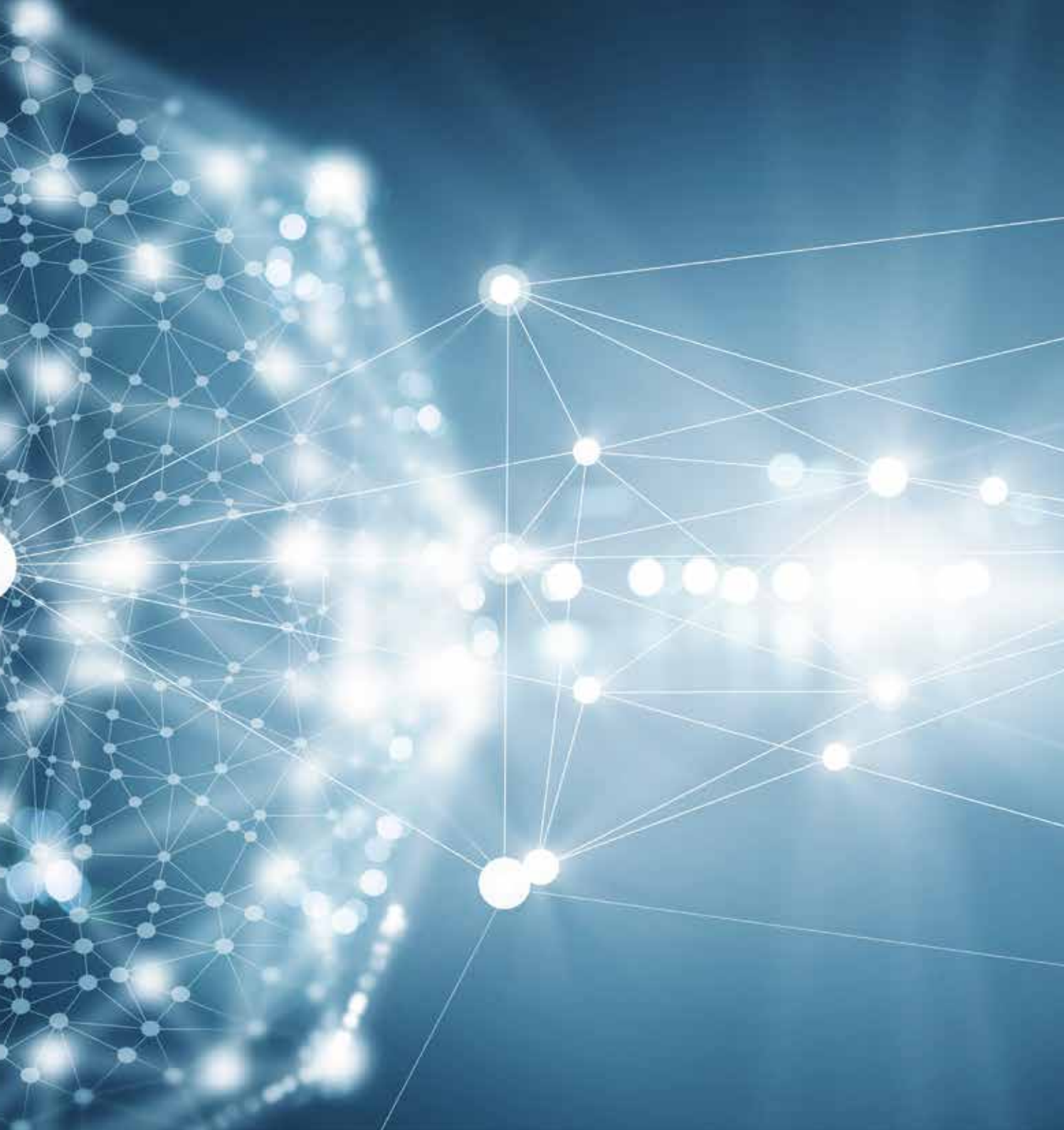




veiligheid van de staat  
sûreté de l'état

VSSE

# ANNUAL REPORT 2019<sup>A</sup> SUMMARY



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# ANNUAL REPORT 2019

## A SUMMARY

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# FOREWORD

For the first time in years, the VSSE published its annual report at the end of 2018. The VSSE hereby resumed its tradition to look back on the dossiers and topics followed by the service. With this annual report for 2019 we pursue that tradition, though we will not only look into the past, but also into the future.

The reason behind this publication is the **memorandum** that the VSSE wrote in the run-up to the elections of May 2019. The purpose of this memorandum was to highlight the needs of our service for our policy-makers, so they would take these elements into account when negotiating for a new coalition agreement or when important policy decisions are being taken. The memorandum also fits in with the VSSE's aim for more transparency.

A memorandum is nothing revolutionary. Many organisations and administrations have made a similar effort. Nevertheless, we can call it a **milestone** for two reasons. To begin with, it is the first time that the VSSE clearly defines and presents its needs to the policy makers. Secondly, the memorandum was written together with our military colleagues from the General Intelligence and Security Service (SGRS), which is unique. It is the result of an ever closer cooperation between both intelligence services. The National Strategic Intelligence plan, which was presented to the National Security Council at the end of 2018, was an important first step in this cooperation, the memorandum a logical next step.

Both are testimony of the fact that my service and the SGRS want to continue building a common policy in the

future. They illustrate that we have taken the recommendations of the parliamentary committee of inquiry into the attacks in Zaventem and Maelbeek to heart, by seeking synergies that lead to closer cooperation and a smoother flow of information.

The SGRS and the VSSE have many things in common, as well as a few collective needs. However, each service has its **own specificity** and legal tasks and, consequently, its own requirements that characterize the functioning of the respective service. The memorandum follows this logic: the first part includes proposals from both services, the second part covers proposals from each individual service.

## THE SGRS AND THE VSSE

A first important proposal groups a **few legislative initiatives**: from the penalization of espionage and interference to the establishment of a Commission that administers the access to administrative documents from the intelligence services. Each and every one of these initiatives is aimed at improving the functioning of the service.

It is commonly known that terrorism dossiers are more and more often being brought to court. In this context, we propose to leave room for an intelligence investigation, besides the judicial investigation. This matter has partly been solved through the creation of a Joint Intelligence Center and a Joint Decision Center in Brussels. The memorandum also offers additional options to improve the interaction between police and judici-



Jaak Raes,  
Administrator  
General of the  
VSSE

ary on the one hand, and the intelligence services on the other hand.

As regards **security screenings**, we have noticed a positive trend in society. People are increasingly comprehending the need to conduct screenings and verifications, for instance for airport personnel. This points to a bigger security awareness. But the vast increase in screenings needs to be managed properly. Therefore, we advocate a federal platform for security screenings that centralizes all requests according to uniform procedures. The National Security Authority, which has already been established and serves as a blueprint for such a platform, could be developed further.

Furthermore, we deem it important to have greater coherence for **shared ICT** tools and the availability of secure communication networks. Both are crucial for a well-functioning security architecture. A separate managing body to coordinate these technical developments would be an asset, even though it could prove to be a very costly matter.



In terms of **training**, resources should be made available to set up a permanent programme of “intelligence courses” for the employees of both the SGRS and the VSSE, and to provide for an adequate infrastructure for that purpose. By joining forces in this way, the cooperation between both services will be deepened. By allowing members of CUTA and the police to follow these courses as well, we can truly work towards a new intelligence culture.

During the past legislature, the VSSE started to structurally brief policymakers. Both the Cabinet of the Minister of Justice as that of the Minister of Home Affairs receive a weekly overview of the most important dossiers. In order to give this commitment a structural character, we propose to include it in the coalition agreement and to also offer security briefings to the Prime Minister in the future.

All these proposals demonstrate clearly that, for the first part of the memorandum, both intelligence services wish to look beyond their own intelligence bubble. We recognise that maximum security can only be achieved through cooperation. Our suggestions are therefore not only important for the SGRS and the VSSE, but for the Belgian security architecture as a whole.

## PROPOSALS FROM THE VSSE

If we compare the VSSE to other similar European intelligence services in terms of budget and employees, it quickly becomes clear that we are one of the smaller services. Countries like the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Croatia allocate significantly more resources. The benchmark that we performed clearly demonstrates that we need to catch up. That is why the VSSE, for a few years now, has been consequently

advocating **a tripling of the budget and a doubling of the number of personnel.**

In the first place, this is necessary to fulfil our legal duties. Due to a lack of resources, some of the threats are not sufficiently covered – a conclusion we already had the National Security Council establish. Our tasks have not become easier. Terrorism and extremism continue to demand an important share of our capacities. The security context also remains complex: in Brussels, the second biggest diplomatic hub in the world, we are quite often faced with espionage. Apart from that, there are cyber attacks, hybrid threats, interference in our democratic processes via disinformation campaigns. There is the polarizing impact of fake news that sets groups of the population against each other and destabilizes our society. Certain foreign investments in the Belgian economy need to be investigated. There is the explosive growth in the amount of screening requests, etc.

If we want to continue to modernize and expand the service, a number of accompanying measures are needed. For instance, the VSSE needs to have a maximum of autonomy when it comes to budget and personnel. This is necessary to turn our service into a flexible organization that can anticipate the fast-changing threat landscape. To guarantee this flexibility, a unified statute within the service is needed. It can no longer be accepted that employees of the VSSE performing the same job have a different personnel statute. Moreover, a unified statute can serve as a model for a statute that can be applied within the SGRS and CUTA. In other words, this is a unique opportunity to improve the mobility and cooperation between these services. An expansion of our service will require adequate accommodation – perhaps we can consider synergies with other security services.

## CONCLUSION

The VSSE protects the Belgian democracy and its citizens against domestic and foreign threats. We collect and analyse information to proactively detect these threats, in order to advise our partners and disrupt the threats. We do this in full respect of the democratic values that we safeguard.

By strengthening the VSSE we want to improve our information position. By doing so we will be able to fully take up our role within the Belgian security landscape. After all, the chain is only as strong as its weakest link. In addition, an intelligence service requires a certain strength in order to be a reliable partner at an international level. The threats that we monitor are by definition cross-border and international cooperation is crucial.

With the memorandum, we wanted to launch the debate about the **future of the Belgian intelligence community**. So far, this topic has not been sufficiently discussed at Belgian level. In any case, the VSSE is ambitious: we want to become a civilian intelligence service that can compete with the most high-performing partner intelligence services at European level. The reinforcement we ask for should make it possible to fulfil that ambition.

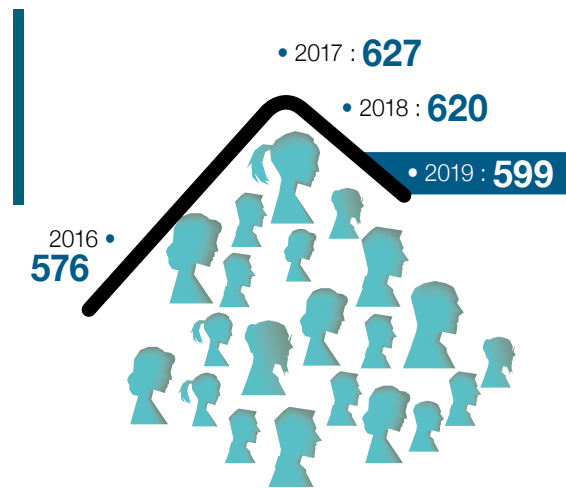
Jaak Raes



# FACTS AND FIGURES

## SLIGHT REDUCTION IN THE NUMBER OF STAFF

The number of staff at the VSSE grew in 2017 but **decreased** again in 2019. This is the result of retirements, on the one hand, and employees who left the service, on the other hand.



## THE END OF THE TERRO-BUDGET

In 2019, the budget of the VSSE was **reduced** due to the decrease in the interdepartmental budget for terrorism. The budget was used, among other things, for an ICT investment and for hiring personnel.



Year	IN	OUT
2014	16.992	4.950
2017	25.311	8.858
2019	33.924	6.643

## THE INFORMATION FLOW TO AND FROM THE VSSE

The VSSE **processed** about 34.000 incoming messages and more than 6.500 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.

# A WORD ON SGRS AND VSSE COLLABORATION

## NATIONAL STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE PLAN

The first ever National Strategic Intelligence Plan (NSIP) for our country, which would lay the foundation of the cooperation between the VSSE and the SGRS, was submitted to the National Security Council in October 2018.

The lessons learnt from the conclusions of the parliamentary committee of inquiry into the attacks of 2016 were taken into account, more specifically the need for more synergy and for an **intensified cooperation**, as well as the need for more people and resources.

## CONCRETE RESULTS

### > One team for counterterrorism

Despite important successes for the intelligence services in recent years, the attacks in Paris or Brussels sadly could not be prevented. To join forces, the SGRS and the VSSE decided to set up a common platform consisting of members of both services who have direct access to the information of both services. The goal is for both services to grow towards each other as far as counterterrorism is concerned.

### > A joint team for shadowing

Both intelligence services are jointly responsible for shadowing. This way, the VSSE's existing team is reinforced.

« A common training course for newcomers was launched this year »

### > Joint training

A **common training course for newcomers** was launched this year, with members of both services. It is our aim to also further develop the cooperation on the issue of training.

### > More transparency and trust

Trust remains a key factor to efficient cooperation. This trust is built upon negotiated mechanisms which allow **for an open information exchange**. An important step in this process was the introduction of common instructions for both services. For sensitive matters like counterespionage or the management of human sources the word “cooperation” has taken on another dimension.

### > Side by side against current challenges

The two services increasingly worked together, for instance in the run-up to **the elections of 2019**.

## PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

Talks are scheduled for a new plan to further intensify the cooperation and to **expand** it to the whole intelligence community.



# THE EVOLUTION OF THE THREAT ASSESSMENT IN BELGIUM

In 2019, our country was spared from terror attacks. This is primarily due to the good cooperation between the Belgian security and intelligence services, which undoubtedly has resulted in the disruption of several harmful actions. After the attacks of 2016, a first permanent framework for dialogue was created between the federal judicial police of Brussels, both intelligence services and CUTA. Over the past few years, the framework was transformed into a **Joint Intelligence Center (JIC) and a Joint Decision Center (JDC)**, which now are competent for the whole jurisdiction of the Brussels Court of Appeal. These platforms ensure that information related to concrete threats circulates easily and timely between the competent services. Following the creation of these platforms, Fora CT (counterterrorism) were created in Antwerp, Charleroi, Ghent and Liège, where information is shared in a similar manner. Each of these efforts are made to prevent that crucial information gets lost or does not end up in the right place in time, with potentially disastrous consequences.

The terrorism threat on which the VSSE focuses and which is the topic of discussion in the JIC, JDC and Fora CT, was more diverse in 2019 than ever. Even though the self-declared Islamic State (IS) was no longer as powerful and well-organized as a few years before, the VSSE continued to closely monitor the threat stemming from the Syrian-Iraqi conflict zone, for it was possible that a few **Belgian FTFs** were still active in certain persistent centres of resistance. Espe-

cially the situation in the Idlib province was very volatile. In addition, the pressure on the Kurdish militias in the north of Syria increased, as they were being threatened by the Turkish forces and the Syrian regular army. Therefore, a day-to-day monitoring of the situation in the prisons and camps under their control was needed. IS and its Belgian contingent was far from a closed chapter for the VSSE.

## SYRIA, IRAQ AND NEW “JIHADI THEATRES”

As stated before, the threat was more diverse in 2019 than ever. When IS faded from the Syrian-Iraqi region, room was once again created for other terrorist groups. Meanwhile, old and new terrorist groups still pledged allegiance to the core structure of IS. In other words, while we kept one eye on Syria and Iraq, we simultaneously had to scan so-called new **“jihadi theatres”**. Afghanistan and Pakistan continued to be a source of unrest: day after day attacks were committed by an amalgam of tribes and terrorist organisations. Even though the attraction for FTFs of Belgian origin was always fairly limited, continued vigilance was necessary. Further to the southeast, there were rumours about new “safe havens” for jihadis who fled other areas of conflict. Due to the relative calm in this region, it could serve as a place to regroup and continue to become skilled at guerrilla tactics and techniques for perpetrating attacks. It is mainly the increased “jihadisation” of conflicts in the **Sahel region** that worries us.

As a matter of fact, this region in particular will have to be focused on in the next couple of years. A combination of relative proximity and migration flows from the south to the north can cause certain threats. As an intelligence service it is our duty to monitor these situations closely.

Not every terrorist or extremist threat comes from abroad. Over the last couple of years, security and intelligence services have been increasingly active in detecting, monitoring and, whenever possible, disrupting so-called **“homegrown terrorist fighters”**, some-





times also labelled as “lone actors”. Though many of them also draw inspiration from the ideology that is actively being spread by terrorist groups like IS and Al Qaeda (AQ), there does not necessarily need to be any face-to-face contact between student and “guru”. Because there is no organization or structure consisting of several people, the risk of detection is automatically reduced. In other words: someone who radicalizes by themselves in front of their laptop, is far less likely to draw the attention of the services. This risk of “exposure” increases again when others become part of the plans or when material support is actively sought. This relatively new phenomenon required a different, tailor made approach by the police and intelligence services. Consequently, a lot of investments have been made over the past few years in an online presence (social media intelligence or SocMint). This approach has definitely borne fruit. Through our work in SocMint, several travel or attack plots have been disrupted (mostly in an

« In the coming year focus will shift to the Sahel region, where conflicts are increasingly “jihadified” »

« Social media allowed us to disrupt several travel or attack plots »

early stage). The cooperation with regard to this collection technique is being developed and intensified, both on a national and international level. The VSSE plays a leading role in this matter.

The VSSE is also taking on a pioneering role in another field, namely with its operations in the prisons. Together with the penitentiary institutions and the other security partners, we closely monitor the phenomenon of radicalization in prisons. Special attention is being paid to prisoners who are released after a period of detention for terrorist activities or to those who are suspected to have radicalized. Here too, the goal is to inform our partners in a timely manner, for instance via the local taskforces. In the past, services have been reproached for not sharing information in time, or for not sharing enough. We can gather from recent experiences that this is no longer the case.

#### RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM AS A BREEDING GROUND

Our regular work on both the external (IS in Syria and Iraq) and internal (homegrown) terrorist threat points to the same form of religious extremism as a breeding ground. This extremism as such of course is not enough to incite someone to commit a terrorist attack.

There are numerous factors that interact. But the underlying breeding ground for this type of terrorism can often be found in the most rigorous form of extremist Islam, namely Salafism. In recent years, we have witnessed a strong growth in the **Madkhalist branch of Salafism in Belgium**, a branch that is characterized by intense proselytism and a strong aversion to the democratic constitutional state. As an intelligence service, not only do we perceive this religious extremism as a threat because it constitutes a breeding ground for terrorist action, we also consider it to be problematic because of its totalitarian, racist and anti-democratic nature. This makes it a significant threat to our inclusive society.

#### EXTREME RIGHT-WING TERRORISM

Up until now, we have focused on jihadi terrorism – the type of terrorism that is being prompted by an extremist, religious vision. In 2019, it became clear in our neighbouring countries, but also in the United States or New Zealand for instance, that the threat that stems from extreme **right-wing terrorism should not be ignored**. This threat and the threat stemming from



jihadi terrorism seem to form a system that follows the law of communicating vessels. Yet, it is all too easy to overlook the underlying causes. Extreme right exists in different degrees and modalities. On the one hand, we can observe that a more civilized part of the far-right community has managed to become socially acceptable in different parts of the EU: “extreme right in suits”, as they are popularly called. On the other hand, a growing number of small cells is being formed that appeals more to streetfighters with far-right views. Both ends of this spectrum (and everything in between) share a very extreme discourse that incites hatred, racism, misogyny, etc. We recently observed that, more and more often, these groups are organising themselves on an international level (or, at the very least, are looking for like-minded people in other European countries). There is also a clear **trend towards procuring arms**. It is our task as an intelligence service to closely monitor these worrying evolutions and to share the information at hand with the security services involved.

## HYBRID THREATS

For the past five years, our attention was very much focused on these threats as described above. An intelligence service, however, has to remain conscious of the fact that even in moments of complete concentration, the threat can be diverse or hybrid. That is why we had to remain vigilant for the threats of espionage and interference by foreign powers. Over the past year, we have focused, more than ever before, on countering this threat through a number of new projects.

2019 was an election year. Together with its military colleagues of the SGRS, the VSSE set up a working group to monitor whether, and under which form, foreign powers were aiming to interfere with the democratic processes in Belgium. First and foremost, each Belgian political party was informed of the intention of the VSSE and the SGRS to take on this task. In addition, they were given a few tools to protect themselves against this threat. These so-called “**awareness brief-**

« The threat stemming from jihadi terrorism and extreme right-wing terrorism are communicating vessels »»



European  
Commission

« Several projects in 2019 focused on countering interference and espionage »

ings” are not new to the VSSE. The competent political and administrative authorities of our country (including the three regions) have been able to call upon this service for some time now. It was, however, the first time that both services worked together to make this happen and that it was executed at such a scale. In parallel with this project, the VSSE, together with the SGRS and the Centre for Cyber security Belgium (CCB), published a leaflet entitled “**Online safety during the election campaign**”.

Not only the terrorism threat was very diverse in 2019, the same holds true for the threat stemming from **espionage and interference by foreign powers**. Because of the fact that our country hosts a great number of European institutions and NATO, this threat is disproportionately large for a country of only 30 000 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 11,5 million inhabitants. For that reason, it is essential to have good cooperation and a good information exchange, both with national and international partners, but certainly also with the institutions. Secondly, it is important to increase the resilience of possible targets for these foreign “spies”. The VSSE is fully committed to doing this. A third option is to disrupt these harmful activities of foreign actors and in doing so, passing on the message that our country will not tolerate this type of activities on its soil. It goes

without saying that a possible future criminalization of actions of espionage and interference would give us even more possibilities.

### CYBER THREAT

Among hybrid threats we do not only count disinformation and online interference (e.g. the election project), but also the so-called cyber threat: the threat that stems from powers using cyber technology as a weapon. In Belgium there are several actors tasked with countering this threat: the above-mentioned CCB, the Ministry of Defence (and the SGRS), as well as the Federal Computer Crime Unit (FCCU) of the Federal police. In 2019, these services held regular meetings to discuss how to use the available resources as effi-



« In recent years Belgium saw a strong increase in the presence of the madkhalite tendency within the salafist scene. Madkhalism is heavily proselytising and has an aversion to the democratic constitutional state »

ciently and complementary as possible. The VSSE certainly isn't the biggest or most important player in this area, but we too can do our share in countering these new threats.

I hope that I have managed to introduce you in a few pages to the biggest challenges that the VSSE was faced with in 2019 and which we will have to continue to tackle in 2020 and beyond.

Making authorities, politicians and citizens aware of the threats that they might be faced with, in others words advocating prevention in a proportionate manner, is one of the cornerstones of the work of an intelligence service and is a task that the VSSE takes to heart. —■

Peter Lanssens  
Director of the Analysis Department

International cooperation

## A VITAL LINK FOR INTELLIGENCE GATHERING

*The VSSE maintains a large network of international contacts. Foreign liaison officers regularly visit our service and personal contacts take place between the heads of intelligence services of partner countries.*

International contacts constitute an important source of information for the VSSE as it does not have its own network of external representations. This forces our service to actively reach out to services who wish to share that information. As a result, the VSSE and its employees invest in language skills, understanding intercultural contact and interpersonal skills.



### LARGE NETWORK WITHIN EUROPE

On a daily basis, the International Relations office of the VSSE manages contacts between our service and about 100 foreign intelligence services. The VSSE receives about 500 visits every year from foreign liaison officers who are stationed in Brussels or in our neighbouring countries.

The bulk of these contacts are of a **European nature** and are either bilateral or multilateral, as is the case for the Counter Terrorist Group (CTG) and the Civilian Intelligence Committee (CIC) of NATO.

The VSSE aims for a closer and intensified cooperation with our neighbouring countries. To fulfil this aim, the International Relations office has appointed points of contact for France, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Germany and the United Kingdom. The impact of Brexit on the bilateral communication between the VSSE and the UK services in 2019 was virtually non-existent. After all, national security, which includes intelligence, falls outside of the scope of the Treaty of Lisbon, which the United Kingdom has left. The political Brexit dossier will nonetheless continue to evolve in 2020.

« Trust is an important basis in working with foreign intelligence services »

### BEYOND EUROPE

The VSSE also maintains an excellent relationship with the intelligence services of **the United States** and **Canada**.

Structured contacts take place with **African, Asian** and **Latin-American** services, as well as services from **the Middle East**, of which a few are supported by written cooperation agreements. The international relations between intelligence services are mostly built on mutual trust. For the exchange of information, the VSSE uses a guideline that prioritizes the rule of law and respect for human rights.

« In 2019, the International Relations office of the VSSE organized several working visits for its top management to the United States, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Luxemburg and Switzerland »



In 2019, the International Relations office of the VSSE organized several working visits for its top management to the United States, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Luxemburg and Switzerland, among others. The VSSE also welcomed several foreign delegations at top management level.

#### COORDINATION

In the aftermath of the parliamentary committee of inquiry into the 2016 attacks, the Belgian security actors hold regular meetings in order **to align their approach** towards foreign services. —■



