



Estonian Internal
Security Service

Annual Review 2023 - 2024



Contents

FOREWORD BY THE DIRECTOR GENERAL	3
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DEFENDING THE CONSTITUTIONAL ORDER	7
Pressures and incidents along the Estonian-Russian border	9
Hybrid operations as an intimidation tactic	13
Hoax calls to Western government officials	14
Metropolitan Eugene's activities in Estonia	16

COUNTERINTELLIGENCE	18
----------------------------	-----------

PROTECTION OF STATE SECRETS	24
Problems with high-risk behaviour	25

CYBERSECURITY	26
Supply chain attacks	28
Loyalty dilemma	32

PREVENTION OF TERRORISM	36
Terrorism and extremism in Estonia	38
Children entangled in extremism	43
Illegal handling of firearms and explosives	46

ECONOMIC SECURITY	50
--------------------------	-----------

WAR CRIMES	56
Recollections of an Estonian volunteer	58
HISTORY: 75 years since the post-war mass deportations in Estonia, Lithuania and Moldova	60



Dear reader,

The Government of the Republic of Estonia's Directive of 12 April 1920 establishing the Security Police¹ stated: "The straightforward task of the Security Police will be to combat those crimes aimed at overthrowing the established democratic republic and social order." Our responsibilities today remain the same as those entrusted to us at our inception – we defend freedom and people's right to make their own choices and to live in peace.

The Estonian Constitution states: "Everyone has the right to remain faithful to his or her opinions and beliefs. No one shall be compelled to change them. [...] No one can be held legally liable because of his or her beliefs." However, the same article also states: "Beliefs cannot excuse a violation of the law." Thus, a balance is struck between rights and freedoms on the one hand and responsibilities on the other. The freedoms of thought, opinion and judgment we protect as a security agency do not grant anyone the freedom to violate what society has agreed upon. For the Internal Security Service (KAPO), there is a clear line between the freedom of beliefs, thoughts and ideas on the one hand and someone's desire to turn those beliefs, thoughts and ideas against the state and its constitutional order, to abuse freedom, on the other hand.

Since KAPO's establishment, the primary threat to the constitutional order of the Republic of Estonia has

remained the same – Russia and its imperialist ambitions. Before Russia began its direct military attacks against neighbouring countries in the 21st century, it sought ways to weaken them: through subversion, hostile propaganda, sending hostile agents into the country and undermining the nation's confidence. Russia has used this familiar pretext for interfering in the affairs of other countries, such as Estonia, citing claims of historical privileges and the alleged need to protect local Russians from persecution. For years, Russia has attempted to exploit ethnic Russians living in Estonia to escalate or maintain tensions, but time has shown that these efforts are increasingly unsuccessful. The latest Estonian integration survey indicates overall positive developments. Although integration is a slow process, the proportion of those integrating is on the rise. Many permanent residents of different ethnicities or with different mother tongues share the same values as Estonian citizens.

On the other hand, we see that individuals with negative attitudes towards Estonia can sometimes have a disproportionately loud voice in public discussions, and a vocal minority can create the impression that there are more of them than there actually are. This can work against integration.

Similarly, the integration survey highlights economic well-being as a strong factor affecting how people relate to their country. In this Annual Review, we pay attention to Estonia's peripheral areas where incomes

¹ The Security Police served as KAPO's predecessor in the Republic of Estonia during the interwar period. KAPO's current official English name – the Estonian Internal Security Service – was adopted in 2012 to reflect its transition from a police institution to a security agency in line with Estonia's Security Authorities Act of 2001.

are lower and services are less accessible compared with the cities of Tallinn and Tartu. Dissatisfaction or economic difficulties make it easier to incite conflict and distrust towards the state. We must make a joint effort as a society to prevent security threats arising from these circumstances.

By working to prevent and combat non-military security threats, KAPO counteracts any foreign intelligence services' influence operations against Estonia. We make no compromises, especially with the current ongoing war in Ukraine. The threat posed by individuals working against Estonia's security interests is more evident during Russia's war against Ukraine. KAPO has made carefully considered proposals to expel such individuals from the country and to ban them from re-entering Estonia or the Schengen Area. Through cooperation with our domestic and international partners, we enhance Estonia's capability to resist activities aimed against the state, whether it is hostile influence operations via social media or attempts to provoke tensions and divisions in society.

These attempts are hybrid threats, representing non-military attacks against society's fundamental values and attitudes with the aim of sowing uncertainty, discontent and fear. This may include cyber-attacks against critical service providers, obstructing aid to Ukraine, disrupting the sense of security for schoolchildren and issuing arrest warrants for Estonian government members. Recent months show that Russian

intelligence services have stepped up their efforts to cause confusion in Estonia and our neighbouring countries. In December 2023, they incited the destruction of property belonging to the Estonian interior minister and the head editor of a major media portal's Russian-language unit.

Despite the inconvenience caused by the adversary, we do not succumb to panic or let fear overcome us. Estonia's institutions are robust enough to withstand this pressure. The constitutional order remains strong through the combined effort of each and every one of us.

Informing the public about potential threats to Estonia's constitutional order remains one of the most effective preventive measures, with one outlet being this Annual Review. As a counterintelligence agency, we engage in a covert struggle against Russian and other foreign intelligence services, winning it just the right amount of visibility as we capture individuals working in foreign interests and join forces with the Prosecutor's Office to bring them to justice. Holding these individuals accountable deters other potential recruits. Our objective is simple – Estonia is and must continue to be as challenging an operational terrain as possible for Russian and other hostile foreign intelligence services.

Among other concerns, the need to prevent and combat international terrorism persists. Estonia's rela-

tively low terrorism threat level means that we consider a terrorist attack unlikely. However, the spread of Islamic extremism in Estonia is increasingly becoming a concern due to growing immigration from high-risk countries. Any violent ideology driven by extremism often attracts young people facing mental or family problems. The result is lost lives.

In an increasingly digital world, we must understand that cybersecurity begins with each individual and society's conscious efforts to mitigate risks. In both the business world and cyberspace, the key advice is to know your service partners and the partners they work with. This is essential to ensure that Estonian innovation does not end up in the hands of the adversary and is not weaponised against us.

Alongside cyber threats, incidents in 2023 related to the Balticconnector gas pipeline and the submarine cables between Estonia and Finland and Estonia and Sweden have drawn attention to ensuring the resilience of our critical services and identifying the factors that threaten them. By cooperating with our partners, we can mitigate risks, but unfortunately, we cannot prevent every incident.

The coming years are likely to bring new challenges and instability. However, we must seize this opportunity to decisively curb Russia's actions so that it never attains its objectives against us, against NATO and against the European Union. Throughout our more than

two decades of membership in major international alliances dedicated to preserving peace and security, we have been able to share our experiences with our partners, both as a nation and as a security service. Recently, these shared experiences have proven even more valuable than during our initial efforts to secure our place in these alliances.

Together, we must do all that is necessary to prevent the atrocities we remember from 75 years ago – the post-war mass deportations in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Moldova – from ever happening again. In this year's Annual Review, we present interesting documents discovered in the National Archives of Moldova, revealing how some of the same document templates, methods and lead operatives were used in the deportations carried out in Estonia and Moldova.

Margo Palloson

Director General of the
Estonian Internal Security Service
12 April 2024

DEFENDING THE CONSTITUTIONAL ORDER

Identifying individuals opposed to the independence, sovereignty or territorial integrity of the Republic of Estonia and preventing and obstructing their activities is the responsibility of KAPO. We find ourselves in a situation where a war has been occurring in Europe for several years. Globally, tensions are escalating and economic downturns are affecting people's daily lives and requiring populations to reflect on coping strategies. Meanwhile, various fanatic interest groups polarise societies and work to destabilise them, instilling a fear of the erosion of established ways of life. Alongside the work of security agencies in safeguarding the constitutional order, society requires a concerted effort from everyone to ensure that anxiety and the fear of war do not sway our attitudes. In

such circumstances, failure to support each other and succumbing to attempts, both domestic and foreign, to sow fear can make individuals and entire populations susceptible to those who seek to exploit people's everyday concerns and difficulties for their own benefit. This susceptibility can lead people to unwittingly become instruments for hostile interest groups.

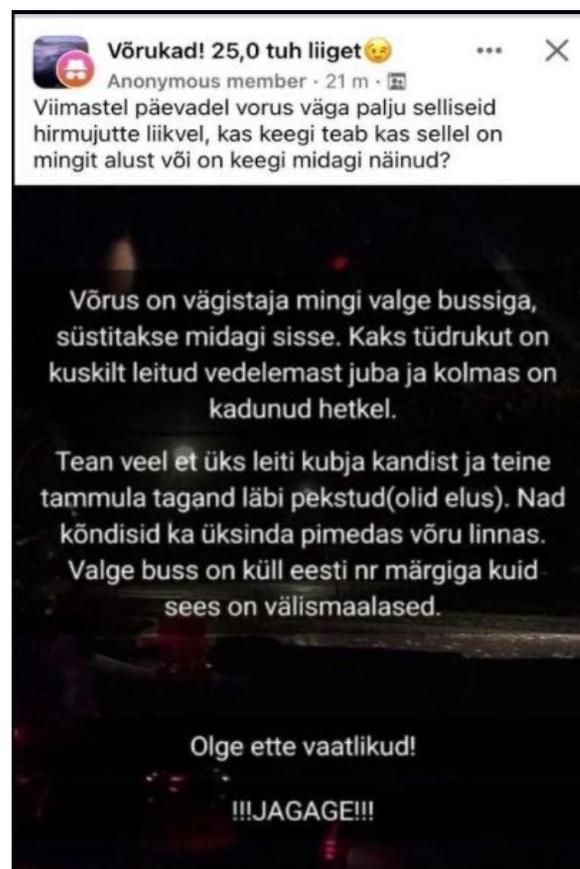
Last year, when the state requested that the financially struggling municipality of Rõuge in south-eastern Estonia repay part of an EU subsidy allocated for a sports facility, it sparked strong protests among local residents.
Source: Mana Kaasik, Tartu 2024 Foundation





With Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, it is essential to outline some threats and circumstances that Russia has sought to exploit and will likely continue to do so, especially in areas bordering Russia, such as Estonia's southeast and northeast. The living conditions in these border areas have provided a favourable environment for Russia's efforts. A 2023 study² conducted by the University of Tartu on the living conditions, internal security, border security and the community in southeast Estonia shows that the income of border area residents is 27 per cent below the Estonian average. Additionally, only a third of working-age individuals in these areas are employed. A significant number feel that the provision of essential services – education, healthcare, public transport and commerce – is unsatisfactory. This can cause frustration and disappointment among residents, making them more susceptible to manipulation by foreign states or other entities acting in their own interests or advocating specific economic, ideological, religious or other group interests.

In 2023, certain vocal segments of the population in the county of Võrumaa attracted public attention due to their sharp opposition to the presence of NATO allies and its expansion. Despite not representing the views or opinions of the majority of local residents, this vocal minority garnered significant attention on social media. Among other things, rumors have been spread about fear about allied soldiers raping girls in Võrumaa and claimed that the police took no action to address these cases. However, this was intentional disinformation. The disseminators of these falsehoods were primarily individuals who are sometimes



Following the opposition of a particular vocal group to the presence of NATO allies in Võrumaa, several alarming messages circulated on social media, including blatantly false rumours spread by conspiracy theorists about alleged rapes. Source: Facebook

described as serial conspiracy theorists. The same individuals were also active on social media platforms in the discussion of other topics, such as the coronavirus.

² Eiki Berg et al. Kagu-Eesti piiriala sotsiaal-majandusliku olukorra, siseturvalisuse, piirijulgeoleku ja kogukonna uuring. Report, March 2023. Centre for Applied Social Sciences, University of Tartu.

Facing a changed world

The global security situation has changed significantly in recent years, and traditional peacetime methods of combating various threats are no longer effective.

The war in Ukraine has forced the Estonian state to adopt a more decisive approach in regard to Russia's influence activities. A recent study, "Estonian Integration Monitoring 2023",³ confirms that the proportion of people influenced by the Kremlin's persistent propaganda efforts and their role in Estonian society is small and appears to be decreasing. Russia's war in Ukraine has prompted significant internal reflection for many, leading to a notable increase in the number of individuals in Estonia seeking to renounce their Russian citizenship.

Russia seeks to exploit the people it controls in neighbouring countries for geopolitical purposes and as a means of influencing the policies of these countries. They are primarily used as tools in foreign policy and influence operations aimed at providing Russia with a pretext to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, much like it did in Ukraine. An important priority or method used in Russian policy is to distort historical narratives, including cementing an image of Russia as the "liberator". Attempts are made to derive certain special rights from the Soviet Army's role in World War II and transfer these to the present context, seeking to capitalise on them.

Aleksei Mägi, a prominent figure in the Narva City Council, posted in August 2022 emotional videos about the location of the tank monument and called the government's decision to relocate the tank to the Estonian War Museum shameful. Mägi also expressed hope that the tank would return to Narva, where it would be welcomed with flowers.

Source: Aleksei Mägi, Youtube

By exploiting incidents and disagreements largely incited by the denial of Soviet occupation, the Kremlin is building up information operations in an effort to discredit sovereign states. Thus, Russia attempts to present examples in the media of systemic discrimination against Russians and manifestations of Nazism. Russia also seeks to play up revanchist sentiments that are allegedly spreading in Europe, claiming that Europe, with its mentally stunted, perverted, nazified and morally bankrupt elites, is intent on destroying Russia, which purportedly upholds traditional values and maintains a healthy society. The West's alleged motive in all this supposedly revolves around seeking revenge for losses suffered in World War II.

Russia has attempted to level the same accusations – rehabilitating Nazism and revising the outcomes of World War II – against Estonia. In recent years, these accusations, which have appeared in official statements and media reports, have centred on the dismantling of nearly 20 monuments or memorials dedicated to the Red Army in Ida-Virumaa in some cases replacing them with more neutral memorials, including the removal of a tank monument outside Narva and transferring it to the Estonian War Museum. Other instances include renaming several streets in Narva, which previously bore the names of individuals who acted against the Republic of Estonia. While these steps had been planned for many years, the changes caused some protests among local residents initially, but over time, the situation has generally been accepted.



Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and later with the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine, Estonian authorities have restricted public and mass celebrations of several symbolic dates for Russia that mark the beginning of Soviet occupation in Estonia. As a result, Russian authorities have sought new strategies for influence operations. One highly visible public action was a propaganda concert steeped in military history held in May 2023 on the Ivangorod side of the Narva River, opposite Narva. The event was aimed at residents of the city of Narva, with an estimated two thousand people on the Estonian side watching the concert. This does not imply that the entire audience shared Russia's current views and values. Some were there out of curiosity, while other Narva residents used the occasion to commemorate their relatives who perished in events of World War II – an annual tradition on 9 May. However, the concert-cum-political-rally organised on the Russian side attempted to add an inappropriate and cynical, aggressively political layer of meaning to the commemoration of war victims, exploiting the emotions of Narva residents. Against the backdrop of commemorating victims, attempts were once again made to incite opposition-based historical narratives and revive old enmity arising from historical controversy.

Recent experiences show that although there may be a small number of people in Narva who still struggle to understand that the city marks the beginning of the European Union, the real concerns of Narva residents do not revolve around tank monuments or street names. Their primary concerns relate to factors affecting their daily lives, such as the price of heating, the state of the job market and the overall economic situation.

Pressures and incidents along the Estonian-Russian border

Visitors entering Russia from Estonia are received by the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) at the border. Since February 2022, the FSB has regarded any Ukrainian citizens attempting to travel to Russia or Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories, or back to the European Union or Ukraine, as potential enemies. In addition to the harassment of Ukrainians within Russia, the persecution of Ukrainian citizens intensified at the Kunichina Gora and Shumilkino checkpoints along the Estonian border.

Ukrainian border crossers were subjected to profiling interviews to scrutinise their personal backgrounds and connections, the forced completion of questionnaires, examination of communication devices and data seizure. Incidents of physical violence also occurred to extract specific and desired responses. In some cases, the inspection of individuals, their belongings and vehicles could drag out the border crossing process for hours or even days.

People were forced to undress for inspection and were then photographed. According to border crossers, the FSB also made video recordings and captured statements that could later be used to compromise the border crossers. Ukrainians crossing the border were briefly placed in detention on fabricated charges, consent was sought for polygraph tests, and sometimes these tests were conducted. This, in turn, prolonged the crossing process for other individuals.

In the final months of 2023, the FSB began increasingly harassing individuals from Estonia and other European Union countries at border points adjacent to southeast Estonia, with reports of the use of violence. While there is no information regarding physical violence against individuals from Estonia, visitors from Estonia have reported experiencing other tactics similar to those described by Ukrainians when crossing the Russian border.

³ Eesti ühiskonna lõimumismonitooring, 2023

Blatant involvement of intelligence services

In 2023, Poland suspected that Russia was orchestrating a new hybrid migration pressure operation through Belarus. Migration pressure is a familiar concern for Poland, as just three years ago, Belarus amassed thousands of illegal migrants on the Polish border. Closer to Estonia, Russia created migration pressure on the Finnish border last year. Without concealing its involvement or fearing reputational damage, Russia openly sent migrants to the Estonian and Finnish borders. Russian border guards often instructed, directed and escorted groups of migrants.

These migration attacks are designed to strain the receiving country's border guard service and other state institutions, as well as to stir anxiety in society,

incite extreme movements to react to news reports, and ultimately divide society. A significant part of a migration attack is carried out through the media as part of an information operation. For this purpose, both bloggers and Russian border guards are directed to produce material.

In December 2023, dozens of migrants arrived at the Narva border crossing without the necessary documents to enter the Schengen Area. The Estonian Police and Border Guard Board's surveillance cameras on one side distinctly captured a group of migrants being directed to cross the Narva River bridge in single file, while on the other side, Russian border guards set up cameras and tripods to record the scene. A few weeks later, the footage captured by the Russian border guards was broadcast on Russian media channels. Unlike in the past, Russian border guards no longer hide their activities; they appear in uniform while producing propaganda materials.



Estonian Border Guard camera footage shows uniformed Russian border guards preparing to film a group of migrants being sent from the Russian side across the Narva River bridge towards Estonia, consisting of about a dozen individuals. The footage was later shown on Russian media channels. Source: Police and Border Guard Board

The offence of violating international sanctions is regulated in the Penal Code under the section on offences against peace. A criminal case investigated by KAPO for the violation of international sanctions against the Estonian leadership of Sputnik, a unit of the Russian media corporation Rossiya Segodnya, has led to charges being brought by the prosecution. In February 2024, KAPO apprehended another individual suspected of clandestinely working for the Sputnik and Baltnews web portals, which are part of Rossiya Segodnya. Such activity constitutes a crime because the detainee worked for a sanctioned entity and provided them with economic benefit. In March 2024, the court ordered the detainee to be placed in custody. The head of Rossiya Segodnya is subject to European Union sanctions aimed at limiting support for Russia's war. Investigation into sanctions violations is part of KAPO's efforts to prevent and counter security threats arising from Russian influence operations.

As the reach of Russian state television channels in Europe is restricted and Russian-controlled information channels have lost credibility, Russian special services have redirected a significant portion of their influence operations towards social media platforms. This involves activating channels with established followings and user bases. For example, during the migration attack targeting Finland, social media groups of Russian-speaking individuals living in Finland witnessed invitations to engage in video production. These calls offered people the chance to voice their concerns regarding the closure of the Finland-Russia border. A week later, a video clip was produced and released on YouTube, using a channel owned by a Russian travel blogger with several million followers. To make it less conspicuous among their previous content, it was presented as a novel form of current affairs coverage. Attempts to repurpose previously established communication groups and channels into vehicles for propagating misinformation also extend to other popular social media platforms.





Although banned Russian television channels are no longer available in the selection of Estonian telecom providers, KAPO is aware of several individuals who knowingly continue to provide access to these channels through various technical solutions. We advise against such activity, as it could be considered a violation of sanctions, and providing unauthorised television broadcasting may result in criminal proceedings.



A screenshot from a website offering access to Russian media channels banned in Estonia.

Limiting access to media that spreads Moscow's message

Helen Rohtla, Head of the Information Society Division at the Estonian Consumer Protection and Technical Regulatory Authority

- The media regulator in Estonia is the Consumer Protection and Technical Regulatory Authority (CPTA).
- The CPTA's task is to prevent incitement to hatred, violence and discrimination in the media and digital services, and the promotion of war or justification of war crimes, which may endanger Estonia's security.
- The CPTA has banned channels that incite the continuation of war and justify war crimes.
- In total, due to international sanctions, telecom operators in Estonia had restricted access to 53 television channels and 307 websites by the end of 2023. Additionally, social media platforms have also restricted users' access to sanctioned media services.
- In February 2023, the European Union's Digital Services Act regulation came into effect, requiring major digital platforms such as Facebook, TikTok and X to cooperate with member state authorities, comply with removal orders, prioritise reports from trusted flaggers (such as fact-checkers) and take measures to prevent the spread of illegal content.

Hybrid operations as an intimidation tactic

Russia will likely continue its efforts to incite societal tensions in neighbouring countries in the coming years and can be expected to use any measures that stop short of triggering NATO's collective defence clause. Over the past year, Estonian society has proven resilient against such operations, and Russia has not achieved its desired results.

From late 2023 to mid-February 2024, KAPO detained about a dozen individuals who were tasked with committing various crimes at the behest of Russian special services. The suspects performed coordinated tasks for the Russian Federation's intelligence or security services and fulfilled various roles. They gathered information to prepare for certain attacks and also carried out some of the planned actions. Among other things, KAPO has reason to suspect that the Russian special services gave the order to vandalise the vehicles of Estonian Minister of the Interior Lauri Läänemets and the editor-in-chief of the Russian-language section of the news portal Delfi, Andrei Shumakov, as well as to deface the Sinimäed Memorial erected in memory of the battles of World War II and damage a memorial in the county of Viljandimaa. The individuals responsible for these acts of vandalism were approached indirectly, for example, through social media. The recruits attempted to sow confusion and instil fear in Estonian society, disguising their actions as ordinary criminal activity, but they failed to achieve much success. Although people's health and safety were not directly threatened, such activities illustrate a more violent and robust modus operandi than has been typical of Russia in the past.

In the autumn of 2023, hundreds of schools in Estonia and the other Baltic states received spam emails

claiming that explosive devices had been placed in the school buildings. Similar bomb threats were also sent to several other institutions in Estonia, aiming to disrupt their operations.

Such threats serve several purposes. They attempt to prompt the Rescue Board and law enforcement agencies to respond to extensive false alarms. They also aim to create psychological and emotional tension by targeting the most vulnerable – threatening the safety of children.

Similar mass emails containing bomb threats have been reported in other European countries as well. According to our analysis of the events, some individuals – even schoolchildren – have taken advantage and participated in these outside-initiated email campaigns, hoping to get a day off from work or school.

Although the threats were serious, the Estonian population remained calm. The Emergency Response Centre, Rescue Board, and Police and Border Guard Board acted professionally and patiently explained the nature of the spam emails to concerned individuals.

In addition to the desire to cause panic, such attackers aim to garner media attention, which they perceive as the ultimate recognition of their actions and an opportunity to find sympathisers. While the threats initially attracted media attention, the media soon grew weary.

When faced with such information operations, it is best to contact the Emergency Response Centre with any concerns and follow the guidance of government agencies. Distressing information found on social media can easily become disinformation. During these incidents, Estonians took the initiative to share clarification from the Police and Border Guard Board and the Rescue Board on social networks to help counter the spread of false information.



The prank call by Russian trolls did not yield the desired results. Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas presented views that she has also expressed publicly. In response, the trolls claimed that Kallas's body language suggested she was being untruthful.

Hoax calls to Western government officials

In the late summer of 2023, several government leaders, ministers and other prominent individuals in Western countries were contacted by people claiming that Moussa Faki, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, wished to meet via video conference. Given the administrative communication styles commonly used in Africa, which often involve the use of private email accounts and messaging apps, it was more difficult to spot the deception. During the prank calls, representatives from various countries discussed global foreign policy, the situation in Niger and the Sahel region, and concerns regarding food security. They also discussed European security, including the war in Ukraine. The man who met with them via video conference spoke in English and referred to multilateral meetings with many participants.

During the video meeting with Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, the caller presented a series of well-known Russian narratives, which the prime minister had to refute. However, this did not appear particularly unusual, as Russia has been able to consistently disseminate its message in Africa.

In reality, the video calls were made by well-known Russian pranksters – Vladimir Kuznetsov and Aleksei Stolyarov, better known as Vovan and Lexus. Vovan and Lexus have made numerous prank calls to celebrities and top-ranking politicians around the world over the years. The content was mainly intended for Russian media consumers, but particularly successful pieces can also be used to entertain Western audiences and discredit politicians, given that ridicule is one of the most effective propaganda tactics.

The prank calls sought to trap politicians into revealing something they would not publicly disclose. In Estonia's case, they could not get the material they hoped for, as the Estonian prime minister reiterated her usual positions. The focus of the broadcast then shifted to the claim that the prime minister's body language suggested she was being untruthful. Vovan (Vladimir Kuznetsov) and Lexus (Aleksei Stolyarov) also released a recording of a conversation with Finnish Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen. They once again pretended to be calling on behalf of an African politician. Vovan and Lexus also announced they had spoken with Swedish Defence Minister Pål Jonson and Foreign Minister Tobias Billström, purportedly on behalf of a representative from the African continent. The Estonian Government Office responded quickly to the prank call, alerting other European politicians and thereby helping to prevent at least one similar incident.



Well-known Russian trolls Vladimir Kuznetsov and Aleksei Stolyarov, better known as Vovan and Lexus, who made hoax calls pretending to be an African official. Source: Shutterstock

Recommendations for officials and politicians:



Use various channels to verify the identity of individuals who are contacting you.

If there is any doubt about the authenticity of an email, consult an IT specialist to confirm that the email genuinely originated from the sender indicated in the address line. It can also be helpful to check the hash value of the email header.

Avoid clicking on direct links provided in emails. Instead, use an internet search to find the corresponding webpage. Email links may redirect to spoofed pages that appear genuine but are actually fraudulent. Pay attention to subtle changes in the address bar or incorrect word order.

Metropolitan Eugene

- Valery Reshetnikov (born on 9 October 1957, ecclesiastically known as Eugene) began visiting Estonia regularly with a visa in 2016. He settled more permanently in Estonia in 2018, after the death of Metropolitan Cornelius (Vyacheslav Yakobs) of the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.
- Before succeeding Cornelius as the metropolitan, Reshetnikov served as rector of the Moscow Theological Academy (from 1995), vicar of the Moscow Patriarch, archbishop of Vereya (from 2000) and a member of the Presidential Council for Cooperation with Religious Associations.
- He graduated from the Moscow Theological Academy and Seminary.



- From 2005 to 2007, he was a member of the committee responsible for the reunification of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (Русская Православная Церковь Заграницей) with the Moscow Patriarchate. He has also been the head of several committees of the Moscow Patriarchate and religious educational institutions.
- Reshetnikov regularly participated in the annual 9 May commemorations at the Bronze Soldier monument at the Defence Forces Cemetery in Tallinn, where he delivered speeches supporting the Kremlin's interpretation of history based on propaganda narratives.
- Leading up to the Estonian parliamentary election in 2023, Reshetnikov collaborated with a political association with several members who promoted the interests of the Kremlin regime. In his capacity as a representative of the Moscow Patriarchate, he intervened in Estonian domestic politics.

Metropolitan Eugene's activities in Estonia

In 2018, at the age of 93, Metropolitan Cornelius,⁵ the longtime leader of the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, passed away. He had held the position of church leader in Estonia for nearly 30 years. His funeral was attended by Valery Reshetnikov, an archbishop who served as the rector of Moscow Theological Academy and the vicar of Patriarch Kirill,⁶ alongside senior clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church. After Metropolitan Cornelius's funeral in Tallinn, the local bishops travelled to attend a meeting at the Moscow Patriarchate.

While the majority of the local clergy of the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate expected the new leader to be the Narva bishop, who had been active in Estonia since 2009, was familiar with local circumstances and had temporarily taken on leadership responsibilities after Cornelius's passing, the Russian side stipulated that the candidate proposed by Moscow, the academy rector Reshetnikov (ecclesiastically known as Eugene), must be elected by the church council.

Considerable effort was devoted to executing this directive, particularly in persuading the clergy to support Reshetnikov's candidacy. The primary responsibility of the Narva bishop during the election process was to act as a rival candidate. While there appeared to be two candidates in the election, the covert aspect of the deal, which involved the transfer of congregational assets after the election, did not materialise.

Throughout its history, the Moscow Patriarchate has been uneasy with the fact that Constantinople, rather than Moscow, is regarded as the centre of Orthodoxy. Reshetnikov's tenure as the new head of the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate marked the beginning of aligning with Moscow's interests, reigniting tensions between churches. For example, in autumn 2018, under the metropolitan's guidance, the local church synod issued a statement criticising the Patriarch of Constantinople for recognising the independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

The Orthodox landscape in Ukraine now mirrored the situation in Estonia, with both Moscow Patriarchate and Constantinople Patriarchate churches operating in the country. This diluted the influence of the Moscow Patriarchate, which is closely tied to the Kremlin regime.

Various sources indicate that Reshetnikov did not demonstrate the same autonomy in his decision-making and activities as his predecessor, Metropolitan Cornelius. While Cornelius's extensive experience, authority among believers, and familiarity with and consideration of local circumstances in Estonia enabled him to express views different from those of the Moscow Patriarchate, the church functionary Reshetnikov represented Moscow's interests and views.

Cooperation between Christian churches was also hindered by Reshetnikov's decision not to meet with the pope during his visit to Estonia in 2018. Moreover, a school with an Orthodox background in Tallinn was also advised to refrain from meeting with the pope as well.

Upon assuming office in Estonia, Reshetnikov immediately raised the issue of church property.⁷ In 2001, the Tallinn City Centre Administration granted the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate free use of the Nevsky Cathedral at Toompea for 36 years. A few years later, the City of Tallinn granted a 99-year lease for a church in the Lasnamäe district. With the entry of Reshetnikov, however, the Estonian

Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate wanted the church buildings it used to be transferred to its ownership. Alongside the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, which is steered by the Moscow Patriarchate, the Russian Embassy in Tallinn also advocates for the transfer of church property. Additionally, Reshetnikov has repeatedly expressed refusal to recognise the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church as the lawful successor of the Orthodox Church that operated in Estonia before the Soviet occupation.

From Russia's perspective, it is crucial to maintain the entities associated with the Russian Orthodox Church abroad, along with their influence and assets, because the church is one of the few remaining levers for Russian influence operations that are not yet directly affected by international sanctions.

■ ■ ■

Considering Reshetnikov's position as the highest representative of the Moscow Patriarchate in Estonia and his close ties with the Russian Orthodox Church, which aligns with the Russian regime responsible for the conflict in Ukraine, the Estonian government decided not to renew his residence permit. Despite Russia's direct military aggression against Ukraine, Reshetnikov remained loyal to Patriarch Kirill and, consequently, to the views of the Russian Orthodox Church, which justify the war in Ukraine. Reshetnikov showed no inclination to integrate into Estonian society, spending approximately a third of his time in Russia over the years despite holding a valid residence permit in Estonia. The decision not to renew Reshetnikov's temporary residence permit was based on a threat assessment of his individual behaviour and does not extend to the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate or its believers in general. Valery Reshetnikov left Estonia on 6 February 2024.

⁵ His secular name was Vyacheslav Yakobs; he was an Estonian citizen by birth.

⁶ Secular name Vladimir Gundyayev.

⁷ In 1996, the Zurich Agreements were concluded, establishing cooperation between the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church and the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. Under these agreements, the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church was recognised as an autonomous church, while the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate was acknowledged as a diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church. Property was returned to the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church as the legal successor of the church that existed before the Soviet Union's occupation of Estonia. The Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate rents a significant portion of the churches it uses.

COUNTERINTELLIGENCE

The intelligence and security services of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China continue to pose the primary intelligence threat to Estonia. The response to security threats from Russia has been extensive across Europe. Measures such as virtually halting visa issuance to Russian citizens or closing borders with Russia have prompted Russian intelligence and security services to alter their modus operandi. This change has been particularly noticeable with regard to operations directed at Ukraine but has also been seen in other European countries.

Russian intelligence and security services have become significantly more aggressive. While they operate more crudely in some respects, they also employ more covert methods. Highly adaptable, they view war-time conditions as prime learning opportunities. Before the conflict, Russia's intelligence services had faced failures in Europe and lacked a reputation of competence, but the confrontation with Ukraine has given them a new direction and purpose – they pose a serious threat.

While the GU,⁸ FSB⁹ and SVR¹⁰ may vie for power at the political level, they work in unison at the operational level. This makes Russian intelligence activities an even greater challenge for Western countries and their citizens. Overall, Russian intelligence and security agencies' interest in Estonia and other European countries has intensified.

Historically, Russian intelligence and security services have preferred to use diplomatic cover, placing intelligence officers to work as diplomats in Russian diplomatic missions worldwide. Despite approximately 700 Russian diplomats/spies being expelled from Europe and other countries worldwide since the beginning of

the war in Ukraine, Russia has managed to replace a significant portion of them with new intelligence officers.

Considerable diplomatic pressure is exerted on foreign ministries abroad to allow intelligence officers into the country without declaring them as such, and in many cases, this has been successful. Without a concerted effort by Western foreign ministries and security agencies to counter this activity, Russia's intelligence services could restore their embassy personnel to pre-war levels within a couple of years.

In addition to expelling intelligence officers and refusing accreditation, most European countries and countries elsewhere have reduced the staff of Russian embassies. In several countries, like Estonia, parity has been achieved with an equal number of diplomatic representatives on both sides. This restricts the opportunities for intelligence services to operate under diplomatic cover and hinders the propaganda and influence activities originating from Russian embassies, which, alongside intelligence activities, pose the most significant security threat to countries.

The Russian Embassy in Tallinn is no exception. Since its establishment, it has been used for intelligence activities, influence and propaganda efforts. To prevent this, 18 diplomats from the Russian Embassy have been declared persona non grata since its re-establishment in 1991.

In the context of the war in Ukraine, the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was justified in its January 2023 decision to close the Russian Embassy's consulate general in Narva and the consulate in Tartu, expelling the staff of these missions. However, repatriating spies and reducing embassy staff has not completely

⁸ GU – the Russian foreign military intelligence service, formerly known as the GRU (Главное разведывательное управление).

⁹ FSB – the Russian counterintelligence service, Federal Security Service (Федеральная служба безопасности).

¹⁰ SVR – the Russian foreign intelligence service (Служба внешней разведки).

thwarted the propaganda and influence activities emanating from the embassy. The Russian Embassy continues its efforts to fill embassy staff vacancies with intelligence officers.

As intelligence activities emanating from the Russian Embassy have been significantly curtailed over the past year and Estonia has almost entirely ceased issuing visas to citizens of the Russian Federation, Russian intelligence and security services have actively resorted to other methods more readily available to them – intelligence and recruitment activities within Russian territory and through social media.

Typical examples include criminal proceedings in Poland and Latvia in 2023, where individuals

involved in intelligence activities targeting these countries had been recruited through social media, using the Telegram app, which is popular among Russians. Often, recruitment efforts target young and impressionable individuals who are driven by the minimal economic incentives offered rather than ideology. Various cryptocurrency platforms are used for compensation. These activities are known to extend far beyond the cases mentioned here and also encompass other countries. Agents recruited through social media serve as cheap labour for Russian intelligence services, and online activity allows intelligence to conceal its involvement. Russian intelligence services have also continued their typically intensive activities in the field of cyber intelligence.



5 May 2023 – a scene from the reception held at the Russian Embassy in Tallinn. According to the website, the reception was organised to celebrate the “victory of the Soviet people in the Great Patriotic War” and “preserve the truth of the heroic Soviet soldiers who embarked on a noble liberation mission to deliver Europe from Nazism”.

Source: Embassy of the Russian Federation in Estonia, Facebook

The intensity of recruitment and intelligence activities originating from Russia has escalated since the onset of the war with Ukraine. In the context of sanctions and restrictions imposed by countries, online activities are among the easiest for Russian intelligence and security services since they do not entail significant additional costs or risks to officers. Targets for recruitment include foreign visitors to Russia. Often, these individuals have a permanent connection to Russia, either being native to the country or having relatives there. It is also not uncommon for individuals to hold a Russian passport as well as that of a foreign country.¹¹

The risk of Russian citizens with dual citizenship being recruited or exploited by Russian intelligence has significantly increased in recent years. Russian intelligence services exclusively regard these individuals as citizens of the Russian Federation and, consequently, expect them to cooperate in full.

In January 2024, KAPO apprehended Viacheslav Morozov, a professor at the University of Tartu, suspected of engaging in and supporting intelligence activities against Estonia. According to preliminary information, Morozov cooperated with Russian special services for years.

Russian special services are interested not only in state secrets but in any information they can gather. Human intelligence remains one of the most important intelligence methods and is likely to remain so in the future. Ukrainian citizens are actively targeted for recruitment. Ukrainians travelling to Europe are easy targets, as coercing them into cooperation is particularly straightforward for Russian intelligence. Russian citizens are also continuously exploited to perform various tasks for Russian intelligence services.

¹¹ See also the chapter on cybersecurity.



Participation at receptions organised for veterans and compatriots at the Russian Embassy in Tallinn remains limited. The image captures a gathering and exhibition held on 19 January 2024, marking the 80th anniversary of the end of the Siege of Leningrad. Source: Embassy of the Russian Federation in Estonia, Facebook



The Chinese Embassy in Tallinn serves as one of China's primary instruments for exerting soft power in Estonia, disseminating official narratives across various policy domains and enhancing China's image.

Chinese interests

Alongside Russian intelligence, the activities of Chinese intelligence services, including those directed towards Estonia, once again deserve attention. Compared with Russia, Chinese intelligence efforts are both more broad-based and more intensive. Chinese businesses and communities in countries across the world are used to advance China's intelligence objectives. Both government-forced technology transfer and civil-military cooperation programmes involve communities, researchers, technology firms or Chinese trade chambers established abroad. Chinese intelligence objectives are supported by various laws that compel both Chinese citizens and businesses to cooperate extensively with state structures.

In 2023, China amended its counterintelligence law, expanding the definition of espionage, increasing the powers of security agencies and strengthening state control over domestic businesses. The law now allows for collecting information from both local and foreign companies in China, as well as implementing various pressure measures and, if necessary, obstructing business activities.

From the perspective of NATO and the European Union, China's increasing economic and military support for

Russia in its war with Ukraine is a concern. Although the Chinese Embassy in Tallinn has not publicly commented on the war in Ukraine, it maintains relations with the Russian Embassy and has maintained active communication during the war.

The Chinese Embassy in Tallinn serves as one of China's primary instruments for exerting soft power, disseminating official narratives across various policy domains and enhancing China's image. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, 2023 marked the first year in which the embassy operated without restrictions. It has restored previous contacts and actively forged new ones.

The embassy strongly opposes dissenting views, such as the proposal to establish a Taiwanese representation in Estonia, and actively works to counteract such suggestions. We have previously reported on an initiative orchestrated from the Chinese Embassy in Tallinn, known as China Watch, which targeted Estonia's public sector, academic circles and local governments. Although this initiative was not particularly successful and has since been discontinued, it inevitably influenced some individuals in Estonia.

China is highly sensitive to any official contacts other countries may have with Taiwan. In response, it employs intelligence and influence tactics at both political and community levels worldwide.

Chinese agent sentenced to prison

A case involving the recruitment of an Estonian citizen, Gerli Mutso, by Chinese military intelligence concluded in 2023 with a verdict from the Estonian Supreme Court. Gerli Mutso and marine scientist Tarmo Kõuts were arrested in September 2020 on suspicion of establishing relations against the Republic of Estonia, engaging in intelligence activities against the Republic of Estonia and supporting such activities. In a plea bargain, Tarmo Kõuts was found guilty of establishing relations against the Republic of Estonia and engaging in intelligence activities and received a combined sentence of three years of imprisonment. Tarmo Kõuts was released from prison in March 2022. After going through all three levels of the judiciary, Gerli Mutso was found guilty of engaging in intelligence activities against the Republic of Estonia and supporting such activities. She was sentenced to eight years and six months in prison.

The court case vividly demonstrates that even small countries are of interest to Chinese intelligence, as they have the same access to international organisations as larger countries. In this particular case, Chinese intelligence services sought access to NATO secrets and research data and used an Estonian citizen as an agent. They also showed interest in NATO cyber defence, the Arctic, maritime affairs and Russia. No secret documents were leaked. In conclusion, Chinese intelligence targets may include individuals with no prior ties to China but possess expert knowledge. It is important to note that personal and private offers originating from China that seem “too good to be true” may not be genuine, and such instances should be reported to KAPO. This does not imply rejecting sensible proposals for cooperation, such as in the field of research, but rather maintaining a realistic awareness of the risks involved.



All three levels of the judiciary found Gerli Mutso guilty of engaging in intelligence activities against the Republic of Estonia and supporting such activities. She received a sentence of eight years and six months in prison. This image, captured on 3 June 2022, depicts Mutso’s conviction during the first-instance trial at the Harju County Court. Source: Vallo Kruuser, Eesti Ekspress

Countries with a notification requirement

In 2023, Estonia expanded its list of countries that require individuals with access to state secrets to notify their employer when travelling to these destinations. This is also sound advice for all travellers.

The notification requirement was extended from three countries to 12. In addition to the Russian Federation, Belarus and North Korea, individuals with access to state secrets must now also notify their employer when travelling to the Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Azerbaijan, the People's Republic of China (including the special administrative regions of Hong Kong and Macau), the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and the Republic of Uzbekistan.

When travelling to these countries, it should be noted that citizens of European Union and NATO member states may be subject to increased scrutiny by local intelligence services. This may include the purpose of their travel, their activities in the country and their contacts with local officials. It should also be assumed that any technical devices they bring with them may be compromised (suspected unauthorised access or electronic or physical intrusion), the individuals may be subjected to electronic or physical surveillance, and their communications may be intercepted.

Also significant are any risks associated with the individual's own behaviour. Individuals engaging in risky behaviour may be manipulated and exploited to act in the interests of the target country; they may also face threats. Guidelines for travelling to countries with a notification requirement can be found on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and KAPO websites. Security clearance holders receive feedback and recommendations from an official responsible for organising the protection of state secrets or security within their institution. Any unpleasant or suspicious incidents in a foreign country should be reported to KAPO for advice and assistance.

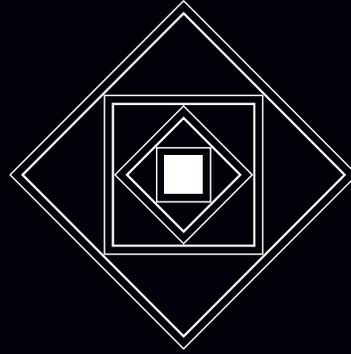
PROTECTION OF STATE SECRETS

State secrets are information that if disclosed would threaten Estonia's national security or harm the country's foreign relations. In severe cases, the disclosure of a state secret can damage the overall functioning of the state, military preparation and planning, and harm human resources. Protecting state secrets is integral to preventing intelligence activities against the Republic of Estonia, and as such, it is one of KAPO's core functions.

Access to state secrets is typically granted only after passing a security vetting process to assess the individual's reliability and personal risks. Subjecting an individual to security vetting requires sufficient justification, as it involves the infringement of fundamental rights and entails increased responsibility.

Statistics on refusal to grant access to state secrets or granting it for a shorter period than requested

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Refused	4	5	11	8	6	7
Granted for a shorter period	2	2	4	4	3	7
Revoked	4	-	-	2	-	-
Not compliant	1	-	-	1	-	-
Procedure terminated by Director General	-	-	-	4	-	-



Problems with high-risk behaviour

In 2023, all instances where security clearances were granted for a shorter period than requested were associated with situations where individuals were financially dependent on particular habits. Mostly, this involved individuals struggling to repay loans. In some cases, an additional factor was the accumulation of debts from gambling, which individuals sought to alleviate by taking out payday loans.

KAPO continues to advise against taking out high-interest payday and consumer loans, as they generally exacerbate rather than alleviate an individual's financial situation. It is always essential to thoroughly consider whether taking such a loan is absolutely necessary and whether repaying the loan is feasible when considering your income and lifestyle. Given the economic downturn in recent years, careful consideration of personal obligations is even more relevant when looking to the future.

It is crucial to understand that the use of narcotic or psychotropic substances and access to state secrets and the processing of classified information

are mutually exclusive. In 2023, an analysis revealed that five out of 15 applicants for a state secret clearance who were referred from KAPO to the Estonian Forensic Science Institute for examination following a security vetting interview had used various narcotic substances.

Applicants for security clearance must demonstrate due diligence in complying with laws and be aware that suspicions of narcotic substance use are also scrutinised during security vetting. If the applicant shows signs of narcotic use or the use of other prohibited substances during their interview, such suspicions will be thoroughly investigated. If the suspicion proves to be accurate, their application will be denied.

When applying for security clearance, applicants must also demonstrate diligence in paying both national and local taxes. If profitable transactions (such as cryptocurrency) or other sources of income without paid taxes are evident from the applicant's bank account statement or other records, the applicant is first directed to submit an additional tax declaration or seek guidance from the Tax and Customs Board.

CYBERSECURITY

Russia's war against Ukraine continues to produce a high level of threat from hostile cyber operations, including those conducted against Estonia. In collaboration with KAPO, the Estonian Information System Authority constantly monitors hostile cyber intelligence activities. State institutions and the military sector remain the primary targets of these cyber operations, but private companies, particularly those providing critical services such as transportation and energy, also come under attack. The attacks are usually carried out by hostile nations' military and special services' cyber intelligence units that persistently work to advance their country's interests.¹²

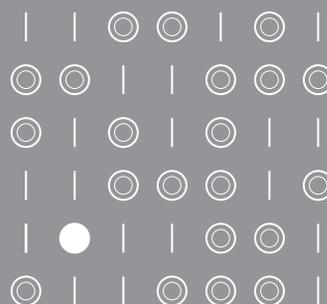
Alongside cyber intelligence threats, the likelihood of cyber sabotage, or cyber-attacks with a destructive impact against critical infrastructure, has also increased. Both state institutions and companies providing critical services must recognise that their status as such renders them potential targets for such attacks. While phishing attacks remain the primary method used against individuals, there is also a growing trend of exploiting unpatched systems and their associated security vulnerabilities in government and private-sector systems. Most state-sponsored attackers and cybercriminals use daily automated network scanning to look for and exploit vulnerabilities immediately. Thus, delaying the rapid implementation of updates and security patches is a critical security risk that could lead to system breaches and exploitation. In the worst case, a ransomware attack may result in the complete destruction of a system, data leakage or both.

In 2023, the main threat to Estonian cybersecurity was the failure to perform necessary updates or delaying them. There was a considerable lack of awareness and diligence in implementing cybersecurity measures. For example, Iranian hackers gained access to the heating and water supply control systems of some Estonian utility operators at the end of the year. The attack hit the industrial automation and control systems of at least three Estonian operators. In one case, the remote control systems for eight boiler stations stopped working, but the affected facilities were promptly switched to manual control to ensure continued heat generation. Another attack targeted a municipal water company, causing the shutdown of remote control systems for nine wastewater pumping stations and one drinking water pumping station, all of which continued to operate efficiently despite this disruption. A third similar attack targeted a building materials manufacturer.

These attacks in 2023 were not restricted to Estonia but were felt globally, with successful attacks reported in several countries. For example, during the first week of December 2023, 180 households in Ireland experienced water shortages for one or two days due to a cyber-attack on the local pumping station.

Russian special services also use hackers who are indirectly related to them and appear to operate independently. For example, they may exploit access points found by cybercriminals, data obtained

¹² These are commonly referred to as advanced persistent threats (APTs) – threat actors that pose a persistent threat of high-intensity cyber-attacks.



through ransomware attacks or hacktivists' service denial attacks intended to disrupt daily life. The purpose of using such covert human tools is to quickly achieve wide media resonance, enabling Russia to create the illusion of a substantial support base and extensive cyber capabilities. To date, most attacks of this type have had a marginal impact. The key to successful attacks often lies in the target's lack of cybersecurity awareness.

Russia's cyber activities against Ukraine provide Estonia with valuable lessons to better prevent and block attacks against Estonia. We can observe how Russian special services in particular use their cyber-attack capabilities and carry out influence operations with cyber elements. The war has also led to cyber-attacks against a new set of targets – attacks aimed at disrupting aid to Ukraine. This includes influencing decision-making at the political level as well as dis-

rupting and destroying the logistical supply chains of specific aid shipments. Supply chains are made more vulnerable due to the involvement of private-sector companies with varying levels of cybersecurity, which presents opportunities for malicious cyber-attackers to exploit security gaps and gain unauthorised access. Despite the adversary's attempts to intimidate us, these cyber-attacks have not had the significant impact and scope that KAPO had anticipated.

The past few years of intense cyber activities against Estonia have underscored that well-organised cybersecurity measures can prevent most hostile attacks. This requires every potential target institution to invest in the necessary resources, including skilled personnel. The first line of defence in cybersecurity is system and security administrators, whose success depends on the support of the institution's leadership.



Recommendations for heads of organisations:

- Invest in cybersecurity measures.
- Employ a skilled IT team and appoint an information security manager.
- Ensure good working conditions and opportunities for professional growth for your IT staff.
- Monitor the implementation of necessary cybersecurity measures.
- Conduct regular cybersecurity tests within your organisation.
- Acknowledge and rely on the expertise of cybersecurity professionals.

Supply chain attacks

In 2020, a cyber intelligence unit associated with the Russian foreign intelligence service (SVR) conducted an attack against the US software company SolarWinds and gained access to thousands of targets, including US government agencies, through the service provider's software solution. Since then, supply chain attacks have been under serious scrutiny as a growing threat. State-sponsored attackers are seeking new and inventive methods to steal information via their targets' contractual partners, third-party software and remote access points.¹³ To mitigate risks from supply chain attacks, it is vital to maintain the highest level of cybersecurity possible – both internally and with contractual service providers. Yet, we repeatedly see security being sacrificed for convenience or cost-effectiveness.

To prevent and mitigate the risks associated with supply chain attacks, it is essential to assess the cyber hygiene and security measures within one's organisation, and to be aware of the cybersecurity protection that contractual service providers and customers have in place. A valuable opportunity for this is to specify cybersecurity-related requirements and responsibilities in the service provider contract.

Similar caution should be exercised with any sub-contractors from third countries that are used by the organisation's contractual service provider. The client may not always be aware of the outsourcing used by the service provider and their methods of service delivery. The risks are particularly significant when hiring remote workers from high-risk countries, as there are limited opportunities to conduct thorough background

checks on such employees. Consequently, the access granted to such parties is more likely to be exploited for the benefit of a hostile state against Estonia.

As KAPO and other Estonian authorities responsible for cybersecurity have continuously emphasised the importance of promptly addressing security vulnerabilities, it was particularly regrettable to see providers of vital services delaying critical updates, and jeopardising not only themselves but also their clients, as recently as last year. Hence, it is crucial to reiterate a number of essential cybersecurity measures (see text box on page 27).

Human factor

Even the most sophisticated cyber-attacks involve a human factor as the most crucial component. The Estonian information and communication technology (ICT) sector is extensive and directly linked to essential and critical services. ICT companies based in Estonia operate as part of an international cooperation network, developing products and services for private consumers and the government agencies responsible for defence. As a security agency, KAPO is responsible for preventing and mitigating potential cyber threats stemming from human error.

The shortage of specialists in Estonia's ICT sector has been a long-standing concern that has been publicly acknowledged for years. Consequently, state-affiliated companies widely recruited individuals from third countries to fill the talent gap. Leveraging the opportunities presented by Estonia's e-residency programme, foreign nationals established businesses in the country and proceeded to hire their fellow citizens and relocate them

¹³ In addition to mandatory requirements, the State Information System Agency has issued several useful cybersecurity recommendations. See, for example, blog.ria.ee/tag/kaugjuurdepaas/ and blog.ria.ee/tarneahelarunded-voimalik-moju-ja-kuidas-end-kaitsta/.

to Estonia. This opportunity was particularly popular among Russian citizens, who found Estonia appealing due to its geographical proximity and the widespread use of the Russian language. At the same time, cybersecurity programmes at Estonian universities gained traction, with many graduates opting to remain in Estonia for research or employ-

ment opportunities. This often involved engaging in development projects and providing services to Estonian government agencies. Similar risks may arise from the citizens of other countries, particularly those that may use their cyber intelligence capabilities against Estonia, such as the People's Republic of China, Iran and North Korea.

Important!

- **Know your customers and service providers.**
- **Be aware of who has access to your organisation's network and who is actively using it.**
- **Keep your software and firmware up to date.**
- **Keep information about security vulnerabilities and other cybersecurity threats up to date. Up-to-date news and advice are available on the Estonian Information System Authority's website.**
- **Maintain a log of your information systems and network traffic for a sufficient period (at least one year) for incident investigation. Logs are crucial as incidents are often discovered after the event, possibly months or years after the attacker first gained access to the system. Without logs, it is impossible to determine the extent of the incident, identify the attacker, or know the damage caused and potential data leaks.**
- **Report incidents immediately. This allows for prompt action to minimise damage and identify the perpetrators.**
- **Remember that negligence and cost-cutting measures can lead to significantly higher costs later on, both financially and from a security perspective.**

Growing threat trends

Cyberspace, its threats and the actors involved are constantly changing. When considering future cyber threats, two distinct directions emerge. Neither of these directions is particularly new or innovative, but they clarify where our defences must be focused.

Though not a new type of attack, the speed and scale at which internet-connected devices can be hijacked and used in attacks could reach unprecedented levels. Threat actors are quick to exploit inadequate cybersecurity measures for remotely controlled devices. They are increasingly focusing on taking over and exploiting network devices, including the domestic appliances commonly used in our daily lives.

Many state-sponsored cyber threat actors have created botnets from vulnerable and compromised devices to conduct attacks, using them as part of their attack infrastructure. These are not isolated instances involving one or two devices but rather complex collections of compromised devices. To prevent and counteract such activities, it is critically important to regularly update both the software and the devices themselves. Devices that are past their prime will inevitably be exploited.





Loyalty dilemma

Russia's war against Ukraine has raised the dilemma of loyalty among Russian citizens working abroad in the ICT sector. Citizenship extends beyond a mere travel document and carries responsibilities towards one's nation, including adherence to certain attitudes, readiness for mobilisation and other aspects. Most notably, citizenship to any country comes with the requirement of loyalty. These obligations stem from citizenship regardless of whether individuals share the views of their home country's incumbent government. According to the Russian Constitution, Russian citizens living in Estonia are obliged to support their country and be prepared for potential mobilisation by Russia.

Dual citizens who hold citizenship of another state but have not officially renounced their Russian citizenship also have obligations towards the Russian Federation. However, the renunciation process is difficult and complex; Russia sometimes appears to deliberately hinder individuals wishing to renounce their Russian citizenship. The Russian Embassy in Tallinn has stated that their priority is issuing new passports and registering new citizens, prioritising children and youth to increase the number of Russian citizens rather than decrease it. Consequently, Russian citizens seeking to renounce their citizenship may encounter obstacles, including being directed to Russia for bureaucratic procedures.

Thus, it is important to recall that Russia has been Estonia's primary national threat in cyberspace for many years. Russia has carefully developed cyber-attack capabilities and is willing to use them against other nations, including Estonia. The war in Ukraine has shown that hostile cyber activities are part of warfare and exploit all knowledge about the networks and access to government, military and critical service provider networks. In many cases, this knowledge and access have been obtained years before the conflict.

Similarly, Russian intelligence services are interested in acquiring knowledge and access to Estonia's critical institutions and networks. Russian (and Belarusian) citizens studying and working in the Estonian ICT sector are under heightened scrutiny by Russian intelli-

gence services, as discussed in our previous annual reviews. Individuals with specialist skills are exploited when deemed necessary, and they are expected to fulfil loyalty obligations to advance Russian national interests when required.

Hundreds of Russian citizens seek employment in the Estonian ICT sector every year. Many of them have more exposure to the military sector than the average Estonian citizen. This is because most graduates from Russian universities have received training at the institutions' military departments, which grants them the rank of reserve officer. Others have completed military service in the Russian armed forces, receiving specialist training for military conflict operations.

Adult male Russian citizens may be issued military service certificates, which establish their wartime duties and mobilisation obligations. Many women also hold military service certificates. This implies that even workers with only a civilian focus, including those in ICT, may have been designated with military roles and responsibilities, which can be required of them within a matter of hours.

Individuals with expert knowledge in ICT and cybersecurity, coupled with loyalty obligations to a hostile foreign power, pose a significant security risk if granted access to Estonia's critical networks. Such scenarios must be prevented at all costs.

The current threat environment requires adaption and increased security awareness to prevent cyber threats stemming from human factors. This also highlights the importance for Estonian government and military institutions, as well as providers of critical services, to know their service providers, partners and subcontractors in order to eliminate the risk of granting access to vital networks and systems to citizens of third countries that could pose a threat to our security. This primarily involves a clear understanding of the individuals providing services to the institution and their levels of access to the organisation and its networks. For contractual partners, this entails seeking approval for any potential subcontractors and other third parties involved in the contractual cooperation. Assistance from KAPO is always available if needed.

Most Russian university graduates receive training at the institutions' military departments



Female Russian citizen



Male Russian citizen



University



Military department



**Military department
instructor**



Army service



Russian Armed Forces

PREVENTION OF TERRORISM

The terrorism threat level in Europe has risen, signalling a potential shift towards heightened threats related to terrorism and Islamist extremism in Estonia as well. While major terrorist organisations like al-Qaeda and Daesh (the Islamic State), along with their affiliated groups, have not become significantly stronger, they are expanding their influence in Africa and Central Asia. They also maintain strongholds in the Middle East.

Revenue from controlled territories and external support provide these organisations with sufficient resources for sustained development. Political instability in African countries, along with their limited ability to combat terrorist organisations, will likely allow these groups to maintain control over previously held territories or even seize new ones in the current year.

Afghanistan currently serves as a haven for terrorist organisations, apart from the ongoing conflict between Daesh and the Taliban regime. Daesh's Khorasan Province branch (Islamic State Khorasan Province or ISKP) has regained its capacity to support operations abroad, making the identification and dismantling of this network in Europe a priority for security agencies. Citizens from Central Asian nations are increasingly linked to planned attacks associated with ISKP in Europe.

The elevated threat level in 2023 can be primarily attributed to terrorist organisations identifying specific targets and issuing calls for attacks, heightened radicalisation, particularly among youth, and the susceptibility of individuals with psychological issues to calls for attacks.

Additionally, Islamist groups are increasingly using Islamophobia narratives as the rationale for their actions. In this context, any criticism of Islam is labelled as Islamophobia, which also serves to undermine the messages of more liberal Muslims. The Society of the Muslim Brotherhood (also called the Muslim Brotherhood) and its affiliated organisations in Europe are the main promoters of such narratives.

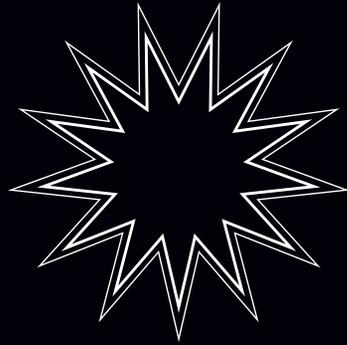
The Muslim Brotherhood's strategy in Europe:

- 1. Promote Islam and a vision of Islamic identity.**
- 2. Protect Islam and Islamic identity against perceived negative Western influences.**
- 3. Enhance the presence of Islam in Europe.**
- 4. Establish an Islamic society in Europe in the long term.**

Accusations of Islamophobia are also used and promoted by the European Muslim Forum (EMF), which we have previously identified as a political instrument of Russia in one of our annual reviews. The leader of EMF is Russian citizen Abdul-Vahed Validovich Niyazov.

The Estonian Muslim community, its leaders and development trends

The Estonian Muslim community continues to expand, becoming more ethnically diverse and nuanced. While the community can be assessed as peaceful, some concerning trends are emerging. For example, there is a lack of adaptation among new immigrants, coupled with a reluctance to integrate into Estonian customs



and learn the language. This causes community segregation and presents challenges to security and public order.

Moreover, conflicts among religious leaders within the Muslim community are driving a reorganisation of the community. This shift is inevitable as the increasing number of new immigrants creates tensions among community leaders.

Tensions at the leadership level tend to fuel the spread of radicalisation. Therefore, it is vital that leaders within the Estonian Muslim community embody moderate Islamic principles and abide by Estonian laws. Individuals with a history of involvement in criminal activities or ties to countries or entities that pose a threat to Estonia's security are not suitable for leadership roles.

It is estimated that the Estonian Muslim community has grown to over 10,000 members, and several foreign individuals, some associated with Islamist movements, have sought to become imams in Estonia. As the community expands, it inevitably attracts attention from international Islamic organisations. Unfortunately, among them are groups promoting extremist ideologies operating across Europe and the Middle East. In the future, the Estonian Muslim community will likely be dominated by a congregation that is heavily reliant on foreign funding.

With the growth of the Muslim community and the increasing number of children, the community has taken the initiative to educate its younger members on the Quran, customs and the Arabic language.

Establishing an Islamic school is also being discussed. Currently, there are an estimated 500 to 600 school-aged children in the Estonian Muslim community, with projections suggesting that nearly a thousand more children will be added in the next six or seven years. This influx poses additional challenges to Estonian schools, which are adapting to a more significant number of children from diverse cultural backgrounds in recent years. Teachers, who are already under stress and overloaded, may face even greater work pressure and mental strain. However, from a societal perspective, it is crucial to integrate these children into Estonian secular society and school environments to prevent the formation of a segregated Muslim community within Estonia. Similar isolated communities in Europe have shown negative social consequences, emphasising the importance of integration efforts.

In 2023, leaders of the Estonian Muslim community faced challenges stemming from the growing spread of propaganda led by the Muslim Brotherhood across Europe, mainly promoting Salafism, a form of Muslim fundamentalism. Exploiting accusations of





On 5 November 2023, a protest titled “Solidarity with Palestine” took place at Freedom Square in Tallinn. Pictured among the participants is Ildar Muhhamedšin, a member of the Estonian Muslim community. Source: Facebook, Ahmed Al Madani

Islamophobia and blasphemy, this propaganda can resonate with young Muslims who share the narrow ideologies propagated by these organisations, which seek to emphasise the superiority of religious rules over secular laws. To reach youth, these preachers of “correct Islam” have established their own organisations and successful social media channels. Through these channels, they address important youth-related issues and offer guidance on behaviour from an Islamic perspective.

Terrorism and extremism in Estonia

Contacts with Islamist terrorism and the rise of Islamic extremism in Estonia are becoming more apparent. This increase can be attributed to various factors, including several events in Europe that have fuelled radicalisation, the associated information operations and the expansion of the community, which have resulted in an increased number of connections.

Since Estonian-born Abdurrahman Sazanakov joined a terrorist organisation in Syria in 2013, several radicalised Estonian citizens and residents have attempted to travel to conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. However, currently, rather than heading to conflict zones in Africa or Central Asia, Islamist activities are increasingly focused on Europe.

In Estonia, a significant factor contributing to the heightened terrorism threat is the transit of individuals associated with terrorism and their attempts to settle in Estonia.¹⁴ Members of the PKK/Kongra Gel¹⁵ terrorist organisation have made efforts to initiate activities within Estonia. With Finland and Sweden becoming NATO members, KAPO has observed individuals from these countries with links to the PKK/Kongra Gel showing interest in Estonia, possibly anticipating potential extradition to Turkey. Their interest in relocating business activities and potential *hawala*¹⁶ financing-related operations to Estonia raises security concerns. Additionally, it is essential to consider the wave of radicalisation stemming from the Hamas-Israel conflict and efforts to finance terrorism through cryptocurrencies. Caution should also be exercised regarding the potential realisation of Russia's migration-based hybrid attack strategy, which could involve extremists arriving in Estonia.

Hamas terror attack in Israel and its impact on Estonia

On 21 January 2023, a man with dual Danish-Swedish citizenship burned the Quran outside the Turkish Embassy in Stockholm. On 28 June 2023, an Iraqi refugee in Sweden burned the Quran and later repeated the act multiple times. Although Quran burnings by

right-wing extremists in Europe have occurred before, the global reaction to these incidents in January and June 2023 was particularly strong.

Several terrorist organisations openly vowed retaliation, urging their supporters in Europe to carry out attacks to avenge these acts of blasphemy. Specific countries were named as potential targets. While security agencies managed to prevent some of these attacks, others succeeded. Spain experienced the first retaliatory attack just days later when a 25-year-old Moroccan, residing in the country illegally, killed a priest and seriously injured a church worker with a machete. On 16 October 2023, a Tunisian citizen killed two Swedish football fans and injured another in Brussels.

The situation in Europe became critical as it was evident that, in addition to radicalised individuals, terrorist networks within Europe were also orchestrating attacks.

Numerous European Islamist extremists viewed the attack by Hamas on Israel as a triumph. This incident escalated the already heightened tensions, inevitably leading to an Israeli response. Many European extremists saw the new conflict as an interfaith conflict, aligning with the previous narratives centred around accusations of blasphemy, further driving radicalisation. The Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent Israeli invasion of Gaza have had a global impact. Terrorist organisations have issued calls for immediate retaliation.

Tensions have also surfaced in Estonia. Expressions of understanding towards antisemitism and the brutality of Islamist terrorism, once unheard of, are now

¹⁴ In 2023, there were nearly 100 cases (of unique individuals) compared with the previous average of 50 cases (of unique individuals).

¹⁵ The Kurdish Workers' Party, or PKK, more recently also known as Kongra Gel.

¹⁶ *Hawala* is a traditional trust-based method of transferring money in Islamic countries, which does not require cash to physically travel to the recipient. Instead of cash, the *hawaladar*, or broker, may also accept valuables, immovables or movables, which are converted into cash handed over to the recipient.

emerging. Some members of the Muslim community have shown increasing signs of radicalisation, though this has been mostly confined to social media.

Following the Hamas attack, a surge of propaganda ensued from Islamist groups, alongside calls to support fellow Muslims in the conflict. Terrorist organisations called for quick retaliation through attacks.

The spread of extremist ideology relies on growing its support base, which societal divisions often facilitate. These divisions need not be ideological; they can also focus on more specific issues. The objective is to instil a steadfast, non-negotiable belief in a specific issue. This conviction in the righteousness and inevitability of the actions in question enables extremists to attract followers who might not fully subscribe to their overarching worldview and objectives. Extremists use propaganda to normalise symbols and language that incite hatred and anger.

Following the outbreak of the Hamas-Israel conflict, Islamist organisations' propaganda has begun to circulate in Estonia. This propaganda is sometimes spread by individuals who may not fully grasp the origins or context of such material, inadvertently contributing to the rise in radicalisation through ignorance.

The propaganda supporting Palestinians has targeted two distinct audiences. For Muslims, the emphasis was on the religious duty to support fellow Muslims. Conversely, messages aimed at non-Muslims skirted the issue of Hamas's attacks, focusing instead on the occupation and retaliatory actions by Israeli forces.

As a result, Estonia has witnessed a notable uptick in the expression of extremist ideologies. The divergent perspectives on the conflict have contributed to the growth of extremism. The conflict had a trigger effect, which in Estonia was fortunately limited to peaceful demonstrations, social media posts, and a few messages voicing support for terrorism or terrorist acts. A significant portion of the extremist activity on social media originated from individuals who had not previously been on KAPO's radar. There were also cases where asylum seekers in Estonia accused the Estonian state of supporting genocide.

To some extent, the boundaries between Salafism, Islamism and right-wing extremism have blurred. For example, Salafists, traditionally non-violent, have begun adopting symbols and slogans associated with Islamism and even Nazism. Meanwhile, individuals holding right-wing extremist views have targeted Jews in their rhetoric while also incorporating Islamist symbols into their messaging.



Terrorist financing

The sources of terrorist financing in Europe have largely remained the same, including business, organised crime, regular donations and alms, and fundraising campaigns. Cash couriers, the *hawala* network, money transfer services and, to a lesser extent, traditional banking channels continue to be used to deliver funds to terrorist organisations.

Estonian credit institutions are well aware of the risks associated with terrorist financing and maintain a cautious stance towards transactions by non-residents. However, offering services through VIBAN¹⁷ accounts, typically associated with international payment service providers and virtual currency platforms, continues to present a risk.

The escalation of the Hamas-Israel conflict in October notably intensified calls for financial support to Hamas. These solicitations occur in both secure, encrypted forums and publicly accessible social media platforms, often framing the request for funds as aid for suffering populations, such as women and children.

One significant concern is that the obscurity surrounding the originators of these campaigns usually means donors are unaware of the actual recipients or the intended use of their contributions. Consequently, well-intentioned individuals might inadvertently fund and support terrorist organisations.

Within Estonia's jurisdiction, transactions have been detected supporting individuals and entities in the Gaza Strip, where the possible end recipient is the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which is subject to European Union international sanctions. KAPO continues its efforts to trace the final beneficiaries of these transactions in collaboration with the Estonian Financial Intelligence Unit and international partners.



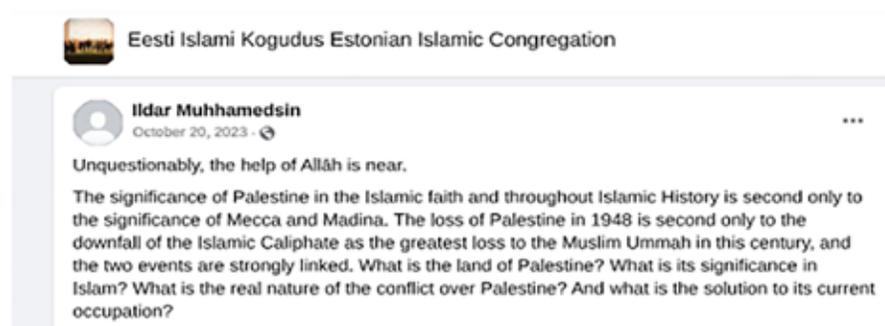
A screenshot from the Telegram group "Gaza Now", urging support and donations in cryptocurrencies such as BTC and ETH. Translation: "Support and donate in Bitcoin/Ethereum at the following address: ..."

¹⁷ Virtual international bank account number. Banks lack visibility into transactions conducted through VIBAN accounts.

How was propaganda orchestrated and public sentiment influenced?

Following the October 2023 Hamas attack, several terrorist incidents took place in Europe while some others were prevented.

- **7 October 2023** The Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of the Hamas terrorist organisation, launched attacks on Israeli settlements and military targets, resulting in nearly 1,200 fatalities from 43 countries and over 200 hostages.
- **7 to 13 October 2023** Senior al-Qaeda leaders and affiliated organisations,¹⁸ along with Daesh (also known as the Islamic State), praised the attack and called for further attacks in Europe.
- **8 October 2023** The International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), established by the Muslim Brotherhood, issued a statement supporting Hamas's actions as a resistance to occupation and called for support from fellow Muslims.
- **9 October 2023** The Palestine Scholars Association in the Diaspora issued a *fatwa* through the Palestinian Islamic Jihad's channel, permitting the killing of Jews within Israel's 1948 borders or in a Muslim state allied with Israel.
- **11 October 2023** International media reported a call to action from the head of Hamas's diaspora, urging Muslims worldwide to send a message of rage against Zionists and the United States of America on 13 October 2023. Hamas requested financial support for fighters in Gaza and called for fighting against Jews, declaring it was time for a "holy war" on the ground, not just in theory.
- **19 October 2023** IUMS issued a *fatwa* calling for the fulfilment of the duty to assist the jihad in Palestine, to continue peaceful protests and to boycott Israel.
- **20 October 2023** Ildar Muhhamedšin, the leader of the Estonian Islamic Congregation and the Baltic Muslim Women's Union, shared his perspective on the conflict on the congregation's Facebook page. He referred to the 1948 loss of Palestine as the second greatest loss for Muslims in the 20th century, following the dissolution of the Islamic Caliphate. His message concluded with an ambiguous stance: "History has confirmed that there can be no peace without justice, without Jerusalem, without Bayt al-Maqdis."¹⁹



- **28 October 2023** Al-Qaeda called for a global jihad in support of Palestine, urging attacks on Jews, crusaders and their allies worldwide.
- **31 October 2023** IUMS issued a *fatwa* calling on neighbouring countries to launch a military attack against Israel. The jihad for the preservation of Palestine is deemed a religious duty, as Islamic law does not permit the failure to repel or silence in the face of aggression.
- **5 November 2023** A protest in support of Palestinians took place in Tallinn, attended by over 300 people. The event, planned to be peaceful, was nearly escalated by a member of the Muslim Brotherhood who had travelled from the Netherlands to Estonia specifically to participate in this event.

Children entangled in extremism

The allure of right-wing ideology for minors and vulnerable adults often lies in its perception as a taboo, making it seem cool and exciting. This ideology's appeal is partly due to its visual and symbolic language, where messages are encoded in symbols that are cryptic to outsiders. Such symbols enable right-wing extremists to create and foster a sense of belonging. The symbols are used in propaganda and recruitment efforts and are often visible on lampposts, public transport or even in lockers at public gyms.

But how should society respond to young individuals who display these symbols? KAPO advises vigilance and recommends engaging in open, friendly dialogue with youths wearing such symbols, whether encountered within one's social circle or educational settings. Often, youths teetering on the edge of radicalisation are suffering from a lack of attention and recognition. Engaging with them constructively might prevent some from advancing further down the path towards violence, directed against themselves or others.

The threat of terrorism driven by right-wing ideology has escalated in democratic societies over the years. When we first addressed the issue of right-wing extremists in our 2021 Annual Review, we noted that the situation in Estonia was relatively mild at the time.

Youths prone to right-wing radicalisation often grapple with mental or family issues and are drawn to simplis-

tic explanations for complex societal dilemmas found on the fringes of social media. Such narratives frequently attribute blame to ethnic or sexual minorities, or the liberal world order. As these individuals gravitate towards increasingly smaller and more insular groups, the shared ideas become more aggressive and violent.

In our previous annual reviews, we have observed that right-wing extremist activities predominantly remain confined to the virtual realm, where individuals compete to surpass one another with extreme ideas, often without meeting in person. However, the past year has seen a noticeable increase in physical gatherings. Collaborative events are organised within Estonia and with like-minded groups in neighbouring countries.

Some right-wing extremists are preparing for a race war, which they refer to as "the boogaloo". This includes joint training sessions and establishing combat clubs, known in North America as "Active Clubs". Adopting this naming convention, a dozen local extremists in Estonia identify as Active Club Estonia members. They post photos on social media and attend events organised by extremists in other countries.

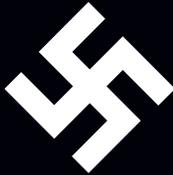
As for left-wing extremist groups, their presence in Estonia has not yet warranted significant attention from KAPO. Nonetheless, should the need arise, readers can be assured that these groups will be met with the appropriate level of scrutiny and response.

¹⁸ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Hurras al-Din (HaD), al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM).

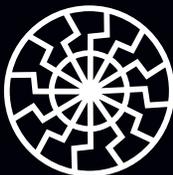
¹⁹ Masjid al-Aqsa (or Bayt al-Maqdis) is the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Hamas named its 7 October 2023 attack Operation Al-Aqsa Flood.

Frequently used far-right ideology symbols

We advise readers to engage in friendly conversations with youngsters who wear far-right ideology symbols, as the people who are the most vulnerable to radicalisation are often vulnerable due to a lack of attention and recognition.



The **swastika**, specifically the red-black-and-white flag of the Nazi Party, continues to hold significance among far-right extremists. It remains the clearest and most potent symbol of the ideology and is largely banned in the public spaces of democratic countries. Individuals with far-right views often seek opportunities to capture images of themselves with the Nazi flag in public spaces and then share these as a heroic act in private conversations with like-minded individuals.



Similar to the swastika, the sun wheel, or **Sonnenrad**, also known as the **Black Sun**, features in many ancient cultures but was hijacked by the Nazis to fabricate a mythology. It had no specific meaning in Nazi symbolism.



The **Totenkopf**, or skull, was used by the Waffen-SS units of Nazi Germany. A bandana with a skull motif is one of the most common items of clothing used by far-right extremists to make themselves recognisable to others.



The **Celtic cross**, or Odin's cross, is an early Christian symbol that was also used as a sun symbol in several pre-Christian cultures. Nazi sympathisers in Norway began using it before World War II, as did Ku Klux Klan members in the United States. It is widely used among far-right extremists and is often stylised to reflect the name of the organisation.



While not part of any ancient runic system, the **Wolfsangel** or "wolf's hook" resembles a runic symbol. It was inspired by a double hook-shaped wolf trap used for hunting in mediaeval Europe; the metal hook was concealed inside a piece of meat and hung from a tree. Wolves and associated imagery were significant in Nazi mythology, and various military units have also used this symbol.



The **Algiz** or **Elhaz** rune represented a tree or elk. It was used as a symbol by several military units of Nazi Germany during World War II.



The **Tiwaz** rune symbolised war and justice in Norse mythology. Similar to other runic symbols, it was also used in Nazi symbolism. Today, it is most commonly found in the symbolism of far-right organisations in the Nordic countries.



The **Nazi soldier** symbol holds great significance for far-right extremists, representing the Waffen-SS as the elite force of a master race. The symbol has two essential features: the Waffen-SS logo and the shape of the German army helmet from World War II.



The **Happy Merchant** is a racist caricature first created by an American cartoonist in the 1980s, which later began to spread on the fringes of social media. The character, with exaggerated facial features, wearing a *kippah* and rubbing his hands together, is used in far-right propaganda to represent a stereotypical image of a Jewish person. Anti-Semitism is a significant part of far-right ideology for historical reasons, but online conspiracy theories further inflame anti-Semitic sentiment.



Far-right ideology primarily spreads through social media alongside various other aspects of online culture. For example, **common memes** are used with additions referencing far-right ideology, such as adding Hitler's moustache and hairstyle to the Trollface meme or attaching Nazi symbols to the character Pepe the Frog. The use of Trollface or Pepe the Frog in an online post does not necessarily indicate far-right content or suggest that the poster holds such views, but far-right extremists often use imagery or characters from meme culture to spread their ideological content.

14/88

Far-right extremists also enjoy hiding their messages behind **numerical combinations**, the most common being 14/88. The first part refers to the 14-word slogan created by American far-right terrorist David Eden Lane: "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children." The second part refers to the eighth letter of the alphabet – H – and the abbreviation "HH" is used as a reference to the Nazi salute "Heil Hitler!"

Illegal handling of firearms and explosives

KAPO focuses on cases of arms trafficking that involve violations of firearm handling requirements during their transport across state borders or pose a threat to Estonia's national security, independence or territorial integrity. Currently, Estonia is not considered a high-risk country for illegal arms trafficking.

Due to Russia's ongoing full-scale war, a large amount of weapons and ammunition are circulating in Ukraine. The war has complicated national oversight regarding the distribution of these arms, and there is a concern that the armaments used in the war might filter into Europe via illicit channels upon the cessation of hostilities or transition to a stalemate in Ukraine. While this will mainly affect neighbouring countries, it will ultimately raise threat levels across Europe.

Although Estonia might not be a leading destination for arms trafficking, the transit of weapons through Estonia must be prevented. The procurement of military-grade weapons – particularly powerful firearms – by terrorists, extremists or actors serving the interests of hostile foreign powers constitutes a direct threat to security.

Firearms from Brussels to Tallinn

In 2023, the Estonian Tax and Customs Board uncovered a surprising parcel hidden among moving supplies in a van travelling from Brussels to Tallinn. M.Y.T., who holds an Estonian residence permit as well as Finnish and Algerian citizenships, placed an order with K.Y., a Belgian citizen of Turkish origin.

The task was to transport the van from Belgium to Helsinki, Finland, along with illegal firearms and narcotics. K.Y. agreed to transport the van but only as far as Tallinn. While loading the van onto a trailer, K.Y. sent a message to M.Y.T., saying that the cargo space was already filled with moving supplies. Despite this, he loaded the van and started his journey from Brussels to Germany, then onwards to Warsaw, through Lithuania and Latvia, and finally heading towards Tallinn. As he approached the border between Poland and Lithuania, M.Y.T. inquired about K.Y.'s whereabouts and was told that he would be informed as soon as K.Y. crossed the border. "I want to hear your beautiful voice already," the respondent added.

While K.Y. crossed other borders without issue, the Estonian Tax and Customs Board stopped and searched the van at the Ikla border checkpoint. Hidden beneath various items inside a sofa, which was covered with blankets, was a box containing five black cloth bags labelled "Kaytan". The bags contained a total of almost 20 kg of pure amphetamine and two automatic firearms. An investigation into the incident revealed that it was an internationally orchestrated criminal operation. A joint investigation team was established within the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust), including members from the Estonian Western District Prosecutor's Office and KAPO, the Finnish National Bureau of Investigation, and the Belgian Federal Police in Brussels.

The investigation led to the detention of another individual, T.P.S., residing in Helsinki, Finland. Further searches of M.Y.T.'s underground lock-up garage in Tallinn uncovered a Zastava automatic rifle with its serial number removed and a Harrington & Richardson Young America Double Action revolver. M.Y.T., who orchestrated the entire operation via phone from

Twenty-two anti-tank mines under a tarp

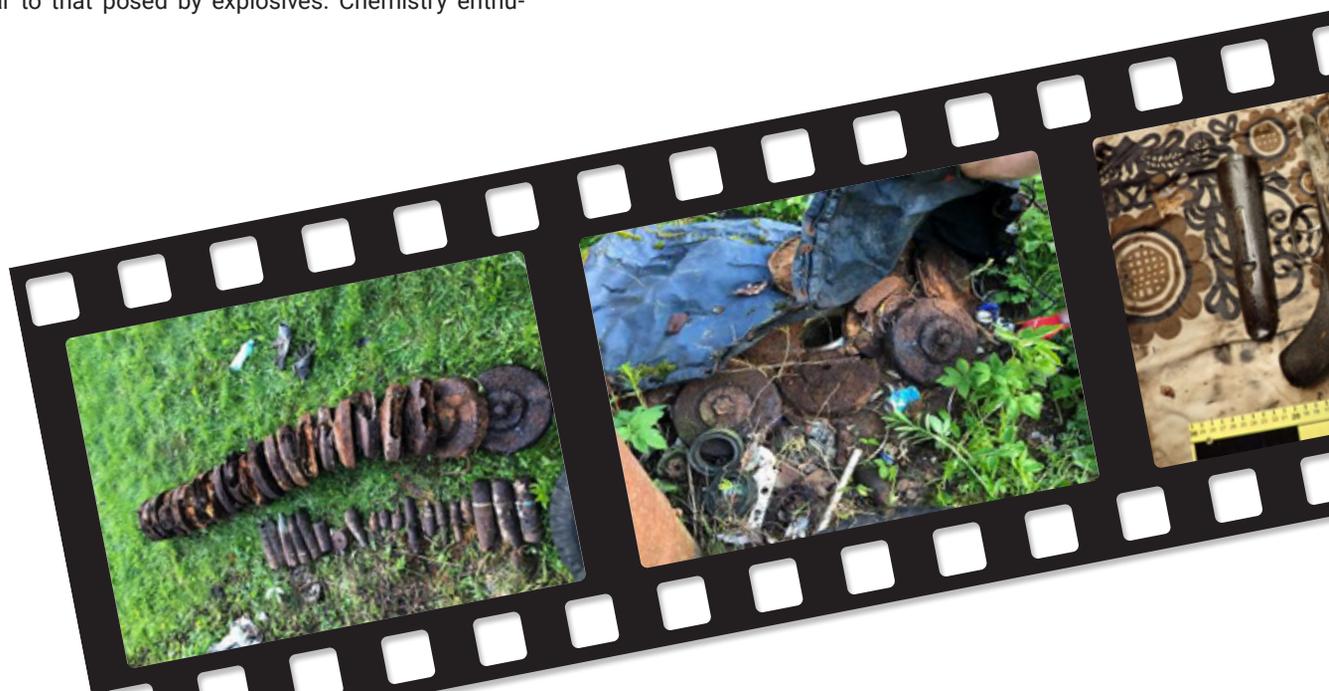
In early 2024, a trial concluded concerning a group of individuals who had stored a significant cache of explosives, firearms and ammunition within their residence in Lääne-Viru county. Among their arsenal were 22 anti-tank mines, hidden under a tarp, seven of which were equipped with fuses. Given that the mines were stored in a yard without a fence and surrounded by neighbouring homes, the potential for disaster was imminent. An accidental impact with the still-active explosives could have triggered a blast on the scale of devastation expected from an anti-tank mine.

Authorities seized a total of 13 illegal firearms and 25 front-loading revolvers, 1086.9 grams of gunpowder and 123.2 grams of TNT, along with 67 units of ammunition. If detonated, the quantity of TNT discovered, combined with the ammunition, would have inflicted irreparable harm to people's lives and health. Accumulating weapons and explosives poses a risk not only to the perpetrators but also to anyone in the vicinity of the arms cache.

In addition to detectorists and individuals engaged in the illegal excavation of archaeological sites, also known as "black archaeology", as discussed in our previous annual reviews, KAPO has repeatedly observed how pyrotechnic experimentation can present a threat similar to that posed by explosives. Chemistry enthu-

siasts experimenting with various dangerous substances order large quantities of pyrotechnic substances or their precursor chemicals online. These substances are experimented with in home laboratories that do not comply with safety regulations, creating extremely dangerous situations and, in the worst cases, endangering the lives of innocent neighbours as well as that of the experimenter. If there is suspicion that someone is experimenting with explosives or pyrotechnic substances, the Rescue Board or KAPO should be notified immediately to protect lives and property. The same applies if you have found explosives or munitions yourself or if you have information about the illegal collection of such substances or items. Potentially fatal accidents and other related consequences can be prevented through the voluntary surrender of such items.

Despite a general downward trend, findings that suggest the deliberate manufacture of explosive devices or the concealed collection of illegal weapons and ammunition remain a cause for concern. Such cases may indicate malicious intent and plans for attacks, requiring extensive information gathering to assess the threat. In 2023, KAPO initiated criminal proceedings to investigate two such incidents. One of these cases involved an explosion that resulted in the death of an Estonian Defence Forces instructor. In both cases, KAPO initiated criminal proceedings based on the penal code section concerning causing an explosion.



The risk of attacks committed with chemical, biological, radioactive or nuclear materials (CBRN)²⁰ in Estonia and across Europe is currently low. However, readiness for such a threat is essential, as managing a CBRN crisis requires specific expertise and highly effective cooperation between agencies. Information exchange, joint exercises, equipment procurement and the development of training programmes are coordinated by the national CBRN steering group.²¹

A “WMD Crime Scene Operations” course was conducted for first responders in 2023 with support from various US agencies. Participants learned to use hazard detection devices, the protective equipment necessary for working at CBRN scenes and engaged in practical exercises. The Estonian Academy of Security Sciences is developing a basic CBRN training course for first responders, based on input from the interagency steering group, and is also developing a guide for customs officials on how to act in the event of a CBRN threat.

²⁰ The initials CBRN refer to malicious threats relating to chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear materials as well as protection against them.

²¹ In addition to KAPO, the steering group includes representatives from the Health Board, Agriculture and Food Board, Tax and Customs Board, Police and Border Guard Board, Rescue Board, and Environmental Board. Participants also come from the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Defence, the Defence Forces, the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences, the Estonian Military Academy, and the Government Office.



In Lääne-Viru county, 22 mines were found hidden under a tarp in a backyard. Most of them would have been capable of causing significant damage to both the owner and their neighbours. Source: KAPO

ECONOMIC SECURITY

According to the Corruption Perceptions Index, Estonia is a country with low levels of corruption. Instances of corruption that are uncovered in Estonia are typically isolated incidents. Persistent high levels of corruption or corruption risks within specific institutions demand improved transparency and ethical standards among officials. Senior state officials serve as role models that influence broader society and, consequently, national security. Therefore, alongside its other responsibilities, KAPO is entrusted with detecting, preventing, obstructing and investigating corruption among senior officials.

Corruption within the defence sector poses a direct threat to national defence and undermines its credibility. This threat becomes particularly serious during critical periods. Suppressing competition and engaging in illicit agreements can weaken defence capabilities and discourage stakeholders in the defence industry from participating in procurements. Furthermore, corruption drives up the costs of products and services. From KAPO's perspective, procurement processes conducted by the Ministry of Defence, the Defence Forces and the Defence League are a priority, given their direct association with national security.

In December 2023, the Harju County Court enforced a plea agreement convicting an employee of the Defence League headquarters of bribery involving a businessperson we will call "A.T.". The Defence League employee had personal expenses covered and personal vehicles serviced by A.T.'s company on at least 14 occasions, in return for awarding contracts for the repair and maintenance of Defence League vehicles to A.T.'s company.

Under the bribery statute, the county court sentenced A.T. to one year and six months of suspended imprisonment, which will not be imposed if the individual completes a two-year probationary period. The Prosecutor's Office is also continuing its investigation into several individuals suspected of bribery and one individual suspected of accepting bribes.

In early 2024, the Tartu County Court convicted a former senior police official, an entrepreneur, of embezzlement, the production and use of forged documents, fraud, and disclosure of state secrets. The evidence presented in court indicated that the activities were extensive, systematic and carried out over an extended period. Furthermore, the individuals under investigation persisted in committing offences even after being notified of suspicions of criminal activity. The court conveyed a clear message that entrepreneurs should not blur the lines between their personal finances and those of the company, emphasising the need for entrepreneurs to prioritise the interests of their shareholders. The Harju County Court found the police official guilty of intentionally embezzling more than 276,000 euros from Tartekplus AS, perpetrating fraud during their tenure as the head of the Police and Border Guard Board's internal control department, and unlawfully transporting and storing restricted-access state secrets on Tartekplus's premises, thereby granting unauthorised individuals access to state secrets. Although the court acquitted the official of providing false information during a security vetting, it emphasised that lying during such checks is not tolerated. The court decision is still pending, and the proceedings will continue in higher courts. The police official has not admitted guilt to any of the charges.



Estonia's innovation must be protected

Russia has sought to use economic pressure to undermine the security of Estonia and our allies in recent years. The European Union, including Estonia among the other member states, has imposed additional sanctions on Russia, made revised assessments of foreign investments, and significantly reduced economic ties with Russia. Additionally, the European Union is updating its economic security strategy to reassess the resilience of its supply chains, the security of its critical infrastructure both physically and in cyberspace, its technological security, and its economic dependencies.

The creator or owner of any economic value plays a significant role in safeguarding that value, including the technological components of that value. When selecting new investments and business partners, vigilance is crucial. KAPO advises people to carefully verify that potential investors do not represent the interests of a hostile foreign state. This includes considering the business and cultural practices of potential investors or partners from third countries, as well as their business associates and ultimate beneficiaries. If an innovative Estonian company attracts a major investor who refuses to cease cooperation with the Russian defence industry, the value created in Estonia may be used against our own interests.

Responsible entrepreneurs can take proactive measures. Understanding your customers, business partners and potential investors is crucial to safeguard-

ing your business interests, including the value you create, your trade secrets, intellectual property and the well-being of your employees. More broadly, safeguarding such interests is vital to protecting both personal and national security. Estonia promotes economic freedom because it stimulates economic development. However, if a situation arises where an interested party seeks to exploit economic freedom to harm the state, you are advised to seek assistance from KAPO.

Foreign investments

Considering the growing importance of economic security, it is useful to stay current regarding law enforcement and security agencies' assessments of foreign investments. The purpose of assessing the credibility of foreign investments is to prevent capital, services and products from falling into the hands of hostile states and individuals listed in sanction registers.

When seeking new foreign partners, it is crucial to have a deep understanding of their business environment, as it will impact future collaborations, with possible repercussions reaching back to Estonia. When attracting foreign capital or engaging with foreign companies, it is essential to identify the ultimate beneficiaries and understand the supply chains and end-users of the products and services. Estonia implemented a new law in 2023 that allows for the assessment of the credibility of foreign investments in sectors vital for Estonia's national security or public order. KAPO's role is to analyse potential security risks in this area.

Sanctions to curb aggression

The objective behind international sanctions imposed on Russia is to inflict the maximum impact on its economy, capacity and willingness to wage war. It is crucial to block Russia's access to technologies and equipment that could bolster or aid Russia's military industry. A significant challenge for those enforcing sanctions, as well as law enforcement and security agencies, is to prevent sanctioned goods from reaching Russia through third-country entities with economic ties to Russia. Diplomatic and law enforcement efforts are deployed to prevent the circumvention of sanctions in this manner. Assets belonging to Russia or entrepreneurs supporting Russia have been frozen, and Estonia plays a role in halting the flow of funds and other economic resources to individuals listed on the sanctions list. Deliberate violations of the sanctions imposed by the European Union or Estonia can result in criminal proceedings.

Disrupting supply chains of sanctioned goods and services outside the territory of European Union member states is a complex task. KAPO recognises the efforts of the many entrepreneurs who implement thorough due diligence measures to prevent sanctions violations and draw attention to attempts to bypass sanctions. We wish to remind entrepreneurs that maintaining economic dealings with Russian counterparts carries a significant risk of indirectly providing economic resources to individuals or entities listed on the sanctions roster, thereby supporting Russia's ongoing aggression. In a sanctions regime, economic agreements that risk breaching sanctions cannot take precedence. It is also unwise to turn a blind eye to the end-use or ultimate beneficiaries of goods not covered by sanctions that are sent to Russia. Apart from the risk of violating the sanctions regime, serious reputational damage must also be considered, which could, in turn, leave the economy vulnerable. In ongoing conflicts,

including economic confrontations, any businesses that engage in trade with Russia may find themselves rejected as partners by existing business associates and suppliers who avoid connections with Russia or have opted to cease Russia-related business activities in their portfolios.

Russia's need for high-tech products from the West remains high, and its aspirations for technological independence are unlikely to be realised soon. Expecting prolonged international sanctions, Russia has resorted to increasingly intricate schemes to acquire dual-use goods²² and military goods produced in Western countries.

To achieve its objectives, Russia has become well-versed in European Union customs procedures and regulations, establishing trust-based relationships with manufacturers of technologies and equipment relevant to its defence industry through intermediaries and shell companies within the EU.

Security agencies face the challenge of tackling complex procurement networks involving intermediary firms within the EU and end-users with no prior history in third countries. These networks enable Russia to evade sanctions and bolster its military capabilities by redirecting goods through third countries that have not joined the EU-imposed sanctions and maintain close economic ties with Russia.

Russia's primary source of revenue stems from exporting raw materials, notably oil, gas and their derivatives, at the highest possible prices. Imports of crude oil and refined petroleum products from Russia face restrictions, albeit with certain exceptions. The price cap imposed on Russian oil serves to curb price escalations prompted by extraordinary market circumstances and has substantially diminished Russia's earnings from oil sales since it went to war against Ukraine.

²² Dual-use goods include software and technology that can be used for both civilian and military purposes.

Falsified documents

KAPO initiated a criminal investigation last year based on a complaint from the Estonian Tax and Customs Board regarding suspected violations of international sanctions and the use of counterfeit documents related to the import of heavy fuel oil from Russia to Estonia.

In September 2022, less than two months after the ban on purchasing, importing or transferring various petroleum products originating from Russia or exported from Russia came into effect, an exceptionally large amount of heavy fuel oil arrived in Estonia from Russia. Documentation indicated it originated from Kazakhstan but transited through Russia. Based on the documentation submitted during customs procedures, the Tax and Customs Board suspected that

the proof of origin documents had been forged and that the goods might have actually originated from Russia. This suspicion is under investigation in criminal proceedings to determine any breaches of the prohibition outlined in legislation implementing international sanctions on imports and whether counterfeit documents were used to conceal such breaches from the authorities.

Criminal investigations related to sanctions violations primarily focus on the illicit transfer of prohibited technology (e.g. computers or microchips), luxury goods (e.g. cars, clothing or wine) and cash to Russia. Estonian authorities, collaborating with foreign partners, closely monitor and identify attempts to circumvent sanctions, particularly concerning the involvement of entrepreneurs operating in Estonia in delivering prohibited goods or resources to Russia.



Damage to communications cables in the Baltic Sea

In 2023, Estonia's critical infrastructure and supply security came sharply into focus. During a severe storm in October 2023, damage was caused to critical underwater infrastructure in the Baltic Sea: the Balticconnector gas pipeline was ruptured in Finland's economic zone and two submarine communications cables were damaged in Estonia's economic zone. The damage resulted in decreased data capacity in the cable owned by the telecom operator Arelion between Estonia and Sweden and an interruption in data connection due to a break in the cable owned by the operator Elisa between Estonia and Finland.

Estonian and Finnish authorities responded immediately, forming a joint investigation team and initiating criminal investigations as the incidents were highly suspect regardless of occurring during a storm. By analysing maritime traffic in the Baltic Sea and the timing of events, it became evident that the incidents were interconnected, and the container ship *NewNew Polar Bear*, flying the flag of Hong Kong, was identified as the vessel that may have caused the damage.

These investigations were unprecedented for Estonia. While the incident occurred within the Estonian economic zone, it fell outside Estonia's territorial waters. In addition to the location, the investigation was further complicated by the harsh weather conditions in late autumn. The investigators had to consider the wind conditions and contend with the stormy seas.

In collaboration with the Estonian Navy and Finnish and Swedish authorities, the incident sites were surveyed using sonar and underwater robots, and evidence was

collected. The investigation revealed that the damage was caused by human activity. A long drag mark was observed along the seabed, and a ship anchor was found near the gas pipeline, which might have made the drag mark. Other critical infrastructure in the Baltic Sea was also inspected during the underwater investigations, but no further damage was identified.

The vessel currently implicated in the investigation belongs to a Chinese company. According to international maritime law, Estonian authorities lacked the jurisdiction to detain the vessel for investigative operations on board. To acquire essential information for the investigation, Estonia and Finland have submitted a request for legal assistance to China. While the investigation continues, and it is premature to draw conclusions about the perpetrator or the intentional nature of the incident, Estonia can already learn from it to enhance the protection of underwater infrastructure in the future.

As the name implies, critical infrastructure ensures essential services for the country. Disruption of these services can have a broad impact on the population, making critical infrastructure a potential target for hostile actors. We must also consider that various defaults and damages occur regularly in critical infrastructure, not always as a result of deliberate actions. Therefore, it is important to ensure the necessary capability for infrastructure protection and rapid repair through contracts, spare parts and appropriate redundancies.

The damage to the communications cables had no impact on Estonia's data communication services; backup connections were used, and both cables were promptly repaired during the investigative operations. The operation of the Balticconnector gas pipeline is expected to be restored by late spring 2024.



Damaged communications cables collected as evidence. Source: KAPO



WAR CRIMES



When Russia launched its military attack against Ukraine, many countries began investigating the war crimes committed in Ukrainian territory to ensure that the perpetrators would be held accountable. Since 3 March 2022, KAPO has been gathering evidence in criminal proceedings related to crimes of aggression, crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in Ukraine. Several closely interconnected but distinct sets of criminal acts are under investigation.

Aggression refers to a state's use of armed force against another in violation of international law. The responsibility for crimes of aggression lies with senior members of the Russian leadership who were involved in the decision-making that led to the attack on Ukraine. While aggression is considered a "leadership crime", joining, participating in or supporting an act of aggression by a foreign state is also prohibited. Therefore, individuals who join or finance armed units attacking another country may also be responsible for a crime.

As the International Criminal Court (ICC)²³ lacks the jurisdiction to investigate the crime of aggression committed by the Russian leadership in Ukraine, there have been widespread calls to establish an international tribunal for crimes of aggression to ensure accountability for the Russian leadership. Until such a tribunal is established, countries with universal jurisdiction over crimes of aggression, including Estonia, are obliged to collect evidence that could be used to hold perpetrators accountable.

On 17 March 2023, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova, suspected of unlawfully resettling Ukrainian children from occupied Ukraine to Russia as a war crime. If these individuals travel to the territory of any of the ICC's 123 signatory states, they will be arrested and brought to trial. Source: Propastop



War crimes are serious violations of the law of armed conflict, also known as international humanitarian law. International humanitarian law aims to protect individuals who are not directly involved in armed conflict to the greatest extent possible during times of war.

Putting aside the issue of determining the aggressor and defender, it is generally prohibited to target individuals who are not actively engaged in the hostilities during armed conflict, including surrendered or incapacitated members of the armed forces. The same principle extends to legitimate targets more broadly; only objects used for military purposes may be attacked. The attacker must be able to verify that the specific target was justified. The indiscriminate bombing of civilian infrastructure, residential areas, hospitals, cultural institutions and power plants, and the destruction of entire communities in Ukraine constitutes a war crime. War crimes also include the inhumane treatment of civilians and prisoners of war if associated with armed conflict.

The evidence gathered so far indicates systematic and mass deprivation of liberty and the killing of civilians in Russian-occupied territories, providing grounds for treating these crimes as crimes against humanity. To successfully prosecute the perpetrators, investigators must establish the typical circumstances of the crimes and identify their links to the armed conflict or their placement within the broader context of state repressive policies. In some cases, these links are clear, while in others, they are more complex.

Attributing attacks solely to a state or armed group gives the impression of anonymity. However, it is evident that behind every action stands an individual – whether a state leader or a military commander – who has issued orders or authorised actions that enable specific individuals to commit war crimes. Furthermore, superiors bear the responsibility for crimes committed by their subordinates, even when they fail to prevent such actions despite having the authority to do so. Investigating war crimes is one way to bring to light the specific actions of specific individuals.

Individuals who have committed war crimes may also end up in Estonia. A considerable number of people residing in Estonia have either been victims of war crimes or possess valuable information about them. Collecting all this evidence takes time, but it must be undertaken now to ensure the evidence is available when the perpetrators can be held accountable. International cooperation is crucial in cases of mass crimes because victims, witnesses and suspects may be dispersed across the globe. Evidence collected in Estonia today could be essential in proving a crime decades later in another country. KAPO maintains close international cooperation with other countries and investigators from the ICC.

²³ The International Criminal Court, seated in The Hague, was established by the Rome Statute on 17 July 1998. The ICC began functioning on 1 July 2002, when the treaty entered into force. Some of the signatory states have not yet ratified the treaty. As of February 2024, 124 countries had acceded to the Rome Statute, but Russia and the United States, for example, have announced their intention not to join. Similarly, Ukraine has not joined the Rome Statute, but since 2014, it has recognised the jurisdiction of the ICC in its territory.

Recollections of an Estonian volunteer

On 2 February 2023, Erko Laidinen, a 35-year-old Estonian volunteer medic, went to Ukraine to provide assistance to injured civilians. While one of the volunteer vehicles was struck by a rocket, Laidinen, who had parked another vehicle, inadvertently captured the moment of the attack on his phone. The attack resulted in one fatality and three severe injuries.

With a background in automotive mechanics and electrical engineering, Erko Laidinen began his volunteer work in Ukraine early in the conflict. Initially, he transported aid volunteers to the border, but he later became involved in delivering humanitarian assistance to Ukraine on behalf of foreign organisations. He has witnessed the struggles of people fleeing their homes and enduring days of displacement, as well as those who opt to stay because they have no alternative



A frame from a smartphone video capturing the moment when the Russian side attacked medics who were assisting victims.
Source: Erko Laidinen

options. It is not uncommon to find a few families still living in a nine-storey building with 120 apartments in a city ravaged by bombings, simply because they have nowhere else to go.

Laidinen knew what he was getting into. Speaking to KAPO about his activities in Ukraine, he said, "I knew how corrupt the country was. These people have lived in poverty because of mafia-style rule. The country is being plundered, and the people live in poverty and suffer. In peacetime, it's hard to make a difference; you can't just shout and wave a flag in the middle of the square. But in this situation, there's a chance to make a change. There are no winners in this war; everyone has lost."

Just a few metres closer to the explosion he filmed, and he might not have survived to tell the tale. In every city in Ukraine, volunteers have their own "Katya" – a volunteer who has set up a base for those in need. They provide assistance, exchange knowledge and share information about enemy activities. It is a place to take a break and have a cup of coffee with your comrades in arms.

During one such break, some soldiers ran to Laidinen's Katya with news of injuries. Laidinen served as a volunteer frontline medic and immediately began packing up. Medics arrived at the scene in three frontline ambulance vehicles. Despite concerns about lacking communication with other vehicles, they continued their journey to a relatively open area. Upon arrival, they saw a wrecked vehicle with a person lying nearby. The medics got out of their cars and rushed to help the injured. Suddenly, an explosion ripped through the air. The vehicle parked next to the injured person exploded. The first explosion was followed by a second, targeting another medic vehicle. Fortunately, the third vehicle began moving just after the first explo-

sion, otherwise it would have been hit too. The entire area then came under mortar fire. Laidinen, who had parked his vehicle on the other side of the road, had his phone in hand. He intended to snap a photo but inadvertently captured a video. A war crime. As the explosion shattered the vehicle's side windows, the phone was flung to the back seat by the force of the blast. It continued recording in darkness for nearly half an hour, documenting the entire assault, the sounds of shouting and the urgent cries of pain from the medics rushing to aid.

Laidinen sought shelter in a cellar, then in another. He was missing for nearly five hours before finding his way back. The incident occurred in an open area, and a sniper could have easily targeted a running medic. "Running across an open area, that's like something from an action movie," he recalls. As he had an agreement with friends that they would collect his remains if he were killed in Ukraine, many went searching for him. People stick together there. "During such times, people develop a genuine closeness," Laidinen remarks.

He says stories like this happen every day in Ukraine. Thousands perish, possibly without anyone ever knowing about their fate. The knowledge of this suffering compels him to continue checking on the welfare of his comrades in Ukraine and seeking assistance and support for them, even while in Estonia. Despite all the efforts, he does not anticipate a desired resolution to the conflict. He believes Russia must be brought to its knees to create a decisive moment. While the outcome will probably not be what the Ukrainian people desire, it is crucial for Russia to understand that the Ukrainian people harbour deep-seated anger, similar to the Russians' enduring resentment towards the Germans after World War II, a sentiment that persists across generations.

History: 75 years since the post-war mass deportations in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Moldova

Author: Pearu Kuusk, historian

From 25 to 29 March 1949, the Soviet occupation regime deported over 20,000 Estonian civilians to Siberia. This was part of Operation Priboi (“Coastal Surf”), which was simultaneously conducted in the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian SSR. In just a few days, approximately 95,000 people were detained and deported from the three Baltic states.

The year 2024 marks 75 years since the March deportations. Historians could only start researching these mass repressions towards the end of the Soviet Union and after its collapse, which also opened access to some of the KGB’s archival documents. KAPO began a criminal investigation into the March deportations in January 1995. The first court verdict in this investigation, the most extensive criminal case in KAPO’s history, was reached on 22 January 1999 when Johannes Klaassepp, a former operative of the Estonian SSR Ministry of State Security (MGB) in Läänemaa, was found guilty by the Lääne County Court. In total, eight individuals have been convicted in Estonian courts for the March deportations as a crime against humanity.

Investigating the March deportations was challenging due to the amount of time that had elapsed and the fragmentary documents left by the Soviet security agencies. However, KAPO investigators managed to gather sufficient evidence of the crime’s planning, preparation, execution and command chains. The work of historians in regard to the KGB (Committee for State Security) archives that remained in Estonia was a great help. Numerous studies, academic articles and memoirs have been

published on the March deportations, along with a wealth of source materials, including the documents of various Soviet security agencies. Notably, the collection “Priboi” Files: Articles and Documents of the March Deportation of 1949, published in the Proceedings of the Estonian Institute of Historical Memory, features an Estonian translation of the top-secret Priboi file from the Estonian SSR MGB, which compiled all the Estonian deportation plans and reports by county.²⁴ This file was a crucial source for KAPO’s investigation into the mass deportation operation in 1949.

Despite the abundance of literature on the subject, historians have repeatedly stated that the topic of the March deportations is far from exhausted, with a significant amount of research material still available. It is important to place the March deportations in the Baltic states within the broader context of the Soviet Union’s post-war mass deportations from 1947 to 1952, which were aimed at quelling resistance, similar to the earlier deportations carried out in the Soviet Union’s annexed western territories in 1939 and 1940 and again in 1944 and 1945. The post-war deportations were the deadliest resettlement operations conducted in Ukraine (1947), Lithuania (1948), and Estonia, Latvia and Moldova (1949). The organisation and instructions for the deportation operations were largely similar.

Each deportation operation was led by a general overseer appointed by decree of the minister of state security of the Soviet Union. Mostly, security officers from the Soviet MGB leadership were dispatched to occupied regions to carry out the operations. The general overseer for the operations – Zapad (in Western Ukraine), Vesna (in Lithuania) and Priboi – was the Deputy Minister of State Security of the Soviet Union, Sergei Ogoltsov. The preparation and execution of the deportation were organised under the joint leadership of the local minister of state security and the Soviet MGB commissioners.²⁵

²⁴ The Priboi Files: Articles and Documents of the March Deportation of 1949. Proceedings of the Estonian Institute of Historical Memory 2 (2019). University of Tartu Press, 2019.

²⁵ For more information on the post-war deportation operations in the USSR, see Meelis Saueauk. Märtsiküüditamine NSV Liidu sõjajärgsete massideporteerimiste kontekstis. Tuna, 2019, pp. 80–97.

²⁶ National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, fund R-3403, inventory 1, file 1, ff. 125–130.

²⁷ See: Meelis Saueauk. Märtsiküüditamine, p. 94. Boris Nazarov ERAF, fund 1, inventory 6, file 2246; Aleksandr Mikhailov ERAF, fund 1, inventory 6, file 7381.

The available source material on the Soviet post-war deportation operations is far from uniform; in some cases, only the general directives at the central government level are available or, conversely, lower-level documents, such as local reports or even the personal files of the deported.

This year's Annual Review includes a translation from Russian to English of two documents used in Moldova's 1949 deportation, Operation Yug ("South"). These were top-secret memos (in Russian, *pamyatka*) for the operational group leader and the loading point commander.²⁶ The texts of the memos, along with the train manifest and a sample report on the deportation process, were distributed on 30 June 1949 to all the sector heads of Operation Yug. The operation lasted from the morning of 6 July 1949 until the late evening of 8 July 1949, with over 35,000 people deported from Moldova to "special settlements" in just a few days.

In Estonia, the separate instructions for operational group leaders and loading point commanders have not survived among the archival material on the March deportations, but the main duties of these positions are evident from Union-wide directives (e.g. the USSR MGB's instructions on the deportation procedure) and county plans for the operation. We do not know whether such instructions were physically used by the operational group leaders and loading point commanders in Estonia at the time of the operation. As stated in the memo for the operational group leader in the Moldavian SSR MGB (item 15), this highly confidential document, along with others, was to be returned to the local city or district branch of the MGB immediately after the operation's conclusion. The memos and other surviving documents from Operation Yug indicate that the deportation organised in Moldova mirrored the tactics used in Operation Priboi in Estonia just a few months earlier. Thus, documents preserved in Moldova may contribute to the research on the March deportations carried out in Estonia and fill gaps in the source material.

Exploring the materials from Operation Yug in Moldova reveals several facts that, in addition to their temporal proximity, link this event to the March deportations in Estonia. The operational sector commissioner for the city of Chişinău was the Deputy Minister of State Security of the Estonian SSR, Colonel Aleksandr Mikhailov (1909–1977), and the commissioner for the Chişinău district was the head of the Pärnu city branch of the Estonian SSR MGB, Colonel Boris Nazarov (1902–1974).²⁷ Thus, the leadership of Operation Yug in the capital of the Moldavian SSR and its surroundings was entrusted to experienced security officers from the Estonian SSR who had distinguished themselves in Operation Priboi a few months earlier. As the deputy minister of state security of the Estonian SSR, Mikhailov participated in the March deportations from their preparation phase, with the list of categories and preliminary figures of the individuals to be deported from Estonia to Moscow as early as January 1949 bearing his signature. During the March deportations, Mikhailov served as the MGB commissioner for the county of Tartu. Nazarov, due to his position, led the March deportations in Pärnu city and county.

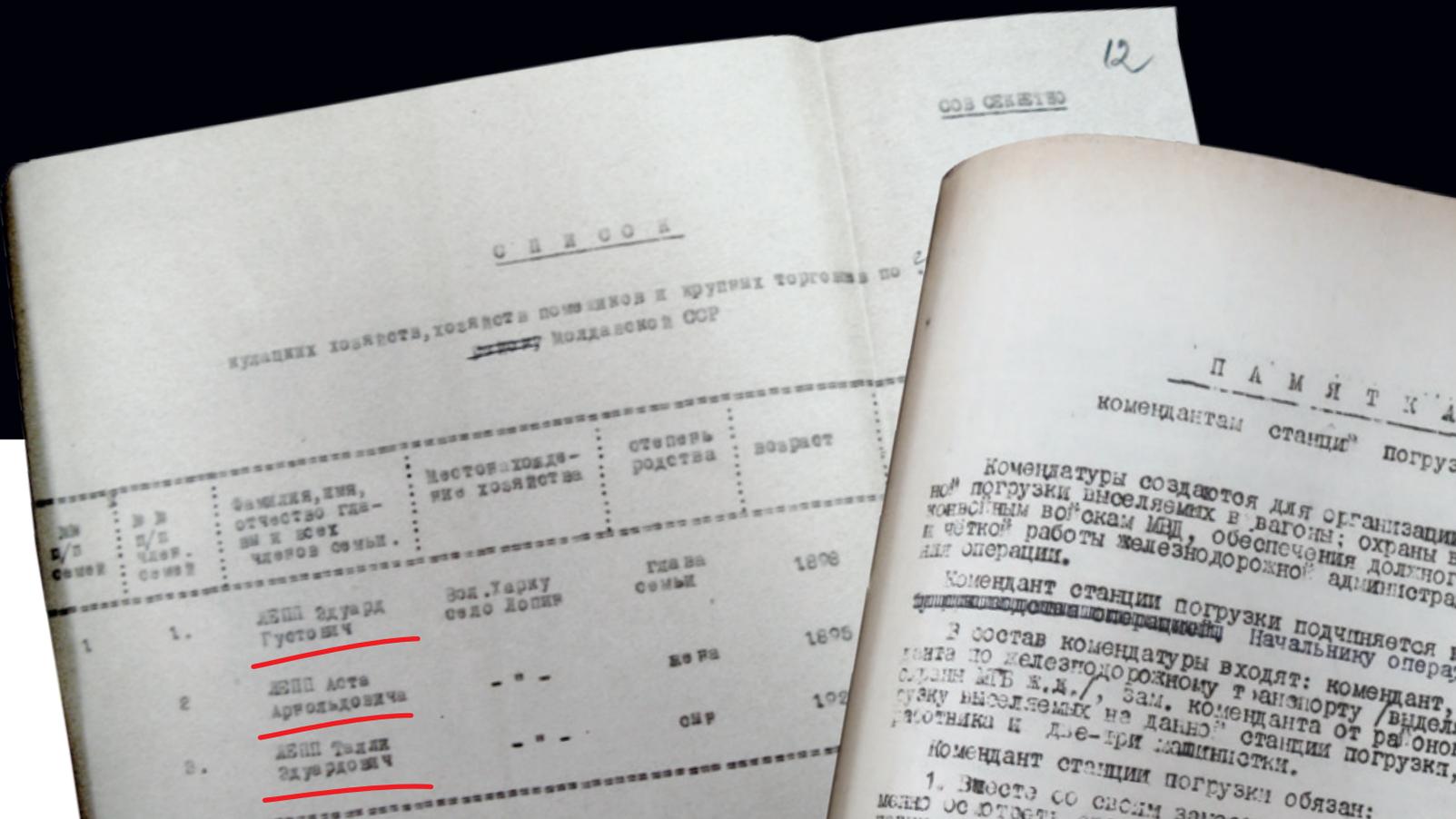
Boris Nazarov (1902–1974)



The post-war deportations in the Soviet Union were massive operations, requiring additional forces, including officers and soldiers. For the execution of Operation Yug, over 4,000 MGB and MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) operatives were dispatched to Moldova from other republics and oblasts of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1949. Both in Moldova and Estonia, the preparation and execution of the operations were coordinated by a Soviet MGB commissioner, Major General Ivan Yermolin, who served as the head of the counterintelligence department of the Belarus Military District MGB from 1946 to 1952. In Moldova, the Soviet authorities likely sought to leverage Yermolin's recent experience in Estonia, hence his deployment to the south, along with leading members of the Estonian SSR MGB.

Evidence of the application of experiences gained during Priboi in Estonia in spring 1949 to Operation Yug in Moldova includes document templates created during the preparation of Yug, which served as blueprints for local operatives in compiling various

lists, statements and reports. Many sample forms feature Estonian personal and place names. For example, among the materials submitted by the chairs of the executive committees to the Moldavian SSR MGB district departments, there is a sample list of kulak households, landowners and merchants, surprisingly including a three-member family from Harku municipality near Tallinn: Eduard Lepp, Asta Lepp and their son Talli Lepp. Born in 1898, Eduard Lepp worked in the Abja collective farm, and his wife Asta was a homemaker. In the document sample, their son Talli is listed as a student at the University of Kishinyov.²⁸ The resolutions drawn up on the document samples confirm that they arrived at the desks of Moldova SSR MGB officers in April 1949, immediately after the end of the March deportations in Estonia. The family mentioned in the document samples was not deported in either Estonia or Moldova, likely representing fictitious names. However, these names indicate the model used source in preparing the 1949 deportation operation in Moldova.



The operatives from the Estonian SSR MGB dispatched to Moldova fulfilled their assigned tasks. On 9 July 1949, Mikhailov reported to the Moldavian SSR Minister of State Security Jossif Mordovets and the Soviet MGB Commissioner Ivan Yermolin that 473 families, totalling 1,443 individuals, had been detained and deported from the city of Chişinău.²⁹ The next day, Nazarov submitted his consolidated report to the operation's leadership, stating that 1,749 families, a total of 5,751 individuals, had been permanently relocated to special settlements from the Chişinău district. Nazarov also reported that during the operation, 27 individuals designated for deportation in his operational sector had fled, and 5 were killed, including a 15-year-old girl.³⁰ On 12 July 1949, Mordovets and Yermolin reported to Moscow that the operation had concluded: "Overall, the deportation operation from the Moldavian SSR proceeded entirely as planned, without any significant incidents or excesses."³¹

The unity of all the mass deportations of 1949 is underscored by the fact that the participants were collectively awarded for "the successful completion of the

special assignment" with a single decree. On 24 August 1949, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR issued a decree "On Awarding Orders and Medals to Generals, Officers, Sergeants and Rank and File of the MGB and MVD of the USSR", awarding the participants in operations Priboi and Yug as well as those who carried out the deportation of Armenian Dashnaks, Greeks and Turks from the Black Sea coast in June 1949 as part of Operation Volna ("Wave"). In total, 3,142 individuals were awarded for participating in crimes against humanity. Mikhailov and Nazarov were awarded the Order of the Patriotic War, First Class.

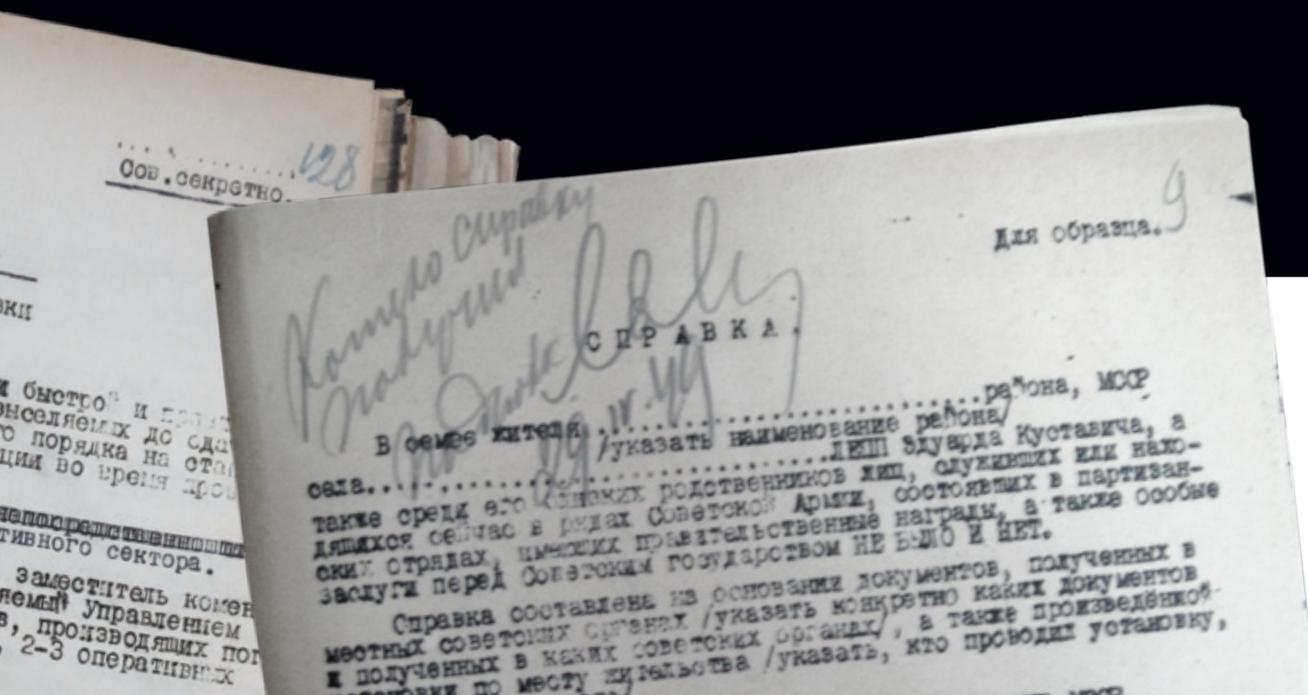
The awards for participation in the Moldova and Black Sea coast operations were annulled by a decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR dated 3 February 1963. Even the official KGB history textbook later described these deportations as a mistake: "The most serious shortcomings were violations of the norms of socialist legislation, including the displacement of relatives of nationalists." However, the awards for Operation Priboi, which involved the deportations in the Baltic states, were not revoked and remained in effect.

²⁸ National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, fund R-3397, inventory 4, file 1, ff. 9–11.

²⁹ National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, fund R-3403, inventory 1, file 1, ff. 201–206.

³⁰ National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, fund R-3403, inventory 1, file 1, ff. 221–225.

³¹ National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, fund R-3403, inventory 1, file 1, ff. 237–242.



**СОВЕРШЕННО
СЕКРЕТНО**



Top secret. Memo for the operational group leader

The operational group leader, tasked with the deportation of families from the special contingent, is required to undertake the following actions:

1. Obtain from the head of the MGB city/district department an extract from the list of families to be apprehended. This extract must include the identification details of all family members subject to deportation and their exact residential addresses.
2. Prior to the commencement of the operation, thoroughly familiarise yourself with the location using a district map or city plan /in cities – streets, houses/ where the families subject to deportation reside, and study the route from the operational group's assembly point to these locations and then to the loading station.
3. Upon receiving the order, the operational group leader, along with his group, must arrive on time, verify the surname of the head of the household and other details against the order, and if they match, proceed with the operation.
4. Before starting the operation, the operational group leader announces that the family is subject to deportation from the borders of Moldova to more distant regions of the Soviet Union /the text of the announcement is different for kulaks, traders, former landowners, and for other categories; to be attached/. If the family members do not speak Russian, the announcement is made in Moldovan.
5. After warning that resistance or attempts to evade deportation will lead to prosecution, suggest that they begin packing their belongings. Ensure that the deportees take buckets with them, and if available, saws and axes.
6. The remaining movable and immovable property, as well as the deportees' livestock, are recorded by the representatives of the local authorities involved in the deportation, who will be responsible for the preservation of the property.
7. During the collection of the deportees, a questionnaire for the head of the family is completed in a single copy, detailing identified information about each family member and close relatives according to section 16. The information obtained from members of the deportee family must be verified against the documents in possession of the deportees.

It is mandatory to interview every adult member of the family from the age of 15 about their identification details and to obtain their personal signature on the questionnaire.

At the same time, a certificate of receipt is completed for each family in duplicate on the specified form.

The questionnaire and certificate of receipt are to be completed in ink. Signatures on these documents must be legible.

If an individual, i.e. a family member identified in another district, is being deported, a questionnaire and receipt will be completed for them as well, but their documents will be marked as "individual", and they will not be listed as the head of the family but as a family member in the receipt.

8. If, at the time of the operation, any family member subject to deportation is absent, the operational group leader will determine the missing person's location /in the field, at neighbours, etc./ and take measures for their apprehension and transport to the loading point.

If the head of the family or a family member listed for deportation flees, hides, dies, is seriously ill, etc., at the time of the operation, the operational group leader will make a corresponding note on the questionnaire and in the receipt.

In cases where additional individuals not listed for deportation are found in the deportee family /father, mother, son, brother, daughter, sister, etc./ during the operation, the operational group leader will carefully verify these individuals and, if they indeed belong to that family and are economically inseparably connected, will add them to the deportee family's composition and list them on the questionnaire and in the receipt.

The operational group leader must report any numerical changes in the composition of the deportee family, as well as clarifications of the deportees' identification details /surname, first name, patronymic, year of birth, etc./, in a separate free-form detailed report for each family to the head of the MGB city/district department.

9. If individuals are discovered within a deportee family, excluding those families noted on the operational sheet as having received approval from authorities, who actively participated in the defence of the homeland during the Great Patriotic War in the ranks of the Soviet Army and partisan groups, served in the Soviet Army, or were awarded the Order of Lenin, Order of the Red Banner, Order of the Red Banner of Labour, Order of the Red Star, Order of Honour, Order of the Patriotic War, or the orders of Suvorov, Nakhimov, Alexander Nevsky, Kutuzov or Bogdan Khmel'nitsky, or medals "For Courage", "For Battle Merit", "For Labour Valour", "For Distinguished Labour", who have special merits to the state /distinguished figures, laureates, deputies of the Supreme Soviet, deputies of regional and oblast councils/, and if there are no able-bodied individuals in the family, immediately notify the city/district department head and await further orders without stopping the deportation of other families.
10. For transporting deportees to the collection point, where necessary, use the population's animal-drawn vehicles in the absence of cars.
11. Do not allow the gathering of unrelated individuals at the homes of the deportees.
In the case of armed resistance or incidents, take measures to eliminate them.
12. Deportee families are handed over to the loading station commander with a report indicating the completion of the task.
The documentation is handed over to the station commander along with the family /certificate of receipt, questionnaires, and reports on changes in the family composition or identification data/. Records and search reports along with any confiscated anti-Soviet documents, weapons, etc. are to be submitted to the city/district department.
After handing over the arrested families to the loading station commander, the operational group leader proceeds to the city/district department with the permission of the deputy commander of the district.
13. Operational group leaders report on the progress of the operation to the heads of the respective MGB city/district departments by all available means – via telephone, through messengers, etc. Communication methods for each operational group are determined on-site by the MGB city/district departments.
14. The operational group leader must immediately report to the MGB city/district department about any cases of armed resistance during the deportation, manifestations of banditry, anti-Soviet outbreaks and other significant incidents during the operation, and the measures taken.
15. Upon the completion of the operation, the operational group leader reports on the work done to the head of the city/district department and returns a report on the handing over of the apprehended families, the task list for the apprehension of the special contingent, the memo, texts of deportation announcements, search reports, etc.

Translation from Russian. The original document is housed in the National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, fund R-3403, inventory 1, file 1, ff. 125–127.

**СОВЕРШЕННО
СЕКРЕТНО**



Top secret. Memo for loading station commanders

Command posts are established to organise the swift and correct loading of deportees: overseeing deportees until they are handed over to the MVD³³ convoy forces and ensuring the necessary order and precise operation of the railway administration during the execution of the operation.

The commander of the loading station is subordinate to the head of the operational sector.

The command post staff includes: the commander, the deputy commander for railway transport /appointed by the MGB Railway Administration/, the deputy commander for districts, who oversees the loading of deportees at the specific loading station, 2–3 operational staff, and 2–3 typists.

The loading station commander is required to undertake the following actions:

1. Inspect the loading station with his deputy for transport in a timely manner to determine the location for loading wagons, considering access routes and the capability of vehicles to approach the wagons.
2. Review the territory of the loading station to determine the placement of the command post and the locations of guard posts during the loading of deportees into wagons.

The guard is reinforced by the available operational personnel and forces upon the arrival of the special contingent at the loading station.

3. Prior to the operation, the commander must receive information from the MGB about how many families, by category, and from which districts are to be deported and how many wagons are allocated to the station for loading the deportees.

Before loading, the station commander must conduct a thorough briefing of all command post staff and clarify their duties to each of them.

4. Upon the arrival of families at the station, the commander and his deputies check the accuracy of the completed questionnaires and certificates with the help of surveys and documents, identifying whether the deportee families include any individuals who actively participated in the defence of the homeland during the Great Patriotic War in the ranks of the Soviet Army and partisan groups, served in the Soviet Army, or were awarded the Order of Lenin, Order of the Red Banner, Order of the Red Banner of Labour, Order of the Red Star, Order of Honour, Order of the Patriotic War, or the orders of Suvorov, Kutuzov, Nakhimov, Ushakov, Alexander Nevsky or Bogdan Khmel'nitsky, or medals "For Courage", "For Battle Merit", "For Labour Valour", "For Distinguished Labour", who have special merits to the state /distinguished figures, laureates, deputies of the Supreme Soviet, deputies of regional and oblast councils/.

If such families are identified, except for families for whom there is a note of deportation approval by the Central Committee on the operational sheet, as well as in the absence of able-bodied individuals in the deportee family, loading must be stopped, and instructions must be sought from the leadership.

Incorrectly completed questionnaires and certificates of receipt are to be rewritten by the head of the operative group that brought the family.

5. The commander and his deputy accept verbal and written statements from the deportees, check them immediately, and report to the leadership to receive instructions.

³³ MVD – abbreviation of the Russian name of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Министерство внутренних дел).

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6. The commander of the loading station /or his deputy/ notes the receipt of each family in the reports of the operational group leaders, which are submitted to the respective MGB city/district departments at the end of the operation as a report on the task completion.

Upon receiving a family, the commander takes both copies of the certificate of receipt, questionnaires and reports on identified changes in the family composition or identification data from the operational group leader.

The commander of the loading station notes the receipt of the special contingent from the operational groups in the district lists of families and individuals subject to detention in his possession. The commander receives these lists from the respective MGB district departments before the start of the operation.

7. After checking the deportees and their completed documents, the commander or his deputy hands over the deportee family to the convoy forces train commander for loading into wagons.

The train commander marks the receipt of the family on both copies of the certificate, keeps one copy and returns the other to the operative who handed over the family to the train. The receipt must clearly state the station, region and oblast where the family is being deported. Signatures, positions and the name of the train commander who received the family, and the operative who handed it over, must be clearly and legibly written on the receipt.

8. Upon filling the wagons with the special contingent, a train manifest is compiled /form attached/, printed in three copies, and signed by the commander and the train commander. The first and second copies of this manifest are submitted by the loading station commander to the Moldavian MGB, and the third to the train commander.

9. Individuals brought to the loading point, i.e. family members being deported from other districts, are handed over to the command post in the same manner as families, i.e. with questionnaires and certificates of receipt, but their documents must be marked as "individual", and they must be listed not as heads of families but as family members in the receipt.

All individuals are loaded into a separate wagon and listed in the train manifest after families, under "individuals".

10. For the purpose of fast and uninterrupted reception of families brought to the loading point, the command post organises reception simultaneously into 4–5 wagons /based on districts/ and accordingly facilitates the access of vehicles arriving at the train.
11. If the station involves loading a group of wagons rather than an entire train, the commander organises the loading of the deportees into the wagons, arranges for their guard and escort along with all documents to the station forming the train, where he oversees their handover to the MVD convoy forces commander.
12. In case of any incidents or obstacles at the loading station or its vicinity, the commander takes measures to address them and immediately reports to the leadership.
13. Every two hours, the commander reports to the leadership on the progress of loading and numerical data in a specified format according to district.
14. Upon receiving an order to conclude the operation, the commander submits all documentation along with a report on the results of the work to the leadership.

Translation from Russian. The original document is housed in the National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, fund R-3403, inventory 1, file 1, ff. 128–130.

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