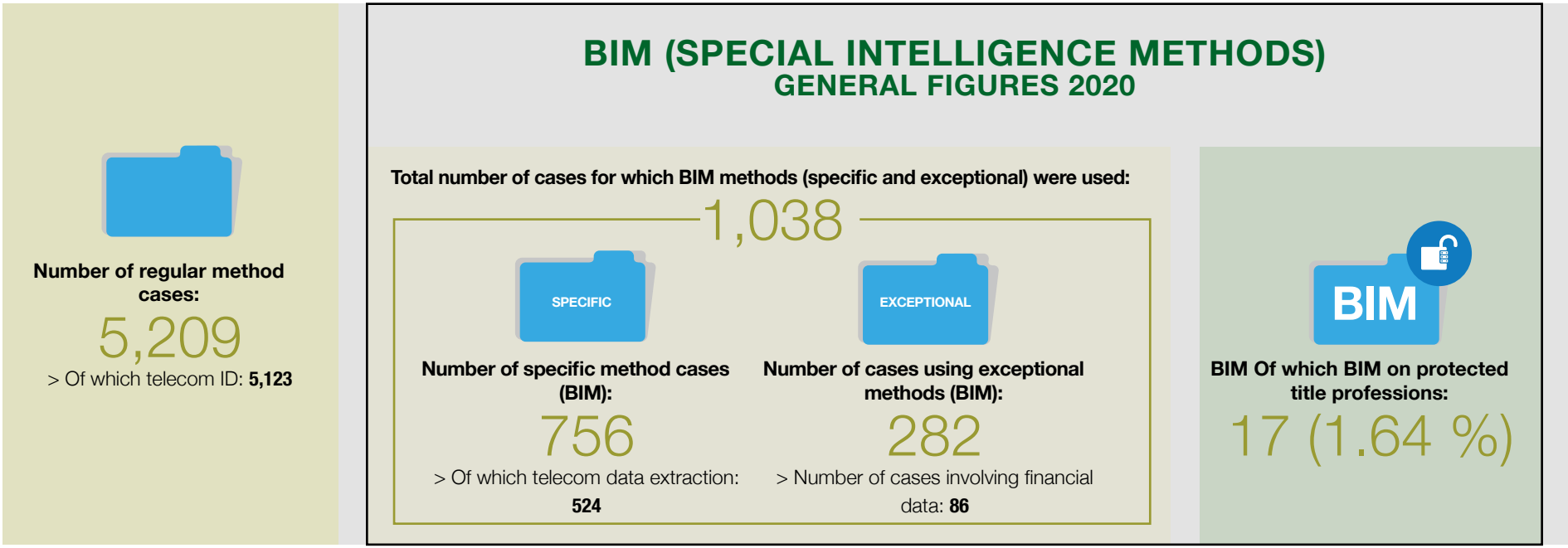
# IMPACT OF THE CORONA CRISIS ON INTELLIGENCE GATHERING METHODS

In 2020, requests for telecom data continued to be a popular intelligence gathering method at the State Security Service. Financial data requests too were also more intensely used.

The corona measures had an impact on just about every aspect of society, including the use of intelligence gathering methods. Lockdown made State Security targets less mobile, which had operational implications for some of the methods used. Fewer close observation operations involving the deployment of technology were carried out and the number of searches and surveillance operations in private spaces also dropped significantly.

On the other hand, the use of financial data proved to be useful. Extraction of telecommunication metadata, i.e. traffic data between different actors, remained at about the same level as in 2019.

It is possible that, even after being approved, a requested method will not be used. For example, a surveillance operation in private premises, such as a house, may repeatedly have been postponed beyond legal validity because it was physically impossible to execute it. The method may then need to be reapplied for, affecting the statistics.



## BUT WHAT EXACTLY ARE THE SPECIAL INTELLIGENCE METHODS (OR BIMS)?

The State Security Service's Intelligence Methods may vary considerably. They may range from identifying a telephone number to using a method of listening in on private premises. The State Security Service uses 28 different methods. We distinguish between so-called 'normal' methods (e.g. requests for telephone device identification data), 'specific' methods (e.g. physical surveillance and observation) and 'exceptional' methods (e.g. phone tapping).

Generally speaking, the more intrusive a method, the more it is subject to external scrutiny. Specific and exceptional methods of intelligence gathering (special intelligence methods or BIMs) are the most intrusive.

The BIM Commission (a committee of three magistrates chaired by an examining magistrate) assesses the requests for methods upstream, the Standing Intelligence Agencies Review Committee downstream. The Standing Intelligence Agencies Review Committee and the BIM Commission may also terminate a method at any time on an ad hoc basis.

## FINANCIAL DETAILS

More and more data is requested in relation to bank accounts, financial transactions and money transfers, largely due to the high quality of the data provided by the National Bank of Belgium (NBB). Previously, the NBB limited itself to one update per year of the identification data on holders and proxies. Now that information is updated almost daily. The VSSE will therefore first obtain information from the NBB on the holder of a document and his/her accounts, and then request the transaction data from the bank(s) concerned.

Requesting transaction data from the National Bank is an exceptional intelligence method and very intrusive in nature. After an internal quality control and approval by the Administrator General, the request is submitted to the BIM Commission for advice. The Commission assesses the legality, subsidiarity and proportionality of the requested method. The head of the State Security Service can give the green light to execute the method at hand only after receiving prior and unanimous positive opinion of the three magistrates of the BIM Commission. The method is checked downstream by the Standing Committee I. The use of all ongoing exceptional methods is evaluated every fortnight in a report to the BIM Commission.

## TELECOM DATA AND ELECTRONIC METADATA

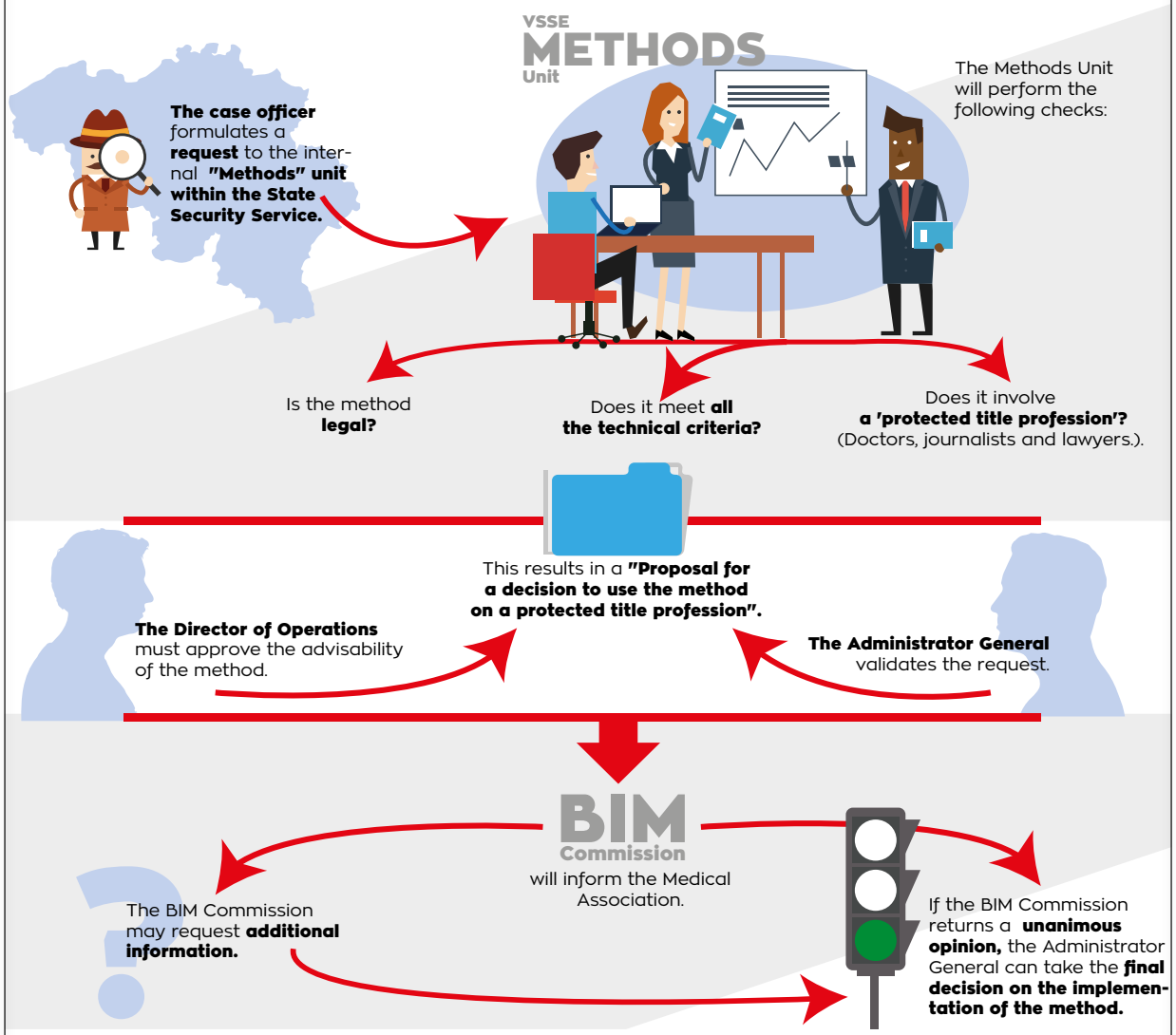
Telecom data, such as intercepted communications or the retrieval of metadata (e.g. a target's telephone traffic), remain popular intelligence methods. The steep rise of over-the-top applications such as Skype and WhatsApp, result in data stemming from traditional telephone communication tools becoming less interesting. A phenomenon on the rise is "new" media providers who do not feel bound by Belgian or European legal rules, although operating in Belgium, and despite the existence of case law. Both the courts and the intelligence services can invoke the rulings in a case against Yahoo! and a case against Skype. In practice, however, the State Security Service is seldom met with significant reluctance from this type of operators.

## TRAVEL AND TRAVEL DATA

In 2020, a number of procedures were introduced which will make it easier for us to request information related to travel (BELPIU, Belgian Passenger Information Unit).

## CHECKS AND BALANCES - PROTECTED PROFESSIONS (E.G. LAWYER)

When using a BIM, the question arises: what about the professional secrecy of a lawyer, a doctor or a journalist? The law provides for a separate procedure for these so-called 'protected professions'.
Example: Suppose a human source tells an inspector a foreign-born lawyer is working clandestinely for a foreign intelligence service. As a lawyer, he/she has a certain reputation in his/her community. The inspector asks for an exceptional method: has the lawyer received money from the foreign power?




As always, the BIM Commission will ensure that the implementation is proportional and justified. The Standing Intelligence Agencies Review Committee can assess a posteriori whether the method applied is justified or not.

In other words, the methods are implemented only after they have passed internal scrutiny. Within the State Security Service, a separate, central section, the "Methods Unit", is responsible for this task.

The Methods Unit acts as an internal quality controller. For more complex operations, it sets up a consultation structure and advises both the applicants and implementers of the methods.

Let us assume that surveillance is to be carried out in private premises. All possible options must be considered: What happens if the door has to be removed? What are the legal implications? Which special methods should be used? At this stage, the Methods Unit acts as a liaison between the BIM Commission and the method implementers.

The procedures can be cumbersome. This is important: for citizens, they are a safeguard that privacy-invasive methods are applied in accordance with the legal principles of **proportionality** and **subsidiarity.** As regards subsidiarity, the Methods Unit will check whether the method is absolutely necessary to achieve the aim. The intrusion into a person's privacy must also be commensurate with the seriousness of the threat. This is called proportionality.

# NECESSARY AMENDMENTS TO THE STATUTORY LAW ON THE INTELLIGENCE SERVICES

*To keep pace with changing threats and a changing world in which the intelligence services operate, the Statutory Law on the Intelligence and Security Services is regularly updated.*

**PROPOSALS FOR LEGISLATIVE AMENDMENTS ARE INTENDED TO MAKE THE WORK MORE EFFECTIVE.**

**Here are the most important ones:**

**1) A legal basis for virtual agents to commit criminal offences**

At present, the intelligence services can already request authorisation to commit certain criminal offences when they use the most intrusive data collection methods such as bugging, phone taps, house searches, etc. However, when operating in the virtual world, officers are not allowed to commit criminal offences. On the web, they have no choice but to be passive onlookers. The slightest activity might require them to break the law: the glorification of terrorism, defamation, making racist comments, etc. By being a mere "spectator", agents are detected and excluded from groups that disseminate content that threatens our democracy, because of the lack of credibility of the comments linked to their profiles.

To address this problem, both intelligence services have tabled the proposal to give their officers more leeway to commit offences in this type of situations. This new method would be strictly regulated by a two-tier check, similar to the one for the most intrusive data gathering methods: prior authorisation by the BIM Commission and a downstream check by the Standing Intelligence Agencies Review Committee.

**2) Strengthening the legal framework governing the perpetration of offences by human intelligence sources**

Currently, a human source providing the intelligence services with information is not authorised to commit a criminal offence to obtain this information. However, allowing this possibility has become essential:

> as a result of the expansion of the criminal code in relation to terrorism (e.g. operating in a recruitment network);

> to ensure a strong information position and credibility when gathering information;

> to ensure their own safety.

This has prompted a legislative initiative to allow human intelligence sources to commit criminal offences subject to strict conditions and several levels of strict checks. Currently, the project has been launched and is working towards a political agreement.

# ROLE PLAYING AND E-LEARNING

***The strength of an intelligence service derives from its staff. And its training is just as important. A large part of it has been redesigned and is now better adapted to current requirements. Some components of the curriculum have been digitised.***

The training of staff members is central to the proper functioning of an intelligence service. This is particularly true for case officers who need to rely on a series of specialist skills not taught in a college or university. They are trained within the service.

**POUR DE NOMBREUX AGENTS, LA FORMATION, FOR MANY STAFF MEMBERS, BASIC TRAINING RECEIVED AS A GROUP CREATES PERSONAL BONDS THAT CAN LAST FOR MANY YEARS.**

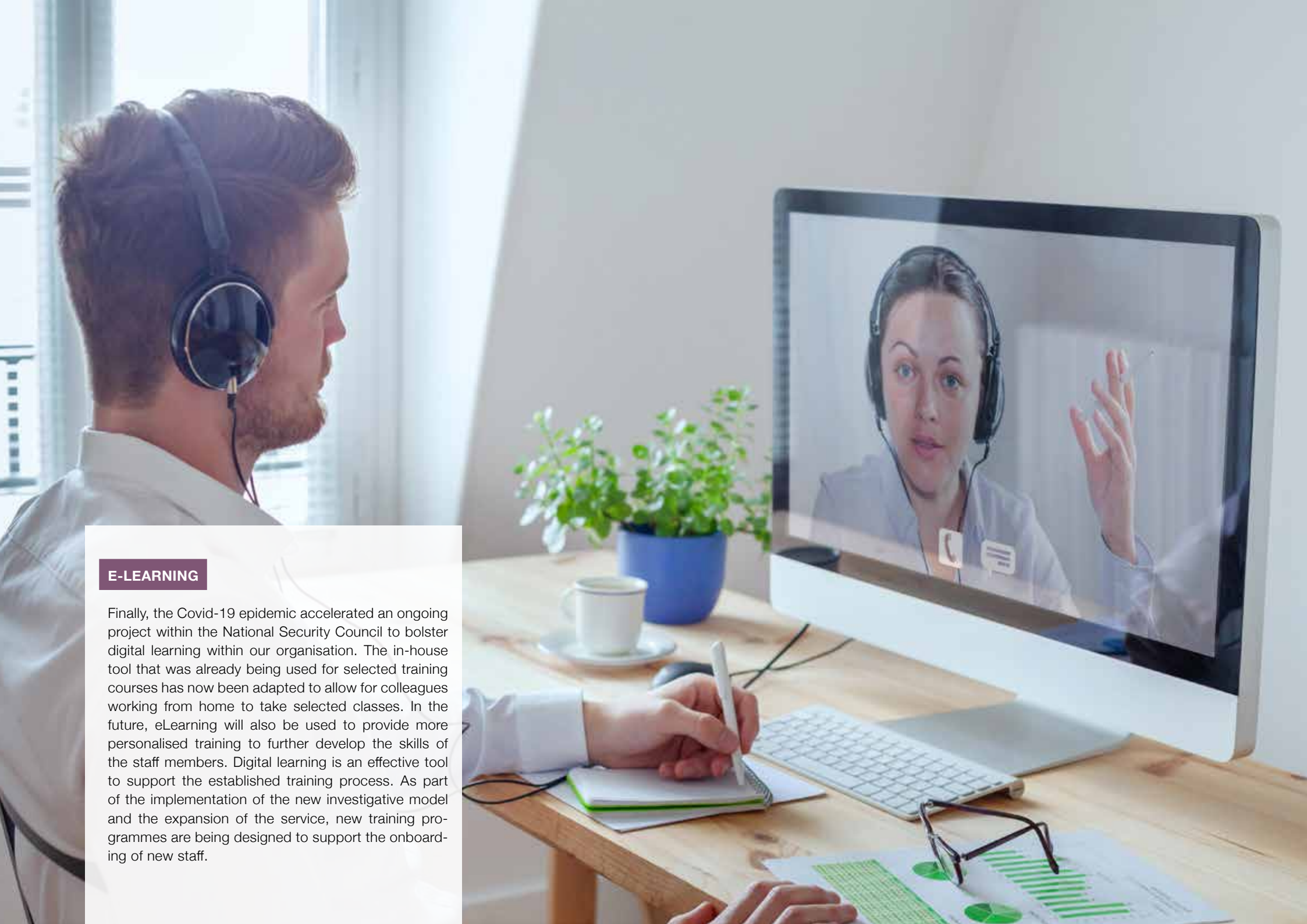
In line with the change imposed by the Directorate-General, training has evolved.

### 1) Handling of human sources

Some training courses have been completely redesigned. This is the case for the training of source handlers, for example, which, according to a directive of the National Security Council, is currently required to be admitted to the function. The course design today is much more focused on the day-to-day challenges faced by officers and the potential difficulties intelligence officers come across during their contacts with human sources. Role-playing in real-life conditions should enable the new resource handlers to upgrade their skills. The training course ends with an individual assessment to ensure the required level of proficiency has been achieved.

### 2) Basic training programme

The basic training programme for all officers joining the service has also been thoroughly reworked. This initiative is based on the outcomes of a survey among around 100 colleagues, and resulted in many practical improvements. The course is now more compact, in order to prepare for the future intake of new colleagues as announced in the government coalition agreement, which allows for a faster flow.



## E-LEARNING

Finally, the Covid-19 epidemic accelerated an ongoing project within the National Security Council to bolster digital learning within our organisation. The in-house tool that was already being used for selected training courses has now been adapted to allow for colleagues working from home to take selected classes. In the future, eLearning will also be used to provide more personalised training to further develop the skills of the staff members. Digital learning is an effective tool to support the established training process. As part of the implementation of the new investigative model and the expansion of the service, new training programmes are being designed to support the onboarding of new staff.

# TOWARDS A MORE SECURE, FASTER, MORE EFFICIENT ICT NETWORK

***In recent years, the State Security Service has invested heavily in a comprehensive revamping and overhaul of its ICT platform, which will be based on a new investigative model.***


Not long after the Zaventem and Maalbeek terrorist attacks in 2016, the Interdepartmental Programme (IP) Terro injected 22.5 million euros into updating the sub-standard ICT infrastructure of the State Security Service and redesigning the overall ICT environment. In the face of the digital revolution, the explosive growth of social media and the ever faster exchange of information, the State Security Service had to catch up with the technology of its European partners' services.

The main focus has been on **infrastructure, storage and networks.** In concrete terms, some of the hardware has been upgraded: staff computers and servers have been replaced. A start was also made to restructure the overall ICT environment and information management, both of which are necessary to perform the intelligence work more efficiently than before.

The remodelling of the ICT environment revolves around two cornerstones, geared towards the core missions of the State Security Service: the first being **gathering of basic information,** the second **the management and processing of the data that have been acquired.**

> For basic data gathering, **a platform is being developed** that optimises the management of this data. The aim is to make searches faster, more secure and more efficient. Currently, searches are still often semi-manual.

> A second component, designed to process all the data gathered, will be the **creation of an IT platform.** This will allow the thousands of documents and large amounts of data received to be centrally stored, integrated and processed.

## NEW INVESTIGATIVE MODEL

**In parallel with the ICT reform and in order to ensure maximum efficiency, the handling procedures are being reformulated and a new investigative model is being implemented.**

This will allow:

- volume management;
- the mass of data received on a day-to-day basis to be monitored in the most efficient way possible;
- prioritisation;
- the service's resources to be allocated to those cases with the greatest human and economic impact;
- choices to be objectified according to objective predetermined criteria;
- us to work in a goal-oriented way so that we can respond more quickly to new threats.

As part of the recruitment campaign that will be introduced in 2021, profiles have already been taken into account that match the new investigative model.