



ESTONIAN  
INTERNAL  
SECURITY  
SERVICE

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ANNUAL REVIEW

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## **Dear reader,**

We often take for granted when things are good and only tend to consider what remains yet to be completed or accomplished. Sometimes we may focus too much on the negative, on unfortunate developments. This is perfectly natural and human. When it comes to security, we must do everything to prevent the worst-case scenario and avoid unfavourable consequences. The essential purpose of all security authorities consists of gathering and processing information and producing intelligence for making decisions on security policy and protecting the constitutional order.

However, today's abundance of information has transformed the role of security agencies. Our skill-set and intelligence are necessary for compiling appropriate situation reports and understanding and distinguishing between meaningful information and fake news. We need to determine whether Estonia's security and national defence are being targeted by the special services and other state institutions of hostile or unfriendly foreign powers, or whether it is simply a case of activism by citizens seeking to achieve their ideological or pragmatic goals. Simply put, we must distinguish hostile influence activities from common self-interested manipulation. Blatant lies are circulated on international social networks and media channels, seeking to convince people of

endless conspiracy theories. Security agencies are often accused of similar pursuits. There is no point in arguing to disprove a conspiracy theory. Our actions speak louder than words; we act when we know the facts. This is how we have operated in the past, and we will continue to do so in the future.

The threats to Estonia's security arising from Russia have not changed. In this annual review, we cover the usual developments in the protection of constitutional order and counterintelligence, as well as some changes in cyberspace. To provide some context, we should note that Russia's resources are currently being primarily expended on attacking Ukraine, but yet they have no shortage of resources. Russia has enough time and energy to continue threatening our safety and security. Russia's influence activities cover many areas of life. The standard open attacks by the propaganda machine, along with the covert manipulation of information and smear campaigns aimed against Estonia, have been so persistent that many have developed immunity. Often, we pay no heed to hostile propaganda anymore and simply shrug it off. So what? It makes no difference to us. But is that always the case? While hostile action may not be a direct attack against us, the consequences often manifest in other ways and forms. We still have a pending court judgment regarding a propagandist who acted in the interests of Moscow and collaborated

with foreign special services and whose lies gave rise to accusations at the international level of human rights violations in Estonia.

Corruption is a social evil caused, on the one hand, by the imperfection of human nature, and on the other hand, by an acquiescent legal and cultural environment. On the whole, Estonia is making good progress – systemic corruption is not a glaring issue in the state or local governments. Of course, such assessments depend, to a large extent, on underlying attitudes and values. Some morally reprehensible behaviours may not qualify as corruption in the legal sense. Conversely, some people fail to change their behaviour even after being sentenced for corruption and instead do everything in their power to carry on without being caught again – in effect, they conspire to act almost like foreign spies.

Estonia's economic development has also brought new threats, especially in relation to Islamist terrorism. The number of people coming from high-risk countries has quadrupled in Estonia over the past six years. As a reaction to Islamist terrorism, terrorist acts by right-wing extremists have increased across the European Union. Both trends give cause for concern. To prevent terrorism in Estonia, we need to consider the developments that we have seen in other European countries. These may affect us in 10 to 15 years' time. As a state, we must act

today. Above all, we need to integrate people from Muslim countries and help the second generation, and the future third generation, to blend into our cultural space in the broadest sense. The better we integrate people in all areas, the safer it becomes for everyone in Estonia. However, sometimes we just seem to go along with the flow, drifting downstream. We should make our own decisions, even if they are unpalatable.

In 1992, when the current Estonian constitution, which we all uphold, was adopted by a referendum, Estonian poet Hando Runnel proposed in his poem *Ei meeldi* (Don't Like) that anyone who has come to our land and decides they do not like it here, is always free to leave for their home. This still seems valid today for anyone averse to our constitutional order, culture and customs.

**Arnold Sinisalu**

Director General of the Internal Security Service  
2013–2023

# DEFENDING THE CONSTITUTIONAL ORDER

## Clash of historical narratives

The fate of monuments has given rise to varying amounts of tension ever since the restoration of Estonian independence. The matter arose acutely and controversially in 2002, when a memorial to Estonian fighters in the German army during the Second World War was erected and later removed in the city of Pärnu. In 2004, the same monument sparked tension in Lihula, and was eventually removed by order of the government.

The 2007 relocating of the Bronze Soldier, a Second World War memorial in central Tallinn, resulted in heightened tensions, but in retrospect, no major actions followed. Russian-speaking communities in Western countries were still firmly under the influence of Russian mainstream media, which promoted official narratives.

Since 2014 and 2015, efforts have increased to heighten tensions in Estonia, mainly with the support of the Russian Embassy and local Russian activists, by promoting their interpretation of history, organising thematic events and displaying visual symbols.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, law enforcement agencies have repeatedly had to take preventive action against attempts by Russian extremists to sow dis-

cord across Estonia at 9 May events, where different historical narratives clash with particular intensity.

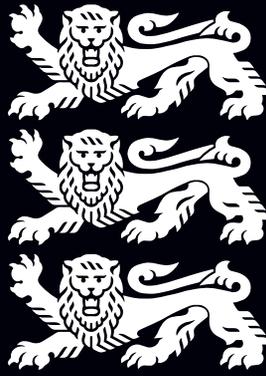
Following the commencement of Russia's direct military aggression in February 2022, there were indications that Russian extremist activists intended to use 9 May celebrations to test the patience of Estonian society and state institutions. Attempts were made to initially present the war in Ukraine as a "low-intensity conflict" that should not affect Estonia or give cause to ban public gatherings. Elsewhere in Europe, Russia saw the opportunity to use the commemoration of the end of the Second World War to establish a conceptual link between the historical military campaign against Germany and the current campaign against Ukraine.

Russia recognised that the events of 9 May were an opportunity to justify its military action and generate support for it. In the influence operations that ensued, social media sites were flooded with symbols of support for the Russian war machine and the country's military-political aspirations.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Russian state media told its domestic audiences that the celebration of 9 May in the Baltic states supported the Russian narrative of standing up to NATO and Nazism and that Russian aggression in Ukraine was finding support and accord in the Baltics. The steps

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<sup>1</sup> The timing is linked to the occupation and annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, which was celebrated in 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Although the use of symbols that support aggression is banned in Estonia, several hundred violations occurred in 2022.



taken in the Baltic states to prevent Russia's attempts to use 9 May to promote its policy of aggression were cast by the Russian media as support for Nazism and confirmation of the Baltic states and their societies' neo-Nazi attitudes.

Before 9 May, KAPO expelled the Russian citizen activist Alexei Yesakov, who actively supported Russia's policy of aggression and tried to provoke tensions in Estonia. Yesakov was one of the leaders of the non-profit organisation Russian Compatriots in Europe and among the organisers of the Immortal Regiment propaganda action held in Tallinn on 9 May.

### **New tensions around monuments**

In the spring of 2022, the defacement of Soviet war monuments was becoming more frequent in Estonia. It was clear that the monuments would be used to further escalate the situation, so the government decided it was time to remove them from public spaces without delay to ensure public order. It was important to apply a consistent approach across the entire country to avoid the state having to face similar tensions in the future.

The government expected some local government councils to maintain a noncommittal position or request to preserve the monuments and continue to display them publicly. These attitudes have their roots in regional ethnic diversity in Ida-Virumaa



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county in Eastern Estonia. In Narva, a group of local activists campaigned against the plan to relocate a tank monument situated by the Narva river. A “tank watch” was formed, and people brought flowers and candles to the site. The Russian media took advantage of the situation by offering the tank watch organisers and anti-relocation activists a media outlet while using them to drive home official Russian messages to the “domestic market” about how the Baltic countries, and especially Estonia, were rewriting history, glorifying Nazism and working with other countries to establish a hostile zone around Russia.

With the local government in Narva failing to take the decision to remove the tank from public space, the Estonian government stepped in, and on 16 August 2022, the Soviet T-34/85 tank was mounted on a trailer and transported to the Estonian War Museum in Viimsi, near Tallinn. Other memorials glorifying Soviet power were also moved from Narva that day.

In 2022, following a plan established by a Government Office commission, monuments unsuitable for public space were relocated across Estonia, placing objects of cultural value in museums and replacing grave markers bearing the ideological symbols of occupying powers with neutral markers. The process has been generally peaceful, informed by the recognition that since the Republic of Estonia did not participate on either side in the Second World War, and both the German and Soviet powers were foreign occupiers, there is no reason to have monuments in our public space that glorify either power’s military force. The initiative is about commemorating war victims in a way that does not make monuments sources of tension or political symbols, or facilitate the justification of crimes.

In 2022, many TV channels transmitting and amplifying the messages of Russian authorities were banned from being broadcast in Estonia. While this was triggered by Russia’s full-scale invasion of

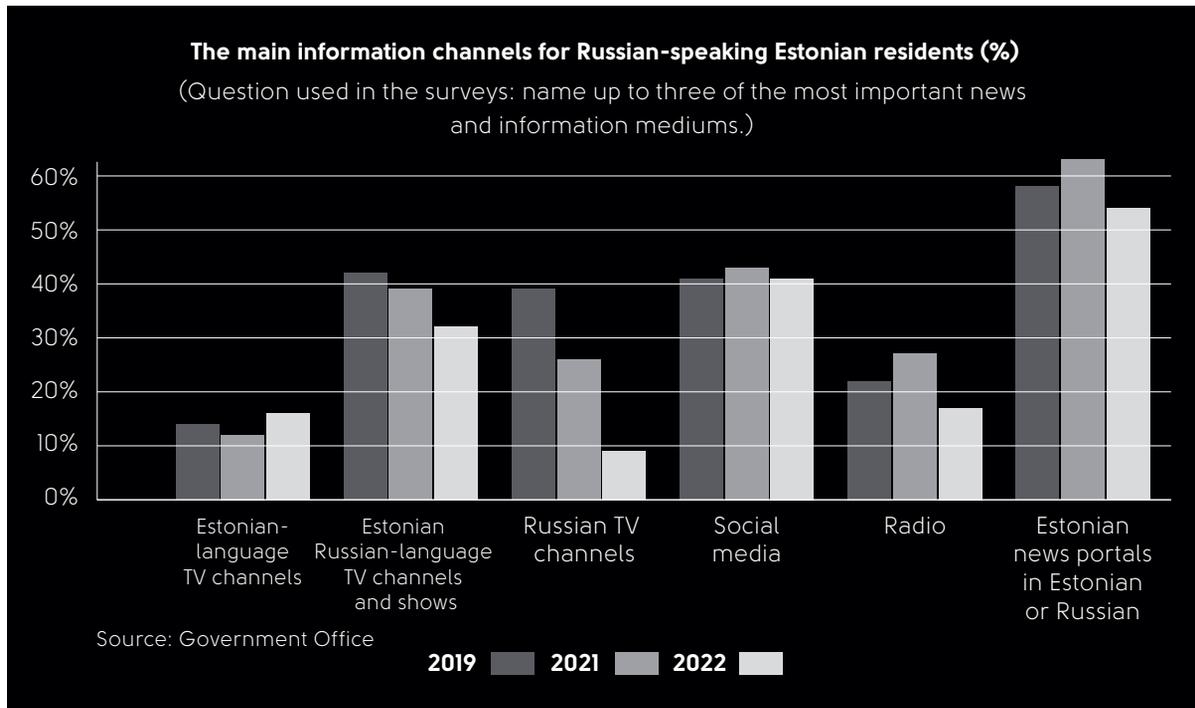
## Suppressing influence operations in the media

KAPO’s methods for countering Russian influence operations and propaganda consist of three broad lines of action:

**1. Naming and shaming.** Identifying the original sources of fake news and media manipulation and publicly attributing the activity to those sources enables both the press and the wider public to become more aware and critical of media manipulations.

**2. Implementing sanctions.** With the commencement of Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014, Western countries applied sanctions against individuals who supported Russian aggression. Media propaganda is part of the Russian military apparatus, and the sanctions imposed on people who control the media also extend to the Russian TV channels used to spread propaganda. The national implementation of these sanctions has been a priority for KAPO.

**3. Targeting war propaganda.** The outbreak of large-scale hostilities provided a suitable context for assessing the content of channels controlled by the Russian authorities. It is the first time this has been done to such a magnitude. War propaganda directly calls for aggression and support for aggression, justifying war crimes and genocide. This type of media content is prohibited in Europe, and countries must limit the activity of channels that broadcast such content.



Ukraine, preparations for taking the step had already been ongoing with our Estonian and international partners. In our 2021 annual review, we discussed the impact of the international sanctions imposed on Yuri Kovalchuk, entrepreneur, banker and a long-time close associate of Russian President Vladimir Putin. In the same year, a Latvian court convicted the leading figures of the parent company of the TV channel PBK for violating European Union sanctions. They were ordered to pay 75,000 euros in fines and surrender assets worth about 3.2 million euros for confiscation. Yuri Kovalchuk is a major shareholder of Rossiya Bank and has a direct stake in the Russian media system. His role at Channel One Russia and the National Media Group (NMG) also gives him influence over other channels.

On 28 February 2022, the Estonian Financial Intelligence Unit sent a memo to radio and television organisations and station operators, announcing that NMG and Channel One Russia are controlled by the Rossiya Bank and will be subjected to restrictive measures, ceasing the broadcasting of these and related TV channels in Estonia. In March 2022, the Financial Intelligence Unit further announced that

the sanctioned Yuri Kovalchuk is linked to companies that own the licences to the TV channels PBK, REN, NTV Mir and Dom Kino, as a result of which the broadcasting of these channels in Estonia was also stopped.

On 25 February 2022, the day after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Estonian Consumer Protection and Technical Regulatory Agency issued an order to communications providers to terminate for one year the broadcasting of the TV channels RTR Planeta, NTV Mir (also NTV Mir Baltic), Belarus 24, Rossiya 24 and TV Centre International (TVCI) in the territory of the Republic of Estonia, due to the fact that on 24 February 2022, they aired a speech by the Russian President Vladimir Putin, in which he justified the military invasion of Ukraine, ignoring fundamental principles of international law. The banned TV channels are now on the European Union's sanctions list, either directly or through their parent companies. Later, access was blocked to several websites that spread war propaganda, justified and supported the ongoing crime of aggression, and incited hatred.

At the end of 2019, Sputnik Estonia, the local branch of Rossiya Segodnya, ceased operations in Estonia as a result of the European Union sanctions imposed on Dmitry Kiselyov, a major figure in Russian media propaganda and the head of the Russian state news agency Rossiya Segodnya. The former manager of Sputnik Estonia, Elena Cherysheva, and her husband, Mati-Dmitri Terest'al, then founded the NGO Sprut Meedia, and in 2020, they launched a news website similar to the banned Sputnik Estonia, named Sputnik Meedia.

Cherysheva and Terest'al were detained in April 2022 on suspicion of violating an international sanction and a sanction imposed by the Estonian government. The Office of the Prosecutor General requested Cherysheva's arrest, which the court did not grant. Elena Cherysheva was banned from leaving her residence but began to violate the ban in late 2022. On 30 December 2022, a court order was issued for her arrest.

According to public sources, Elena Cherysheva is currently working for the media in the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine. In 2022, several more Russian activists, whose activities KAPO had assessed as damaging to Estonia's security, left Estonia for Russia. Elena Cherysheva has been sought by the Police and Border Guard Board since January 2023.



 Politsei- ja Piirivalveamet

Asutus   Dokumentid ja load   Elamine ja töötamine Eestis   Politseitöö   Piir ja meri

### Tagaotsitavad inimesed

Kui sul on infot tagaotsitava inimese kohta, siis anna sellest teada:

- hädaabinumbri 112
- PPA infotelefonil 612 3000 (E-R 9:00- 17:00)
- [ppa@politsei.ee](mailto:ppa@politsei.ee)



Elena Cherysheva

## The increasing role and impact of social media and communication apps

For Russian-speaking Estonian residents, the role of social media as an information channel is far greater than for Estonian speakers. Anyone whose line of work requires them to understand people's attitudes should be aware of this, whether they are involved in reducing risk behaviour or shaping other vitally important processes. Moscow's tactics for influencing other countries are based on creating tension and division in their societies. With the reduced role of traditional mainstream information channels, Moscow is increasingly turning to social media and communication apps.

Semi-closed social media groups covering news about Estonia and, allegedly, bringing together the local Russian-speaking communities sometimes have tens of thousands of members. Social media groups that large are unusual in Estonia. Curiously, the members of such groups, which seek to shape people's attitudes, include a considerable share of users with Russian mobile numbers. These are not just curious onlookers; they actively participate in threads, share news stories and links, and express opinions, shaping dominant views.

Different social media platforms treat the spreading of disinformation and propaganda with varying severity, but Russian influence operations mostly follow the same tactics: posting Russian-language news stories or links to sites that are fiercely critical of Estonia, Ukraine or the West. While the sources of the articles have to pass through the platform's filters, the negative impact on members' attitudes is mostly achieved in the comments section, where the social criticism expressed in the article turns into a hateful slur. Many such bubbles exist in social media groups on topics related to Estonia, but few have reached a large number of members. Social media platforms have not yet adequately responded to these hostile activities, and reports from concerned users rarely lead to the temporary or permanent removal of posts.

In a positive development, members of Estonian civil society have emerged as digital activists who are working to counter information attacks in both Estonian and Russian, and sometimes also in English, and try to burst seemingly unanimous hostile bubbles. In this way, they have become an important counterbalance to groups that, overnight, went from complaining over COVID measures to voicing pro-Russian viewpoints. Fending off information attacks that support Russia's military aggression has also become the focus of Estonian volunteers.



### Доброрадных Мария

Добрый день всем в группе. Меня зовут Мария Доброрадных продюсер телеканала Россия-1 Вести.

Великая Отечественная война будет памятна в моей семье всегда, погибло 6 человек из нашей семьи на фронте, трое во время блокады в Санкт-Петербурге. Поэтому по зову сердца делаю сюжеты о Нарве и Т- 34 !!!

Два материала уже в эфире были! Делаем сегодня сюжет на вечерние новости сегодня, пожалуйста,

Снимите пробег, хоть немного самое начало!!!

На телефон в горизонтальном положении!

89166253430 мой телефон в там телеграмм. Мария Доброрадных. Очень нужно, прошу Вас снимите. И если кто-нибудь ещё пару слов скажет, почему этот автопробег важен, хорошо будет.

Пожалуйста!!!!

С уважение к памяти о Великой Отечественной войне, Мария Доброрадных.

An example of how an alleged Rossiya 1 channel employee was looking to recruit volunteers in a social media group for Russian propaganda interests

## Our address: the Soviet Union

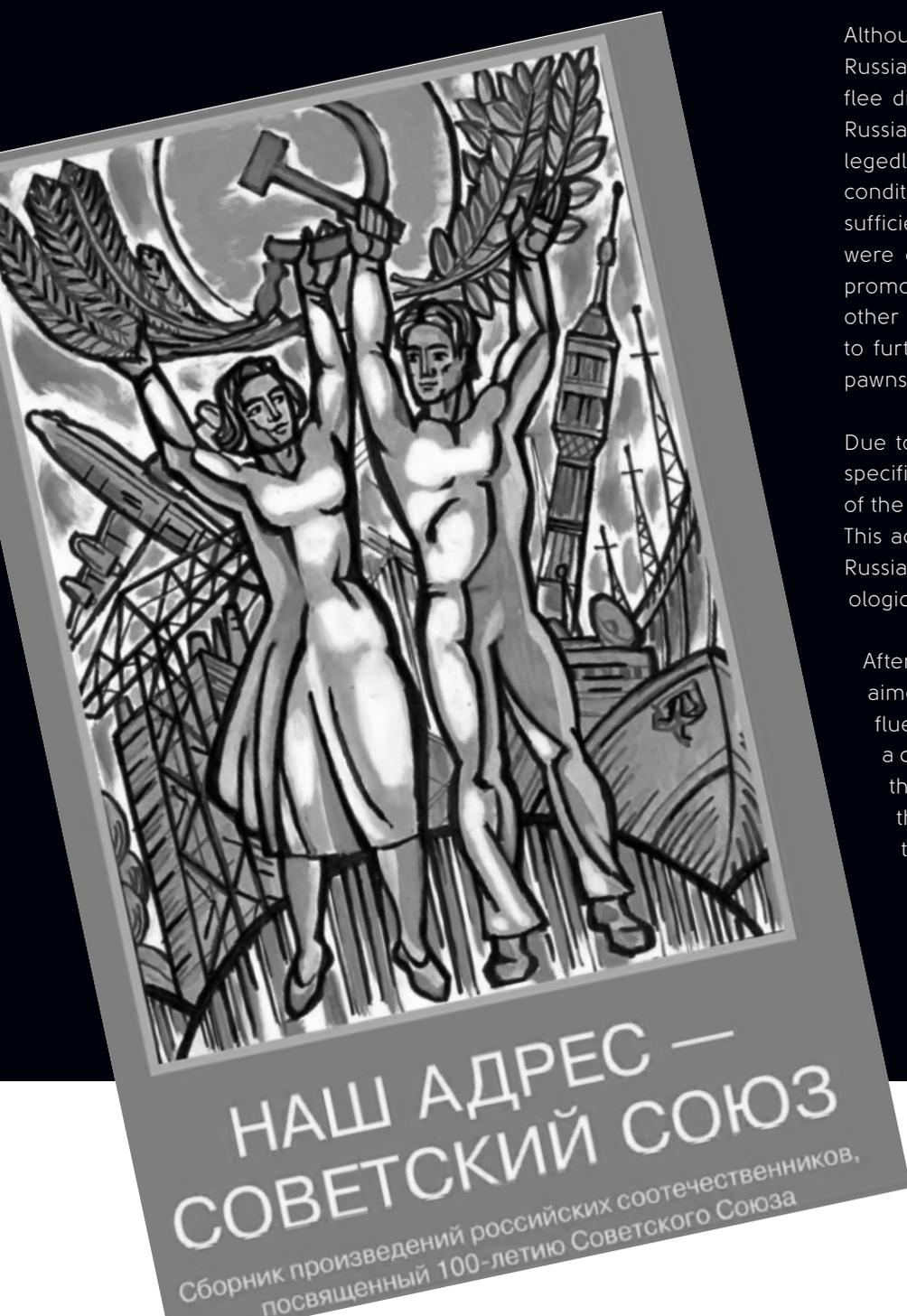
International sanctions, deportations of extremist Russian citizens from Estonia and entry bans have impeded Russia in realising its political influence objectives. Several individuals and associations have also decided to withdraw from active propaganda efforts. However, this does not signal a change of

heart; instead, it suggests that pro-Russian activists are not satisfied with the reduced resources now that attention has turned to Ukraine. The representatives of Russian interests in Estonia have a direct, and materially motivated, interest in restoring their former network and funding scheme. In order to speed up this process, they are spreading allegations of mass discrimination against Russian-speaking minorities, especially in the Baltics.

Although official Russian rhetoric has called on Russian-speaking residents in other countries to flee discrimination and come to live and work in Russia, this has been without any real result. Allegedly, Russia could not provide adequate living conditions or even find the necessary resources to sufficiently accommodate the Russian citizens who were deported from Estonia in 2022 for actively promoting Russian influence activities. This is another example of how even people working hard to further the Russian cause are merely seen as pawns to advance the state's interests.

Due to their family ties, many Estonian residents, specifically those living in Ida-Virumaa, are aware of the reality of life in Russia compared to Estonia. This accounts for the lack of interest in settling in Russia, even among those that are culturally or ideologically closely affiliated with it.

After a lull during the COVID pandemic, events aimed at maintaining the Russian sphere of influence resumed in 2021 and 2022, pointing to a continued desire to feed into the nostalgia for the scale and influence of the Soviet Union or the Russian Empire. The book *Our Address: the Soviet Union*, presented at a 2022 Moscow conference for Russian activists abroad, is just one illustration of this desire.



Russia's influence operations in the coming years will likely focus on fracturing the Western sanctions policy by using "soft values" in the field of culture, sport and education, or other methods, to mitigate the opposition to Russia in countries' domestic and foreign policies.

In 2022, public attention in Estonia briefly turned to a group posting Russian-language messages that mainly relied on official Russian narratives and spoke of peace and neutrality in a tone that would at times venture off into hostility. People linked to the group blamed Western (including NATO and European Union) and Ukrainian leaders for the aggression launched by Russia and repeatedly accused Ukrainian war refugees in Estonia of betraying their homeland and bringing the fear of war to Europe. The group has not found a wider audience.

## **Nationality, religion and ideology**

For years, Russia has sought to advance its interests through various networks of influence. Three key areas stand out: nationality/culture, religion and ideology. The activities in each area are amplified by harnessing the information space and economic networks.

Nationality-based networks appear in the guise of the "Russian compatriots abroad policy". Networks of coordination councils are set up. Along with ethnic Russians and Russian culture, other peoples of the former Soviet Union are also engaged.

Religion-based influence activities centre around the Russian Orthodox Church, which formulates expedient religious justifications for the political and military choices of the Russian leadership.

In the case of ideology, the focus is mainly on the combination of two factors: anti-fascism and traditionalism. Emphasising anti-fascism is a way to lean into the shared experience of fighting against Nazi Germany. These arguments are also used in Russia's influence operations in Europe, which appeal to historical memory and the events of the Second World War.

With traditionalism, Russia's ambition is to emerge as a champion of traditional values by construing Western societies as morally degenerate and futureless formations without an identity, history or culture, where satanism, homosexuality and anarchy run rampant, and the ability to reproduce intelligent elites has been lost. Russia, by contrast, is envisioned as upholding traditional values, placing importance on family and education and remaining true to its historical uniqueness, emphasising the right to choose its own path and not to submit to the West, which would rather see Russia turned into a colony that provides mineral resources.

Moscow's relationship with members of the networks built around nationality, religion and anti-fascist ideology is that of a patron and its clients. However, when it comes to traditionalism, Moscow is looking for various opportunities to coalesce with extreme conservatives in the West. In this area, Russia is more successful in circles that buy into various conspiracy theories, such as the Great Reset and the Great Replacement. Even though Russia has not been able to establish itself as a champion for traditionalists, it still manages to utilise this network to communicate its messages.

## Activist K's journey to deportation

- 1995** K, a citizen of the Russian Federation, receives an Estonian residence permit.
- 2007** K becomes active in connection with the Russia-incited tensions surrounding the Bronze Soldier monument and the street riots that followed its relocation. With other activists, he establishes the movement Nasha Partiya (Our Party).
- 2008** K joins the Night Watch movement, which was involved in "protecting" the Bronze Soldier, starts participating in Russian propaganda events both in Estonia and Russia, and taking part in the events of the Russian Foundation Russkiy Mir, the congress of the Russian political party A Just Russia, and the national conference of Russian compatriots in Tallinn.
- 2009** With funding from Russian state foundations, K launches a website that promotes the ideology and historical narratives of the Russian authorities.
- 2010** K attends the conference "World without Nazism: the shared task of humankind", organised by the Federation Council of the Russian Parliament in Moscow, and joins the Victory Committee set up by the Russian Embassy.
- 2011** K is one of the founders of the Estonian branch of the organisation World Without Nazism, is a delegate at the national conference of Russian compatriots, and takes part in the forum of Baltic compatriots in the Leningrad region and the assembly of the Russkiy Mir Foundation.
- 2012** K participates in the Moscow conference of the Russian-backed non-governmental organisation World Without Nazism and its general assembly in Strasbourg.
- 2013** K joins the Coordinating Council of Compatriots operating under the auspices of the Russian Embassy and, together with other "anti-fascists", instigates an oppositional action at the conference "Crisis of Democracy in Russia" in Tallinn, which was organised for Russian opposition figures.
- 2014** K participates in the round table "Democratic process and the risk of radicalisation in Ukraine", organised by World Without Nazism. A few weeks after the round table, there is a power conflict in Kyiv, and Russia occupies and annexes Crimea. K takes part in several street gatherings in Estonia to support Russia's actions in Ukraine.



- 2014** K launches a new website aimed at expanding Russia's influence in Estonia and coordinated by the Russian state news agency Rossiya Segodnya. The agency's official task is to present Russian state policy and the life of Russian society to an international audience.
- 2016** K is involved in organising the Immortal Regiment action in Tallinn on 9 May, providing organisational and media support.
- 2017** K attends a meeting held in the compatriots' committee of the Russian State Duma and a Baltic compatriots' forum in St Petersburg.
- 2018** K is a delegate at the global conference of Russian compatriots in Moscow and participates in the forum "Together with Russia" organised by the Russkiy Mir Foundation.
- 2019** K takes part in the forum "It's time for Moscow", organised by the Moscow city government.
- 2020** K attends a conference on the Arctic in St Petersburg.
- 2021** K participates in the World Congress of Russian Compatriots in Moscow and receives a letter of thanks from the Moscow House of Compatriots for his work for Russian compatriots.
- 2022** K participates in the video conference "Heroification of Nazism and the rise of neo-Nazism in the Baltic States. Is denazification possible?" organised by the Russian state-backed NGOs Eurasian Peoples' Assembly and the Historical Memory Foundation.
- 2022** K is banned from entering the Schengen Area for five years, and his Estonian residence permit is revoked.



# INVESTIGATION OF RUSSIA'S CRIMES OF AGGRESSION

Right from the start of the war, Ukrainian law enforcement agencies began gathering evidence of international crimes. It is clear that just as the effects of Russian aggression are felt around the world, the impact of the international crimes committed in Ukraine goes beyond Ukraine's borders. What is remarkable about the war in Ukraine and singular in the context of armed conflict is that the extensive collection of evidence of international crimes started immediately from the outset of the conflict. In addition to Ukraine itself, several other countries began criminal proceedings promptly after the start of the war.

Countries prosecute international crimes committed outside of their territory under universal jurisdiction, which imposes an obligation to investigate crimes in cases where prosecuting the perpetrators is in the interest of the international community as a whole.

On 3 March 2022, KAPO initiated criminal proceedings based on elements of a crime of aggression, a crime against humanity and a war crime. In May, Estonia joined an international investigation team with Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia and Romania that liaises with the Interna-

tional Criminal Court (ICC). Criminal proceedings were also initiated in several other countries, such as Germany, France and Sweden. The main purpose of the criminal proceedings conducted in Estonia is to identify victims, witnesses and possible suspects related to Estonia.

KAPO investigators are working to identify victims of war crimes among war refugees. If necessary, we exchange information with other countries and ICC investigators. Bringing the perpetrators of crimes of aggression, crimes against humanity or war crimes to justice is a prolonged and complicated process that often only bears results decades after the crimes were committed, as Estonia has seen from first-hand experience.

KAPO, in cooperation with domestic partners, is conducting a campaign to inform Ukrainian war refugees about the opportunity to provide information regarding crimes against humanity and war crimes. Similar information campaigns are being carried out by Ukraine and countries with a large number of Ukrainian war refugees.

# es



Standing next to a destroyed Russian tank on show in Kyiv prior to Ukraine's Independence Day, a Ukrainian woman shows what she thinks of Russia's leaders and military. Photo: Oleksi Samsonov, Global Images Ukraine, Getty Images

# COUNTERINTELLIGENCE

All the elements of the Russian state are engaged in the war against Ukraine, from the political leadership to the industries that prepare the necessary military equipment or sustain the state budget. Russia's intelligence and security services also play an essential role in this ecosystem. The work of the intelligence services, which remains covert in times of peace, is much more exposed during periods of heightened tension.

Russian intelligence services have been involved in laying the necessary political groundwork for war by using local activists in various parts of Ukraine. They have also engaged in active warfare. Simultaneously, they play a crucial role outside of Ukraine in shaping European and global public opinion through influence operations to create division. Intelligence does not ease its activities during the active phase of hostilities. Instead, the Russian leadership's expectations for the intelligence services to conduct operations and provide information have only increased since the war began.

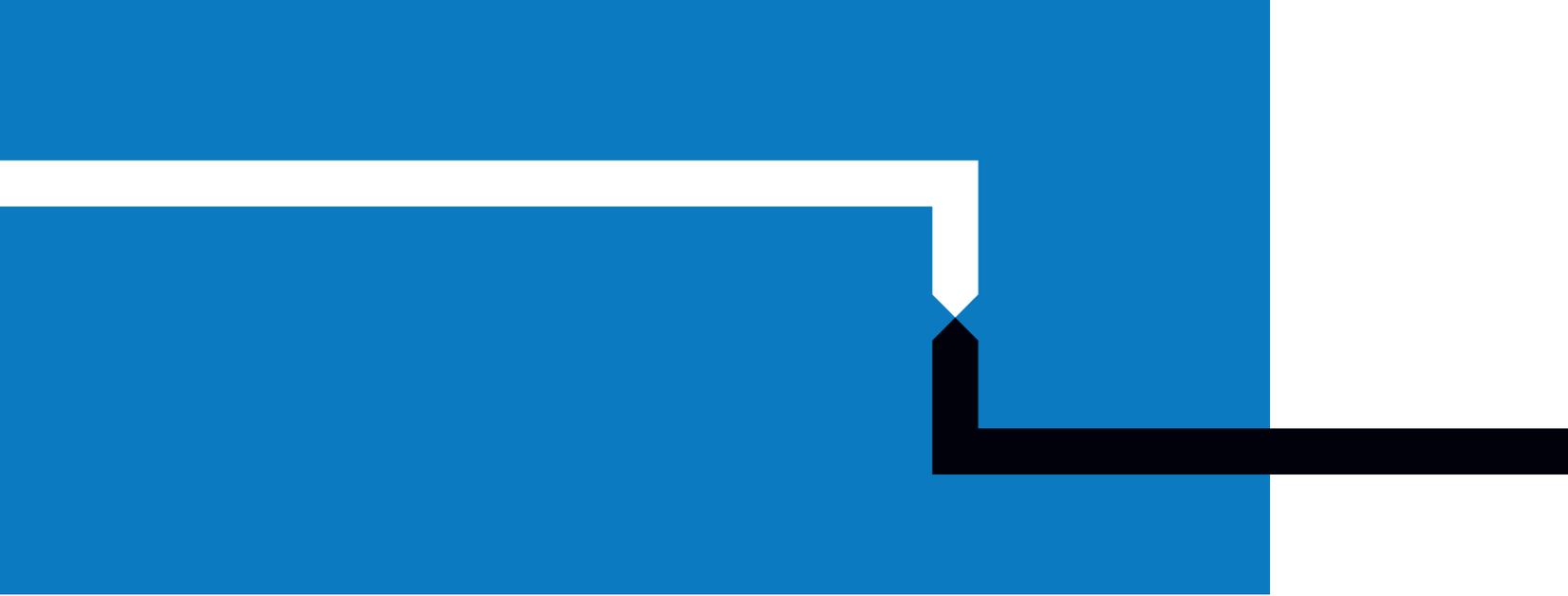
The methods used by the Russian intelligence services in the aggression against Ukraine in 2022 were shaped by the preceding period of COVID-19 restrictions, which transformed border crossings and intelligence officers' working practices. Importantly, the attack on Ukraine also gave some the impetus

to start a new life, as not everyone in the Russian intelligence and security services agrees with the state leadership.

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) played the most prominent role in laying the groundwork for the aggression against Ukraine. Although the FSB's activities and possible analyses have been publicly criticised, there are currently no signs that this has discouraged their operations. The FSB continues to be responsible for ensuring support for Russia's military efforts among the population and leadership of the occupied territories. Leading up to 24 February 2022, the FSB worked to ensure that once hostilities started, the administration of the occupied areas and key individuals were willing to make the necessary decisions, and local activists were ready to carry out the tasks set by the Russian authorities. In several cases, the FSB achieved this objective.

## **FSB pressure on war refugees headed to Estonia**

Over the years, KAPO has seen the FSB's efforts to recruit local officials and pro-Russian activists from various regions of Estonia, such as Ida-Virumaa.<sup>3</sup> The observations shared with KAPO in 2022 about the undercurrents in Estonian society have clearly indicated low support for Russia's illegal activities.



In the wake of escalated conflict since the end of February 2022, more than 45,000 refugees from Ukraine have temporarily settled in Estonia. Conversations with the war refugees have shone a light on the FSB's forceful actions against Ukrainians in Russia and the occupied territories. From filtering camps to interrogation at border points, Ukrainians are under increased scrutiny and are being scanned for individuals hostile or dangerous to Russia. People's communication devices are inspected, their property is raided, they are questioned and sometimes threatened, and there have been cases of violence. The FSB has also systematically worked to recruit war refugees arriving from Russia before they enter Estonia, both by threatening and bribing them.

KAPO's 2021 annual review described how posters at the border points of Estonia called on people to report recruitment attempts and any contact with Russian intelligence or security services. Both Estonian residents and war refugees have contacted KAPO, enabling us to chart the activities of the Rus-

sian intelligence services towards Estonia since the war began. For example, the FSB has started to systematically interrogate people who regularly visit Russia for work. At border points, these commuters are asked about their feelings towards Russia and the "special military operation" being carried out against Ukraine, and for information about the alleged persecution of Russians in Estonia. FSB employees record the conversations either with a visible or hidden camera, or using body cameras worn by the border guards.

Such activities understandably put a great deal of pressure on regular border crossers who need to visit Russia for work, because giving the "wrong answers" might mean they are banned from entering the country. On the other hand, video recordings of responses acceptable to the FSB may be used against these individuals in the future. KAPO advises people to report all such incidents that take place on Russian territory in order to mitigate potential risks, including the risk of being pressured in the future.

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<sup>3</sup> Both the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces (GRU) primarily work and conduct their operations outside of Russia, while the FSB's intelligence operations against foreign countries, including Estonia, are mainly limited to Russian territory, although in certain cases these activities are also transferred to third countries. The FSB's role outside of Russian borders has been growing since the start of the century. The FSB often targets people who are visiting Russia. The fact that the internal security service, the FSB, is one of the most actively involved Russian agencies in Estonia, alongside Russia's foreign intelligence and military intelligence, is telling in itself.

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## **Expulsion of diplomats accused of spying and the principle of parity**

In parallel with its aggression against Ukraine, Russia continued its regular intelligence activities in Europe, both under diplomatic cover and by other means. If an intelligence officer posing as a diplomat oversteps the limits of diplomatic activity, the receiving state can always declare them a *persona non grata* and expel them. The response of European countries to Russian aggression has been quick and decisive. Since the beginning of hostilities, European countries have coordinated to expel more than 600 Russian diplomats. Understandably, the use of expulsion measures varies from country to country. Some expelled selected diplomats, while others terminated, to the greatest extent possible, the presence of Russian intelligence officers in the country or closed down Russian diplomatic missions altogether. Each country has adopted the measures it deemed the most effective. Expelling diplomats is not simply a non-military response to Russia's military activities; it significantly inhibits Russia and its intelligence services' access to information, forcing them to use other, more expensive and less effective intelligence methods.

European and other Western countries have also made it abundantly clear that the time of embassy-based espionage and interference in the domestic matters of the receiving country, which had been tolerated up to a certain extent, is over. It goes without saying that as a professional and leisure destination, the Western world will remain closed to the expelled diplomat-spies for many years to come.

Estonia has declared several diplomat-spies as *persona non grata* over the years. After Estonia regained its independence, the first intelligence

officer presenting as a Russian diplomat was expelled in 1996, and since then Estonia has expelled a total of 18 diplomat-spies. In light of this practice, Estonia's decision in March 2022 to ask three diplomats from the Russian embassy to leave the country came as no surprise. Their expulsion was followed by Russia's decision to close its Consulate General in Narva and the consular office in Tartu, which effectively ended the appointments of the staff of these institutions.

In January 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia informed the Russian Embassy that it would apply the principle of parity in relation to the staff of the Russian and Estonian embassies. In other words, the foreign ministry requested that Russia reduce the number of employees in its embassy in Tallinn to the same level as in the Estonian embassy in Moscow – eight diplomatic positions and 15 administrative and technical positions. Russia responded by recalling its ambassador from Tallinn, and the Estonian ambassador in Moscow was asked to return home. At the end of March 2023, Estonia sought the removal of another diplomat from the Russian Embassy who undermined Estonia's security and constitutional order, and that individual was ordered to leave the country.

A total of 36 Russian embassy employees have been forced to leave Estonia since Russia started its war against Ukraine. As of February 2023, both the Russian and Estonian embassies have the same number of employees, and both are headed by the deputy head of mission. Expulsions and the principle of parity have significantly inhibited Russia's and its intelligence services' access to information and made it difficult to conduct intelligence and influence operations from the embassy. Estonia will continue to pursue its strict counterintelligence regime.

Expelling selected diplomats and implementing the principle of parity cannot altogether prevent the Russian intelligence and security services from conducting operations in and towards Estonia. Both SVR and GRU officers have continued to vis-

it Estonia, using various covers, despite the travel restrictions imposed on Russian citizens. Active recruitment activities on Russian territory have also continued.



The building of the Consulate General of the Russian Federation in Narva in mid-summer 2022  
Photo: Taavi Sepp, *Postimees*

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## Increased intelligence activities

We predict that these activities will likely intensify in the future, because during times of war, the Russian political and military leadership has a greater need for information, heightening its expectations for the intelligence services.

Technology transfer from the West to Russia has also persisted, with the Russian technology sector and military industry continuing to depend on Western know-how and components. Persons involved in the intelligence services and businessmen who are keen to make a profit are both engaged in this transfer. Some of this activity has also passed through Estonia.<sup>4</sup>

Since the start of hostilities on 24 February 2022, Western countries have implemented various additional measures to obstruct Russian intelligence and influence activities, from blacklisting specific individuals for years, imposing visa bans and cancelling residence permits and broadcasting licences to conducting targeted operations to suppress intelligence activities and opening criminal proceedings. As a final measure, criminal proceedings are one of the most effective means of suppressing intelligence operations, because they result in specific consequences for specific people and lead to an investigation of the events. Publishing the results of criminal proceedings further helps to hinder recruitment by the intelligence and security services of hostile countries by giving people reason to think twice before agreeing to collaborate.

Over the last 15 years, Estonia has convicted 31 people for violations related to collaboration with foreign intelligence or security services or handling state-protected information; two more court judgments have not yet entered into force. Twenty people have been convicted for collaborating with the Russian intelligence services, and there has been one case concerning collaboration with Chinese intelligence services. In ten cases, individu-

als were convicted of violating the regulations for handling state-protected information.

In recent years, Western countries have increasingly recognised the effectiveness of criminal proceedings in restraining and preventing intelligence activities. Latvia and Lithuania have taken steps similar to Estonia, while criminal proceedings have always played an important role in the United States. While at war with Russia, Ukraine has initiated numerous criminal proceedings against individuals working against their country in the interests of Russia. Many other Western countries that for years preferred not to intervene publicly and directly have also begun convicting traitors and agents, even though the procedure is complex, time-consuming and costly for the state. Investigations launched in Sweden, Norway, Germany, Austria, Slovakia and Poland in the past year are a sign that criminal proceedings are no longer a merely hypothetical possibility for individuals apprehended cooperating with hostile intelligence services. They are a likely reality.

In 2021, the world was reluctant to anticipate Russian aggression and considered it improbable. It was widely believed that common sense and economic rationality would prevail in geopolitics. Yet the Russian leadership defied expectations and decided on a violent course of action, launching military aggression against Ukraine. Was this a surprise even to China, Russia's long-time partner? Did they know about the invasion in advance? The war in Ukraine has put Beijing in a difficult situation, insofar as it has inhibited global discussions on issues that China feels strongly about. Other countries worldwide expected China to take a clear position on the war in Ukraine, but the Chinese leadership has been reluctant to do so. While China's views on the war have become more negative over the past year, Beijing avoids direct criticism of Russia, which continues to be an important partner for China in the import of raw materials necessary for the Chinese economy.

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<sup>4</sup> See also the chapter "Sanctions violations, economic security and the fight against corruption".

Gathering information on Ukraine and the ongoing events there was a major effort for Chinese intelligence in 2022. Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February, signs of a somewhat closer than usual cooperation between Chinese and Russian intelligence officers could be observed. The question is how much confidence the Chinese leadership has in the information provided by Russia and to what extent it relies on Western sources to obtain information about the events in Ukraine. The misleading nature of the information shared by Russia should no longer come as a surprise to anyone.

In 2022, the Chinese embassy in Estonia continued its efforts to spread China's ideological narrative among Estonian politicians, people in academic circles and local government staff. Active and systematic work also continued to secure Estonia's support for foreign policy initiatives and economic projects important to the Chinese state. As 2023 arrived, the Chinese embassy began to show more interest in the parliamentary elections and the broader political landscape in Estonia.



Chinese Defence Attaché Colonel Li Yusheng on 9 May 2022 at the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Tallinn Old Town  
Photo: Rauno Volmar, *Delfi*



# PROVIDING CYBERSECURITY

Russia's aggression against Ukraine raised the threat level of cyberattacks with serious implications for Estonia. As Estonia has been among the foremost supporters of Ukraine since the outbreak of the war, KAPO was prepared for Russian cyber counteractions – both direct attacks against computer networks and infrastructure and increased Russian cyber-supported influence operations. The war has drawn more attention to the movement of Russian citizens in Europe and the rest of the world, but their movement has also been inhibited by the conflict, to some extent complicating the Russian special services' human intelligence operations.

In our assessment, the level and volume of cyber threats have been lower than expected. There are several reasons for this. On the one hand, Ukraine has been the priority target for Russia's cyber operations since before the start of hostilities, and on the other hand, Estonia has been consistently improving its ability to prevent and block hostile cyber activities in cooperation with various agencies and foreign partners.

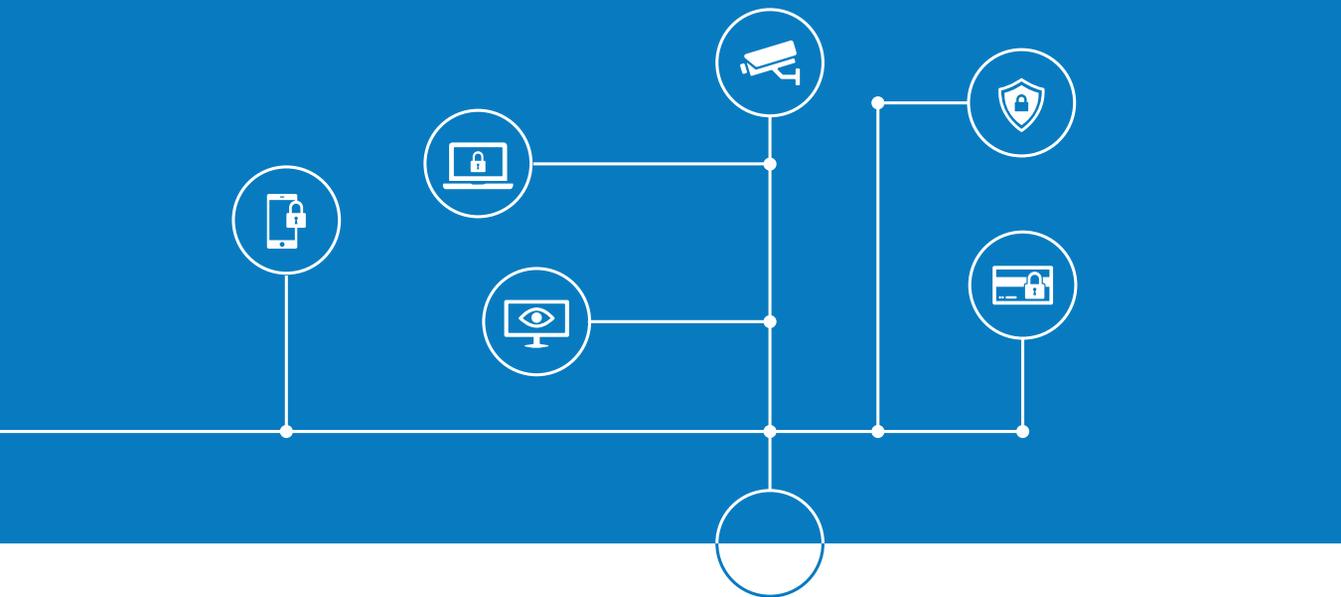
Regardless of the war, cyber intelligence campaigns by Russian special services against Estonia and other European countries have continued as usual. They continue to scan the computer networks of Estonian public authorities and critical infrastructure to find vulnerabilities and opportunities for hacking or to gain access to various information. In addition to helping raise awareness

of how attacks are conducted and prevented, each institution plays a critical role in ensuring the resilience of Estonia's cyberspace by keeping information technology (IT) systems up to date and quickly fixing any identified vulnerabilities.

With the ongoing war, cyber sabotage has emerged as a new threat. Renouncing Russia's energy resources has unsurprisingly met with counteractions against European countries. Russia seeks to influence public opinion using levers affecting everyday life to get Western countries to ease their sanctions. One of the narratives used in such influence operations is that Europe will be left in the dark and cold without Russia's energy supplies, including gas. Cyberattacks are used to disrupt critical infrastructure in order to reinforce this narrative.

## **Hostile interest towards networks of critical infrastructure**

KAPO considers it highly likely that the Russian special services will continue to attempt to gain illegal access to the computer networks of Estonia's critical service providers and key transport and logistics companies in order to gather information and be prepared to disrupt their operations with cyber measures if necessary. The war in Ukraine may have increased the number of institutions and companies that are potential targets for Russian cyber operations.



In cyberspace, active influence operations to support Russian interests continue. Several distributed denial-of-service attacks (DDoS) against Estonian targets<sup>5</sup> were carried out in 2022. Accompanied by extensive social media coverage, such attacks are mostly designed to create the impression of a large mass of highly competent hackers willingly supporting Russia. Whether information about such attacks should be shared with the public, and if so how, should be carefully considered in each case, while always remaining alert to the possibility that gaining wider public attention might be precisely the objective of the DDoS attack, with the ultimate intention of supporting other influence operations.

Estonia has recently been attractive for Russian entrepreneurs and professionals in the IT sector as a location to establish a business in the EU, obtain a Schengen visa, communicate in their mother tongue and help other Russian citizens to travel, live and work in the Schengen area by invite. Russia's war of aggression and the resulting prompt restrictions on visas and residence permits for Russian citizens have significantly reduced these opportunities. The mobilisation that started in September 2022 has put additional pressure on Russian citizens. Many have sought to leave Russia and obtain Schengen documents and residence permits to avoid mobilisation. They take advantage of various exemptions to get around the restrictions imposed on Russian nationals, including the less stringent restrictions on foreign labour in the IT sector.

According to the information available to KAPO, the actual skills and qualifications of a number of IT workers and computer experts who have moved to Estonia from Russia do not correspond to those stated in their applications – they have simply taken advantage of the exemption for information and communications technology (ICT) professionals in order to get out of Russia. Some Estonian employers fail to conduct sufficient background checks on new recruits to alleviate staff shortages quickly and easily. There are also those who, for various reasons, overlook the requirements and essentially act as “visa factories”. Such companies and individuals often maintain strong links with Russia. They have branches, headquarters or partners in Russia, who are obliged under Russian law to cooperate fully with the Russian authorities, including the special services.

Over the past year, the Estonian ICT sector has also attracted people who have relevant academic education but also have military training, have attended military faculties at Russian higher education institutions and are Russian reserve officers. We also know that the Russian armed forces recruit individuals who have not completed military service but have specific computer skills for technical tasks. The civilian and military sectors are intertwined in the Russian system; both are fully engaged in achieving military objectives. Similarly, Russian citizens abroad are obliged to comply with Article 59(1) of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, according to

<sup>5</sup> In 2022, the Estonian Information System Authority (Riigi Infosüsteemi Amet, RIA) received information on 2,672 cyber incidents with an impact (i.e. approx. 20% more than in 2021). The most frequently identified and reported incidents included phishing scams (1,206), service disruptions (344) and account takeovers (236). Fraud was reported on 224 occasions and compromised accounts on 164. Last year, RIA was also notified of 302 DDoS attacks, of which 100 had an impact, and 21 ransomware attacks.



**An IT company located in a Western country,**  
often with the participation of people with  
a Russian/CIS background

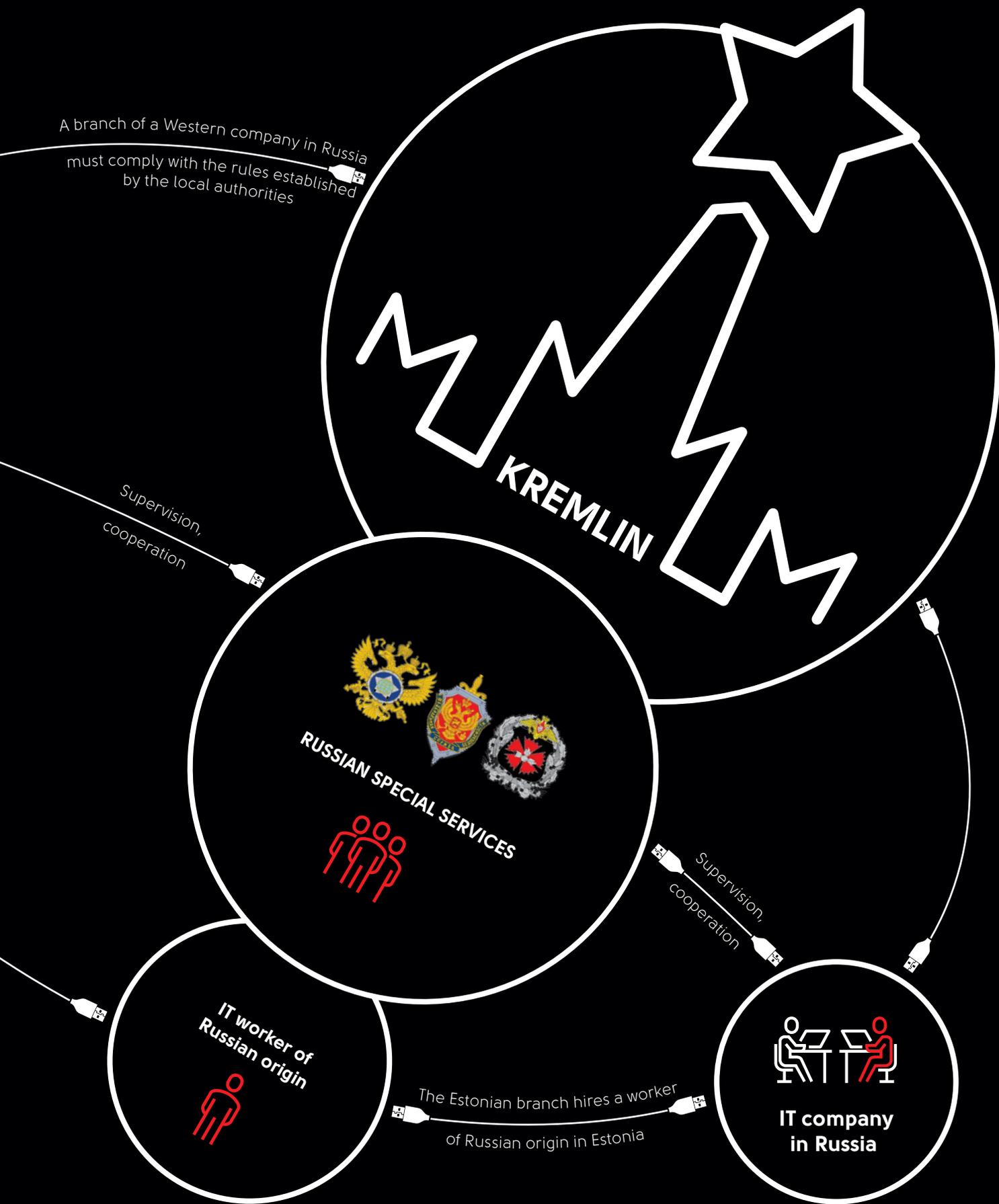
which the defence of the fatherland is the duty of every Russian citizen. Russian citizens abroad are likely being sought for involvement in the intelligence activities of the Russian special services.

Instructions on how to avoid sanctions when completing official documents to settle in Estonia are shared through social media channels such as Telegram. Estonian citizens with whom it might be possible to obtain a residence permit upon marriage are also sought through these channels.

The Estonian courts have taken a position on this issue: complaints by Russian citizens that they have not been granted a visa to work as an IT specialist in Estonia or that their visas have been cancelled have not been satisfied. An administrative court reaffirmed the previous rulings of the lower courts, stating that a foreign national does not have a subjective right to a visa. The court also indicated that the citizens of an aggressor state have no legitimate basis to expect that they can continue their normal lives and that they will be welcomed with open arms in foreign countries for the purposes of tourism, visiting or working if the country of their citizenship (in this case, the Russian Federation) has started the hostilities in question.

The continued focus on Russia does not mean that cyber threats from other countries have disappeared. Chinese cyber snoopers also work tirelessly to gain access to Estonian networks and exploit security vulnerabilities. While technology produced in China may look temptingly cheap and accessible, it may contain malware and give access to Estonian networks and connected devices. Chinese citizens and companies (both in China and abroad) operating in the IT sector are also subject to a duty of loyalty and cooperation with the Chinese authorities, including the obligation to disclose, where necessary, data obtained in the course of cooperation or service provision.

Hires Russian worker for the Estonian branch



**IT worker with Russian connections**

# PROTECTION OF STATE SECRETS

KAPO has observed that state secrets continue to be at risk of disclosure, mainly because people are careless: they have not learned the requirements for keeping and using state secrets. Many breaches could have been avoided by following the basic requirements for the protection of state secrets.

For example, when presenting or electronically transmitting classified information to someone or convening a meeting involving classified information, it is necessary to ensure that everyone who will be privy to the information at the meeting has the appropriate security clearance. It is also necessary to be aware that the electronic processing of classified information is only allowed on a system accredited by the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service and not simply on any computer network.

In 2022, KAPO received 159 notifications of breaches regarding the handling of state secrets, which is about the annual average over the past five years. To mitigate the risks, KAPO encourages institutions that process state secrets and foreign classified information to always report suspected breaches of requirements for handling state secrets. Reporting is mandatory, even in cases of mere suspicion.

As a first line of defence, only people who have been granted the right to access restricted-level state secrets or have completed security vetting can access state secrets. Security vetting identifies potential security risks associated with a person or company that could jeopardise the protection of the state secrets entrusted to them. Security vetting is carried out by the security authorities: KAPO and the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service. KAPO is the main provider of security vetting for civilian and military structures, as well as for private companies. The Foreign Intelligence Service carries out security vetting for its own staff (except the Director General and his/her deputies), the Director General of KAPO and his/her deputies, the Secretary General and Deputy Secretary General of the Ministry of the Interior, and prosecutors.

Security vetting when requesting access to confidential or higher-level state secrets is carried out under the State Secrets and Classified Information of Foreign States Act and the Security Authorities Act, and in accordance with the principles of the Administrative Procedure Act. Access to state secrets is only granted after security vetting.



Since security vetting is an administrative procedure that substantially interferes with a person's fundamental rights, it must be duly justified. By applying for personnel security clearance, a person consents to the collection of their data from other individuals, as well as from institutions and companies. The processing of personal data must be lawful, transparent and comprehensible to the applicant: security vetting is not intended to be a background or credibility check that has no connection with an application for access to state secrets.

Between 2018 and 2022, KAPO refused to grant or extend a security clearance on 34 occasions; on 15 occasions, it granted access for a shorter period than requested. The security clearances of six individuals were revoked.

In 2021, the Director General terminated the administrative procedure for security vetting regarding four individuals whose data could not be gathered due to their long-term stay or residence abroad. Some applicants had also obtained foreign citizenship via naturalisation, which they refused to renounce.



**Statistics on refusal to grant access to state secrets, or granting it for a shorter period than the requested, 2018–2022**

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Refused	4	5	11	8	6
Granted for a shorter period	2	2	4	4	3
Revoked	4	–	–	2	–
Not compliant	1	–	–	1	–
Procedure terminated by Director General	–	–	–	4	–

The main reasons for refusing to grant a security clearance, or granting it for a shorter period than requested, are:

1. the applicant's poor financial situation;
2. the applicant's unreliability or deliberate concealment of information in their application;
3. appearing at a security vetting interview with signs of drug use, which can be considered unreliable behaviour;
4. no need for access;
5. involvement in criminal or judicial proceedings as a suspect or the accused;
6. alcohol addiction.

People in financial difficulties who are working with materials containing state secrets can become easy targets for common criminals and foreign intelligence agencies. Traditionally, people's predicaments have been exploited to acquire secret information from them in return for a "helping hand" and to influence them to work for a foreign state. Lately, people's financial situation has been affected by the rising energy and food prices, the fall in the value of cryptocurrencies and the rise in mortgage interest rates. While such negative effects on people's economic situation do not happen overnight, they certainly have an impact if people are not aware of the risks involved and do not realistically assess their financial capacity.

Between 2019 and 2021, KAPO refused to grant security clearances to ten individuals due to the absence of a need for access to state secrets. This means that the authority requesting the security clearance failed to substantiate, during the security vetting, that the applicant needed access to classified information (confidential or higher) or classified information of foreign states. In each of these cases, the applicant could carry out their duties without needing security clearance or completing security vetting.

Institutions processing state secrets are required to organise staff training on the protection of classified information and electronic information security. Most institutions take the need to educate their staff on state secrets seriously. For example, staff are required to take a test at least once a year, or information days are organised. Unfortunately, there are also institutions where the acquisition of skills and knowledge in handling state secrets is left to the individual, which increases the risk that rules may be broken and secrets compromised.

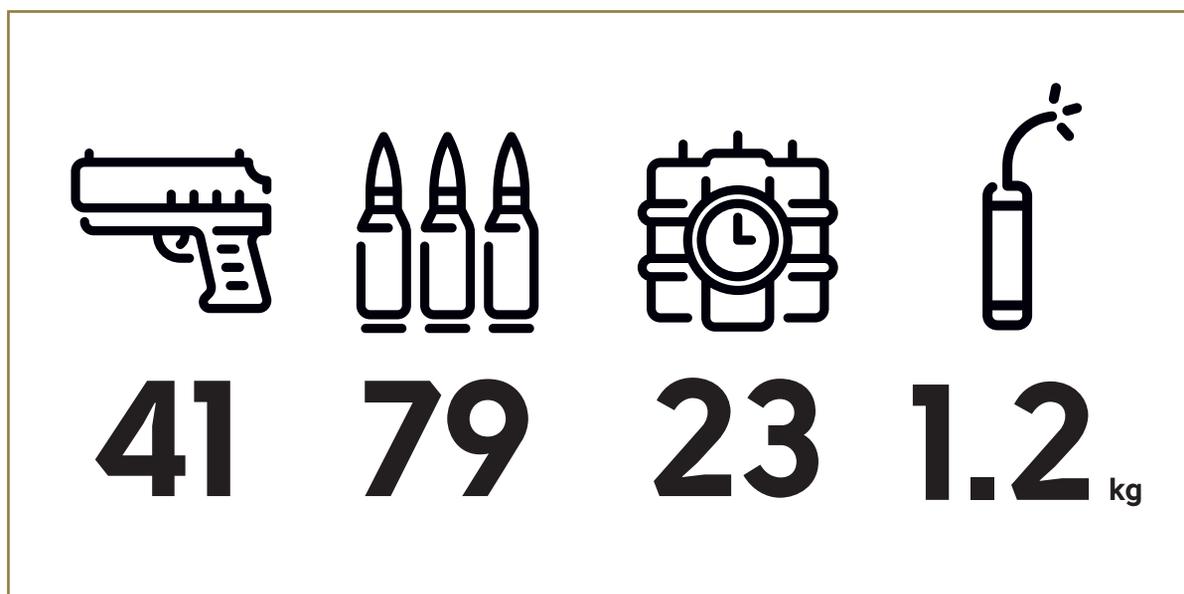
KAPO regularly organises training sessions on protecting state secrets in institutions that process classified information. The main areas of training include the general principles and possible breaches in the protection of state secrets, as well as security threats. KAPO also carries out training for the keepers of classified information registers. The training sessions are free of charge for institutions, and their exact content and time can be discussed in advance by contacting us at [riigisaladus@kapo.ee](mailto:riigisaladus@kapo.ee).

# PREVENTION OF INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

## Illegal handling of firearms and explosive devices

2022 has not seen a change in the general situation in Estonia regarding the illegal handling of explosives, firearms and ammunition – the security

threat arising from these activities remains low. In our assessment, the war in Ukraine may in the future lead to changes in the activities of circles involved in illegal explosives and arms trade. According to the information available to KAPO, no illegal weapons or explosives related to the conflict have been identified in Estonia.





**In 2022, KAPO opened three criminal cases related to the illegal handling of firearms and/or explosive devices.**

These cases show that, unfortunately, there are still firearms and explosives in illegal circulation. Therefore, it is important to be aware that coming forward with any information concerning amateur metal detectorists and voluntarily surrendering weapons and explosives can save lives.

- In the first criminal case, five suspects were investigated for the illegal handling of firearms and explosive devices under the Penal Code. During a search carried out as part of the investigation, 57 units of illegal ammunition, 36 illegal firearms (including an MG 42 machine gun, two MP 40 submachine guns, rifles and handguns) and a large quantity of various illegal firearm parts were confiscated.
- In the second criminal case, an individual was suspected of making explosive devices. A search at his home uncovered an explosive substance and fuse – critical components for making an explosive device.
- The third criminal case also involved the possession of illegal firearms and explosives. The proceedings in this criminal case are ongoing.

**In 2022, three criminal cases opened by KAPO in 2021 came to various conclusions:**

- A 54-year-old man accused of detonating an explosive device at a bus stop on Pärnu Road in Tallinn on 18 April 2021 was convicted by Harju County Court and sentenced to 11 years and six months in prison. The court judgment has not yet entered into force.
- Criminal proceedings against a 38-year-old man who threw Molotov cocktails at the Riigikogu and KAPO buildings in Tallinn on 18 November 2021 were dismissed, as he was found to lack capacity; he was instead committed for compulsory psychiatric treatment. The court judgment has entered into force.
- The explosion at 15 Ilmarise Street in Tallinn on 14 December 2021 was classified as suicide with an improvised explosive device, and the criminal proceedings were dismissed.

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## National defence assets and CBRN threats

Russian attacks on Ukraine's civilian and critical infrastructure show it is not only clearly designated national defence assets that are at risk in the event of aggression. Only the latter are KAPO's direct responsibility – we advise on preparing risk analyses and developing security plans for national defence assets and organising related exercises. However, as potential targets are quite numerous, ensuring their readiness to repel possible acts of sabotage or attacks requires more awareness than before.

In our previous annual reviews, we have discussed chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear materials (CBRN<sup>6</sup>) and related threats in the context of Islamic terrorism, but with the war in Ukraine, the security of nuclear plants has become more pertinent than before. While currently having no nuclear power plant itself, Estonia can be affected by attacks against facilities in neighbouring countries.

Any strategic facilities that come under the control of Russian forces during the conflict in Ukraine and the radioactive and other hazardous substances taken from these facilities pose a potential long-term threat.

To step up preparedness for CBRN threats, KAPO has compiled a CBRN emergency response plan, set up an interagency steering group and prepared guidelines for use during a CBRN crisis. Working with the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences, we are also putting together a basic training programme for CBRN first responders.

The CBRN designation only describes incidents caused by malicious activity and does not cover accidents. CBRN materials-related incidents caused by human error or, for example, a natural disaster are classified as HAZMAT<sup>7</sup> incidents. The leading agency in the case of accidents and disasters is the

Rescue Board (for chemical hazards), the Environmental Board (for radiation and nuclear hazards) or the Health Board (for biohazards). A CBRN incident, which may be classed as an attack, is a police event, and the response is led by KAPO, with the other agencies involved playing an important supporting role.

## Impact of Islamic terrorist organisations and changing modes of action

While the threat of terrorism in Europe has not subsided in recent years, the number of terrorist attacks has declined. Combatting terrorism in European countries has played a major role, as many terrorist attacks are prevented in their planning stages. Nevertheless, international terrorism remains one of the main threats to security in Europe. Terrorist organisations seek to increase their influence and restore their capacity to organise attacks against Western countries, Europe included. Daesh (also known as Islamic State) and Al-Qaeda continue to pose the greatest threat, along with their affiliates and branch organisations.

As in 2021, terrorist organisations continue to threaten entire regions – the Middle East, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, North and East Africa, and the Sahel region.<sup>8</sup> In addition to countries in the Middle East, the threat of terrorism has increased significantly in Africa and Central Asia. Daesh and its allies alone carried out attacks in 20 African countries in 2022. Terrorist organisations successfully exploit the weakness and political instability of countries. Daesh and Al-Qaeda are persistently moving towards their strategic goals of creating one or several Islamist states and overthrowing current regimes.

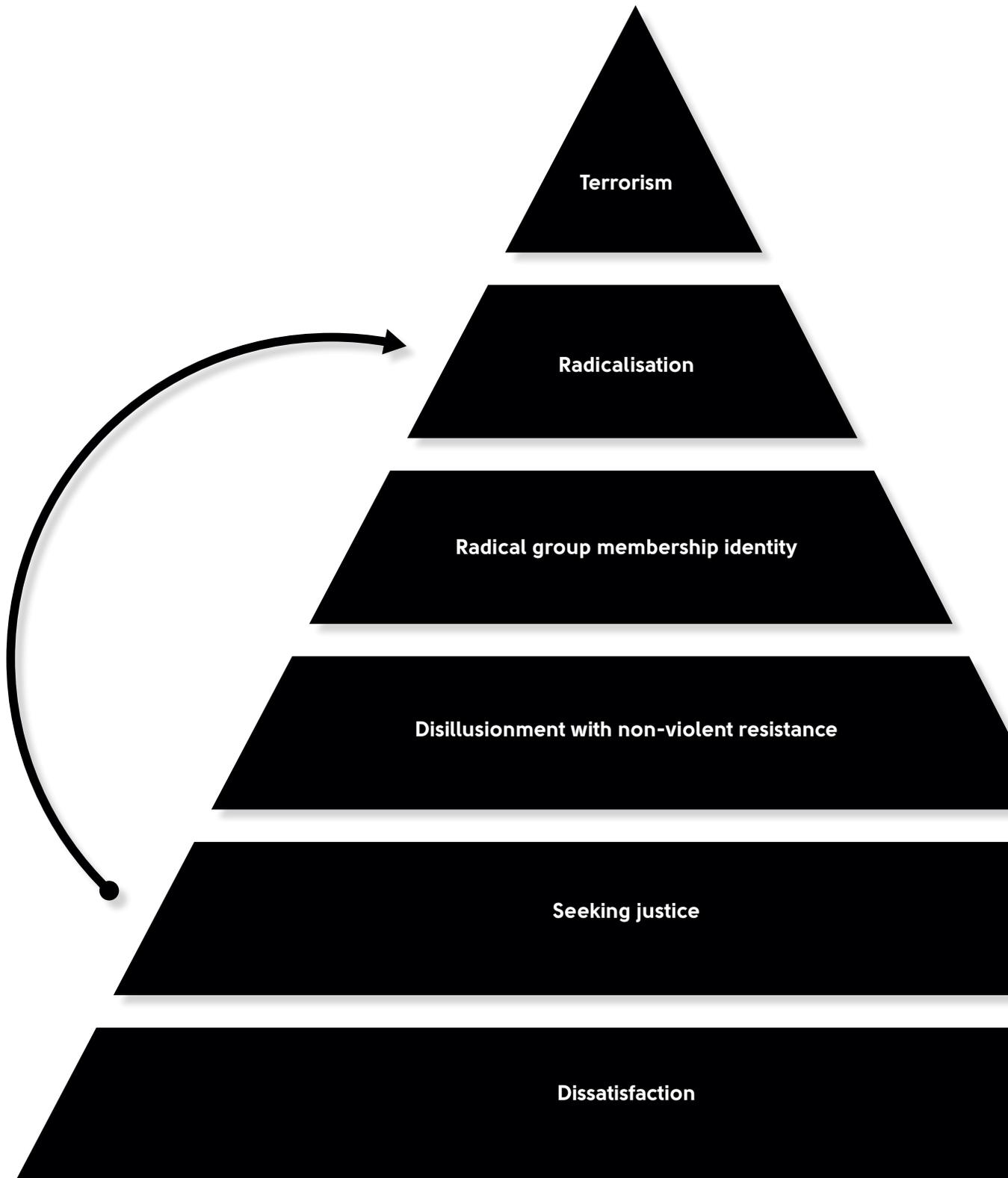
Despite the fighting between different factions in Afghanistan, the country has become a safe haven for terrorist organisations, which also threaten neighbouring countries in Central Asia.

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<sup>6</sup> The initials 'CBRN' are used to describe malicious threats relating to chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear materials as well as protection against them.

<sup>7</sup> HAZMAT – hazardous material.

<sup>8</sup> The Sahel is the name given to the belt in Africa that lies between the Sahara desert to the north and the savannah to the south. This elongated area stretches from west to east for about 5,400 km, connecting the Atlantic and Red Sea coasts, spanning 1,000 km at its widest point and a few hundred kilometres on average. The belt runs through ten African countries.



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Russia's aggression against Ukraine has reduced the general public's focus on the threat of international terrorism. The countries on the eastern border of Europe are making efforts to identify dangerous individuals among the refugees arriving in Europe. This places an unprecedented burden on the border control and security authorities of Eastern European countries. The illegal migrant trafficking operation launched by Belarus in 2021, which saw thousands of migrants crowd the borders of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland and attracted a great deal of attention, continues with less intensity. Added to this was the wave of citizens of high-risk countries fleeing from war-torn Ukraine. Since February 2022, more than 280,000 third-country (non-Ukrainian) nationals have entered the European Union from Ukraine, including persons who have been detained due to their links with terrorism.

In our assessment, the war in Ukraine will not heighten the threat of terrorism in Europe in the near future. But several factors make the war attractive to terrorists and extremists:

- There may be attempts to smuggle weapons and explosives used in Ukraine.
- The tumult of war and the ensuing confusion might offer opportunities to migrate to Europe.
- While Daesh and Al-Qaeda advise their members against participating in this ideologically distant conflict, they recommend taking advantage of the opportunities the war presents, specifically:
  - to receive military training and acquire skills in the use of various weapons;
  - to create networks for organising future attacks and secure them with the necessary equipment;
  - to adopt the tactics employed in the war in Ukraine in terrorist attacks against Western countries.

## Radicalisation

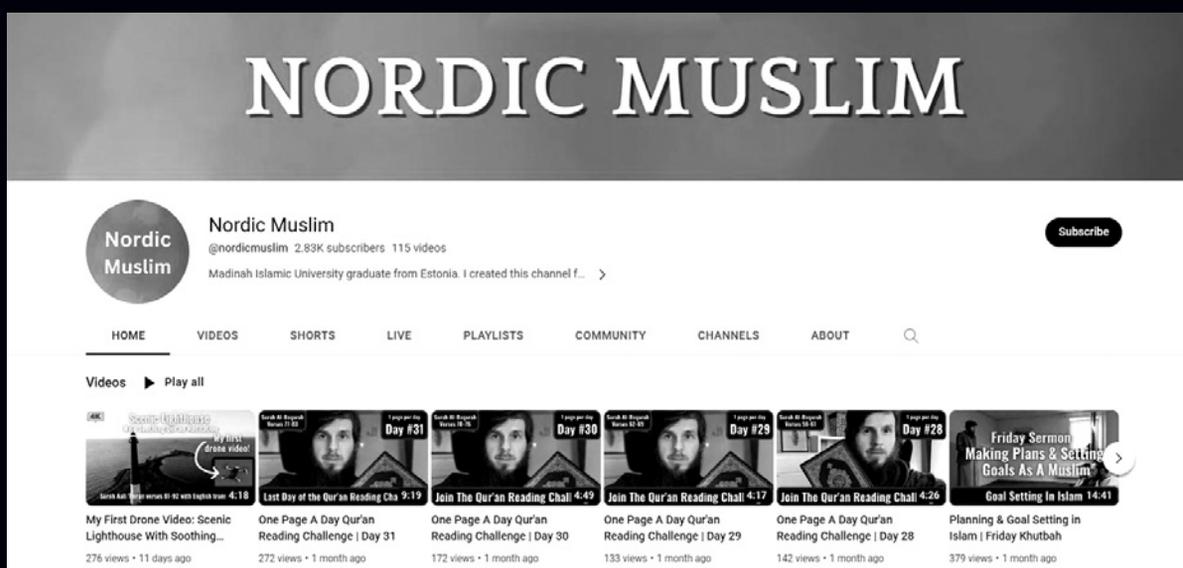
Terrorist propaganda is a critical tool used to radicalise and recruit people and inspire attacks. Multilingual propaganda is mainly circulated on social media and encrypted data exchange platforms. Because large social media platforms seek to limit the spread of terrorist propaganda, platforms that don't require users to disclose or authenticate personal information are used instead.

Common propaganda messages include imposing an anti-Western and anti-democratic narrative, justifying the use of violence in achieving goals, claims of discrimination against Islamic values in the West, and criticism of Western countries' participation in the fight against terrorism in Islamic countries.

Radicalising European residents is a strategic aim for terrorist organisations. The organisations seek to use activities performed by their supporters in Europe to compensate for their decreased capacity to carry out attacks.

The use of social media to communicate extremist ideology has transformed considerably. Several extremist religious leaders in Europe have been criminally punished for supporting terrorism and inciting violence. In order to prevent such scenarios from recurring, ideologists have found ways of concealing messages that promote extremist ideologies among other social media content. Social media posts contain links to encrypted communication channels where followers can access unabridged material. Popular social media channels enable users to earn "legal income" through posts and marketing agreements, while the real beneficiary may be an extremist organisation.

KAPO has identified social media posts by Estonian users that use religious beliefs as an argument to incite antagonism between communities. The messages posted by these instigators echo those spread in Europe, very clearly suggesting, without directly calling for violence, that people of different faiths



should not recognise each other’s customs and encouraging Muslims to oppose the shared cultural practices in Estonia. Such appeals are aimed at immigrants, directly impeding their integration and coping.

The 32-year-old Islamic preacher RR is one example. He regularly posts his sermons and monologues on social media. Although his messages do not incite violence, he clearly calls on Muslims to distance themselves from Estonian culture.

Islamist propaganda has transformed the dynamics of radicalisation and organising an attack. In the past, radicalised individuals associated themselves with a specific terrorist organisation and received tactical and weapons training to organise an attack. In recent years, radicalisation and calls to organise attacks have resulted in the potential attackers acquiring offensive capabilities while possibly having no ties to terrorist organisations. Their motivation for the attack may not be to support the goals of terrorist organisations but to act on their personal convictions. The attack is powered by the anger and inspiration incited within the process of radicalisation.



Screenshot from the organisation’s web page

KAPO has observed that people susceptible to radicalisation include young people and in some cases even minors. This is primarily due to the influence of social media. Most of those radicalised have adopted an Islamist worldview. Belonging to a specific group or organisation is no longer a prerequisite. Topics such as blasphemy, Islamophobia and the clashing of liberalism with religious rules<sup>9</sup> have taken precedence over calls by terrorist organisations to join their ranks and fight for their cause. In Estonia and elsewhere in Europe, some individuals identified as posing a threat have also been diagnosed with mental disorders.

<sup>9</sup> For example, equal treatment of the LGBTQ community, acceptance of other faiths, and the primacy of secular customs and laws over religious rules.

## Situation in Estonia

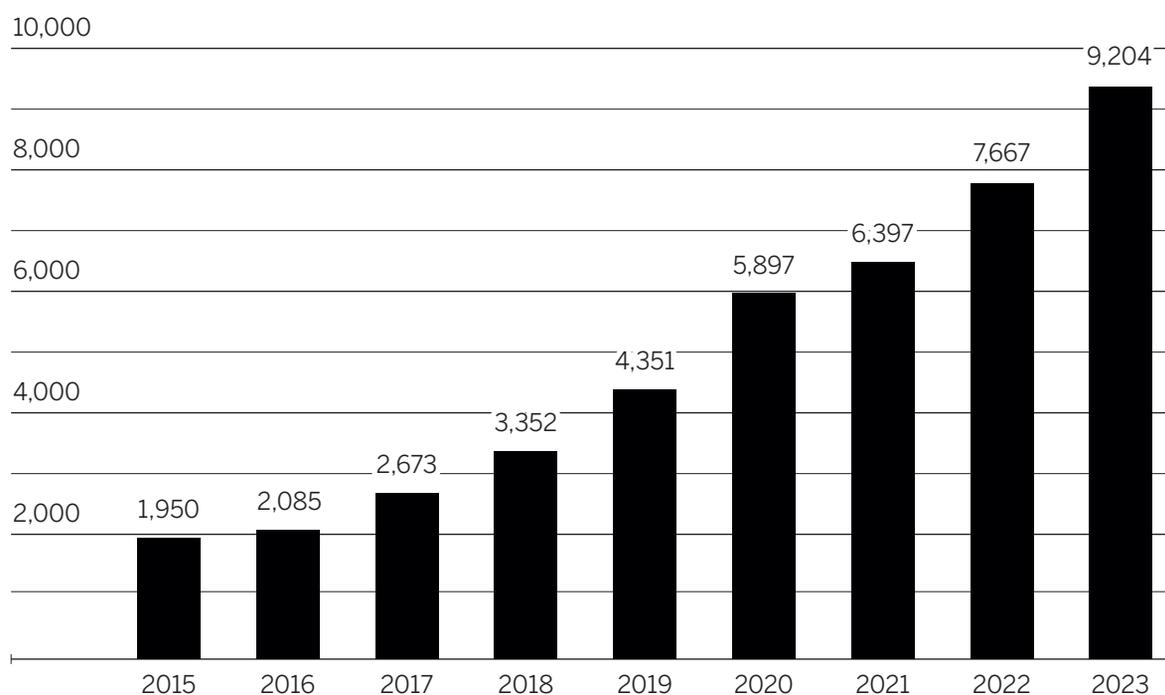
While the threat of terrorism in Estonia remains low, terrorist attacks cannot be entirely ruled out. In our previous yearbooks, we have indicated that there are a few dozen people in Estonia associated with religious extremism and Islamist terrorism who pose a security threat. According to information available to KAPO, no Estonian residents sought to join a terrorist organisation or settle in territory occupied by terrorists in 2022.

During the year, based on recommendations by KAPO, the Estonian Ministry of the Interior imposed entry bans on 23 persons who posed a security threat due to ties with terrorism or Islamist influence operations.

With Russian, Ukrainian and Belarussian citizens leaving the labour market due to restrictions and other reasons, several Estonian companies responded by recruiting citizens of Central Asian countries. The short-term recruitment of people from Central Asia increased fourfold compared to 2021,<sup>10</sup> bringing their share to 76% among people from high-risk countries registered for short-term work in Estonia.

Increased labour migration from Central Asian countries almost immediately led to indications that not only legitimate businesses but also criminals were involved in transiting workers. 2022 also brought us a significant case concerning short-term workers from Central Asia who were suspected of terrorism. All the short-term workers involved in this case have since left Estonia.

**Change in the number of foreign nationals from high-risk countries living in Estonia, since 2015 (as of the beginning of the year)**



<sup>10</sup> In 2022, Estonia granted short-term work permits to 3,152 citizens of Central Asian countries.

The number of foreigners from high-risk Islamic countries<sup>11</sup> who have settled in Estonia is growing steadily. Migration flows, which temporarily declined during the COVID-19 pandemic, have resumed. The growing Muslim community is inevitably linked to several other risk factors: increased contact with high-risk countries, the transfer of the origin countries' problems to Estonia and the increased likelihood of radicalisation. It is essential to quickly integrate people settling in Estonia into local society and prevent the emergence of closed communities.<sup>12</sup> The large volume of integration programmes targeted towards refugees from Ukraine should not dampen efforts to integrate citizens of high-risk countries.

Structural changes in the Estonian population echo the development trends of other European countries. The steady growth of communities permanently settled in Estonia poses challenges in the fields of integration, education, the labour market and foreign relations. The transfer of problems from other countries to Estonia happens through communities. From a security and terrorism prevention perspective, Estonia needs to ensure wider cooperation in foreign relations, security and law enforcement with countries with whom cooperation in these or other areas is lacking.

## Financing of extremism and terrorism

Terrorist organisations and extremist movements finance their activities with money and assets obtained legally as well as illegally. The preferred form of funding is a financial donation from a private individual. This is a matter of a simple transfer of funds. While terrorist organisations have successfully adopted virtual currencies, their high volatility and, in some cases, the complexity of converting them to traditional currency make more standard financial instruments the preferred medium.

Terrorist fundraisers usually have a good overview of state oversight mechanisms, which are public. Inspections are avoided by using simple solutions, such as transferring small amounts, using labels such as social aid or community-related or civic initiative fundraising campaigns to conceal the real purpose of the support. Online funding and fundraising campaign services are used.

While the profile of a terrorist financier is difficult to outline, some insight can be gained from the updated guidance material published by the Estonian Financial Intelligence Unit on its website. These guidelines describe the characteristics of suspicious transactions and are complete with an appendix containing the list of countries with a high risk of terrorist financing.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of the threat of international terrorist financing, Estonia remains a transit country that can be used to move payments for criminal purposes. This is facilitated by the prominent image of Estonia as an e-state, as well as companies offering virtual currency and payment services. Unfortunately, national regulation and oversight have not been able to keep up, leading to uneven or, in some cases, non-existent due diligence in the fintech sector.

11 Countries that support Islamist terrorism or do not fight international Islamist terrorism, countries where Islamist terrorist organisations operate, and countries that do not control their territory or are too weak to effectively fight against Islamist terrorism.

12 In 2022, a community resolved an act of violence without involving the police. Community leaders decided who was to blame for the dispute and imposed a financial penalty.

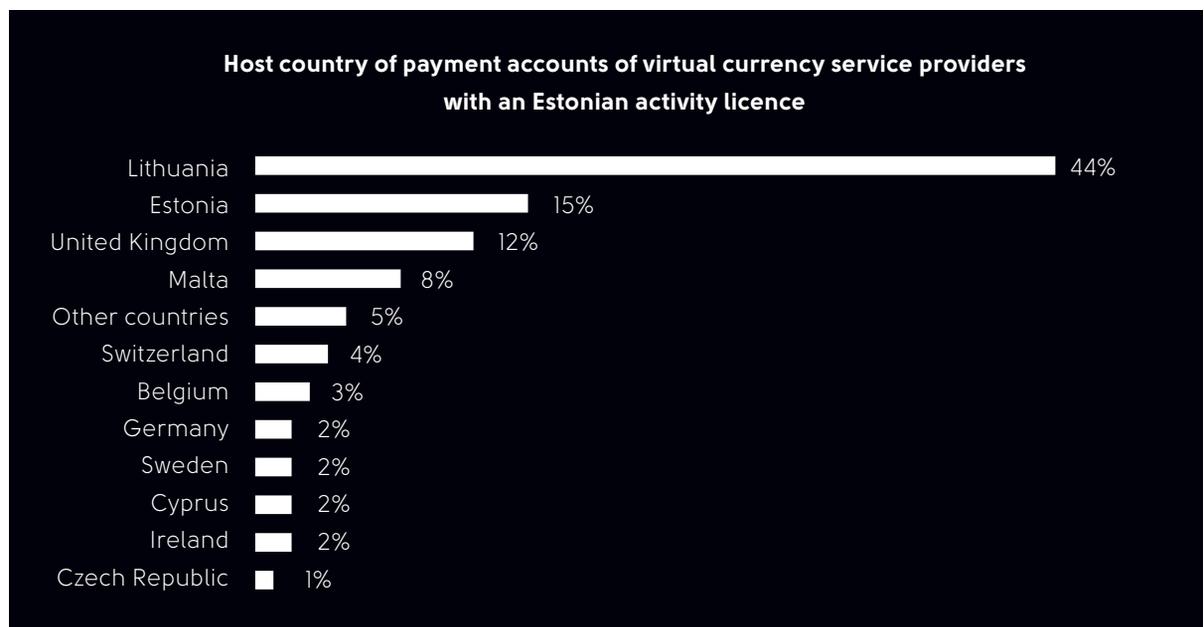
13 [www.fiu.ee/en/guidelines-fiu/guidelines#guidelines-on-the-ch](http://www.fiu.ee/en/guidelines-fiu/guidelines#guidelines-on-the-ch)

Blockchain technology is widely claimed to be fully public and traceable. In fact, this only applies to the more common virtual currencies and only on the condition that service providers operating under an Estonian activity licence comply with regulatory due diligence measures and inform the national supervisory institutions in accordance with the law. The reality, however, is somewhat different. Scarcely any market participants in the virtual currency sector comply with the requirements of the Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing Prevention Act or follow the guidelines of the Financial Intelligence Unit. The transparency of the sector is further impaired by the fact that the payment accounts of most companies with an Estonian activity licence are located outside Estonia: among 177 service providers, only 15% had an Estonian payment account. A significant share of the payment accounts are located in Lithuania, the United Kingdom or Malta.

Another problem area is the non-governmental sector, which lacks awareness and the legal framework necessary to prevent terrorist financing.<sup>14</sup> As of late 2021, there were 23,362 non-profit organi-

sations and 818 foundations registered in Estonia. Of these, 56 have been assessed as having an increased risk of terrorist financing. While KAPO has no information on the local non-governmental sector being involved in the financing of terrorism, cooperation with the Financial Intelligence Unit has enabled us to identify financial transactions linked to a foreign Islamist movement. Representatives of this movement have established a non-governmental organisation in Estonia using the e-resident status. This case illustrates the dangers of e-residency in relations with countries not involved in judicial cooperation with Estonia.

We have also observed a lack of awareness of the dangers of terrorist financing in the financial technology sector's crowdfunding platforms and other fundraising services. Such financing methods are wrought with the risk that the trust of an investor or donator is abused and the collected funds are redirected to be used for terrorist purposes. There have been several cases in other countries where crowdfunding platforms were used to raise funds for Islamic extremists and right-wing extremists.



14 [www.fiu.ee/en/guidelines-fiu/guidelines#countries-with-a-hig](http://www.fiu.ee/en/guidelines-fiu/guidelines#countries-with-a-hig)



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## Interest in e-residency

With the boom in the fintech sector and virtual currency service permits in recent years, persons linked to terrorism have also expressed an interest in e-residency. Since the start of the e-residency programme, KAPO has identified 26 persons associated with Islamist terrorism or extremism who have applied for e-residency or become e-residents. Among them have been individuals linked to Al-Qaeda, Daesh, Hezbollah, the Taliban and the Muslim Brotherhood.

If an e-residency applicant from a country that is not involved in police or judicial cooperation with Estonia meets all the requirements when applying, and there is no discrediting information about them in public sources, then obtaining an e-residency is a relatively simple and speedy affair, taking about one or two months. Revoking e-residency after a security threat has been identified, on the other hand, is a considerably more complicated, time-consuming and costly undertaking for the state. If a person who has lost their e-residency on this basis pursues the matter in court, the process of revoking e-residency can go on for years.

In the future, terrorist organisations, their supporters, extremists and common criminals will continue to show interest in anonymous electronic money transfer services and the ability to conduct transactions that do not require a physical presence.

The main defence against the financing of terrorism is the transaction party's awareness of the risk of money laundering and terrorist financing and compliance with the mandatory due diligence measures provided by law.

The motives of extremists and/or terrorists for conducting business in Estonia via the e-residency programme are related to their efforts to move economic activity out of the supervision and jurisdiction of the security authorities of their country of residence. In order to conceal their real motives, the individuals associated with terrorism who are granted e-residency take their time before actively engaging in business or channelling transactions and money through an Estonian company. Establishing a company provides an indirect basis for obtaining a Schengen visa and can, given a credible background, make it easier to obtain the visa. E-residency also presents a good opportunity to check how capable a European Union member state is in detecting people who pose a threat to security. The application for e-residency can be submitted online, which bypasses the risk of contacting a state institution in person. If an e-residency application is refused due to the threat the applicant poses, the individual is informed of this and thus receives feedback that the Estonian authorities are aware of their background.



Notable former e-residents of Estonia



# SANCTIONS VIOLATIONS, ECONOMIC SECURITY AND THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION

Russia needs sophisticated military equipment and weapons to continue its aggression, while the European Union aims to reduce Russia's ability to continue the war effectively – with economic sanctions<sup>15</sup> that no longer allow Russia to buy military or dual-use goods<sup>16</sup> from Europe. The Russian military industry and several other industries – including aviation, biotechnology and the nuclear industry – depend on European imports for advanced technology. AI projects, which play a major role in Russia's image-building, are especially dependent on external supplies. And although the Russian government domestically spreads reassuring messages about technological independence and self-sufficiency, producing many high-tech components is currently beyond the reach of Russian industry.

In cooperation with its European partners, KAPO has observed increasing efforts by Russia to obscure supply chains where Russia is the final recipient of various goods. For this purpose, networks of legitimate companies controlled by Russia have been set up in Europe and Asia. This is why the tran-

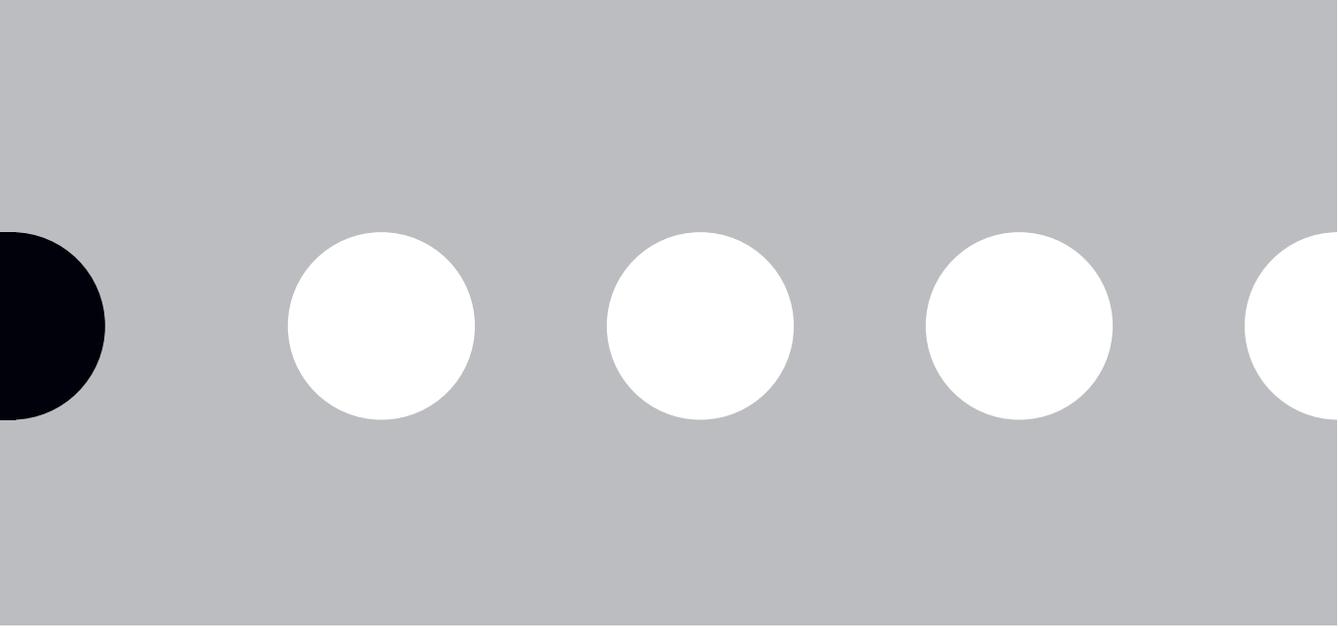
sit countries along the Russian border, such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Finland, must work meticulously to prevent sanctions violations, detect the illegal exports of goods and handle any identified violations. The Estonian authorities, with their partners, are working to ensure any technology that can support Russia's military and economic capabilities does not transit through our region to Russia.

At the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, KAPO is represented in the Strategic Goods Commission, which in 2022 saw a sharp increase in the intensity of its work. The sanctions that came into effect following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine led to increased consultations and reduced the transport of strategic goods to Russia. The enforcement of import and export sanctions on Russia is supervised by the Estonian Tax and Customs Board, while KAPO is responsible for the preliminary investigation of intentional sanctions violations. Both agencies have come across sanction evasion schemes in the course of their work. These include falsifying the destination of goods to deliver prohibited goods to Russia under the guise of transit to third countries.

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<sup>15</sup> Sanctions are discussed in more detail in the chapter on economic security.

<sup>16</sup> Dual-use goods are goods, including software and technology, that can be used for both civilian and military purposes.



There are also deliberate attempts to misdeclare goods and to smuggle in prohibited luxury products among permitted goods. The capacity of the customs checkpoints in countries bordering Russia is being tested to identify weak points where prohibited goods can be transported across the border. Increasingly longer lists of prohibited goods, numerous exceptions to the sanctions and the novelty of the whole situation have posed a serious challenge for the frontline agencies implementing the sanctions. However, they have successfully adapted to the new situation over the past year, and having a common objective has further strengthened cooperation between the public and private sectors. Attempts to circumvent the sanctions are an indication of the impact they are having on Russia as a whole, as well as on the sanctioned individuals.

The changed attitude of companies operating in the European Union has also helped ensure sanctions compliance. Many large corporations no longer want to do business with Russia due to the sanctions and reputational considerations. Some Estonian companies particularly stand out for carefully adhering to the sanctions. They screen out potential business partners whose activities differ from the

norm and who appear to seek sanctioned goods for their illegal delivery to Russia. Communicating with manufacturers of technology of interest to Russia and implementing know-your-customer policies certainly play a major role in identifying any attempts to evade sanctions.

Europe's vigilance regarding supplies to Russia means that customers related to the Russian military industry increasingly need to purchase the necessary components through third countries. In the past, Russian military procurement often used a scheme whereby a Russian scientific or educational institute was shown as the end user. With the new sanctions in place, attempts are being made to hide any connections with Russia and the final use of the goods there. This leads to an increased risk of goods being diverted through third countries.

Against the background of Russian aggression in 2022, China's consistent efforts to strengthen its global economic footprint cannot be ignored. KAPO continues to monitor possible hidden Russian capital in Estonia and the Chinese authorities' possible channelling of investment into the country.

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## **Criminal proceedings for violations of international sanctions**

In May 2022, KAPO opened criminal proceedings in a case of a suspected sanctions violation involving an individual and a related company. A shipment of goods subject to an export ban was stopped on its way to Russia. The shipment contained electric generators and engines with accessories.

In early December 2022, during a joint operation with partners from the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), KAPO arrested Vadim Konoshchenok in Estonia for smuggling equipment and ammunition components from the US to Russia. Konoshchenok is a Russian citizen who lived in Estonia under a residence permit. He is currently awaiting extradition to the US. Following the arrest, KAPO officers searched a warehouse linked to Konoshchenok, where they found a large quantity of ammunition: 13,600 US-made rounds for sniper rifles. Konoshchenok had previously been repeatedly detained at the Narva border crossing trying to deliver similar ammunition to Russia, but the Estonian authorities had confiscated the goods.

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On 10 October 2022, the Tartu County Court convicted Belarusian citizen Pyotr Rafalovich of an attempted violation of international sanctions and knowingly using a counterfeit document. The court sentenced Rafalovich to two months in prison, after which he would be expelled from Estonia, with a five-year ban on re-entry. Rafalovich was expelled after having served his sentence.

Rafalovich attempted to deliver a shipment to Russia via the Luhamaa road border crossing, which included, among other items, 509 kg of 3D print filler, an electro-pneumatic positioner and other Siemens technical equipment. Both the 3D printer filler and the electro-pneumatic positioner are among the goods banned from being sold, supplied, transferred or exported to Russia. At the Luhamaa checkpoint, Rafalovich presented documents indicating Armenian-based companies as the recipi-

ents of the 3D print filler and the electro-pneumatic positioner. However, he was also carrying shipping documents showing that the recipient of the print filler was a company in Moscow, while the positioner was on its way to a company in St Petersburg.

## **The fight against corruption and Estonian cases**

Corruption is the abuse of public authority. Since 2021, Estonian cabinet ministers and their political advisers and senior officials have been required to declare their interests. Data on their meetings with lobbyists can be found at [www.korruptsioon.ee/en](http://www.korruptsioon.ee/en), demonstrating that the regulation works. This self-regulatory instrument is a significant step in reducing corruption risks and promoting an open society. The public needs to know which officials meet with lobbyists and what topics they discuss, as this reduces the risk of unequal treatment and increases the credibility of the public sector.

An environment inhospitable to corruption should be cultivated from the local government level up to prevent related security threats from developing. Tallinn as Estonia's capital city and most important economic hub affects the entire country's culture, making fighting corruption here a priority.

For years, KAPO's anti-corruption activities have focused on information technology, critical infrastructure and the defence forces. We know that Russia uses corruption as a means to subvert its neighbouring countries and, in the case of Ukraine, also as a buildup to a military attack. Effective prevention and combating of corruption is a key area for KAPO in ensuring that Estonia remains resilient to Russian hybrid attacks, which may also include attempts to induce corrupt behaviour.

In the Corruption Perceptions Index compiled by Transparency International, an international organisation involved in the fight against corruption, Estonia ranks 13th to 17th, alongside Austria, Hong Kong, Ireland, Iceland and Canada.

## Embezzlers of Navy assets were convicted

A court judgment entered into force in September 2022, which found ex-marines TL and JV guilty of the large-scale joint embezzlement of Defence Forces assets. They removed spare parts of Defence Forces vessels from a naval base in Tallinn, some of which they then sold back to the Defence Forces through procurement procedures.

TL and JV made every effort to conceal their activities: several middlemen, as well as companies in the Czech Republic and Latvia, were used to sell back the items; new credible-looking packaging was supplied for the goods; and the companies involved in the scheme were presented to the official contract partner of the Defence Forces, which bought and supplied the spare parts back to the Navy in good faith. A third marine was also involved in one of the criminal episodes. However, the prosecutor dismissed the case against him for reasons of expediency, as he confessed to his misdemeanour, his role in the matter was minor, and there was no public interest in completing the proceedings. The marine also left the Defence Forces. In addition to reputational damage, the Defence Forces incurred a total loss of 205,186 euros.

The investigation uncovered a broader issue in the Defence Forces, showing that accounting for acquired property and its subsequent movement was sometimes unclear and incomplete, even for the institution itself. The case also highlighted how private companies should be more attentive when mediating goods and services to state institutions: they should be alert to the risks involved in the highly unusual practice of unknown providers selling highly specialised components that are only manufactured by a limited number of producers.

The court gave the two men a three-year suspended sentence with a probationary period of three years and six months. They must also compensate the Estonian state for the jointly caused damage. The property of at least one of the guilty parties has been seized to secure the claim.

## A long struggle for clarity of waste management in Tallinn

On 16 December 2021, Tallinn Circuit Court made a judgment in a criminal case opened on 1 March 2017, in which Margo Tomingas and Kaido Laanjärv were found guilty, as non-officials, of having intentionally contributed to a large-scale violation of procedural restrictions by an official, Arvo Sarapuu, the former deputy mayor of Tallinn, between 2014 and 2017. The Office of the Prosecutor General dismissed the criminal proceedings with respect to Sarapuu on 21 December 2018 for health reasons.

The court considered it implausible that Tomingas, with no previous direct involvement in waste management, would start collecting information for his personal use and invest his own money to establish and run a company, Baltic Waste Management OÜ, that, as a new player, would seek to secure the waste collection services for the entire capital city. This would have been virtually impossible without connections and the support of the deputy mayor. According to the court, Sarapuu not only participated in the decisions to declare the tender successful and award the contracts to the company but essentially directed these decisions.

The court was convinced that the company was only established after a tripartite agreement to conceal Sarapuu's connections and put forward the company as the winner of the public contracts for waste collection in different areas of the capital. In September 2022, the judgment of the Tallinn Circuit Court entered into force after the Supreme Court decided not to hear the appeal by Tomingas and Laanjärv.

# WARPED REFLECTIONS FROM HISTORY: SOME PARALLELS BETWEEN 1941 AND 2022

**Peeter Kaasik, historian, Estonian Institute of Historical Memory**

"It may be quite a good thing that we were unaware of the full capability of the Bolsheviks. Otherwise, the eastern campaign against them might never have been undertaken ... Deep down, the Führer is livid with himself that he formed a false view of the potential of the Bolsheviks based on reports from the Soviet Union."<sup>17</sup>

These lines, taken from the diary of the Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, suggest that as early as 1941 the German leadership began to realise that they had become entangled in a very compromising campaign on the Eastern Front. However, this did not prevent them from justifying their decision-making.

Taking our cue from the Latin phrase *audi alteram partem*, or "listen to the other side", we could say that the truth lies in comparisons, because history

has the unfortunate tendency to repeat itself in new forms and guises. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which began in February 2022, was quickly compared to Hitler's Blitzkrieg offensive against the USSR in 1941. Strictly speaking, the war in Ukraine has been ongoing since 2014, and the annexation of Crimea and the establishment of the self-proclaimed People's Republics in Donbas allow us to draw further parallels with earlier historical events, even if they are somewhat arbitrary. For example, there are similarities between the Minsk agreements and the Munich Agreement of 1938. Although both may have been driven by the noble goal of preventing war, they ultimately only postponed it while signalling to the aggressor that the West was seriously struggling to defend its professed values. Or as Winston Churchill once said: "In Munich we were given the choice between war and dishonour. We chose dishonour and we will have war."<sup>18</sup>

In 2023, any talk of a Blitzkrieg offensive on the Ukrainian front is long outdated. If we were to draw

17 Diary of Joseph Goebbels, 19 August 1941, *Tagebücher 1924–1945*, Band 4, 1940–1942. Herausgegeben von Ralf Georg Reuth. München: Piper, 1999, 1655–1656.

18 There are different versions of this statement. The criticism was really aimed specifically at Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain ("You were given the choice between war and dishonour. You chose dishonour and you will have war."). See Stephen J. Lee. *Aspects of British political history, 1914–1995*. London, New York: Routledge, 1996, 157–165. However, Churchill made similar points even before Chamberlain's famous speech on 30 September 1938. For example, he wrote to David Lloyd George, "Everything is overshadowed by the impending trial of will-power which is developing in Europe. I think we shall have to choose in the next few weeks between war and shame, and I have very little doubt what the decision will be." To Lord Walter Moyne, he wrote, "We seem to be very near the bleak choice between War and Shame. My feeling is that we shall choose Shame, and then have War thrown in a little later on even more adverse terms than at present."



parallels, the current stalemate resembles the situation on the Eastern Front in the second half of 1942, before the Battle of Stalingrad (for optimists, the situation is akin to that of the summer of 1943, before the Battle of Kursk).

At first glance, the Blitzkrieg parallel doesn't seem to hold up. While Russia probably managed to surprise the whole world in February 2022, the offensive quickly began to stall after just a few weeks. However, if we zoom out on the map and expand the time frames, the parallel will bear out. Echoing the words of Goebbels, the war was a gamble from the start, an endeavour grounded on wishful ideological thinking based on a very questionable rationale.

Let us bring this to the current day. The emergency meeting of the Russian Security Council<sup>19</sup> on 21 February 2022 laid out all the arguments used to justify the war, and in their absurdity (e.g. the claims of denazification), they sometimes even surpassed Hitler's vision of the post-war world order. It was probably only during this meeting that the closest associates of President Vladimir Putin began to fathom the scale of the "special military operation", and some of the

less fanatical officials present at the meeting probably realised right then and there the gamble of what would follow. In this sense, as dictators who have lost all sense of reality, Putin and Hitler seem to share some similarities in their thinking.

### **Some remarks on war propaganda**

When writing about wars that have long ago ended, historians can rely on documents, memories, diaries and existing historical literature. When it comes to the ongoing war in Ukraine, the special services, who analyse information gathered through various channels, or those in the upper military ranks, probably have a better overview of the situation. As for now, historians have to make do with publicly available sources.

When covering wars, it is crucial not to overlook the role of propaganda. The truth about war is an abstract concept even centuries after the events, to say nothing of what is presented as truth during the war. We should not underestimate the human capacity to believe in conspiracy theories and rumours, and the tendency to engage in wishful thinking. Possible explanations for this include the over-

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<sup>19</sup> During this session, members of the Russian Security Council expressed their support for the recognition of the so-called People's Republics of Donetsk and Lugansk as independent states. Putin signed the respective decree that same day.

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abundance of information in democratic societies on the one hand and the scarcity or biased nature of information (or its poor availability) in non-democracies on the other. Where the truth is blurred, this provides fertile ground for conspiracy theories and wishful thinking to proliferate. However, being biased should not necessarily mean abandoning the principle of source criticism.

Military propaganda (or updates on the progress of the war) is a separate topic that in today's terms falls under the category of strategic communication. Regardless of what we call it, military propaganda is far from being wholly negative or synonymous with lies and incitement to hatred. It is an integral part of war. The question instead is how propaganda is communicated and who it is directed to.

Having observed some of the war coverage on either side, I would say that the Ukrainians are engaged in strategic communication, while the Russians are spreading propaganda in a more deplorable sense. After all, how do you conduct military propaganda in wartime when you are not even allowed to describe the war for what it is?

Russian state-directed domestic propaganda is a separate matter and can, in its occasional primitiveness, come off as extremely transparent to an outside observer who has retained the ability to think critically. But the spectrum of propaganda is much more diverse than that and includes different messages intended for different audiences – it is important to keep in mind that an element of the information flow emanating from Russia is directed beyond state borders where it serves to promote opposition to the mainstream among the political and intellectual elites of different countries and exploit the usual discontent with the ruling power or its representatives. In any case, we can see greater creativity in the conspiracy theories and fake news intended to sow confusion than in the material fed to the average Russian (or, in *Russkiy Mir*'s terms, compatriot) glued to the TV. Russian society is still dominated by a cult of the Great Patriotic War (Second World War), but the infrastructure that was once used to support it has now faded away.

The announcements of the Soviet Information Bureau (Советское информационное бюро, Совинформбюро) during the Second World War are a textbook example of strategic communication, especially when comparing them against Soviet operational documents. These announcements were published in both the civilian press and the army papers, with the voice of Yuri Levitan, a well-known radio announcer from Moscow Radio, booming in the background, delivering the same information to listeners with a dramatic flourish. However, they weren't outright lies or inflammatory propaganda – those were the focus of other agencies and the editorials of *Pravda*, the main state newspaper of the time.

The underlying idea was to lie as little as possible, while distorting the truth, for example, by amplifying the gains and downplaying (or withholding) the losses – within realistic limits so as to remain credible. What is left unsaid is just as important as what is said. Ukrainians have put these old principles into practice. Presumably, what the average observer knows about the war is what they want them to know. Not that this knowledge is untrue; it's simply not the whole truth. This is completely understandable in a time of war: while there is no reason to share information with the enemy, it is necessary to maintain the patriotic spirit of fighters and boost the morale of allies.

So, bearing in mind the fog of war, I will refrain from presenting any detailed facts about today or making sweeping conclusions based on individual events. Instead, I will draw some parallels from decades ago by focusing mainly on the year 1941 and using the example of Estonia.

## Parallels between the Summer War of 1941 and today

The war in Ukraine should be viewed as two separate stages. In the first few weeks, the Russian offensive was successful and bore similarities to Hitler's Blitzkrieg. I will leave this period aside and focus on the retreat of the Russian army.

Despite the relative success it achieved at the beginning of 2022, the Russian army was soon forced to withdraw, first from outside Kyiv, then from Chernihiv, Sumy and Kharkiv, and finally from Kherson.

It seems that nothing much has changed in Russian methods of warfare since the Second World War. Although experts claim that Russian military planning is done with high scientific precision, this has yet to be seen in practice. To date, it is still all based on frontal assault and quantitative superiority in hardware. These are combined with terror against the civilian population, which has been unleashed during both advance and retreat. For the latter, we could describe the events of 1941 as "scorched earth tactics". Time will tell which concept will come to represent the activities taking place in the current war.

Orders delivered from above and leading to more or less organised activity are one thing; events simply running their course on the ground is another. The question is also to what extent the regular army is tasked with implementing scorched earth tactics. This can also affect the subsequent course of events.

The scale of the planned and unplanned bloodshed and destruction also depends on the role of the commanders and the extent to which they direct, prevent or attempt to prevent these acts. Specifically, it depends on whether the commanders retain control over the situation. Giving free rein for destruction often destroys morale, and sooner or later the military unit turns into a lawless band of plunderers. If morale breaks down for good during the course of looting or retreating, the commander is no longer of importance. What follows is more or less spontaneous, depending on what a particular soldier (or a group of soldiers or a gang leader) considers his task, but also on his criminal tendencies, bloodlust and appetite for destruction.

Last but not least, it depends on his selfish desire for plundering. Of course, the latter was severely limited in 1941, when the collapse of the front prevented soldiers from sending looted goods back to their home villages.

When it comes to marauding, Estonian history provides more parallels from 1944, when an extensive wave of looting became one of the first manifestations of "liberation". The Red Army's more extensive marauding in the Second World War happened during the offensive and mainly took place outside the borders of the USSR, including the Baltic countries, but especially in Germany. Gradually, the transport of war booty to the homeland was also organised, but this was mainly driven by state interests, which, admittedly, were melded with the personal interests of the commanders. In the course of all this, the ranks were also given the opportunity to collect some of the spoils of war.

It seems that this may well be a historical tradition, which has its roots in the Tatar-Mongol conquests of the 13th century and is probably not frowned upon in Russia even today. On the subject of the Tatar-Mongols, the current war is also not without some oriental flavour. The fighters from Chechnya, known as the Kadyrovites after their authoritarian leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, may not be much of a threat against the regular army, but they have gained notoriety for "keeping order in the rear". Technically, they are not part of the Russian army; instead, their role resembles that of a feudal vassal. The current war coverage has focused on other easterners too, such as the Buryats, whose ideas of the nature and methods of warfare are probably somewhat different than those of Europeans.

Western analysts sometimes make the mistake of expecting the Russian army's modus operandi to be more European than it really is. By contrast, ancient eastern military tactics are a common theme in Estonian folklore, where they are reflected in the atrocities committed by creatures known as *koerakoonlased* (dog-snouts) and *peninukid* (hound-knuckles), pictured as having the head of a dog and the body of a man and used to signify militants in general or Oprichniki more specifically in the wars of the 16th to 18th centuries.

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As already mentioned, in the Second World War, marauding for personal gain took place during the offensive rather than during the retreat. This is simply a reminder that relatively unpunished marauding was condoned during the Second World War, just as it is condoned in the current war, where the Russian and Belarusian post offices near the front have quickly become overloaded with the “fair spoils of war”.

### Scorched earth tactics

But let us return to the topic of scorched earth tactics. As the Russian army was sent off to war, the orders they received can only be deduced from their actions. It is safe to assume that in addition to deliberate, supervised moves, there were also acts of carelessness – that’s how it has always been, so why should now be any different?

The summer of 1941 was certainly characterised by a certain amount of disarray. For a few weeks, Stalin disappeared from public view altogether. Only when the war had been going on for a week did the party and the government finally issue general orders. By that time it was clear that the Wehrmacht was advancing very quickly, entire large Red Army forces were disintegrating, tens of thousands of units of military equipment were left behind, hundreds of thousands of soldiers were captured, etc. So, on 29 June 1941, in a joint directive of the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR and the Communist Party, the motion was finally taken to partially admit that the situation was very bad.<sup>20</sup> It is safe to assume that the military was already well aware of this; more than anything, the document served to define the tasks of the party, the soviets, the Komsomol and trade union organisations in the areas close to the front. These tasks included organising a crackdown without mercy against all manner of disorganisers, deserters, panic-mongers and spreaders of rumours in the rear; to destroy spies, saboteurs and enemy paratroopers. In the event of a forced retreat of the Red Army units, all valuable property, including

non-ferrous metals, grain and fuel that could not be shipped out, was to be destroyed.

Another noteworthy aspect of this joint directive is its vagueness. While it laid out clear tasks, their fulfilment was discouraged by indications that all of this could be interpreted as fostering panic. And in the Stalinist era, such remarks were not just empty words. Therefore, a certain inconsistency or even disorder was inherent from the beginning.

The directive was followed by a more assertive move on 3 July 1941, when the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin made a public address on the radio, declaring, “We must organise a fight without mercy against all manner of disorganisers, deserters, panic-mongers and spreaders of rumours in the rear; eradicate spies, saboteurs and enemy paratroopers; and provide prompt assistance to our fighter battalions in all this.”<sup>21</sup> Technically speaking, this was a declaration of war against the civilian population in the territories from which the army was expected to retreat. The process of identifying the disorganisers and other culprits was entrusted to the whims of the immediate organisers.

Several thousand civilians suspected of the aforementioned acts were killed in Estonia during the Summer War of 1941 (although this was only a fraction compared to what happened in western Ukraine and western Belarus, which were annexed from Poland). Many people were killed without being suspects: they were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

There is a certain feeling of déjà vu when comparing this to the current war in Ukraine, where the territories left behind by retreating Russians have often revealed a horrifying sight. The most notable case, and the one that has come to symbolise all others, is the Bucha tragedy in the Kyiv region, where a large number of bodies of murdered civilians were found. Who exactly was behind all of this – was it the regular army, mercenaries from the private Wagner units, the Kadyrovites, the military formations of

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20 Директива СНК СССР и ВКП(б) партийным и советским организациям прифронтовых областей, 29 июня 1941 г. – 1941 год: в 2 книгах. Кн. 2, [апрель 1941 – декабрь 1941] / научный редактор В. П. Наумов. Москва: Международный фонд “Демократия”, 1998, 446–448.

21 Выступление И. В. Сталина по радио 3 июля 1941 г. – 1941 год: в 2 книгах. Кн. 2, [апрель 1941 – декабрь 1941] / научный редактор В. П. Наумов. Москва: Международный фонд “Демократия”, 1998, 448–452.

the People's Republics or someone else, and was it a spontaneous act of killing motioned by a vengeful commander or were the men following specific orders? Frankly, it is still too early to tell.

But the same goes for the Second World War events in Estonia – it is often impossible to retrospectively identify the culprits behind the various cases of brutality in 1941, because although the records specifically mention destruction battalions, in reality they were accompanied by border guard squads and other military units of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) who were responsible for security, the barrier troops formed among them, and the Red Army and Navy.

However, the call to eliminate "saboteurs" only took up a small section of the joint directive of 29 June 1941. The entire missive served as a call to engage in organised and unorganised depredation. And this was no incidental proposal, because following the directive and Stalin's radio address, the leaders of the regions close to the front gave similar orders. For example, the appeal of the Estonian Communist Party and the Council of People's Commissars of the Estonian SSR from 8 July reads as follows: "Ambush and destroy the enemy. Do not leave the enemy with a single farm animal, a single kilogram of bread, a single litre of fuel. Burn down warehouses and enemy cargo. Crush enemy telegraph and telephone communications. Wreck the railway in the enemy's rear ..." And so on and so forth.<sup>22</sup>

It has to be said, however, that there is nothing unusual about retreating forces destroying resources that they either cannot take with them or find too inconvenient or useless to take with them. Such destruction also serves to halt the enemy's advance. In this way, bridges, railways, communication lines, fuel depots, airfields and, if possible, roads are destroyed or damaged. Finally, if there is sufficient time left, the territory is mined. There is no reason to suspect that democratic countries and dictatorships are any different in this respect. It is true that international conventions apply in the case of mining. And while

mines may indeed halt the enemy's advance, civilians are still the main victims.

Therefore, the destruction of civilian infrastructure can occur at any point. This infrastructure includes power plants, electrical grids, pumping stations, sewage and water infrastructure, heating plants, various civilian warehouses, shops, public buildings and government institutions, as well as schools (their layout generally allows them to be quickly repurposed as barracks, hospitals, etc.). And there are also factories, mills and workshops, all of which are in some form used or accommodated to carry out military commissions; after all, the wartime economy is mainly occupied with supplying the front. The difference is that while these facilities were burned down and blown up during on-the-ground hostilities in 1941, nowadays all of this can also be done remotely (after retreating or even in advance) using missiles.

Again, the same logic applies – the destruction is intended to make it as difficult as possible for the enemy to occupy and control the territory by having them deal with suffering civilians as an added burden. Today, however (and also in 1941, although more indirectly), the destruction of civilian infrastructure is considered a war crime because it often results in a humanitarian disaster, including unleashing a wave of refugees, and it pressures the enemy to make concessions or surrender. In the current war, this seems to be one of Russia's goals.

If the above can still somehow be considered an inevitability of war, the targeted bombing of residential blocks, kindergartens, schools and hospitals can in no way be sincerely regarded as such. But there is nothing new about this either. For example, the carpet bombing of German and Japanese cities during the Second World War was based on the same logic.

Aside from the deliberate destruction of residential spaces, everything described above also happened in Estonia in 1941. Considering Russia's traditional ways of conducting warfare, it makes no sense to seek to interpret these events from the perspective

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<sup>22</sup> Appeal of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and Council of People's Commissars of the ESSR to the working people from 8 July 1941 – *Kommunist*, No 164, 10 July 1941.

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of a rational Protestant ethic or the spirit of capitalism. We should always consider eastern factors that add an element of impulse to what may appear to be organised activity. On the one hand, every structure, regardless of its purpose, is obliterated. On the other hand, crucial infrastructure such as bridges, railway buildings, not to mention stocks, ammunition, weapons and equipment, are left intact.

I will conclude with an episode from the Summer War of 1941. One of the first orders after the outbreak of war was to start evacuating prisons and camps, but once the front started moving and this was no longer possible, the prisoners were simply to be executed. As a result, bands of prisoners began to jam the already overburdened railway infrastructure. Not all prisoners could be transferred. For example, according to official reports, 8,789 prisoners were killed in western Ukraine, and major massacres were carried out in Lviv, Tarnopol, Dubno, Lutsk and other prisons. Given the confusion and disorder that ensued, we will probably never know the actual number of prisoners killed.

In Estonia in the summer of 1941, the evacuation of prisoners was probably the only order that was carried out by the book. This was by no means due to humanitarian considerations – Estonia was a secondary direction of the Wehrmacht's advance, and due to the lack of troops, the front halted for a few weeks in central Estonia in the first half of July, allowing time for the bulk of the prisoners to be transported out by rail and sea. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Red Army men and Soviet activists were left behind.

But there were also cases where troops were forced to retreat with no time to take the prisoners with them, and they were simply shot. For example, after the Germans captured the town of Petseri, 14 dead bodies were found in the detention cell, the monastery garden and elsewhere. In Pärnu, on 8 July 1941, the NKVD buildings were set on fire before the retreat. The 32 detainees held in the police detention cells managed to escape. Ten men and one 14-year-old boy were shot into a hole dug in the prison yard in the town of Viljandi; one of the wounded managed to climb out of the hole and escape. There were similar cases elsewhere. The biggest mass

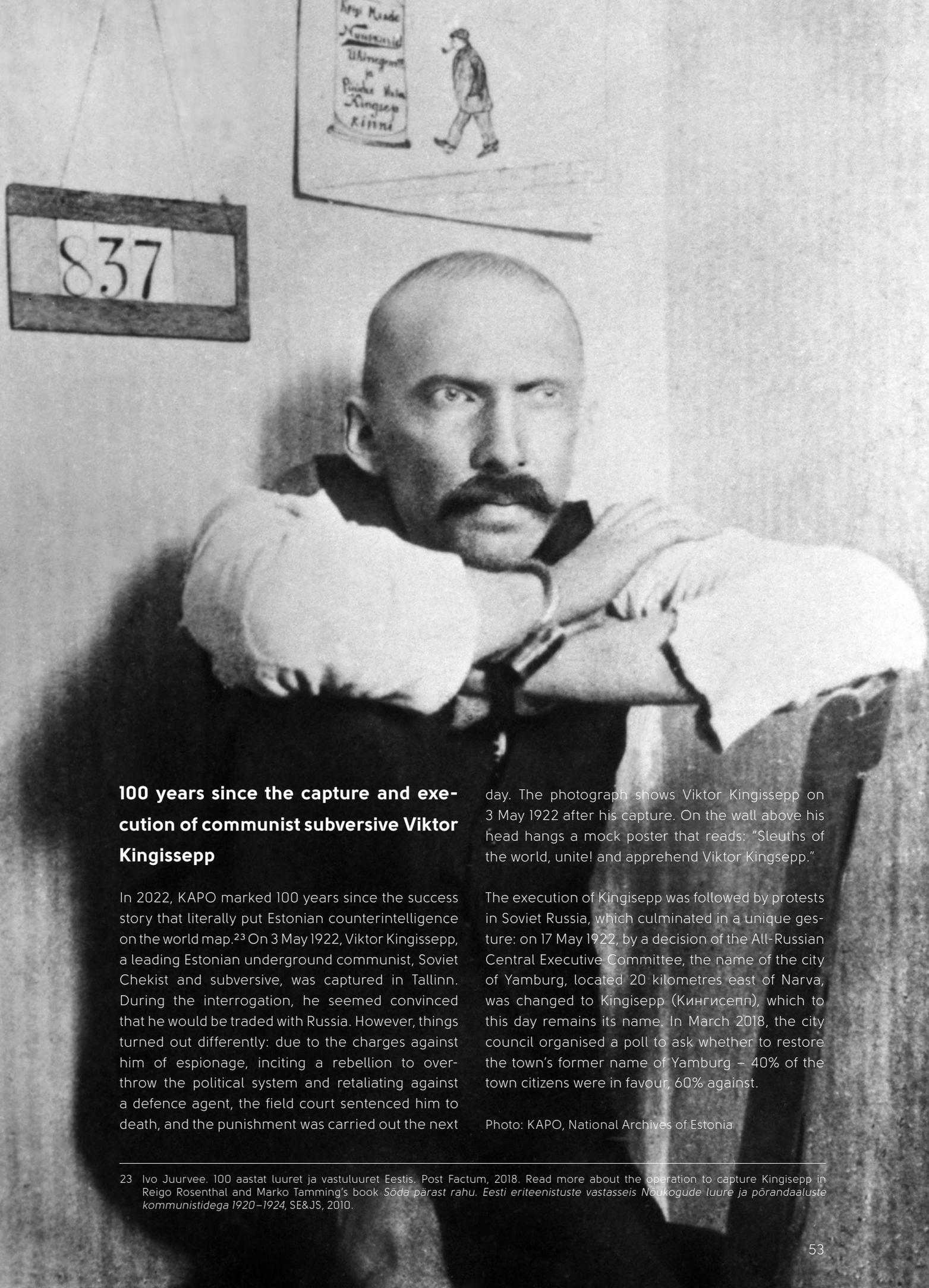
murder was carried out just before the retreat from Tartu, when 193 people were shot in the town prison on the night of 9 July. Larger mass graves were later found in Saaremaa: 90 bodies were buried in the Kuressaare castle yard, 20 in the village of Iide and 25 in Salme Parish.

Bringing it back to the present day, nothing much has changed. The same kind of logic could easily apply to the massacres of Bucha and elsewhere – it was either too late for the retreating troops to take the prisoners with them, or it seemed pointless, and they were simply shot.

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Fortunately and unfortunately for Estonia, the country is located on the border between East and West, which is why conquerors and looters from both sides have traversed its territory over the centuries. Among them, the Germans and the Russians most clearly stand out, the first arriving in the 13th century, the other somewhat later. Neither deserves to be remembered with any particular fondness, especially considering the wars of the 20th century. Even now, defence planning in our region is based largely on what Russia does, but sadly also on what Germany fails to do.

In trying to piece together Russia's plans for the war in Ukraine, one can only guess. They have certainly turned out differently from how they were envisaged. Perhaps time will give a better answer. In 2022, the mass of soldiers that make up the Russian army probably had no idea about the nature of the "special military operation" they were about to embark on – that is, what they were fighting for. Here lies perhaps the biggest difference with Hitler's Blitzkrieg, where the roles were reversed: the attacker was motivated and more or less knew what he was doing, while the morale of the defenders was weak, at least to begin with. History has shown that, at least for the civilian population, a retreating Russian army has been more dangerous than a victorious one – and time has changed nothing. But it is unlikely that the Ukrainians had any real illusions about how things would turn out, certainly not based on their past experiences.



## 100 years since the capture and execution of communist subversive Viktor Kingissepp

In 2022, KAPO marked 100 years since the success story that literally put Estonian counterintelligence on the world map.<sup>23</sup> On 3 May 1922, Viktor Kingissepp, a leading Estonian underground communist, Soviet Chekist and subversive, was captured in Tallinn. During the interrogation, he seemed convinced that he would be traded with Russia. However, things turned out differently: due to the charges against him of espionage, inciting a rebellion to overthrow the political system and retaliating against a defence agent, the field court sentenced him to death, and the punishment was carried out the next

day. The photograph shows Viktor Kingissepp on 3 May 1922 after his capture. On the wall above his head hangs a mock poster that reads: "Sleuths of the world, unite! and apprehend Viktor Kingsepp."

The execution of Kingissepp was followed by protests in Soviet Russia, which culminated in a unique gesture: on 17 May 1922, by a decision of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, the name of the city of Yamburg, located 20 kilometres east of Narva, was changed to Kingissepp (Кингисепп), which to this day remains its name. In March 2018, the city council organised a poll to ask whether to restore the town's former name of Yamburg – 40% of the town citizens were in favour, 60% against.

Photo: KAPO, National Archives of Estonia

23 Ivo Juurvee. 100 aastat luuret ja vastuluuret Eestis. Post Factum, 2018. Read more about the operation to capture Kingissepp in Reigo Rosenthal and Marko Tamming's book *Sõda pärast rahu. Eesti eriteenistuste vastasseis Nõukogude luure ja põrandaaluste kommunistidega 1920–1924*, SE&JS, 2010.

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