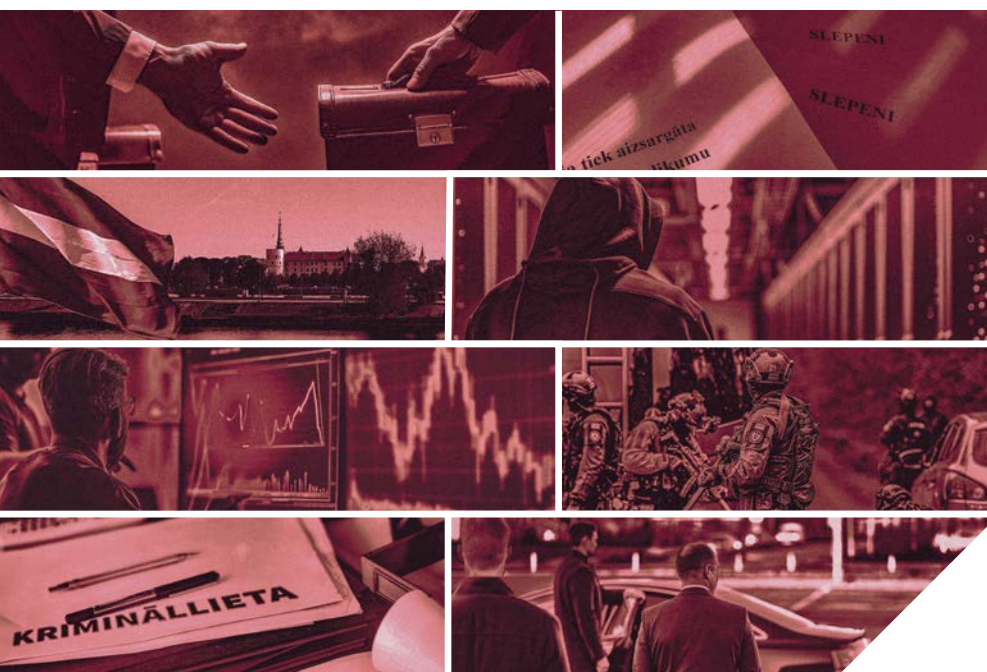




LATVIAN STATE SECURITY SERVICE



ANNUAL
REPORT

2023

ANNUAL REPORT
ON THE
ACTIVITIES
OF LATVIAN
STATE SECURITY
SERVICE (VDD)
IN 2023



APRIL 2024

**LATVIAN STATE SECURITY SERVICE.
ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2023**

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FOREWORD

Russia's unprovoked military aggression against Ukraine, which has shaken the international security architecture meticulously constructed after Second World War, has been going on for more than two years. During these two years, by continuing to commit unprecedented war crimes against Ukrainian civilians and infrastructure, Russia is blatantly ignoring international humanitarian law and treaties established over the centuries to which it has acceded to.

Last year Latvian State Security Service (VDD) continued its participation in the international team of investigators formed to investigate Russia's crimes in Ukraine, providing support in carrying out investigative activities. There is no statute of limitations for the crimes that Russia continues to commit in Ukraine. In the Service's assessment, Russia and its ruling elite must not go unpunished, even if it takes a long time to bring those responsible for aggression and other international crimes to justice.

The war in Ukraine undeniably continued to have a negative impact on Latvia as well. VDD provides analysis and assessment of factors that had an impact on the national security of our country in 2023, as well as current risks and forecasts. Also, to the extent permitted by the secrecy of the Service's activities, VDD has compiled the publicly releasable results of its work.

Last year, the Service initiated the highest number of criminal cases to date per year on suspicion of spying for Russia or other forms of support for the aggressor state. As evidenced by the espionage cases investigated by VDD and the analysis of other information at the disposal of the Service, despite the massive diversion of resources to fight the war in Ukraine and divide the West, Russia continues to carry out intelligence and influence measures against our country.

VDD continued its close cooperation with the Defence Intelligence and Security Service (MIDD) to uncover malign Russia's activities, for which Russia employs both assets dating back to the collapse of the Soviet Union as well as newly recruited individuals. Current

trends confirm that Russia is ready to use any methods against countries unfriendly to it, and the intelligence and security services of Russia do not need to worry about obeying the law for the measures taken.

In order to reduce intelligence risks for critical infrastructure objects under the responsibility of the Service, last year VDD continued vetting employees of these objects, paying special attention to persons potentially disloyal to Latvia. The Service also verified information on suspicious incidents near critical infrastructure objects and other objects of significance to national security, which indicated potential reconnaissance activities.

In 2023, the number of possible violations of the European Union (EU) sanctions investigated by VDD also increased. Despite the increasingly expanded international sanctions against Russia and its ally Belarus, some Latvian entrepreneurs continued to look for business opportunities in the aggressor country.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year also continued to negatively impact the processes in our society. The percentage of the population who continue to use the Russian language in everyday life, even 30 years after the restoration of Latvia's independence, is small yet significant. Two years after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there are still some individuals whose attitudes to geopolitical events have not significantly changed. In particular, they continue to consume propaganda and disinformation generated by the Kremlin. The longstanding self-sufficiency of the Russian language in the public space has hindered these residents from gaining a sense of belonging to Latvia and the Western cultural space.

Similarly to the year before, in 2023 VDD examined risk information on thousands of diverse cases, much of it related specifically to pro-Kremlin expressions. The Service held talks with several hundred Latvian residents who expressed support in the information space for the Kremlin or otherwise indirectly glorified the crimes committed by Russia against Ukraine

and the Ukrainian people. Last year again confirmed that Russia's information influence measures have a destructive effect on this part of Latvia's society, therefore our state must take the strictest measures to curb the Kremlin's propaganda.

VDD expects that Russia's actions against our country will become even more aggressive. Russia will use provocations to psychologically impact Latvian society, seeking to arouse fear and insecurity by testing our vigilance and resilience.

The Service reiterates that the support of every resident of Latvia is essential for ensuring national security. Therefore, VDD is grateful to the public for its activity so far, by reporting on supporters of Russia's aggression and other potential threats, and calls for continued active and purposeful participation in strengthening the security of our country.

Finally, it should be noted that in January of this year VDD began working in its new premises, that have been constructed and equipped in accordance with the highest information protection and physical security requirements of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the intelligence and security services of the EU Member States. Therefore, residents who have information useful to the work of VDD or who need a consultation are welcome, after applying in advance, to visit the Service's new headquarters at 207 Brīvības gatve, Riga. Brīvības gatve means "Freedom Avenue," giving added significance to the Service's location. Safeguarding the freedom of the state and the people of Latvia is one of the main tasks of the Service.

Yours sincerely,
Normunds Mežviets,
Director General of Latvian State Security Service



Service building on Brīvības gatve, photo – VDD



01

COUNTERINTELLIGENCE

In terms of the scope of activities, aggression and available resources, last year the most significant threat to the national security of Latvia continued to be posed by the intelligence and security services of Russia. Russia's intelligence remained focused on Ukraine. Concurrently, gathering intelligence on NATO and the EU Member States supporting Ukraine, including Latvia, remained a priority for the aggressor state's intelligence and security services.

All three intelligence and security services of Russia continued their activities against Latvia last year: the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces (GRU) and the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). However, according to the observations of VDD, the most aggressive and intensive activities against Latvia were conducted by FSB and GRU.

Although significantly less intensive than Russia's activities, the Belarusian intelligence and security services also continued working against Latvia. Also, last year they often acted in the interests of or on behalf of the intelligence and security services of Russia, as is typical for almost all member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

The Chinese intelligence and security services also maintained interest in Latvia. However, as in previous years, VDD did not observe aggressive activities by these intelligence and security services directly endangering the national security of Latvia.

VDD conducted extensive and systematic measures to counter the intelligence activities of foreign intelligence and security services in the territory of Latvia. One of the Service's important activities in the field of counterintelligence last year remained the vetting of foreigners entering Latvia, i.e. vetting them from the perspective of intelligence risks. The Service also paid increased attention to suspicious activities by Latvian nationals and citizens of other countries within our country. Having identified signs of espionage or other crimes against national security, the Service began an investigation.



Last year, cases of espionage identified and investigated by VDD once again confirmed that information on Latvia's military facilities and critical infrastructure, as well as the personnel and resources of the armed forces is of key importance to the intelligence and security services of Russia.

Such information can provide Russia with significant advantages in the event of a war. Also, last year the intelligence and security services of Russia and other hostile countries were interested in obtaining publicly unavailable information on political, economic and societal processes in Latvia, as well as the personnel, capabilities and resources of Latvia's intelligence and security services and operational services.

It was also in the interests of Russia's intelligence and security services to recruit and train persons for conducting harmful activities not only in Ukraine or elsewhere in Europe, but also in the Baltic States, including Latvia.

the activities of its intelligence and security services against Latvia at the previous level of aggression and intensity.

According to information available to VDD, in 2023, Russia's intelligence and security services assessed several potential scenarios for the development of events, and in the Kremlin's perception, a military conflict with NATO cannot be ruled out. Taking this into account, gathering up-to-date information on strategically significant objects in the territory of Latvia, which in the event of war would be targets of military significance, was a priority for the intelligence and security services of Russia. Last year, VDD in cooperation with MIDD detained several persons on suspicion of spying for Russia, who were engaged in observing and studying such objects.

At the same time, Latvia's political decision-making process, the presence of allied forces in the territory of Latvia, the security situation and infrastructure in the border area of Russia, the personnel, capabilities and resources of Latvia's intelligence and security services and operational services, the mood of inhabitants in different regions, the potential for provoking unrest etc., remained of interest to Russia's intelligence and security services last year.

According to information obtained by VDD, last year, assessing the national resilience of Latvia was an important goal for Russia's intelligence and security services. The intelligence and security services of Russia purposefully searched for "weak points" in order to divide Latvian society and faith in the idea of a national state. The efforts of Latvia to strengthen the role of Latvian as the official language, reducing the dominance of Russian content in the public space of Latvia, and to promote energy and economic independence from Russia, are not in line with the foreign policy interests of the aggressor state. The intelligence and security services of Russia also looked for ways to induce apathy in Latvian society about the war in Ukraine, to promote readiness to reduce the sanctions introduced against Russia and the desire to make other compromises with the aggressor.

1.1.

TRENDS IN THE ACTIVITIES OF RUSSIA'S INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY SERVICES

Logos of Russia's intelligence and security services



GRU



FSB



SVR

Although Russia has transferred significant intelligence resources to the Ukrainian front, it was still able to maintain

SECURITY OF CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Taking into account the priority intelligence interests of the intelligence and security services of Russia, VDD urges the public to notice any suspicious activities at critical infrastructure objects in Latvia and to immediately inform the Service thereof.



Illustrative image, VDD

Airports, ports, railway stations, road bridges and junctions, infrastructure for the provision of water, electricity and gas to inhabitants and other objects, the malfunctioning of which would significantly affect the implementation of the basic functions of the state and society, are considered as objects of critical infrastructure. A full list of critical infrastructure objects is not publicly available in order to protect individual objects from increased interest and to reduce intelligence risks.

The vigilance of the personnel responsible for the security of critical infrastructure objects is fundamentally important for the prevention of risks: recording of suspicious incidents, responding to them, informing the State Police and VDD. Last year, the Service regularly identified shortcomings in the work of persons responsible for the security of critical infrastructure objects.

Shortcomings most frequently identified by the Service:

- those responsible for recording incidents are lax about recording the personal data of persons involved in incidents. Later, it is difficult to identify the persons involved.
- not seeking explanations from persons about their reasons for being near the object.
- in some cases, those responsible were not even trying to respond to suspicious activities near the objects

At the same time, a significant threat similar to external observing and studying of the object can be posed by disloyal employees inside it. Such persons

can potentially not only obtain geospatial data, but also gather information about other employees or create hidden access rights to information systems. Therefore, a particularly high standard applies to the evaluation of current and potential employees at critical infrastructure objects.

VDD also regularly performs vetting of persons employed in critical infrastructure objects in the context of intelligence risks. Last year, as a result of vetting, VDD found 21 person unsuitable for work at critical infrastructure objects.

EXAMPLES OF SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITIES:

- filming, photographing or observing the object;
- piloting of a drone or unmanned aerial vehicle in the vicinity of a critical infrastructure object;
- extended stays at the object or repeated movement near it;
- taking notes or sketching while near the object;
- making marks, attaching objects or digging near the object;
- use of optical or electronic measuring devices;
- making a suspicious video call or phone call at the object;
- the use of non-standard communication devices, such as a walkie-talkie;
- veiled face or other camouflage, concealment of identity;
- accessing the object in the dark;
- stopping nearby in a car equipped with a video recorder;
- provocative actions that could be aimed at checking the security regime of the object;
- persons with military attributes – camouflage clothing, military-style shoes;
- symbols associated with Russia on clothing or corresponding tattoos;
- surveillance cameras located in atypical locations, in particular with an autonomous power supply system (batteries, chargers), for example, in a forest in the vicinity of railway infrastructure or other critical infrastructure;
- drawing anti-NATO and anti-Ukrainian or other provocative graffiti on or near a critical infrastructure object.

As in previous years, intelligence from the territory of Russia was the most widely used type of intelligence collection for obtaining information about Latvia. Despite travel restrictions and regular warnings from VDD regarding risks, an average of 1000 residents of Latvia continued to visit Russia every month, offering opportunities for Russia's intelligence and security services for recruitment and obtaining information.

FSB was particularly active on the Latvian-Russian border, carrying out checks and interviews of travellers. According to information available to VDD, representatives of FSB paid special attention to Ukrainian citizens and Latvian nationals with intelligence potential. VDD reiterates that travel to Russia and its allies carries particularly high risks of recruitment, intelligence gathering and provocation.

Faced with intense counteractivity from NATO and the EU countries and limited opportunities to operate in Western territories, Russian intelligence and security services last year sought new channels for recruiting sources of intelligence information. Social networking sites and direct communication applications have increasingly served this purpose. VDD recorded cases of both intelligence gathering and transmission of pro-Kremlin content in discussion groups, as well as addressing individuals on social networking sites with the aim of engaging them in intelligence gathering.

As evidenced by the cases identified by VDD, the communication platform "Telegram" was most often used to recruit new sources of intelligence. A good example is the channels created on "Telegram" by the pro-Kremlin criminal organization "Baltic anti-fascists", which, among other crimes, were used to recruit sources of intelligence and collect intelligence for the benefit of Russia. Last year, VDD asked the Prosecutor's Office to prosecute two so-called "Baltic anti-fascists" online recruits who were identified and detained in close cooperation with MIDD on charges of espionage. Both persons had collected and transferred information about the armed forces of Latvia and allied countries within the territory of Latvia to the pro-Kremlin criminal organization.

In 2023, a number of so-called "illegals" were discovered in NATO countries, i.e. agents sent abroad who hide their connection with their country of origin – Russia by impersonating citizens of another country. While the activities of "illegals" cannot be completely excluded in Latvia, it is less relevant, since it is possible for Russia to achieve the same goals using traditional intelligence from the territory of Russia. At the same time, the Service recommends caution in the event of sudden efforts by foreigners to establish contact. According to cases detected in NATO countries, special care is required with regard to persons from Latin American countries. In suspicious cases, it is recommended to pay attention to

whether the behaviour of the foreigner, their expression of cultural norms and personality are typical of the inhabitants of their purported country of origin.

1.2.

OBJECTIVES OF RECRUITMENT BY THE INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY SERVICES OF RUSSIA

In the past year, the intelligence and security services of Russia were still interested in recruiting persons who either have direct access to publicly unavailable information, or opportunities to obtain such information from acquaintances, former colleagues or business partners. Last year, VDD found that employees of Latvian state and municipal institutions often do not adequately assess the risks associated with various informal requests.

VDD draws attention to the fact that requests from private detectives may also be associated with intelligence risks. Caution is advised in dealing with both persons engaged in illegal detective activities, and also licensed private detectives. The Service reiterates that the disclosure of classified information is a criminal offence. In addition, it may turn out that the person seeking information is working for a foreign intelligence service.

VDD DRAWS YOUR ATTENTION!

VDD calls on state and municipal officials to treat requests from private detectives with caution, especially when asked to profile a colleague or obtain information from databases of national importance. We urge you to inform the Service immediately about such cases. VDD also reiterates that the use of workplace databases for private purposes can lead to dismissal or criminal charges.

As evidenced by cases analysed by VDD, the following persons are at the highest risk of recruitment within the territory of Russia:

- law enforcement officers;
- officials of state and municipal institutions;
- persons whose daily work duties allow them to obtain information about the National Armed Forces (NAF) and NATO forces, their bases, logistics or operations without hindrance;
- persons who served in the armed forces of the USSR or who have relatives who served therein;
- residents of Latvia who have relatives living in Russia, on whom it is possible to exert pressure.

In addition to intelligence gathering, one of the main tasks of Russian military intelligence is the formation of support positions for so-called kinetic operations, i.e. sabotage, diversion, etc. Thus, the intelligence and security services of Russia may approach residents of Latvia not only for the acquisition of information, but also for seemingly legitimate tasks, such as renting or maintaining properties, storing an object or placing an object in an urban environment. The performance of such tasks may provide significant support to the intelligence and security services of Russia in the implementation of harmful activities against the state of Latvia.

Over the past year, Russia continued to experience negative consequences from the restrictions imposed by the West on the import of technology, dual-use goods and production equipment. The establishment of schemes to circumvent these restrictions is important for the sustainability of the military-industrial sector of Russia. The intelligence and security services of Russia are also actively working in this direction. They are trying to build fictitious companies and networks of associates in Western countries in order to covertly import banned goods needed by Russia's military into Russia.

VDD WARNS!

VDD encourages manufacturers, distributors and carriers of goods to carefully monitor who is the final recipient of the goods, what goods are actually transported and whether the invoices contain accurate information. Violation of the EU's export restrictions to Russia is a criminal offence.

implemented by VDD, last year, the possibilities for activity by the Belarusian intelligence and security services in the territory of Latvia were limited. At the same time, the Belarusian intelligence and security services – the State Security Committee (KGB) and the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Belarusian Armed Forces (BGRU) – continued their work against Latvia from the territory of their country. The most active action against our country last year was taken by the KGB.

Last year, VDD learned of several cases when officers of the Belarusian intelligence and security services and other structures have taken various measures against citizens of Latvia and other EU countries who have temporarily entered or have stayed in the territory of Belarus for a long time. The Belarusian intelligence and security services are interested in using citizens of the EU Member States entering Belarus for obtaining information about developments in Europe, propaganda activities to discredit Western countries, as well as for other purposes. They may use illegal methods to achieve their goals.

VDD WARNS!

Traveling not only to Russia, but also to Belarus carries high risks of intelligence, recruitment and provocation. Latvian institutions have limited possibilities to help their nationals who are in difficulties in countries hostile to Latvia.

The autonomous interests of the Belarusian intelligence and security services were mainly related to ensuring the viability of the political leadership of Alexander Lukashenko. For this purpose, in 2023, the Belarusian intelligence and security services continued to gather intelligence on the Belarusian diaspora in Latvia, asylum seekers from Belarus, political opponents of A. Lukashenko and processes and plans of an economic nature that could have a positive or negative impact on the Belarusian economy.

At the same time, the Belarusian intelligence and security services continued to cooperate closely with the Russian intelligence and security services last year and also to obtain information to meet Russian intelligence needs. Therefore, the intelligence and security services of Belarus were interested in information about the defence capabilities of Latvia, military equipment and its movement in the territory of Latvia, objects of military and civilian critical infrastructure.

According to information obtained by VDD, the Belarusian intelligence and security services consider officers of Latvian law enforcement institutions

1.3.

TRENDS IN THE ACTIVITIES OF THE BELARUSIAN INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY SERVICES

Logos of intelligence and security services of Belarus



KGB



BGRU

Thanks to the political decisions taken in Latvia to restrict migration and the counterintelligence measures

and former military personnel to be highly valuable recruitment targets. Also, Belarusian citizens who have the right of residence in the EU, but who themselves or whose relatives still live in Belarus, are particularly suitable for cooperation with the Belarusian intelligence and security services. For example, truck drivers with Belarusian citizenship working for EU freight transport companies are at risk of recruitment.

Members of Lukashenko's political opposition living in the EU and persons close to them are also still of interest to the Belarusian intelligence and security services.

1.4.

TRENDS IN THE ACTIVITIES OF THE CHINESE INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY SERVICES

Logos of intelligence and security services of China



Intelligence Bureau of the Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (JSD-IB)



Chinese Ministry of State Security (MSS), which conducts intelligence and recruitment of agents abroad



Chinese Ministry of Public Security (MPS), which provides support to MSS intelligence against foreigners on Chinese territory

Last year, Latvia was not among the priority intelligence targets of the Chinese intelligence and security services. At the same time, China (including through its intelligence and security services) continued to identify opportunities for expanding its economic and political influence on a global scale. China sees Latvia as part of NATO and the EU. In an effort to consolidate its status as a world power, China competes with these alliances in terms of economic, technological and military development and influence.

Unlike the intelligence and security services of Russia and Belarus, the Chinese intelligence and security services did not conduct intense and aggressive activities against Latvia. At the same time, in the assessment of the Service, the threat caused by the intelligence and security services of China, especially

to the economic security interests of Latvia, should not be underestimated. Last year, VDD mainly observed interest by the Intelligence Bureau of the Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission of the Chinese People's Liberation Army in Latvia.

According to the information at the disposal of VDD, the interests of the Chinese intelligence and security services last year included internal processes and involvement of Latvia in decision-making in NATO and the EU, strategically important sectors and companies in Latvia, potential investment niches in our country, as well as science projects with high innovation potential. China's intelligence and security services were also interested in creating positions of influence in Latvia in order to foster disseminating of narratives and decision-making in our country that correspond to Chinese interests. In this context, last year VDD registered the interest of the Chinese intelligence and security services in Latvian academic and scientific circles.

China's intelligence and security services primarily continued to obtain intelligence about Latvia from the territory of their country. For Latvian nationals who regularly visit China, the Service recommends taking into account intelligence and recruitment risks. China's intelligence and security services primarily look at potential recruitment targets and try to engage them in covert cooperation directly during their stay in China.

In addition, VDD reiterates that the use of information and communication technologies produced in China and other countries outside NATO and the EU carries potential threats to the security of private information and cyber intelligence risks. Chinese companies are obliged by regulatory enactments to cooperate with the Chinese authorities, including intelligence and security services, if necessary, by providing all the information of interest to them.



Illustrative image, Freepik



DETECTED CASES OF ESPIONAGE

In the past year, a number of criminal cases of espionage investigated by VDD were brought to court. On the basis of the evidence obtained by the Service, five persons were sentenced to prison terms.

To detect cases of espionage, VDD used all the powers granted to it by laws and regulations governing counterintelligence and operational work. The Service also continued close cooperation with MIDD, which, in

accordance with its competence, informed VDD about unauthorised cases of information gathering about military facilities and armed forces in the territory of our country.

Taking into account that in the following cases not all the verdicts have already entered into force, VDD reiterates that no person shall be presumed guilty until proven guilty in accordance with the procedures laid down by law.

Espionage in the highest decision-making body of Latvia – the Saeima —

Briefly about the persons:



Jānis Ādamsons

- citizen of the Republic of Latvia;
- prior to his arrest – Member of the Saeima, member of the Defence, Internal Affairs and Corruption Prevention Committee;
- spied for FSB.



Gennady Silonov

- citizen of the Russian Federation;
- was an officer of the State Security Committee (KGB) of the Latvian SSR;
- FSB officer;
- Curator of J. Ādamsons.

Detention

G. Silonov was detained by VDD on June 9, 2021 and J. Ādamsons on June 10, 2021.

About the offense

- By participating in the regular work of the Saeima and communicating with other deputies in various formats, J. Ādamsons gathered information on the work of the Saeima and Saeima committees, state institutions, Latvia's intelligence and security services and law enforcement institutions, the situation in the Russian border area and other issues of the political agenda in the interests of FSB. Meeting with the curator in the territory of Latvia, J. Ādamsons transferred the collected information to the FSB

- The crimes were systematic, long-term and regular. J. Ādamsons has been charged with 43 episodes of espionage.

Result of the investigation

On November 11, 2023, the court of first instance sentenced J. Ādamsons to eight years and six months in prison, and G. Silonov to seven years and six months in prison. The individuals have appealed the court's ruling to a higher court.

What this case tells us

- Even state officials who do not have a security clearance for working with official secrets are useful for foreign intelligence and security services. Such state officials have access to information describing other officials and policy planning documents, they hear “water cooler conversations”, and they can participate in events that are not accessible to the general public such as conferences, visits to critical infrastructure objects and law enforcement facilities or the border area.
- Persons who have once served in Soviet intelligence and security services and power structures remain a prime recruitment target for Russia's intelligence and security services. Such persons often feel nostalgia for the Soviet era and are ideologically motivated to cooperate.
- Former KGB officers are still in the age group where they are able to harm the national security of Latvia. Retired KGB officers can continue to work for the intelligence and security services of Russia, serving as curators or intermediaries for the transfer of information.

Spying and provocations at the Latvian Air Force Base

Briefly about the persons



Martins Griķis and Sergejs Hodonovičs

- citizens of the Republic of Latvia;
- both young people, one of whom is 20 and the other 23, do not have higher education or professional skills;
- they were open to moneymaking opportunities on the internet;
- spied and carried out other activities for the benefit of the Russian intelligence and security service.



Detention

VDD, in cooperation with MIDD, detained the individuals on April 24, 2023.

About the offense

- M. Griķis (in the first picture) formed a network of sources for obtaining information about Latvia's national defense resources. M. Griķis, using the communication app "Telegram", attracted S.Hodonovičs, who obtained intelligence about the NAF Air Force Base, as well as the movement of troops and military equipment in its vicinity (in Lielvārde and Rembate parishes).
- S. Hodonovičs was additionally used to carry out provocations. He carried out hooligan actions in the urban environment by drawing graffiti which gave the impression of apparent support for Russian aggression in society.
- Taking into account the heightened counterintelligence regime implemented by VDD and MIDD since the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the vigilance of the public against suspicious activities, it has become more difficult for the intelligence and security services of Russia to conduct intelligence activities in the territory of Latvia. For this reason, the Russian intelligence and security services are increasingly using the online environment for the recruitment of Latvian nationals, as well as for the exchange of information.
- Due to the lack of content control, the messaging platform "Telegram" has become one of the most frequently used communication tools for carrying out various criminal activities, including recruiting persons, organising espionage and obtaining intelligence.
- The intelligence and security services of Russia are also ready to exploit persons without education, regular income or future prospects. Troubled young people are a prime recruitment target for the Russian intelligence and security services, as they are interested in easy money and know how to use information technology.

Outcome of the investigation

Both have been found guilty by court of first and second instance. On January 30, 2024, the court of second instance sentenced M. Griķis to three years' imprisonment and S.Hodonovičs to two years and eight months' imprisonment. In addition, M. Griķis was sentenced to probation for two years and six months, while S.Hodonovičs was sentenced to two years and four months of probation. The verdict has not yet entered into force.

What this case tells us

Attempted recruitment of a VDD officer

Briefly about the person:



Sergejs Vasiljevs

- citizen of the Republic of Latvia;
- earns a living by repairing electrical appliances;
- worked for FSB.

Detention

VDD detained the person on February 17, 2020.

About the offence

- S. Vasiljevs acted as a so-called recruiting agent. He established contact with a VDD officer on behalf of FSB, initially trying to create a misleading impression of his willingness to cooperate with the Service in counterintelligence work.

- S. Vasiljevs' real goal was to try to involve the VDD officer in secret cooperation with FSB, laying the groundwork for establishing contacts with officers of the Russian intelligence and security service. S. Vasiljevs tried to get the officer of VDD to gather and transmit to the FSB information which is an official secret and had become available to the officer in connection with the performance of official duties. The acquisition of such information by the intelligence and security services of Russia could cause serious harm to Latvia's national security.
- The recruitment attempt was unsuccessful. The VDD officer was trained for such cases and immediately identified S. Vasiljevs' intentions.

Result of the investigation

The criminal trial in the first and second instances has concluded. On September 5, 2023, the court of second instance sentenced the person to three years' imprisonment. The judgment has entered into force and is no longer subject to appeal. It should be noted that on July 15, 2020, the court of first instance acquitted the person and released him from custody, as a result of which S. Vasiljevs took the opportunity to flee the country. At present, S. Vasiljevs is on the international wanted list.

What this case tells us

- One of the traditional goals of the Russian intelligence and security services is the formation of operational positions in the intelligence and security services of the target country. Sources in such institutions are of particular value to the intelligence and security services of Russia. Law enforcement officers are equally important recruitment targets.
- Officers of Latvia's national services, especially in counties in the border area of Russia, should regard any contacts with citizens of the country at risk or residents who offer to help establish contacts with citizens of the country at risk, as intelligence risks.
- This case reflects why the Russian intelligence and security services prefer to carry out recruitment on the territory of their country, i.e. where they have safe conditions and no need to worry about counterintelligence measures by VDD. As far as possible, the intelligence and security services of Russia will try to lure the target person to their country or countries that are favorable to Russia. For example, the CIS countries, as well as Serbia and Armenia, are considered as such.

1.5.

INTELLIGENCE ACTIVITIES IN THE CYBERSPACE

While the level of cyber threats in the cyberspace of Latvia remained consistently high over the past year, the situation as a whole is currently assessed as stable. The situation in the field of cybersecurity continued to be affected by the ongoing war in Ukraine, which Russia also expanded into cyberspace. Cyberattacks were carried out not only against Ukraine, but also against NATO and the EU Member States supporting the war-affected country, including Latvia.

Groups of pro-Russia so-called hacktivists¹, in which hackers and coding enthusiasts have joined together, have continued extensive activities in cyberspace. Pro-Kremlin hacktivist groups regularly carried out

cyberattacks on state and municipal institutions, state-owned companies and strategically important companies over the past year. In most cases, these attacks were politically motivated, i.e. they were used as a response to institutional activities that were not in line with Russia's strategic objectives, such as expressing or providing support to Ukraine.

As in 2022, most of the attacks by pro-Kremlin hacktivist groups were low-efficiency so-called DDoS, or distributed denial of service attacks². Those attacks have temporarily hampered or blocked the functioning of certain institutions' websites and other information systems available on the public network. In rare cases, attackers carried out so-called phishing attacks in an attempt to defraud sensitive data with misleading reports or infect the devices of state and municipal officials with malware. VDD found that in the past year pro-Russian hacktivist groups tried to compromise the systems of state institutions in order to discredit Latvian institutions and retrieve publicly unavailable information from the systems.

¹ From the English words "hack" and "activist"; persons who, driven by political or ideological motives, carry out cyberattacks on the information systems of their opponents.

² Distributed denial of service – a type of cyberattack aimed at blocking access to an online resource or service.



Illustrative image, *Freepik*

Last year, pro-Kremlin hacktivist groups regularly published notices about hacked websites, databases, e-mail systems and retrieved documents of Latvian institutions on channels created on the communication app “Telegram” and social networking sites. VDD found that in a large number of cases, the statements of the hacktivists were disinformation.

Since the Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, state institutions of Latvia and other strategically important objects have significantly improved their readiness and defence capabilities against cyberattacks, thus strengthening the security of the cyberspace of Latvia. Thanks to the preparations made, most of the public authorities and other bodies targeted by hacktivists last year were able to respond immediately with the latest security solutions. In connection with this, most of the attacks by Russian hacktivists were unsuccessful, not bringing the results expected by the attackers.

VDD DRAWS YOUR ATTENTION!

Pro-Kremlin hacktivist groups exaggerate their “achievements” in cyberspace, hoping to cause as wide a resonance as possible in the information space and gain recognition among pro-Kremlin audiences in Russia and beyond. This is also part of Russia’s information operations against NATO and the EU member states.

The largest cyber espionage threat to Latvia was still posed by cyber groups under the control of hostile foreign intelligence and security services. It is these cyber units that have the highest level of preparedness, resources and skills to plan and execute complex cyber intelligence operations. The highest threat on the cyber front of Latvia is posed by cyber groups led by the intelligence and security services of Russia. Chinese cyber units have also begun to show noticeable interest in Latvia.

The objectives of cyber groups led by foreign intelligence and security services are different. Most often, they seek to compromise computer systems, i.e. they illicitly infiltrate these systems in order to instantly retrieve sensitive intelligence, sabotage the operation of computer systems or destroy the data contained in them. Very often, however, groups controlled by hostile states compromise computer systems in order to acquire and consolidate a long-term hidden foothold in these systems. Such a hidden presence can be used in the long term by cyber groups led by intelligence and security services to carry out any of the aforementioned malicious actions against the victim’s computer system.

Similarly, cyber groups under the control of Russian intelligence and security services continued to carry out so-called supply chain attacks last year, which are currently considered one of the most dangerous and difficult to identify cybersecurity threats. These are complex attacks, which are usually carried out in order to infiltrate and perform harmful actions, either on a large number of computer systems at the same time or on certain well-protected systems. In such cases, cybercriminals attack the potential target through one of the actors in its supply chain. For example, computer systems, software, or updates may be infected with malware before being delivered to a potential target.

According to VDD, a large proportion of cyberattacks still succeed due to mistakes made by information technology managers and users. Cyber attackers use poorly configured computer networks and poor adherence to cyber hygiene to their advantage. VDD draws attention to the fact that disproportionate access rights granted to poorly protected user accounts, for example, to databases of national importance, pose high risks of cyber espionage.

COUNTERING THE ACTIVITIES OF THE INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY SERVICES OF HOSTILE COUNTRIES



Migration control measures

In order to prevent foreigners connected to the intelligence and security services of Russia or Belarus from entering Latvia, officers of VDD, in cooperation with other services, last year implemented enhanced migration control measures both inside the country and at border control points. Persons who pose intelligence risks or other types of threats to the national security of Latvia were denied entry and residence in Latvia. Some of these foreigners were denied entry to Latvia at border control posts, while others were included on the so-called black list of foreigners who are prohibited from entering the Republic of Latvia. If the persons included in the blacklist were already in Latvia, they were expelled from the country with the help of the State Border Guard. More in the section “Migration Control”.



Criminal enforcement measures

In 2023, VDD initiated eight criminal cases related to suspected espionage. This is the highest number of criminal cases initiated for espionage in a single year to date. Half of these criminal cases were initiated in close cooperation with MIDD. The Service also continued its investigations from previous years within criminal cases initiated on suspicion of espionage. In three criminal proceedings, VDD obtained evidence of the guilt of persons in espionage and sent the materials of these criminal cases to the Prosecutor’s Office for prosecution. As a result of investigative work carried out by VDD, five spies were sentenced to prison last year. More in the section “Detected Cases of Espionage”.



Protection of critical infrastructure objects

In the past year, VDD continued to regularly inform the personnel of critical infrastructure objects about intelligence risks, signs of suspicious incidents and the desired action in cases of noticing such incidents. VDD also continued vetting the persons employed at such

facilities, assessing them in the context of intelligence risks. In total, in 2023, VDD vetted 6831 critical infrastructure employees. 21 of the persons vetted were declared by VDD as unsuitable for work at critical infrastructure objects and issued a negative opinion.³ The most common reasons for issuing a negative opinion were significant intelligence risks and links to organised crime. In a large part of these cases, the service found support by the individuals for pro-Kremlin and totalitarian ideology.



Vetting of aviation industry employees

VDD continued its vetting of persons employed in the aviation industry last year, with an increased focus on identifying intelligence risks.⁴ In total, VDD vetted 4,211 persons employed in the aviation industry last year. As a result, VDD identified risks posed by seven persons. Employers were given a negative opinion on these individuals, prompting them to be suspended from their duties for security reasons.



Public information and other information measures

Despite the specific nature of the work of the Service and justified secrecy in public communications, VDD continued to inform the public about the threat caused by the intelligence and security services of Russia, paying special attention to possible attempts to recruit the residents of Latvia for espionage or other activities directed against Latvia. The Service regularly warned of the particularly high risks of recruitment and intelligence when visiting Russia or Belarus.

Also, VDD officers briefed officials and employees of state and municipal institutions on the threat caused by foreign intelligence and security services, including recruitment and intelligence risks. In total, last year VDD provided briefings for 33 institutions, giving a total of 63 presentations. The information was provided to about 2,800 officials and employees, covering a significantly larger number of persons than in 2022 (about 1,800).

³ The assessment criteria are specified in Section 16 of Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No. 508 of July 6, 2021 “Procedures for the Identification of Critical Infrastructure, including European Critical Infrastructure, Planning and Implementation of Security Measures and Business Continuity”.

⁴ The vettings were carried out in accordance with Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No. 829 of December 14, 2021 “Procedures for the Performance of a Background Check and the Procedures for issuing and Cancelling a Civil Aviation Aircrew Member and an Airport Identification Card”.

FORECASTS

- Also this year, the greatest threat to the national security of Latvia will come from the intelligence and security services of Russia. Intelligence from the territory of Russia will remain the main type of intelligence collection, with officers of intelligence and security services working in the territory of their country and recruiting Latvian nationals, as well as citizens of other countries for gathering intelligence.
- Persons who regularly travel from Latvia to Russia or allied countries of Russia will continue to be exposed to a high risk of recruitment. At the same time, the intelligence and security services of Russia will continue attempts to recruit Latvian nationals online. They will be interested in recruiting persons not only for gathering intelligence, but also for the formation of support positions and the implementation of harmful activities in Latvia or elsewhere in Europe, including Ukraine.
- In connection with the planned reorganization of the Western Military District of Russia, the intensity of Russian espionage in relation to Latvia could intensify further in the near future. In the event of a military conflict, troops stationed in this particular area of Russia would be responsible for hostilities in the Nordic countries, the Baltic States and Poland. The reorganization provides for the division of this area into two districts, redistributing resources and forming new units of the armed forces. It is expected that in connection with these changes, the Russia's armed forces will have to develop new operational plans, which will require gathering military intelligence on the territories of potential hostilities, including Latvia.
- While the intelligence and security services of Belarus and China will also maintain their interest in Latvia, their activities will not reach the level of intensity and aggression characteristic of the intelligence and security services of Russia.
- Cyber intelligence threats will remain high in 2024. Cyber groups from countries hostile to Latvia will continue to carry out attacks with the aim of gathering intelligence. Cyber groups are expected to remain highly interested in opportunities to compromise the supply chains of their targets in order to gain access to end-user equipment and realize their strategic intelligence goals.

ASK FOR HELP!

In case of suspicion of possible contact with an officer of a foreign intelligence and security service, we urge you to immediately inform VDD by calling the 24/7 phone number **+371 6720 8964**, writing to the **info@vdd.gov.lv** or, upon prior appointment, visiting the Service's HQ at Brīvības gatve 207, Riga.

MIGRATION CONTROL

In order to prevent foreigners or other risk persons related to the intelligence and security services of Russia or Belarus from entering Latvia, VDD officers continued to assist in migration control in 2023. Service officers assessed both arrivals at Latvian border control posts and took measures to identify risk persons in the territory of Latvia. The Service comprehensively screened foreigners to identify any potential threat to the national security of Latvia, ranging from intelligence risks to terrorist threats.



PROFILE OF AN ALIEN DENIED ENTRY TO LATVIA

Officers of VDD were present daily at border control posts on the Eastern border of Latvia, in order to prevent foreigners who pose intelligence risks or may otherwise endanger the national security of Latvia from entering the country.

Service officers engaged in checks on foreigners and conducted in-depth interviews with them. The Service has created a portrait of a typical foreigner who was denied entry to Latvia at the border control post.

Gender: male;

Age: 35–60 years;

Nationality: Russian or Belarusian citizenship or Russian and Ukrainian dual citizenship.

Characteristics:

- The foreigner's circle of contacts, or the course of life so far, suggests intelligence risks. For example, the person has contacts in intelligence and security services, law enforcement institutions or military institutions of Russia, or his relatives or acquaintances include persons close to the Kremlin.
- The person openly supports the war started by Russia in Ukraine or expresses an ambiguous attitude to Russian aggression, clearly not taking either side. In some cases persons have claimed they have heard nothing about the war in Ukraine, they supposedly have no interest in politics, so they do not have an opinion on it.
- The person has been involved in measures of non-military influence of Russia, for example, propaganda activities directed against Latvia.
- The alien provides false or distorted information. Not cooperative, i.e. gives short, general and evasive answers.

Measures implemented by VDD to address migration-related risks



Increased control of arrivals at crossing points on the Eastern border of Latvia

Last year, VDD in cooperation with the State Border Guard continued to strengthen the control of foreigners entering Latvia at the Eastern border of the country. More than 8,000 persons were examined in-depth by the Service, including through interviews with these individuals. During the year, on the basis of the risks identified by VDD to the national security of Latvia, a total of 860 foreigners were denied entry to Latvia at border crossing points – approximately five times more persons than in 2022 (179). 265 citizens of Ukraine, 234 citizens of Russia, 150 dual citizens of Ukraine and Russia, 38 citizens of Belarus, as well as citizens of other countries were not allowed into Latvia. With regard to the large number of Ukrainian citizens, it should be noted that these were pro-Kremlin persons who support the interests of the criminal regime in Russia. Many of these individuals had lived in Russia or its occupied territories in Ukraine long before the start of the war.



Blacklisting of aliens

Last year, the Minister of the Interior placed 28 foreigners on the so-called blacklist based on the recommendations of VDD. Half of them, or 14 individuals, were blacklisted in connection with intelligence risks identified by VDD. Eight persons were denied residence in Latvia due to a threat identified by the Service to the constitutional order of Latvia or the security of the information space. In turn, six persons were put on the blacklist based on threat to the economic security interests of Latvia. For example, some of the foreigners were linked to Russian companies subject to EU sanctions that had provided support for Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. The majority or 25 of those blacklisted were Russian citizens, two were Belarusian citizens, and one was an Estonian citizen.



Illustrative image, Freepik



In-depth vetting of visa and residence permit applicants

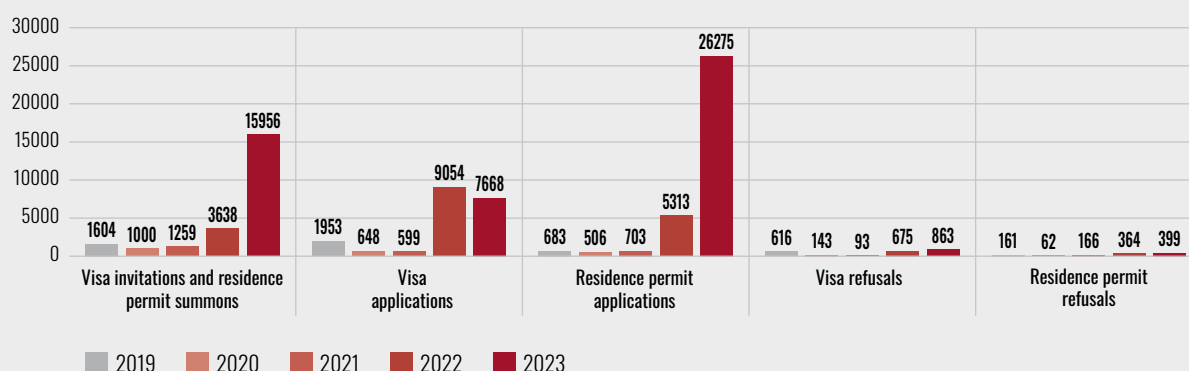
Last year, VDD vetted 7,668 visa applicants and 26,275 applicants for residence permits. In addition, VDD vetted 15,297 foreigners on the basis of invitations or summons from Latvian companies or residents, asking these foreigners to be granted a visa or residence permit. In 2023, VDD carried out extensive work evaluating the applications of Russian citizens living in Latvia (former citizens or non-citizens of Latvia) for receiving the status of the long-term resident of the EU. In total, the Service vetted 15,643 such persons. Last year, the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (OCMA) denied a residence permit to a total of 399 persons. Some of them were denied a residence permit as part of VDD’s vetting process due to their unwillingness to cooperate and provide requested information, or for providing false or distorted information. Also, as a result of cooperation between VDD and the OCMA, 863 foreigners were refused a visa. The most common reasons for refusing a visa were the failure to provide the requested information, risks identified during vetting or the applicant's support for Russian aggression in Ukraine



Vetting the asylum seekers

Last year, VDD continued vetting asylum seekers in accordance with its competence. Most of them applied for asylum in Latvia last year, fleeing from armed conflict zones or repression by the Russian and Belarusian regimes, as well as for political and economic reasons. VDD vetted 1,670 asylum seekers, more than three times the number of vettings conducted in 2022 (489). 1,005 asylum seekers were from terrorism risk countries, 69 from the aggressor country Russia and its ally Belarus, and the rest from other countries. During the vettings, VDD found no negative information on 1,480 persons. For one Russian citizen, the Service prepared a negative opinion in relation to identified intelligence risks. For 189 persons, the vetting is ongoing. Among these, for 20 Russian and Belarusian citizens, the Service has identified the need for an in-depth examination of identified risk factors.

Vettings by VDD of visa and residence permit applicants



Šī informācija tiek aizsargāta
saskaņā ar likumu
slēpumu

02

PROTECTION OF OFFICIAL SECRETS

As intelligence risks remained high, over the past year VDD continued to implement targeted and systematic measures to protect official secrets. In cooperation with the two other Latvia's intelligence and security services – MIDD and Constitution Protection Bureau (SAB) – VDD continued vetting persons and inspecting facilities, assessing their compliance to work with information containing official secrets.

Last year, following the recommendations of Latvia's intelligence and security services, amendments were made to the laws and regulations governing the protection of official secrets. Thanks to these amendments, the requirements for the protection of information containing official secrets have been significantly strengthened. One of the most important changes is that since last year, information with a classification level "restricted" is also considered an official secret⁵. In other words, information marked as "restricted" has been added to the existing classifications of official secrets "top secret", "secret" and "confidential" as the lowest protective marking. Such changes were mainly introduced in order to promote a more responsible attitude by the personnel of the institutions to the protection of information marked as "restricted".

Through performing counterintelligence measures on a daily basis, VDD has ascertained that the foreign intelligence and security services hostile to Latvia also have a great interest in information marked as "restricted". Such a classification grade is assigned to information related to the performance of the functions of the institution and the provision of basic activities. For example, the set of information marked as "restricted" may include a layout plan of the premises, information on the location of structural units and technical equipment, the regime of access pass, technical and physical security. The provision of such information to persons outside the institution has the potential to cause harm to the security of the institution, industry or state.

⁵ Amendments to the Law on Official Secrets adopted on April 20, 2023.

In order to become acquainted with the information classified as restricted, a security clearance for access to official secrets (hereinafter – security clearance) is still not required. On the other hand, the employee must sign a commitment to protect and not to unlawfully disclose restricted information. VDD reiterates that criminal liability applies not only for unlawful disclosure of top secret, secret or confidential information, but also for unauthorised disclosure of restricted information.

The requirements for the protection of official secrets had not been reviewed for almost 20 years, therefore, at the end of last year, new Cabinet of Ministers regulations were adopted⁶, which set significantly higher requirements for the protection of official secrets adapted to current threats. Most significantly, security requirements have been increased for those premises where work with information containing official secrets takes place. Given that the implementation of these requirements will require financial contributions from the institutions, the new rules provide for a transitional

VDD RECALLS!

In accordance with the Law on Official Secrets, the heads of state institutions and relevant structural units are responsible for ensuring compliance with the secrecy regime and protection of official secrets. At the same time, each person who has access to official secrets is personally responsible for the fulfilment of the requirements for the protection of official secrets, compliance with the established secrecy regime and special record-keeping rules. Violation of the rules for the use or protection of official secrets shall be subject to disciplinary or criminal liability.

period of five years. In VDD's assessment, by introducing the elements for the protection of classified information provided for in the new regulations, the official secret protection system in Latvia as a whole will become more effective and resilient against the threat caused by foreign intelligence and security services.

2.1.

VETTING APPLICANTS FOR AND HOLDERS OF A SECURITY CLEARANCE

In 2023, VDD continued to conduct both first-time vetting of persons before starting work with information containing official secrets, and to reassess the reliability and ability of holders of security clearances to protect official secrets. Repeated vetting, as in previous years, was carried out by the Service in cases where it was time to decide on the granting of a security clearance for another term, the person's position changed, or the need arose to use information of a higher level of classification at work. Also, newly acquired information about the holder of the security clearance, which may indicate risks to the security of the protected information, served as the reason for the re-vetting.

In the past year, in 162 cases, a comprehensive vetting of persons took longer, and the Service took advantage of the statutory option to extend the vetting period from three to six months. The extension of the length of the vetting period was mainly due to a large amount of verifiable information or difficulty in obtaining information on certain stages of a person's life, such as periods of stay abroad. In some cases, the Service had to conduct an in-depth investigation in relation to the risk factors identified during the vetting, which indicate

⁶ Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No.822 of December 19, 2023 "Regulations Regarding the Protection of Official Secrets and the Classified Information of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, European Union and Foreign Authorities".

PROTECTION OF OFFICIAL SECRETS

a possible threat to the security of the information to be protected.

Last year, VDD conducted in-depth vetting of about 2,000 persons, assessing their compliance to work with official secrets. In 1,873 cases VDD found no disqualifying information⁷ and issued security clearances to individuals. Of these, 1,211 were security clearances of the second category, which provide the right of access to confidential and secret information. In turn, 662 were security clearances of the third category, which allow only confidential information to be consulted.

Among the in-depth vetting conducted by VDD, there were also 59 vettings on persons applying for a category one security clearance. Such authorisation shall confer the right of access to top-secret information in addition to confidential and secret information. In accordance with the procedures laid down in the Law on Official Secrets, VDD sent the information and recommendation obtained during these vettings to SAB for a decision on the issuance of a security clearance.

In the past year, VDD in 104 cases found the need for an extraordinary or additional vetting of the holder of a security clearance. The most common reasons for initiating such a vetting were:

- regular trips to Russia, Belarus, CIS countries or China;
- multiple violations of the requirements for the protection of official secrets;
- suspicion of involvement of a person in criminal activities;
- suspicion of abuse of duty;
- the use of databases unrelated to work duties;
- contact with persons disloyal to the state or criminal or suspicious persons;
- suspicious financial transactions and savings of uncertain origin;

- newly acquired derogatory information about a person, which indicates the possible unreliability of that person.

2.2.

REASONS FOR DENYING ACCESS TO OFFICIAL SECRETS

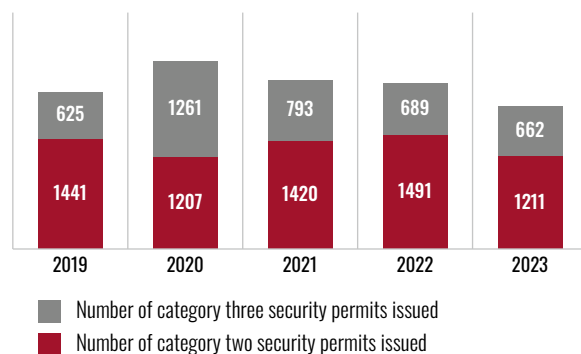
A decision to deny a person access to official secrets was taken by VDD in 12 cases in 2023. For nine of these persons, the Service refused to issue a security clearance, while three persons were annulled a previously granted security clearance.

The reasons for the negative decision by VDD were as follows:

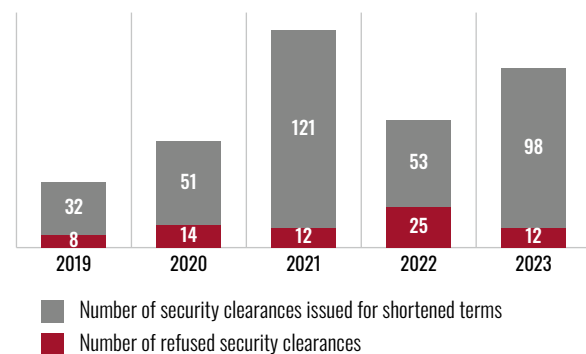
- in nine cases, facts were established about a person in the course of the vetting, which give reason to doubt person's reliability and ability to maintain an official secret (Section 9, Paragraph 3, Article 6, sub-article "a" of the Law on Official Secrets). Of these, in six cases the person was refused a security clearance, while in three cases a clearance that had already been issued was annulled.
- in three cases, the Service refused to issue a security clearance, finding the applicant's non-compliance with the requirements of Section 9, Paragraph 3, Article 3 of the Law on Official Secrets, i.e., the person had been punished for an intentional criminal offense.

The decision against a person was in most cases based on a number of risk factors identified by the Service, which in general indicated a high threat to the security of the information to be protected.

Dynamics of security clearances issued by VDD



Refusal to grant security clearance or issuance for shorter terms



⁷ The reasons due to which persons should be denied access to information containing official secrets are specified in Section 9, Paragraph 3 of the Law on Official Secrets.

Among the risk factors identified by the Service last year were:

- maintaining contact with risk persons in Russia or Belarus;
- expressing support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine;
- frequent administrative offenses;
- use of official position for selfish purposes;
- unauthorised use of databases of national importance for private purposes;
- evidence indicating dishonesty, unreliability or recklessness on the part of a person;
- intentionally providing false information, misrepresenting or concealing information during the vetting process, for example, during conversation with a VDD officer;
- regular contacts with representatives of the criminal world;
- alcohol, gambling or other addiction;
- mental health disorders, unethical, inadequate, unpredictable or inappropriate behaviour;
- failure to inform about changes in the data indicated in the questionnaire.

In 98 cases, VDD issued a security clearance for a shortened period, namely one, two or three years, instead of a maximum of five years. Such a decision was taken by the

Service in cases where in the course of the vetting facts or circumstances were established that are considered to be risk factors, but in accordance with the Law on Official Secrets there are not sufficient grounds for immediately denying the person access to official secrets.

In addition, last year, as in other years, VDD carried out in-depth vetting of candidates for positions at state institutions at the request of these institutions. In such cases, the Service provided an opinion on whether a person could potentially be granted a security clearance if he or she was hired. During the year, VDD issued six negative opinions on candidates for the posts. In these cases, during the vetting, VDD had established facts that give reason to doubt the trustworthiness and ability of the person to maintain an official secret.

VDD DRAWS YOUR ATTENTION!

The issuance of a security clearance for a shortened period of time indicates established risk factors. At the same time, in such cases, VDD continues to pay increased attention to the activities of the clearance holder even after the issuance of the clearance.



CHANGES TO BE NOTIFIED WITHIN ONE MONTH

Holders of a security clearance have an obligation to provide information in writing regarding the following changes:

- change of name, surname, citizenship or contact details;
- a new spouse or cohabiting partner, divorce;
- change of name, nationality, place of residence or occupation of the spouse or cohabiting partner;
- travel to countries outside NATO or the EU;
- expulsion, including of a spouse, from a country or a ban on entry to it;
- contacts with persons who are not nationals of NATO or EU Member States or who live outside NATO or the EU;
- administrative penalties imposed in Latvia or abroad;
- participation in criminal cases (including as a witness);
- contacts – including by family members – with employees of foreign embassies, diplomats, representatives of foreign intelligence and security services or counterintelligence services;
- recruitment attempts for secret cooperation;
- blackmail, threats or other threats, including to family members;
- use of narcotic substances or psychotropic drugs;
- consultation with a medical practitioner or specialist regarding the use of alcohol, narcotic, psychotropic or toxic substances, gambling or other addictions;
- registration in the register of self-excluded persons for gambling and interactive lotteries.

The information shall be submitted to the manager of the secrecy regime of person's workplace or to the competent Latvia's intelligence and security service no later than one month after the change or its coming to light.

CASES WHEN THE SECURITY CLEARANCE REFUSALS ARE DISPUTED



Illustrative image, VDD

Last year, three persons exercised the right laid down in the Law on Official Secrets to challenge the decision of VDD denying access to official secrets. In all cases, the Prosecutor General, after considering the disqualifying information found by the Service, found the decision of VDD to be justified and upheld it. Two of those individuals also appealed the Prosecutor General' adverse decision. However, the Administrative Regional Court also left the original decision to deny access to official secrets unchanged in both cases.

These three persons were denied access to official secrets under Section 9 Paragraph 3 Article 6, sub-article "a" of the Law on Official Secrets in connection with the facts established in the course of the vetting which give reason to doubt the person's trustworthiness and ability to maintain an official secret. In all cases, VDD had identified a number of facts and circumstances that indicated a high risk to the security of classified information.

All the persons had previously been issued a security clearance and served in Latvian law enforcement institutions, where officers must meet a particularly high standard of reliability. It should be noted that one of the reasons for denying access to official secrets in all cases was a lax attitude to the statutory obligation to inform in writing no later than within a month about changes in the data indicated in the previously completed questionnaire. VDD draws attention to the fact that such conduct may be assessed as an irresponsible attitude to the rules or a targeted concealment of information.

Changes in the questionnaire, regarding which a person is obliged to report to the provider of the secrecy regime of his/her workplace or the competent Latvia's intelligence and security service, are stipulated in Article 38.6 of Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No. 822 of December 19, 2023 "Regulations Regarding the Protection of Official Secrets and the Classified Information of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, European Union and Foreign Authorities" (see the

frame "Changes to be notified within one month" earlier in the chapter).

VDD shall, as far as possible, provide insight into these cases in order to raise awareness of the reasons that may serve as a basis for denying access to official secrets.

- One person for whom VDD revoked the security clearance had not regularly complied with the requirement to inform about changes in the data indicated in the questionnaire. Likewise, the holder of the security clearance had withheld essential information during the vetting. The person had not provided information, for example, about such significant events as a ban on entering the United States and participation in civil proceedings related to credit default. The Service found that the person provided distorted and false information about his involvement in the case that led to the initiation of criminal proceedings. The Service also found that the holder of the security clearance had concealed information about maintaining contact with several persons living outside NATO and the EU. In addition to the above, the vetting found that the person regularly engaged in suspicious transactions and borrowed money. The holder of the security clearance had regularly ignored the obligation to report on the change of residence, places of stay outside the place of residence, the commencement of cohabitation and similar significant facts. The set of negative information obtained by VDD characterised the person as one who does not consider it important to comply with the obligations established by legal provisions and treats the fulfilment of financial obligations frivolously. In the assessment of VDD, such a person poses a high risk to the security of classified information and may also be an easy recruitment target for foreign intelligence and security services. This person tried unsuccessfully to reverse the negative decision of VDD by appealing both to the Prosecutor General and then to the Administrative Court.

- In the second case, doubts about the person's reliability were caused mainly by an irresponsible attitude to compliance with the rules and the performance of duties. VDD found that the person carelessly treats both the obligation to inform about changes in the data indicated in the questionnaire and other regulatory enactments. This person who had access to highly sensitive information at work had been held liable to disciplinary action for improper performance of official duties. Also, the person had not informed about an administrative penalty imposed, as well as the status as a witness in four criminal cases. In the person's past activities, the Service had also identified other risk factors. At the same time, the person tried justifying oneself by presenting the violations as minor. But neither the Prosecutor General nor the Administrative Regional Court was persuaded by the person of their credibility and ability to maintain official secrets.
- In the third case, the reasons for denying the person access to official secrets were similar. The person had been subject to disciplinary action for repeated unauthorised use of databases intended for work purposes for personal purposes. In the course of the vetting, VDD found out that the person had concealed information about contacts with several persons living outside NATO and the EU. For example, the person had met one such acquaintance on the territory of Belarus. The holder of the security clearance had also not regularly updated other information in the questionnaire, such as a number of administrative penalties received for exceeding the speed limit. It should be noted that the last security clearance was issued to the person for a shortened term – one year instead of the maximum five years. The Prosecutor General upheld the VDD decision to deny the person access to official secrets. The right to appeal the decision of the Prosecutor General to the Administrative Regional Court was not exercised by the person.

2.3.

INSPECTIONS OF PREMISES AND COMMERCIAL ENTERPRISES

Last year, VDD continued to inspect the premises used for work with information containing official secrets, assessing their compliance with security requirements. Last year, the Service conducted 20 such inspections in state institutions. As a result of the inspections, the Service provided recommendations to the institutions for the improvement of the secrecy regime and security solutions.

Also, VDD continued to evaluate private companies and state-owned companies that applied for an facility

security clearance for the first time or for a repeated term. In 2023, the Service checked the readiness and ability of six merchants to perform work, which provides for the need to get acquainted with information containing official secrets and ensure its protection.

After a comprehensive evaluation of the applicants, in accordance with the procedures laid down in the Law on Official Secrets, VDD sent the compiled information and recommendation to SAB for a decision. In five cases, as a result of the vetting by VDD, no information was found that would raise doubts regarding the merchant's readiness and ability to ensure the protection of information containing official secrets. In one case, however, VDD identified risks and recommended refusing to issue a facility security clearance.



03

PROTECTION OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL ORDER

As a result of sanctions introduced by Western countries and targeted counteraction by VDD, Russia was only able to use a limited range of instruments of influence against Latvia last year. In fact, the Kremlin did not have the opportunity to significantly change the internal political processes in Latvia with the help of political, diplomatic, humanitarian and legal instruments. However, Russia continued to be the main threat to Latvia's constitutional order.

Last year, Russia was unable to restore systematic activity in its previously important non-military influence activities of protecting the rights of so-called “compatriots” and preserving historical memory. Previously active organisations were made aware of the unacceptability of pro-Kremlin actions after warnings issued by VDD, and they therefore completely stopped or significantly reduced such activities. Russia tried to compensate for this by involving “compatriot” activists in activities supporting Russian propaganda campaigns.

Last year, Russia's non-military influence activities were aimed at that section of Latvian society which, having lived for a long time in the Russian language information space and being influenced by massive Russia's propaganda, feels a sense of belonging to the Kremlin's worldview. By planning and implementing influence activities targeting this part of society, Russia tried to increase distrust of the government and institutions of Latvia so that, if necessary, these inhabitants could be used as a tool to achieve Russia's goals. Last year, Russia continued to use former “compatriots” who had fled from Latvia to Russia, including some known pro-Kremlin activists, to influence the opinion of this part of society about developments in Latvia.

Using its available instruments of influence, in 2023 Russia developed a plan to counter the efforts of Latvia to strengthen the position of the official language in the public space. Latvia continued promoting the integration of Russians living in the country into society, encouraging improvement of proficiency in the official language in this part of society. In VDD's assessment, Russia views the efforts of our state institutions to promote the integration of Russians into Latvian society as a serious threat to its ability to influence processes in Latvia.



3.1.

IMPACT OF THE WAR ON LATVIA'S SOCIETY AND INTERNAL SECURITY

In 2023, Russia's invasion of Ukraine continued to have a negative impact on processes in Latvian society. Although the situation remained stable and under control, news of the crimes committed by the Russia's armed forces in Ukraine, as well as the absurd claims by war criminal Vladimir Putin to justify violence and his threats to Western countries, raised tensions and insecurity in society. At the same time, in the assessment of VDD, Latvian society as a whole maintained resistance to Russian war propaganda and continued to demonstrate support for Ukraine.

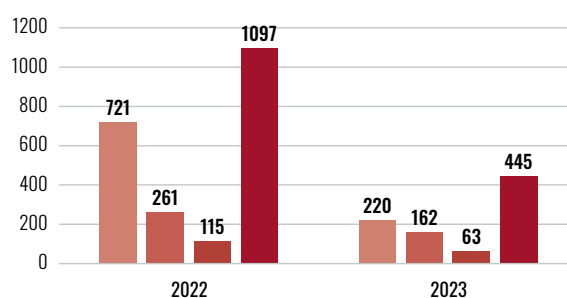
Risks to the internal security and constitutional order of the country were still posed by the section of the population that openly or covertly supported the aggressor state Russia and the war in Ukraine. Last year, VDD continued to observe such a position mainly amongst daily Russian-language speakers, who have lived in the information space of the Russian language for a long time and have been subject to information influence measures implemented by Russia. Based on their longstanding, deformed worldview shaped by Kremlin propaganda, these members of society interpreted international and domestic political processes in accordance with Russian interests.

Similarly to 2022, last year such persons actively expressed support for the Kremlin's policies and Russia's hostilities in Ukraine via comments on social networking sites. However, compared to the situation a year earlier, the number of cases of individuals expressing blatantly pro-Kremlin narratives decreased in 2023. VDD conducted comprehensive monitoring of the information space to identify such cases and limit

the glorification or justification of Russian aggression. For more detail about the trends observed by VDD in the information space, see the chapter of the report on the security of the information space.

VDD, in cooperation with the State Police, also paid increased attention to expressions glorifying the aggressor state in the urban environment. The Service mainly recorded incidents such as drawing of the letter "Z" (affirming support for the war) and other symbols glorifying Russia in public places. Other delinquent activities recorded included targeting the Ukrainian flag and property owned by Ukrainians. At the same time, according to VDD's analysis, the number of pro-Kremlin activities in the urban environment decreased significantly compared to 2022.

Pro-Kremlin activities in the urban environment



- Support for Russia's aggression expressed in the urban environment (various symbols and statements painted on walls, including "Z", displaying the Russian flag, shouting slogans, vandalism of monuments, flags and other objects etc.)
- Symbols of support for Russia affixed to clothing or cars (Russia's flag, logos of Russia's armed forces or intelligence and security services etc.)
- Harassment on the street of Ukrainian refugees, their property or residents of Latvia openly expressing support for Ukraine
- Total number of pro-Kremlin activities in the urban environment

Despite the reduction in the number of incidents, in VDD's assessment, the pro-Kremlin-oriented population continued to create tensions in the community over the past year. The negative sentiments of this part of society were deliberately exploited by both Russia's propaganda outlets and local pro-Kremlin activists, seeking to increase discontent in this part of society and manipulate it in their own interests. These residents also continued to be manipulated by political parties oriented towards the pro-Kremlin electorate, which in the second half of last year began preparations for the European Parliament elections in June 2024.

In 2023, Latvia continued to implement a targeted policy for strengthening the positions of the official language and protection of national security. The decisions and policies made by the state in these directions produced discontent and negativity in the segment of society that has lived in the Russian language information space for a long time. This part of society continued to demonstrate unwillingness to delve into the history of Latvia and the current geopolitical situation.

A section of Latvian society continued to be swayed by Russia's deliberately directed narratives about Latvia as a failed state and the supposedly invaluable importance of Russia to the Latvian economy. Russia spread such narratives with the aim of increasing nostalgia for the Soviet Union in Latvian society and promoting sympathy for its successor, Russia. Influenced by the narratives that have been circulating in the information space of Russia for a long time, this part of society was sceptical about the economic development opportunities of Latvia.

According to VDD's analysis, the narratives spread by Russia about the Latvian economy resonated and promoted tension and intolerance mainly in the part of Latvian society that has been exposed to the massive propaganda of Russia for a long time. Dissatisfaction with the pace of economic growth in Latvia, as well as the existing geopolitical risks create favourable conditions in the long term for increased polarisation and radicalisation in certain parts of society. In such a situation, various marginal and populist political forces may enjoy increased support in this section of society.

In the Service's assessment, the aforementioned factors pose risks to the internal political stability and constitutional order of the state.

Last year, VDD continued to intensively counteract pro-Kremlin activities in Latvia, systematically obtaining information about the still-existing Russian "compatriot" organisations and their efforts to restart their activities. The Service also paid attention to political parties focused on the pro-Kremlin electorate, as well as individual pro-Kremlin activists.

3.2.

THE IMPACT OF THE WAR ON RUSSIA'S ABILITY TO IMPLEMENT INFLUENCE MEASURES AGAINST LATVIA

Russia's ability to implement non-military influence measures in Latvia over the past year was still significantly limited. Russia had to reorient available institutional and human resources to Ukraine. In turn, the financing of measures of influence was hampered by sanctions and other deterrence measures introduced by the West. Since most of the "compatriot" organizations and individual activists were motivated financially, the reduced flow of Russian funding diminished their interest in engaging in the defence of Russia's political goals.

Moreover, since the beginning of the Russia's war in Ukraine, VDD has purposefully counteracted Russia's non-military influence efforts in Latvia. As a result, the environment of the "compatriots" was disoriented and less active. This environment lacked new leaders, while several young activists had "fled" to Russia or its allied countries. Only a small number of "compatriot" organizations, on the basis of inertia, continued minimal activities which did not have a great influence on socio-political processes in Latvia.

However, despite the slowdown in activities, in the assessment of VDD, a majority of "compatriot" organizations and individual activists held a wait-and-see position. VDD analysis indicates that representatives of the "compatriot" environment continue to hope for a favourable outcome for the Kremlin in the war in Ukraine and the restoration of earlier ties with Russia. This was also evidenced by efforts in the autumn of 2023 to revitalise platforms for "compatriots" activities that were important in previous years.

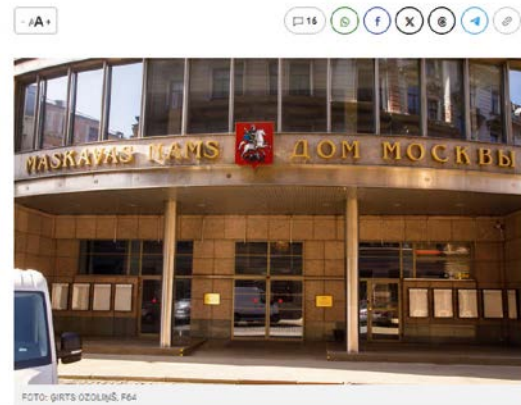
At the end of last year, criminal proceedings performed by VDD against one such platform, the so-called "Moscow House", in fact paralysed its activities. Since its establishment in 2004, "Moscow House" had acted as a central point of support for various influence activities implemented by Russia directed against the interests of Latvia. In this building in Riga, the Russian Embassy and other "compatriot" policy subjects regularly organized events in which they spread narratives justifying Russia's aggressive policies, as well as interpretations of historical events corresponding to Russian interests. Information obtained during the pre-trial investigation indicates that the management of the "Moscow House" allegedly continued to benefit financially from the "Moscow House", the use of which is prohibited under international sanctions.

PERSONS IN THE MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE OF THE “MOSCOW HOUSE” SUBJECT TO SANCTIONS

- The sole shareholder of the “Moscow House” until the building was taken over by the Latvian state was the Property Department of the City of Moscow. This department is a structural unit subordinate to the Moscow City Government.
- The Property Department of the City of Moscow is managed by the mayor of Moscow Sergey Sobyenin, who has been included in the list of persons subject to EU sanctions for supporting Russia's military aggression against Ukraine since July 21, 2022.
- In turn, V. Putin, who is subject to EU sanctions, was considered the real beneficiary of the “Moscow House”.

VDD veic kratīšanas Maskavas namā; ir aizdomas par sankciju pārkāpumiem

Aizdomās par iespējamu pret Krieviju noteikto Eiropas Savienības (ES) sankciju pārkāpšanu Valsts drošības dienests (VDD) šonedēļ veicis kriminālprocesuālas darbības “Maskavas namā” Rīgā, informē VDD.



Screenshot of a publication posted on the Tv3.lv portal on December 22, 2023.

In order to prevent further operation of this platform of Russia’s influence, on October 13, 2023, the National Security Committee submitted to the Saeima a draft law for the takeover of the “Moscow House” under the ownership of Latvia. The process concluded on January 11, 2024, with the Saeima having adopted in its final reading a law on placing the “Moscow House” under the ownership of Latvia. VDD participated in the preparation and progress of the draft law, providing several opinions on the non-alignment of the activities of the “Moscow House” with the national security interests of Latvia.

As a result of counteraction implemented by VDD, the level of activity of so-called individual “defenders of the rights of compatriots” in Latvia was also low last year. The most well-known representatives of the pro-Kremlin environment, such as Vladimir Linderman, Yuri Alekseev, Alexander Gaponenko and Tatyana Andriječa, significantly reduced public activities, as they were involved in legal proceedings in which, as a result of investigations by VDD, they have been accused of criminal activities directed against the national security of Latvia. Other Russian “compatriot” activists also avoided openly expressing their support for Russia, aware that the justification and glorification of war crimes committed by Russia was subject to criminal liability.

Last year, Russia tried to compensate for its inability to ensure systematic support for the activities of

“compatriots” in the territory of Latvia with campaigns of information influence to discredit the state of Latvia. Russia used every opportunity to spread its traditional narrative about supposedly prevailing Russophobia in Latvia. Last year, VDD identified several cases of disseminating disinformation in relation to tests of official language proficiency for Russian citizens living in Latvia and preservation of residence rights in the territory of Latvia. By pitting Russians living in Latvia against the Latvian state administration with the help of disinformation, the aggressor state tried to maintain the support of this part of the Latvian society and keep it in the information space of the Russian language.

Analysis by VDD shows that persons who have fled from Latvia to Russia were purposefully involved in Russia’s non-military influence activities. Pro-Kremlin Latvian nationals were mainly motivated to flee to Russia to evade liability for crimes committed in Latvia. A no less important reason was the possibility of earning money by engaging in Russian influence activities directed against Latvia. The “escapees” were also united by a sense of belonging to the Kremlin's worldview and ideological support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the war crimes committed there. Several Latvian pro-Kremlin activists fled to Russia last year, including former Member of the European Parliament Andrei Mamikin and former Riga City Council member Ruslan Pankratov.

Being aware that the capacity of the previous “compatriots” has been exhausted and the deployment of open influence measures in Latvia is significantly limited, Russia continued to look for the next generation of leaders. To this end, Russia last year increased the so-called “quotas” for young people from Latvia to study in Russia’s higher education institutions.

In 2023, the intensity of activities of the Russian Embassy in Latvia remained low, with the Embassy being aware that the organisation of public events in support of Russia would not be tolerated by the Latvian authorities. Russian diplomats mainly communicated with the public through social networking sites.

In August last year, photos of a group of young people who began their studies at the universities of the aggressor state were published on the official Facebook account of the Russian Embassy in Latvia, as part of the program implemented by the federal agency “Rossotrudnichestvo” under the auspices of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The main goal of this program has always been to prepare future “compatriot” activists for the defence of Russian interests abroad, including in Latvia.



On August 17 last year, a photo of young people from Latvia who were applying for study places in Russia’s higher education institutions was published on the Facebook account of the Russian Embassy in Latvia.

VDD has repeatedly warned in previous reports that studying at Russia’s universities is associated with intelligence and recruitment risks. These risks are particularly high in the current geopolitical environment. Russia offers foreigners free educational opportunities for the purpose of ideologically indoctrinating them as future advocates of Russian interests in other countries.

In an effort to remotely influence political decision-making in Latvia and discredit our country in the international community, Russia also made complaints to international law enforcement institutions about “violations of Russian rights” in Latvia.

3.3.

SOCIETAL GROUPS AND PERSONS WHO CONTINUED TO SUPPORT RUSSIA

In 2023, the mood of the pro-Kremlin section of society continued to be influenced both by messages spread by Russia, as well as by various pro-Kremlin and opposition political organisations and individual activists in Latvia.

Viktor Gushchin, a long-time Russian “compatriot” activist and the head of the unregistered entity Latvian Council of Civic Organisations (LSOP), tried to revitalise the activities of “compatriots” at the end of last year. In the fall of 2023, V. Gushchin organized two meetings in Riga’s “Moscow House”. On October 6, 2023, a closed meeting of Russian “compatriot” organisations was held in the “Moscow House”, which was chaired by V. Gushchin and representatives of the Russian Embassy in Latvia. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss current developments in the field of “compatriots” and to revitalise activities by “compatriots”.

On November 29, V. Gushchin organized another meeting at the “Moscow House”, at which representatives of Russian “compatriot” organizations were informed about his trips to Russia and his participation in several international conferences of “compatriots” in October and November. Through his activities, V. Gushchin continued to spread the Kremlin’s narratives about the historical role and significant influence of Russia in the development of Latvia, as well as the “Russophobic” policies of Latvia and the other Baltic States.

The meetings organized by V. Gushchin can be seen as an attempt to mobilise “compatriot” environment for activities in the interests of Russia. However, practical activity did not follow after the meetings, which is typical of the “compatriot” environment, given the divergent interests and motivation to act for the implementation of measures of Russia’s influence of its most visible activists.

In the past year, several activities by pro-Kremlin and opposition political organizations and activists clearly coincided with the Kremlin’s foreign policy interests. Last year, the political party “Latvian Russian Union” (hereinafter – LKS), which tries to indirectly defend Russian interests, mainly at the international level, continued its public activities. This political party criticised the action taken by the Latvian state and civil society against the instruments of non-military influence of Russia, which Russia had used for years to strengthen its influence in Latvia.

Last year, representatives of the LKS continued to participate in various events at the international level,

spreading narratives about the need to normalise relations with Russia, reduce military support provided to Ukraine and make other “compromises” with the aggressor state.

Both LKS and other political parties oriented towards the Russian audience, internally as well as internationally, continued their efforts to discredit the Latvian government and the state by expressing distorted and biased information about processes taking place in Latvia and the decisions taken. The main objective of these activities in the assessment of VDD was to spread the traditional Russia’s propaganda narrative about supposed Russophobia in Latvia.

Representatives of political organizations oriented towards the pro-Kremlin electorate deliberately countered the efforts of Latvia to strengthen the use of the official language by implementing a complete transition to teaching in the official language in schools and carrying out tests on the proficiency in the official language of Russian citizens permanently residing in Latvia. The political parties oriented towards Russian voters manipulatively presented these efforts of Latvia to unite society and integrate Russian people as much as possible as an action against Russians living in Latvia.

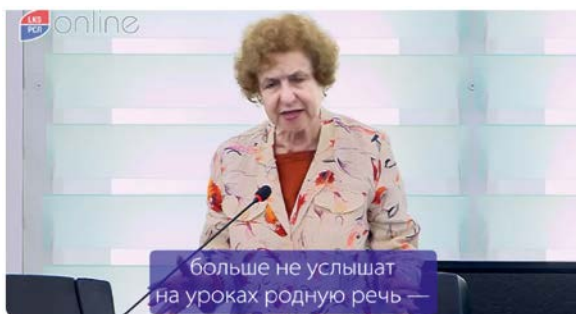
Likewise, political organizations oriented to the Russian electorate continued to advocate the normalisation of relations with Russia despite Russia's war in Ukraine. Last year, such organizations periodically called for the ending of sanctions against Russia, trying to justify such a move by pointing to alleged problems caused by sanctions to the Latvian economy.

In the assessment of VDD, such activities and messages not only discredited the state of Latvia and Ukraine internationally, but also continued to pit the Russian population against the government and other institutions of Latvia, promoting interethnic tensions.

VDD continued to observe pro-Kremlin expressions on social networking sites. More than 700 authors of such manifestations were identified. In the vast majority of cases, the Service did not detect purposeful involvement by these individuals in Russian influence activities. Expressing pro-Kremlin views was primarily prompted by ideological beliefs formed by long-standing consumption of Kremlin propaganda.

3.4.

EXTREMISM AND RADICALISM



ТАТЬЯНА ЖДАНОК: 1 СЕНТЯБРЯ В ЭТОМ ГОДУ НЕ БЫЛО РАДОСТНЫМ



"DEMOKRĀTISKAS DEPORTĀCIJAS" JAU SĀKĀS?

Screenshots from the video posted on the official YouTube account of LKS in 2023, which demonstrates how the members of the political party turned against the efforts of the state of Latvia to strengthen the usage of the official language and national security. Translation of the title of the first screenshot from Russian: “Tatyana Zhdanoka: September 1 was not happy this year”. Translation of the quote in the screenshot: “[pupils] will no longer hear their mother tongue in class”.



Illustrative image, Pixabay

Last year, VDD continued to obtain information on right- and left-wing extremist organisations and their members in Latvia in order to identify and prevent threats to the constitutional order of the state and society. The Service also paid special attention to non-organised individuals who had begun to radicalise and were prepared to use violence to achieve their goals.

PROTECTION OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL ORDER

In the Service's assessment, as in previous years, the threat posed by supporters of radical and extremist views to the country's constitutional order was generally low in 2023. Both right- and left-wing extremist organisations still lacked the resources and organisational capacity to grow, attract new members and carry out meaningful and ambitious actions.

Following the invasion of Israel by militants from the terrorist organisation Hamas, the Service did not observe increased activity among right-wing and left-wing extremists. With rare, individual exceptions, there was no strong support for any of the parties in the conflict.

Last year, VDD observed an increase in the number of young people showing interest in right-wing extremist ideology. These individuals had mainly begun to radicalise online. Last year, the internet continued to serve as one of the main platforms for the public expression of right-wing extremist views, mutual communication and the dissemination of radical material.

VDD found that right-wing extremist advocates mostly use online communication apps such as "Telegram" to communicate with each other, where content posted by users is not properly controlled. On this communication platform, extremism supporters exchanged radical and violent content.

In the past year, VDD found that young individuals may simultaneously adopt ideas or visual attributes from several extremist ideologies that may even contradict each other. These persons do not understand or seek to understand the differences between various ideologies, and tend to shift their ideological position. According to VDD, the observed trend brings risks, as the activities of such persons are difficult to predict.

As in other years, right-wing extremists continued to spread critical narratives online against the Latvian state administration, immigrants, people of a different colour, sexual minorities and issues related to these groups of society. On the internet, the main audience for such narratives was young individuals who uncritically



CASE OF RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM AND TERRORIST PROPAGANDA

Due to the lack of control over the content published by users on the messaging platform "Telegram", there are groups whose members disseminate content that glorifies, justifies and encourages terrorism. Last year, VDD found intensive involvement by a Latvian citizen in several international "Telegram" groups supporting right-wing extremism and terrorism.

On July 11, 2023, after an in-depth study of the person's activities, VDD initiated criminal case against this resident of Latvia pursuant to Section 79⁴ and Section 79⁶ of the Criminal Law. In particular, the Service saw indications of crimes such as justification of terrorism, self-training for terrorism as well as recruiting and training others for terrorism in the person's activities.

VDD found that the person deliberately obtained and disseminated terrorist propaganda, video recordings of terrorist acts, as well as instructions for the manufacture of explosives and various weapons online. VDD found that the person administers several international right-wing extremism and terrorism "Telegram" groups, promoting the dissemination of hateful and violent content. In correspondence, the

person expressed hostility towards people of racial, ethnic, religious and sexual minorities.

VDD found a large amount of terrorism-related material on the person's data storage device, including the manifestos of Anders Behring-Breivik, Brenton Tarant, James Mason and other right-wing terrorists, video recordings of terrorist acts, as well as instructions for the manufacture and use of explosives and various weapons. The Service also found in the possession of the person practical instruction by Islamist terrorist groups on how to carry out attacks. An analysis of the information by VDD shows that on several occasions in Europe, supporters of right-wing terrorism have also used instructions created by Islamist terrorists to plan attacks.

In the course of the investigation, VDD found that the Latvian citizen had individually sent useful information to several persons for the performance of terrorist acts, i.e. instructions for the manufacture of explosives and weapons, as well as video recordings of terrorist acts.

The pre-trial investigation in this criminal case is ongoing.

consume the available information and are thus exposed to increased risks of radicalisation.

VDD also observed that in 2023, right-wing extremists in Latvia gradually increased efforts to establish contacts with extremists in other, mainly European, countries. The purpose of establishing communications was to exchange views and contact information. Last year, VDD also noted trips abroad by some local extremists to meet with like-minded people in person. As a result of international contacts, local right-wing extremists learned from the experience of their foreign associates. In the Service's assessment, in the long run, such contacts may contribute to better preparedness by local extremists for various activities against national security, including violent attacks.

Amongst left-wing extremists, only the association "Latvian Workers' Front", which promoted the idea of communism, continued its visible activities last year. The association's public activity was suspended at the initiative of VDD upon request to the Prosecutor General's

Office. The Service identified a threat to the constitutional order of the State from the activities of the association, including the dissemination of proposals to change the political system of the State of Latvia by violence.

The "Latvian Workers' Front" was deprived of opportunities to spread its ideology on social networking sites. Access to its website was also blocked. Despite the ban on public activities, last year the association and several of its activists tried to continue their activities in a conspiratorial manner, as well as looking for ways to circumvent the restrictions imposed. On January 22, 2024, the Riga Regional Court ordered the complete termination of the association's activities.

At the same time, adherents of other ideologies in the left-wing extremist environment were mostly passive and did not pose a threat. Activity was continued by individual adherents of anarchism, who criticised the introduction of the State Defence Service. Despite the public's disinterest in their ideas, these activists continued to look for ways to reach out to like-minded young people.

COUNTERING ACTIVITIES CAUSING THREATS TO THE CONSTITUTIONAL ORDER OF LATVIA



Monitoring of pro-Kremlin and other radical activities

Last year, VDD continued constant monitoring of the information space to identify potential threats to the constitutional order and security of the state of Latvia. During the year, the Service conducted an in-depth evaluation of thousands of posts that directly or indirectly expressed support for Russian aggression or other radical messages and appeals. As a result of the counteraction taken by VDD, the amount of blatantly pro-Kremlin activities in the information space decreased. However, pro-Kremlin manifestations in the urban environment continued to be recorded by the State Police, who informed VDD about the detected cases. The Service analysed these cases according to its competence. Pro-Kremlin figures were also significantly less likely to express support in urban environments for Russian aggression last year than in 2022. However, the State Police regularly observed the letters "Z" painted in public places, which have become a symbol of support for the Russian war in Ukraine, and other hooligan activities.



Preventive talks and liability warnings

Over the past year, VDD paid increased attention to the activities of pro-Kremlin-oriented persons in the information space and in the urban environment. Having identified signs that a person could potentially carry out activities endangering the constitutional order of Latvia, the Service warned him or her of the criminal liability provided for in the event of the implementation of such activities. The Service continued to monitor Russia's "compatriot" activists last year, warning them of the illegality of providing support to the aggressor state. Talks with "compatriot" activists were also conducted before the usual dates of tension and disagreement in society (February 24, March 16, May 9 etc.) and associated public events to prevent the planning and enactment of provocations.



Monitoring of protests and other public events

Last year, the Service continued cooperating with Riga and other municipalities, evaluating announced protests and other public events. Having identified risks that narratives supporting the Russian aggression might be conveyed or public safety might be endangered during an event, VDD issued an opinion on the admissibility of holding the event or necessary restrictions. The Service also provided information, assessment and recommendations at its disposal to the State Police, which is responsible for ensuring public safety and order during public events. VDD paid special attention to events in support of Ukraine to identify possible provocations or potential pro-Kremlin manifestations during these events in a timely manner and to inform the State Police or the police of the relevant municipality about them.



Criminal enforcement measures

As in 2022, the pro-Kremlin manifestations observed by VDD continued to threaten the security of the information space of Latvia, with persons expressing open support for Russian war crimes in Ukraine. More detail about criminal cases and investigations against such persons can be found in the sections of the report on the security of the information space. In turn, hooligan activities recorded in the urban environment, including drawing symbols glorifying Russian aggression, continued to be evaluated by the State Police. Also last year, VDD informed the State Police about cases that came to the attention of the Service, when persons used symbols glorifying aggression in the urban environment or online. The most such manifestations last year were recorded on 9 May. Based on information provided by VDD, the State Police initiated more than 200 administrative offence proceedings, imposing fines on persons. Also last year, VDD recorded cases when Latvian nationals tried to support Russia's armed forces by providing them with resources or fighting in the war in Ukraine on the side of Russia's army. Last year, VDD initiated one criminal case on suspicion of financing an armed conflict, as well as one on suspicion of unlawful participation in an armed conflict abroad.



Administrative instruments

Last year, VDD continued to eliminate the threat posed by persons to the constitutional order of Latvia by using administrative instruments. The Service continued to exercise its right to recommend to the Minister of the Interior that foreigners threatening the constitutional order be placed on the blacklist. Regarding identified risks to the constitutional order of Latvia, last year VDD recommended to blacklist eight persons. Among such persons were the long-time president of the Latvian-Russian Cooperation Association Boris Katkov and the musician of Russian origin Artemy Ivanov (Temada), who are prone to provocations and systematic administrative violations. Also, in connection with the threat to the constitutional order, on the recommendation of the Service, the Minister of the Interior blacklisted Olga, Vitaly and Andrei Muravyov, the owners of the Russian company "Pobeda" and its related company "Pobeda Confectionery", who had provided resources to the occupying army in Ukraine.

Last year, for the first time, VDD exercised the rights provided for in the National Security Law to recommend to the Minister of the Interior to impose a prohibition on a Latvian national from leaving the Republic of Latvia. Such a prohibition in relation to information at the disposal of the Service regarding plans by persons to engage in activities which may endanger national security after returning to Latvia was recommended by VDD last year to be imposed on five persons. Most of these persons who were banned from leaving the country were the founders and supporters of the pro-Kremlin criminal organization "Baltic anti-Fascists", whose criminal activities were investigated by the Service within the criminal case.

FORECASTS

- As the war in Ukraine continues, the Kremlin's ability to influence the internal political processes of Latvia and pose a threat to the constitutional order of Latvia will continue to be limited. At the same time, the Kremlin will continue to use the tools at its disposal to advance its foreign policy interests. Various pro-Kremlin organizations, useful “opinion leaders” and certain groups of the population who continue to be favourable towards Russia will continue to serve as instruments of Kremlin influence in Latvia.
- Issues related to the war in Ukraine which are connected to the domestic policies of Latvia will continue to contribute to interethnic tensions and differences. There will continue to be divergent opinions on the use of the official language in the public space, cooperation with Russia and the activities of pro-Kremlin persons in society. Such a situation is beneficial for Russia, so it will continue its efforts to influence the part of society living in the pro-Kremlin information space.
- Several political parties oriented to the Russian audience will continue to claim the support of the pro-Kremlin population. In the run-up to the European Parliament elections, these parties will intensify their activities and, under conditions of political competition, will try in various ways to assert themselves as the leading “defenders of Russian rights” of Latvia. The messages spread by these parties will be consistent and useful to Russian interests.
- The condemnation of Russian aggression in Ukraine, which prevails in Latvian society will continue to limit possibilities for the implementation of various pro-Kremlin activities. Pro-Kremlin individuals and organizations will continue to hold a wait-and-see approach and most often hide their position. The pro-Kremlin section of the public will continue to wait for a potentially favourable outcome for the Kremlin in the war in Ukraine, hoping for the possibility of restoring former ties with Russia. Social networking sites will remain the main platforms for pro-Kremlin activities.



04

SECURITY OF THE INFORMATION SPACE

Similarly to the year before, last year's Russia's information influence activities were largely subordinated to the needs of war propaganda. This meant that Russia primarily tried to justify the invasion of Ukraine and the war crimes committed there, as well as to ensure that part of Western society, including Latvia, leaned on the side of the aggressor state, supporting the destruction of Ukrainian cities and civilians.

To achieve these goals, Russia continued to rely on traditional resources for information influence campaigns. Television channels, internet sites and information resources on online platforms remained relevant in the Kremlin's propaganda architecture in 2023. At the same time, there were significant changes in the way the content created by these information resources was delivered by the aggressor state's propaganda subjects to the audience in Latvia.

In the assessment of VDD, last year Russia strengthened the importance of social networking sites, video-sharing platforms and direct communication applications in its information influence activities. The reason for this was both changes in the information consumption habits of a large part of society, as well as sanctions by Western countries against Russia's media companies, which are used in aggressive Russian propaganda aimed at undermining the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine.

Also, persons who have moved from Latvia to Russia were purposefully involved in the information influence activities of Russia directed against Latvia. These included both previously known pro-Kremlin activists and persons who until their departure to Russia were not active in the information space of Latvia. However, both categories of persons were useful to the Kremlin in spreading defamatory and discrediting information about socio-political and economic processes in Latvia, NATO and the EU.

Thus, last year, as in previous years, VDD continued to implement enhanced monitoring of the information space of Latvia, observing pro-Kremlin manifestations, identifying the persons involved and investigating their



motivations and purposes. Analysis conducted by the Service shows that the absolute majority of the detected cases were mutually unrelated expressions by individual persons, facilitated by the periods spent in the information space of Russia. However, in VDD's assessment, in some cases, residents of Latvia who had moved to Russia were acting as Russian propaganda subjects, conducting targeted actions directed against Latvia.

As in previous years, China continued to expand its information influence activities in Latvia. China's activities in the information space were mainly aimed at creating a positive image of the country, as well as discrediting NATO and the EU. In VDD's assessment, China's information influence activities were aimed at increasing distrust among Western countries, as well as undermining public confidence in transatlantic relations.

The past year proved that one of the cornerstones of the national security of Latvia is a unified and resilient information space. In the assessment of VDD, the strengthening of Latvian language content in the information space of Latvia is one of the basic elements required to protect the national security of the country from the information influence efforts of countries unfriendly to Latvia.

4.1.

RUSSIAN INFORMATION INFLUENCE SUBJECTS

Last year, Russian television channels, as before, played a significant role in information influence measures. Although the primary audience of Russia's TV channels was the population in Russia, the content created by them in some cases continued to reach the Latvian public as well.

In VDD's assessment, the restrictions imposed on the electronic mass media of Russia and Belarus in Latvia were an important factor in reducing the negative impact of these resources in the information space of Latvia. At the same time, the distribution of the content of these television channels to consumers in Latvia was facilitated by the activities of so-called illegal operators as well as video-sharing platforms, primarily YouTube, which did not sufficiently restrict programs and broadcasts created by Russian propaganda actors subject to sanctions.

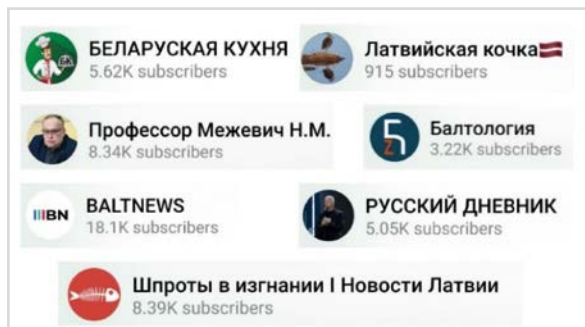
The possibilities for other traditional Russian media to reach a wider audience in Latvia were limited. In 2023, VDD monitored the distribution of press originating in Russia and Belarus. Since in Russia and Belarus the work of the "media" is subordinated to the propaganda needs of both countries, in VDD's assessment, their content praises Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and the further spreading of such publications in Latvia is unacceptable. The Service has held talks with individuals, warning them of criminal liability.

Another integral part of Russia's outreach efforts last year were internet trolls. After his unsuccessful rebellion against V. Putin, Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of the private military company "Wagner", was killed. For a long time, he was responsible for the activities of the so-called troll farm "Internet Research Agency" located in St. Petersburg.

According to information available to VDD, Y. Prigozhin had been close to Yulia Afanasyeva, the head of the non-governmental organization "Centre for Social and Cultural Initiatives," which is registered in Russia but has maintained contacts with Latvia's pro-Kremlin activists. Although the death of Y. Prigozhin undermined the effectiveness of these organisations, in the assessment of VDD, organisations and subjects associated with the former head of "Wagner" retained their importance in Russia's information influence architecture.

SECURITY OF THE INFORMATION SPACE

Last year, groups and channels on the platform “Telegram” had an increased role in Russia’s information influence activities. Analysis by VDD shows that channels and groups were formed on this application en masse, intended for the systematic and regular dissemination of Russian propaganda. The work was continued both by the previously identified channel “Shproti v izgnanii”, created by the authors of the information resource “Sputnik” of the Russian agency “Rossiya Segodnya”, and by many other information resources financed from the Russian budget.



Screenshots of the logos of individual “Telegram” channels used for Russian propaganda purposes.

In 2023, the pro-Kremlin section of Latvian society as well as individual pro-Kremlin activists were a cheap and handy resource, which was very useful for the organisers of Russia’s information influence measures. Using accounts on social networks, video-sharing platforms and direct communication applications, such persons further spread Russia’s war propaganda and amplified messages aimed at discrediting the state of Latvia and our allies in NATO and the EU.

Last year, the importance of activists who fled from Latvia to Russia was increased due to a new array of Russia’s information influence measures. Several pro-Kremlin activists who fled to Russia have long been associated with various Russia’s “compatriot” organizations. By escaping to Russia, they saw opportunities to continue earning money by belittling the Latvian state, its officials and political processes in various propaganda campaigns.

Moreover, according to analysis conducted by VDD, there was quite a lot of competition among pro-Kremlin activists who fled from Latvia to Russia for opportunities to engage in Russia’s information influence activities and receive financial compensation for this. These persons were also useful in the information space of Russia, portraying them as “victims” of the political system of Latvia and repressions against Russians. These persons also performed the functions of “opinion leaders” and “experts”, commenting on developments in Latvia and other Western European countries in accordance with the political interests of Russia.



Screenshots of pro-Kremlin activists who fled from Latvia to Russia: Romans Samuļs (top), Kirill Fyodorov and Andrei Mamikin, depicted in information resources used for Russia’s propaganda purposes.

VDD’s analysis shows that virtually all the activists who fled to Russia and who were previously present in the pro-Kremlin environment of Latvia were involved in Russia’s information influence activities, for example, Vadim Alekseev (known under the pseudonym Vadim Avva), Sergey Vasiliev, Igor Gusev, A. Mamikin, R. Pankratov, etc. One of the most visible examples of the activities of such persons was the pro-Kremlin criminal organization “Baltic anti-fascists”. S. Vasiliev and Victoria Matule, who fled from Latvia to Russia, tried to participate in Russia’s influence campaigns waged against Latvia by administering the “Telegram” channel “Baltic anti-fascists”.

Persons who fled from Latvia to Russia were also a useful tool for Russia’s television channels. Statements made by these persons were used by the creators of Russia’s propaganda content to attack the interests of Latvia

by discrediting Latvian officials and state institutions, as well as political and public processes. Last year, pro-Kremlin activists from Latvia were regular guests on the conspiracy theory-based program “Dolls of the Heir of Tuti” on the Russia’s TV channel “First Channel”, as well as on broadcasts by the Russia’s propagandist Vladimir Solovyov.

The characters who fled to Russia tried to win the favour of the Russian and Belarusian state authorities by creating personal videoblogs. In 2023, Romans Samuļs, who fled to Belarus, was active in this niche, as well as A. Mamikin and Kirill Fyodorov, currently living in Russia. Alexey Stefanov, one of the content creators of the information resource “Sputnik” funded by “Rossiya Segodnya”, also ran his own personal video blog.



Screenshot from an interview with Oleg Zikov published on the Internet site “iz.ru”.

Information influence measures – a set of propaganda campaigns and information operations that are used to achieve a change in the behaviour, opinions and / or belief system of individuals or society.

Analysis conducted by VDD shows that last year the activities of the Russian Embassy in Latvia in the public space were also subordinated to the efforts of the information influence of Russia. The Russian Embassy regularly used accounts on social networking sites and direct communication applications to disseminate official statements by Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs on developments in international politics. The Russian Embassy also continued to spread lies about historical events and criticize the decisions taken by Latvia aimed at reducing the Russian presence in our public space, i.e. the demolition of Soviet military objects and renaming streets. In turn, the the Chargé d’Affaires ad interim of the Russian Embassy, Oleg Zikov, regularly gave interviews to the information resources “Tass”, “Izvestia”, “Zvezda” and “REN TV” used for Russian

propaganda purposes, discrediting the decisions made and socio-political processes in Latvia.

4.2.

METHODS OF RUSSIA’S INFORMATION INFLUENCE RESOURCES

In the past year, the main working methods of subjects used for Russia’s information influence measures were related to deliberate and systematic use of social networking sites, video sharing platforms and direct communication applications. These platforms were also the main tool for media organisations close to the Kremlin, whose activities due to sanctions imposed against Russia are limited not only in Latvia, but also in other EU countries. The operating principles of these platforms also allowed subjects in Russia to organize covert (anonymous) information operations both for discrediting individual persons and organizations and for spreading systematic disinformation about various developments in Latvian society.

Analysis by VDD shows that the channels created for the purposes of Russia’s information influence on social networking sites and direct communication applications worked synergistically. The creators and administrators of such channels regularly republished each other’s content, thereby creating an illusory picture of seemingly widespread support for the Russian worldview.

Last year, the “Telegram” channel “Baltic anti-fascists”, created by S. Vasiliev and V. Matule, as well as related channels and chat rooms, was one of the most visible anti-Latvian information influence measures of Russia. At the same time, in the assessment of VDD, Russia devoted limited financial and intellectual resources to the said channel, resulting in the inability of the creators and administrators of the channels to offer original content to their audience. Instead, S. Vasiliev and V. Matule were mainly engaged in the reproduction and further distribution of information published on other “Telegram” channels.

At the same time, the activities of the pro-Kremlin criminal organization “Baltic anti-fascists” are also a clear example of how Russia is trying to combine information influence campaigns with the gathering of intelligence. In parallel with disseminating Russian propaganda messages, self-proclaimed “Baltic anti-fascists” S. Vasiliev and V. Matule organized the involvement of residents of Latvia in gathering information for transfer to the Russian intelligence and security services or the Investigative Committee.

CRIMINAL CASE AGAINST THE “BALTIC ANTI-FASCISTS”



The creators of the content of the “Telegram” channel “Baltic anti-fascists” S. Vasiliev and V. Matule. Screenshot from the platform “Telegram”.

On October 10, 2023, VDD asked the Prosecutor's Office to initiate criminal prosecution against six Latvian nationals for leading the criminal organisation “Baltic anti-fascists” and participating in the crimes committed by this organisation. At the moment, three members of this criminal organization are in Russia. Meanwhile, three persons were detained by VDD last year. After their release from prison, in 2023, in accordance with the procedures laid down in the National Security Law, the Minister of the Interior, on the basis of the recommendation of VDD, imposed a ban on them leaving the country.

Criminal case against the so-called “Baltic anti-fascists” was initiated by VDD on November 28, 2022. At that time the Service initiated criminal proceedings pursuant to Section 81¹ of the Criminal Law, i.e. assistance to a foreign state in action directed against the Republic of Latvia. On May 31, 2023, taking into account the information obtained during the investigation, VDD changed the legal qualification of the so-called “Baltic

anti-fascists” criminal offence in accordance with Section 89¹, Paragraph 2 of the Criminal Law.

According to information obtained by VDD, the so-called “Baltic anti-fascists” created a criminal organization to commit especially serious crimes against the Latvian state. To coordinate crimes, the pro-Kremlin criminal organization “Baltic anti-fascists” still uses several interconnected “Telegram” channels. In the assessment of VDD, the members of this criminal organization continue to pose a threat to the security of our country.

In the course of the investigation, VDD found that the pro-Kremlin criminal organization “Baltic anti-fascists” had committed the following criminal activities:

- illegal collection of non-disclosable information about developments in Latvia with a view to transferring them to the intelligence and security services of Russia;
- glorifying and justifying Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine;
- collection of financial resources and other resources to support the army of the aggressor state Russia in Ukraine;
- spreading calls for involvement in the ongoing hostilities in Ukraine on the Russian side.

The commission of these crimes may be punishable by life imprisonment or imprisonment for a term of ten to twenty years, with or without confiscation of property, with probation of up to three years.

TECHNIQUES FOR CREATING RUSSIA'S WAR PROPAGANDA



In 2023, Russia continued to spend huge resources on the war propaganda machinery. To further and support it, various information campaigns and so-called active measures implemented by Russia's intelligence and security services were used.

According to information obtained by VDD, Russia's intelligence and security services continued to organise trips for “international journalists” to the territories occupied by Russia. The purpose of the trips was to demonstrate how Russia is “bringing order” to areas of Ukraine where it has destroyed cities and murdered people.

According to the information available to VDD, these trips were organised by Russia with the aim of justifying the war crimes it has committed and controlling the messages in the publications produced by these

“journalists”. The publications produced during these trips were distributed on various internet sites intended for spreading disinformation, such as the website “news-front.su” curated by the Russian intelligence and security services. At the same time, due to the blatant lies prevalent in these publications, the content they produced did not make it into the mainstream media and thus failed to reach a significant audience.

According to the information at the disposal of VDD, such trips organised by Russia allowed “journalists” to see with their own eyes the destruction brought about by the “Russian World”. The “journalists” had the opportunity to look behind the scenes at the Russia's propaganda machine, which is trying to construct an interpretation of the war in Ukraine consistent with the Kremlin's political interests. But to earn the money promised for participation in Russia's propaganda campaigns, the “journalists” concealed this behind-the-scenes reality from their audience.

4.3.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE INFORMATION INFLUENCE OF RUSSIA

In the assessment of VDD in 2023, the situation in the information space of Latvia was generally calm and stable. Russia's propaganda narratives and interpretations about developments in Latvia and the international community could not reach the general public in Latvia. Also, according to the analysis of VDD, over the past year, compared to 2022, the level of aggression in the information space of Latvia decreased. In the assessment of VDD, the activity of Russian internet trolls in the information space of Latvia was also small.

At the same time, according to VDD, like the year before, last year, pro-Kremlin groups of society and their representatives used Telegram, TikTok, Facebook and YouTube to further disseminate narratives generated by Russia's traditional propaganda resources on these platforms. Last year, during systematic monitoring of the information space of Latvia, VDD made an in-depth assessment of several hundred thousand posts on social networking sites, with the aim of identifying publications to be assessed in the context of indications of criminal offences referred to in the Criminal Law.

The analysis of VDD shows that comments and videos supporting Russia were mostly published online last year by Russian-speaking residents of Latvia not related to political parties and other organizations. VDD conducted preventive talks with 400 authors of aggressive comments, recordings and videos, warning them of criminal liability if they continue to publish posts justifying Russia's war crimes in Ukraine and spreading hate speech. The purpose of such talks was to

limit the activities of aggressive individuals in the public sphere in order to prevent an increase in aggression to a level capable of having a negative impact on national security.

In the assessment of VDD, last year the largest increase in the level of aggressiveness on social networking sites was caused by the following events:

- 24 February – the first anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine;
- 9 May – the day when Russia celebrates its so-called “victory” in the Second World War;
- 16 March – Latvian Legionnaires' Commemoration Day.

According to VDD's analysis, the authors of pro-Kremlin commentaries and videos were mainly individuals from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who have long and uncritically consumed information and disinformation based on the Kremlin's propaganda narratives. In most cases, these individuals were aware of what had been done, they regretted their actions and deleted the relevant content from their accounts on social networking sites. At the same time, in 11 cases, VDD initiated criminal cases against the distributors of such content on suspicion of inciting national hatred or glorifying war crimes committed by Russia (more detail in the section of the report on pre-trial investigations).

Similarly, talks conducted by VDD with persons who distributed posts supporting the war started by Russia or hate speech on social networking sites and communication apps show that the pro-Kremlin section of Latvian society does not consume content created in Latvia in the Russian language. The main sources of information for such individuals are Telegram, YouTube and TikTok, where they are reached by Russia's propaganda narratives about the war in Ukraine and entertaining content produced by Russian media companies subject to EU sanctions.

THE AGGRESSIVE COMMENTATOR – A PROFILE

Similarly to the year before, in 2023, the typical, aggressive commentator on social networking platforms was a 30 to 49-year-old man, a non-citizen or former non-citizen living in Riga city or its surrounding districts, who wrote his comments in Russian. Last year, aggressive commentators mainly expressed support for Russia's war in Ukraine, promoted ethnic and national hatred, published slogans against the Latvian state, and called for the demolition of the Freedom Monument.

Reasons for aggression in social networks:

- a low level of education and income;
- excessive consumption of alcohol and other addictive substances;
- mental health problems;
- low level of media literacy, which influences the consumption of conspiracy theories and Kremlin propaganda;
- distrust of decision-makers, public institutions and mainstream media;
- lack of emotional intelligence.

COUNTERING RUSSIAN INFORMATION INFLUENCE ACTIVITIES



Closing propaganda resources

With the aim of restricting the spread of Russia's propaganda narratives in Latvia, VDD, according to its competence, continued to evaluate the operation of internet sites whose content may cause threats to the national security of Latvia. In cases where such content was identified, VDD informed the National Electronic Mass Media Council in accordance with the procedures laid down in the Electronic Communications Law. Thus, in 2023, the Service proposed to restrict access to about 20 such sites from the territory of Latvia.



Preventive talks and warning of persons

Similarly to 2022, last year VDD continued its preventive work by conducting talks with persons who had published posts on social networking sites and direct communication applications aimed at justifying the war and war crimes committed by Russia in Ukraine or containing signs of hate speech. Last year, the Service warned more than 400 Latvian nationals about criminal liability in case of committing criminal offences.



Blacklisting of persons

Last year, VDD recommended to the Minister of the Interior to include several Russian propagandists in the list of persons who are denied entry to Latvia. Such persons included Darya Lantratova, a figure close to the Russian power elite, the Estonian pro-Kremlin activists Oleg Besedin and Andrei Andronov, implementers of Russia's propaganda campaigns, as well as Armen Bagirov, head of public relations at the Russian media company Gazprom Media.



Criminal enforcement measures

Last year, VDD continued targeted work to identify cases where persons disseminate content in the information space of Latvia for which criminal liability is provided for. Last year, VDD initiated 11 criminal cases on suspicion of inciting national hatred or glorifying war crimes committed by Russia (more detail in the section of the report on pre-trial investigations).



Informing the public

In 2023, the Service continued systematic work in the field of public communication with the aim of raising the awareness of the Latvian public about the security situation in our country, as well as in the region. Concurrently, VDD is grateful to those members of the public who regularly drew the attention of the Service to developments in the information space of Latvia that might be contrary to the national security interests of Latvia.

The information gathered by VDD shows that certain outbreaks of aggression on social networking sites were also caused by news stories indirectly related to the Russia's war in Ukraine, such as the decision of the International Olympic Committee to allow Russian athletes to compete in the upcoming Paris Olympics, the refusal of a Ukrainian fencer to shake hands with an athlete from the aggressor country, and other events. In VDD's assessment, the aforementioned confirms that, despite a reduction in the number of aggressive manifestations, tensions that have arisen as a result of the Russia's invasion of Ukraine still remain in society of Latvia.

4.4.

CHINA'S INFORMATION INFLUENCE ACTIVITIES

Last year, China also continued gaining a foothold in the information space of Latvia. In the assessment of VDD, China's information influence activities were closely related to the efforts of that country to strengthen its influence in the economic and science sectors of Latvia and the Baltic Sea region countries.

Thus, China's information influence activities were aimed not only at strengthening its position in the Latvian media environment, but also in the academic and business fields. This was done with the aim of forming a community of opinion leaders in various fields, which would regularly and systematically convey narratives promoting China's foreign policy interests in the political and economic life of Latvia, as well as in international politics.

The analysis of VDD shows that in Latvia's information space, subjects related to Chinese influence disseminated information aimed at discrediting NATO and the EU. Similarly, by spreading manipulative information about Western countries and international organisations, China deliberately sought to undermine the existing international security architecture based on strong transatlantic ties between Europe and the US.

At the same time, China deliberately and systematically worked to create a positive image of China, with the

active involvement and participation of participants in the information space of Latvia. This was achieved through regular publications in the Latvia's media, the manifestations of individual persons on social networking sites, as well as the activities of the Chinese Embassy in Latvia, both on the Facebook platform and through efforts to break into the media content of the Latvian mainstream with "its own story".

In the assessment of VDD, in terms of their scale and aggression, China's information influence activities in Latvia's information space are not equivalent to the measures deployed by Russia. At the same time, they also contributed to the strengthening of messages corresponding to the geopolitical interests of Russia in Latvia. The objectives of the information influence activities of these countries were similar in many ways. The information influence activities of both countries were aimed at increasing the negative attitude of Latvian society towards NATO and the EU, as well as at undermining trust in our allied countries.

FORECASTS

- This year, Russia will continue to produce war propaganda to justify the invasion of Ukraine and the war crimes committed there. Although the resources of the information influence of Russia have largely been directed to the war in Ukraine, in the assessment of VDD, Russia will also intensify the measures of information influence directed against Latvia. It is predictable that as the war started by Russia in Ukraine continues and the tense security situation in the region continues, Russia will try to increase the feeling of fear and insecurity in Latvian society.
- Social networking sites and direct communication applications will play an increasingly important role in Russia's information influence architecture. VDD's analysis shows that already today Russia's intelligence and security services use such platforms, especially "Telegram", in the so-called active measures.
- Trends in the past year confirm that the intelligence and security services of Russia are increasingly trying to combine the implementation of active measures with the acquisition of intelligence. The analysis of VDD shows that these efforts of the intelligence and security services of Russia have different goals, including to discredit the socio-political processes in Latvia and our state officials, to seemingly mask intelligence activities in the public space, as well as to create favourable conditions for obtaining information about specific processes and persons.
- It is expected that Russian media companies and organizations will continue to look for ways to return not only to the Latvian, but to the entire European media and entertainment market by registering media companies in other countries. In this way, Russia will try to circumvent the restrictions imposed by the West on the activities of Russian electronic media.
- Russia will continue to develop information influence measures to increase the international community's distrust of Ukraine's ability to win the war against Russia and to try to reduce the support of the EU, including Latvia, for Ukraine in the struggle for peace in Europe.



05

ECONOMIC SECURITY

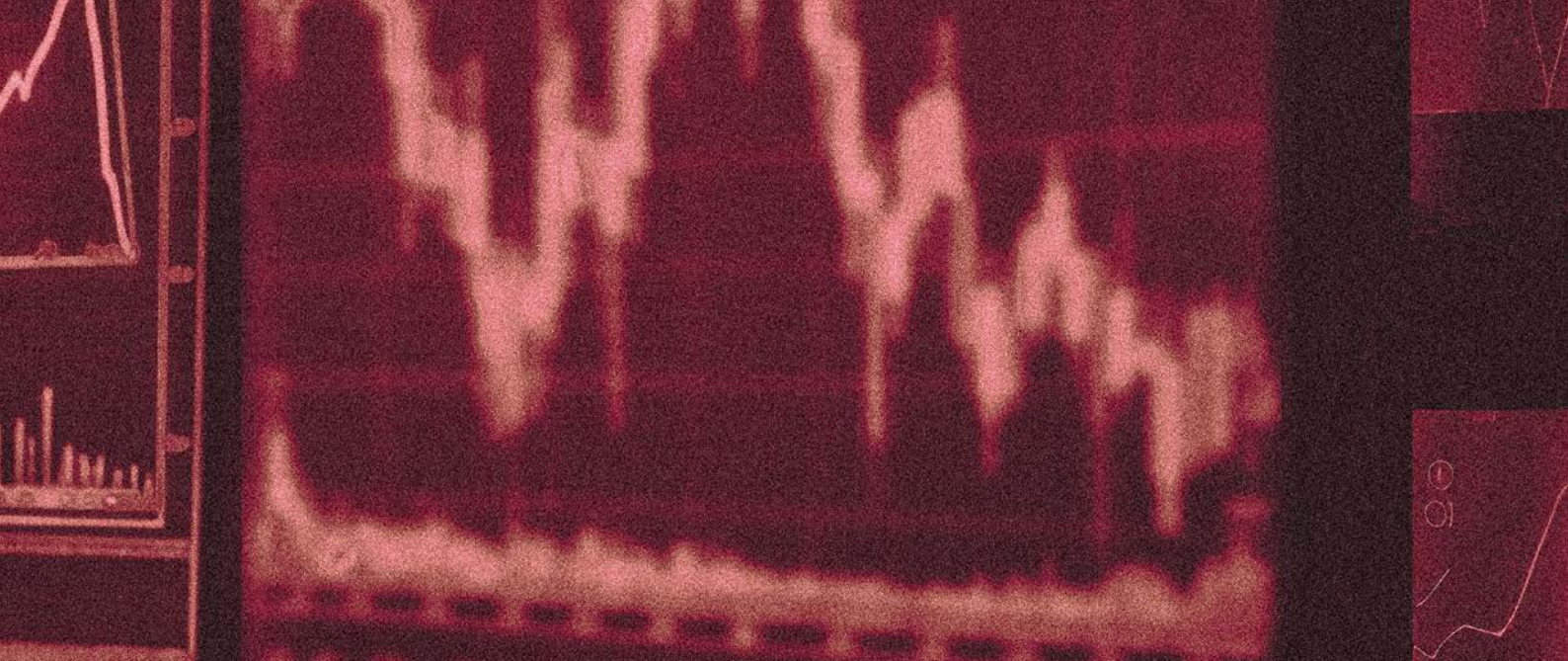
As in other years, in 2023 VDD paid increased attention to international and national processes that may negatively affect the economic security of Latvia. The Service constantly predicted further development of the situation and informed the highest state officials regarding the current threats to the economic security of the state, concurrently implementing measures for the reduction of threats within the scope of its competence.

Over the past year, risks to the country's economic security and reputation continued to arise from violations of international sanctions against Russia and Belarus. Therefore, one of the priorities of VDD was to obtain pre-emptive information on the risks of potential violation of sanctions and the prevention of such crimes. In the assessment of VDD, the greatest risks were related to possible violation and attempted violation of import and export restrictions imposed by the EU against Russia and Belarus, or so-called sectoral sanctions. The Service also identified attempts to export dual-use goods and technology subject to EU sanctions to Russia, which can be used for military purposes and contribute to Russia's military and technological capabilities.

Taking into account the geographical location of Latvia and the available transport infrastructure, the territory of Latvia remained an attractive chain link for the transit of goods subject to sanctions. Those circumstances continued to pose challenges to the institutions involved in the supervision of cross-border transactions, mainly customs and financial institutions.

In the assessment of VDD, conditions favourable for circumventing sanctions last year were still formed by the trade of goods subject to import or export restrictions imposed by the EU with companies in third countries⁸ that have not imposed restrictive measures against Russia and Belarus or are not fulfilling the commitments made. In the past year, such a favourable attitude toward Russia was maintained mainly by the CIS countries and China.

⁸ Here and forthwith – non-EU countries.



Last year, some dishonest Latvian entrepreneurs continued manipulative activities aimed at circumventing the sectoral sanctions imposed by the EU by falsifying accompanying documents regarding compliance with the requirements of the sanctions regime and providing false information about the transported goods, their composition, origin or destination to the authorities involved in the monitoring of sanctions.

VDD also recorded isolated cases where, hiding their intention to violate sanctions, companies based in other countries were used as intermediaries in transaction schemes that performed the function of a formal buyer or seller. At the same time, transport and payment flows in these cases were organised along different, sometimes even economically illogical routes.

VDD initiated a total of 17 criminal cases last year in connection with suspected violations of EU sanctions. In five cases, the suspects were found guilty of violating international sanctions. Two of these criminal cases concerned the violation of EU export or import restrictions. Latvian companies involved were subject to confiscation of financial assets related to the criminal offence, while natural persons involved in criminal activities were subject to fines. The amount of financial resources seized for the benefit of the state in cases of violation of sanctions investigated by VDD last year amounted to about half a million euros (more detail in the chapter of the report on pre-trial investigations).

Also in 2023, VDD continued to evaluate the energy and transport sectors of Latvia, which faced various challenges, systematically reducing the presence and opportunities for influence by the unpredictable and unreliable cooperation partner – Russia. In 2023, the situation in the energy sector stabilized due to external circumstances. At the same time, in the assessment of the Service, Latvia still needs to continue strengthening energy independence and security by improving the availability of alternative energy resources and, in

accordance with the planned, separating from the power supply circle BRELL established during the Soviet era. In the transport sector, the situation was also stable in 2023, although attracting alternative cooperation partners to increase freight turnover still presented challenges.

5.1.

SITUATION REGARDING FINANCIAL SECURITY AND SANCTIONS

Over the past year, the international community continued to tighten sanctions against Russia and Belarus to undermine Russia's economic and military ability to continue its aggression against Ukraine. Last year, the EU approved three additional sets of sanctions, introducing stricter restrictions on trade and the provision of services, as well as implementing a number of measures to reduce the circumvention of sanctions through third countries.

However, sanctioned entities and dishonest entrepreneurs continued to look for new ways to circumvent the restrictions imposed. As a result, other merchants were often exposed to the risk of being unknowingly involved in sanctions circumvention schemes.

In the assessment of VDD, increased risks to the economic security of the country continued to be caused by the lax attitude of individual entrepreneurs to the risks of violating sanctions in business transactions with partners in the East. This trend was most pronounced in sectors related to the transportation, trade and production of sanctioned goods.

Unscrupulous entrepreneurs continued to use the possibilities of import and export of goods subject to sanctions through the countries of Asia and Middle East region, which have not limited economic cooperation with Russia and Belarus, to circumvent sanctions.

DETECTED CASES OF VIOLATION OF SANCTIONS

Last year, the Service initiated 17 criminal cases on suspicion of violations of EU sanctions against Russia or Belarus. VDD provides a brief glimpse into two cases in which individuals were found guilty as a result of an investigation last year.

Violation of the export ban on luxury cars



Illustrative image, Freepik

In the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, since March 2022, the EU has imposed a ban on the export of luxury goods to Russia. On March 6, 2023, VDD, pursuant to Section 84 of the Criminal Law, initiated criminal proceedings against the owner of a company registered in Latvia on the basis of suspicions of unauthorized sale and delivery of a luxury car owned by the company to a Russian citizen for use in the aggressor country.

During VDD's investigation, it was found that a company representative had taken manipulative actions to illegally import the company-owned luxury car *Bentley Mulsanne Speed* into Russia, thereby circumventing the sanctions imposed by the EU. The vehicle was not handed over to the Kyrgyz buyer, who

had formally made the payment for the purchase of the car but was delivered to Russia and put into use by a Russian citizen.

To circumvent the sanctions, the delivery of the vehicle to Russia was carried out through Estonia. As the Service learned during the investigation, the payment for the vehicle was made on behalf of its formal Kyrgyz buyer by another company registered in Jordan, indirectly owned by the owner of the Latvian company. On April 6, 2023 more than 112,500 euros that were transferred to the account of the company registered in Latvia for purchasing the vehicle were frozen.

Result of the investigation:

The owner of the company pleaded guilty to committing a criminal offense. On October 30, 2023, the court sentenced the person to a fine in the amount of 62,000 euros. In turn, financial resources in the amount of 111,600 euros were recovered from the company for the benefit of the state. Also, the seized funds in the amount of more than 112,500 euros were confiscated from the company as property related to the crime.

Violation of the ban on the import of steel products



Illustrative image, Freepik

The EU has imposed a ban on imports of steel products from Belarus since March 2022. On September 28, 2022, VDD, pursuant to Section 84 of the Criminal Law, initiated criminal proceedings against a member of the board of a company registered in Latvia on the basis of suspected attempts to illegally purchase steel products from a gas equipment factory located in the Belarusian city of Navahrudak.

During VDD's investigation, it was found that in May 2022, a member of the company's board submitted to the bank an invoice issued by the Belarusian gas equipment factory for the purchase of liquefied gas cylinders and their valves for a total amount of more than 73,500 euros. A representative of the company

tried to purchase 1,800 gas cylinders and 2,000 gas cylinder valves. The gas cylinders, the cost of which exceeded 64,000 euros, were made of steel and their importation into the EU is prohibited.

The bank found that the subject of the transaction was a commodity subject to EU sanctions and rejected the payment of the transaction. Taking into account the bank's indication of a potential transaction for sanctioned goods, the company's representative changed the details of the invoice previously submitted to the bank and tried to pay for the transaction again. Again, unsuccessfully.

Result of the investigation:

A representative of the company pleaded guilty to attempting to violate EU sanctions. On October 17, 2023, the court sentenced the person to a fine of 12,400 euros. In turn, financial resources in the amount of 24,800 euros were recovered from the company. Also, 9,500 euros were confiscated from the company's bank account.

According to information analysis carried out by VDD, goods were often transported through the CIS countries or China in order to circumvent sanctions. At the same time, companies registered in the EU Member States, including Latvia, were also involved as formal intermediaries in trade chains. With such a technique, the persons involved in criminal activities seek to create an impression of a seemingly legal, low-risk transaction in order to avoid the interest of the authorities involved in the monitoring of sanctions to conduct an in-depth examination.

In order to identify the risks of circumvention of sanctions and prevent such violations, VDD continued cooperation with the public and private sector institutions involved in the application and supervision of sanctions last year.

Significant work in identifying and preventing possible violations of sanctions continued to be carried out by Latvian commercial banks, which conducted thorough research of their customers and monitoring of transactions. In the assessment of the Service, the Latvian financial sector continued to comply with high standards for monitoring the risks of violating sanctions. Banks and other financial institutions improved their internal control processes according to the identified risks and effectively implemented measures to mitigate risks.

At the same time, in the assessment of VDD, in certain sectors of the economy, companies should improve their internal procedures for controlling the risks of violating sanctions.

VDD DRAWS YOUR ATTENTION!

Last year, VDD identified the need for improvement of internal control mechanisms in business areas related to the movement of goods and services subject to import or export restrictions. Similarly, measures to reduce the risks of violations of sanctions should be implemented in the transport and logistics sector.

5.2.

IMPROVEMENT OF THE SYSTEM FOR MONITORING COMPLIANCE WITH SANCTIONS

Last year, VDD participated in the improvement of the system for monitoring compliance with sanctions, providing recommendations for changes in the regulatory framework of this system within the scope of its competence. In the assessment of VDD, Latvia

currently has a well-functioning system for monitoring compliance with sanctions. A clear division of responsibilities between the competent authorities has been established and there is an intensive exchange of information between the responsible authorities.

However, the unprecedented increase in the amount of EU sanctions against Russia and Belarus over the past year created challenges for the responsible authorities of Latvia, which are related to the need for additional personnel resources and specific knowledge for the enforcement of sanctions and monitoring of compliance. Such circumstances may have a negative impact on the efficiency of the implementation of sanctions, therefore it is essential to regularly improve the processes for monitoring compliance with sanctions by concentrating resources on the performance of key functions.

On December 7, 2023, the Saeima adopted amendments to the Law on International Sanctions and National Sanctions of the Republic of Latvia, expanding the competence of the Financial Intelligence Unit (FID) in the enforcement of sanctions. According to the amendments to the law, since April 1 of this year, in addition to its existing functions, FID will be competent to take decisions on the freezing of funds and economic resources owned or controlled by natural or legal persons subject to sanctions, as well as on the release of funds in exceptional cases provided for in the EU sanctions framework. In certain cases, such as ports and aviation, the decision-making on the release of frozen funds will remain the responsibility of the competent authority in the field.

In addition, last year, as a result of cooperation between the investigating authorities, changes were made to the procedure for investigating violations of sanctions, delegating investigative functions according to the scope of the respective institution's activities. In particular, in addition to VDD's current responsibility under the Criminal Procedure Law to investigate criminal offences in the field of national security, by order of the Prosecutor General's Office, the investigation of sanctions violations in the customs field was delegated to the Tax and Customs Police Department. This institution was previously engaged in the investigation of violations of sanctions detected at customs control points, but by order of the Prosecutor General's Office, the areas of responsibility of VDD and the Tax and Customs Police Department in investigating sanctions violations were clearly separated.

VDD, in accordance with its competence, last year continued to focus on detecting and investigating violations of sanctions related to the provision of financial or economic resources to natural or legal persons subject to EU sanctions who are responsible for undermining the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine. VDD also investigated cases

ECONOMIC SECURITY

of illegal export of goods and technology to Russia that can be used for military purposes or to strengthen Russia's military capabilities.

Last year, FID made changes to the guidelines for reporting suspicious transactions. The clarified guidelines provide that VDD should receive information on detected cases or attempts of violation of sanctions, while the FID addresses suspicious transactions that may be related to circumvention or attempted circumvention of sanctions.

In the assessment of VDD, the concentration of the functions of supervision of compliance with sanctions under concrete competent authorities will simplify the administrative decision-making process and promote more efficient application of the international sanctions regulations in Latvia. Also, in the assessment of the Service, the aforementioned measures will improve cooperation between state institutions and the private sector, while promoting the effectiveness of the investigation of sanctions violations.

COUNTERING POTENTIAL ATTEMPTS TO VIOLATE SANCTIONS

In the past year, VDD regularly received and evaluated reports from members of the public and private sector on possible cases or attempts to violate sanctions.

Analysing the content of the reports and clarifying the circumstances, VDD in several cases warned the persons involved in suspicious transactions about the criminal liability provided for violation of sanctions. In turn, the assessment of individual cases, when the Service detected signs of violation of sanctions, ended with the initiation of criminal proceedings.

In 2023, VDD received a total of 316 reports of possible sanctions violations. 211 reports were from banks and other credit institutions, 20 from legal entities, three from individuals. The remaining 82 reports of possible violations or attempts to violate sanctions were received by the Service from state authorities, mainly from the FID.

Part of the reports received from institutions and individuals contained information on one single transaction to be assessed or a set of related transactions, while part of it contained information on several unrelated transactions. Therefore, the actual number of suspected violations of sanctions assessed was higher than the total number of reports received.

The decrease in the number of reports compared to 2022 is due to the clarifications made by the FID last year in the guidelines for reporting suspicious transactions,

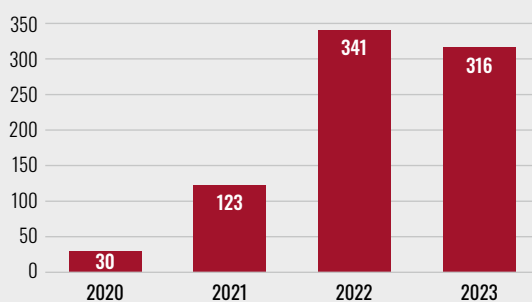
which provide information on possible circumvention of sanctions to be provided to the FID. In connection with these changes, VDD received fewer bank reports last year of possible attempts to circumvent sanctions. At the same time, the number of reports received from the FID increased last year, which already contained a qualitative assessment of suspicious transactions.

The majority or 72% (228) of all reports received by VDD last year were on possible violations of sanctions imposed by the EU against Russia, while 18% (57) of the reports – on possible violations of sanctions imposed by the EU against Belarus.

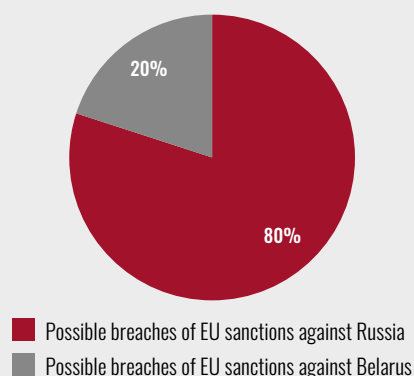
These reports focused on alleged violations of EU import and export restrictions, or sectoral sanctions against Russia and Belarus. On the other hand, there were separate reports of suspicious transactions that could be related to the circumvention of sanctions by exporting various electrical equipment, luxury goods or dual-use goods subject to EU sanctions to third countries close to Russia.

9% (28) of the reports received related to simultaneous violations of OFAC sanctions imposed by both the EU and the US. In turn, 1% (3) of the reports received by the service were for violations of the national sanctions of the United Kingdom and Ukraine against Russia or Belarus.

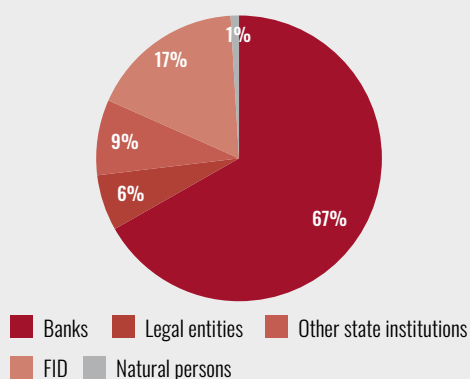
Number of reports received by VDD in the past year



Reports received by country for which EU sanctions have potentially been breached



Reports received by VDD by source of report



In accordance with the Law on International Sanctions and National Sanctions of the Republic of Latvia, the US OFAC as well as the national sanctions of other NATO member states must be observed in financial transactions and public procurements, without engaging in cooperation with subjects that are applied such sanctions. Non-compliance with sanctions may result in denial of access to payments in US currency. In addition, when information about the case of non-compliance with sanctions enters the public sphere, at the international level, the reputation of the company, bank and also the state involved in unauthorized transactions is negatively affected. Similarly, national sanctions of both EU and NATO member countries may be directed against persons who support the circumvention of sanctions imposed by these international organisations.

Analysis of the reports received by VDD shows that the banking sector followed a strict risk management policy in the area of sanctions last year and continued to carefully implement measures to reduce the risks of sanctions violations in the financial services sector.

At the same time, insufficient caution against the implementation of business with Eastern countries and the associated risks of violating sanctions was still observed in certain sectors of the economy. Such situation exposed both banks and companies to increased risks of violating sanctions, as in the event of incautious treatment their products or services might get involved in sanctions circumvention schemes without them even realizing it.

The analysis carried out by the Service shows that entrepreneurs whose business activities have historically been oriented specifically towards the Russian or Belarusian market were exposed to significant risks of violating sanctions last year. Companies whose activities are related to the import or export of sanctioned goods and services were particularly exposed to risks. This applied to both Latvian entrepreneurs and foreign merchants who use Latvia's advantageous geographical location for cargo transit with Russia and Belarus.

The analysis carried out by VDD shows that foreign-based companies were often used to circumvent sanctions, which were often newly founded and acted in the interests of Russian and Belarusian businessmen. Therefore, in transactions with foreign business partners, it is important to observe the “know your customer” principle and carefully assess the risks of violating sanctions related to the transaction.

VDD DRAWS ATTENTION!

In the assessment of VDD, in cross-border transactions with third countries involving goods or services subject to sanctions, special care must be taken and the possible links of the cooperation partner with Russia or Belarus should be assessed.

5.3.

VETTING OF INVESTORS



Illustrative image, VDD

In 2023, VDD continued vetting foreign investors in accordance with the procedures stipulated by the Cabinet of Ministers.⁹ The Service assessed whether investments of foreign citizens or enterprises in strategically important enterprises and sectors of the national economy will not have a negative impact on the national security of Latvia.

The Service also verified the information received from the Ministry of Economics on foreign direct investments being assessed in other EU Member States. In 2023, 196 such requests were received from the Ministry of Economics for evaluation. As a result of the vetting, no risks to our national security interests were identified.

⁹ Cabinet of Ministers Regulations No. 311 of June 20, 2023 “Procedures for the Prevention of Threat to Commercial Companies, Associations and Foundations of Significance to National Security”.

ECONOMIC SECURITY

Over the past year, foreign direct investment in the EU Member States has continued to decline. This trend was associated with the uncertainty caused by Russia's military aggression, the risks of a recession in the European economy and inflation.

Over the past year, foreign investors maintained a high interest in investing in innovative development projects and EU companies. For foreign investors, as in the previous year, the greatest interest was in investing in communications and information technology companies, trade, finance and manufacturing sectors, as well as projects for the production of renewable energy. Most of the investment in the economies of the EU Member States flowed from North America, Great Britain and members of the European Free Trade Association.

In accordance with the National Security Law, VDD also continued vetting investors in commercial companies of significance to national security. In 2023, the service analysed and provided decision-makers with an assessment of several potential investors and the risks they pose.

Last year, VDD continued vetting foreigners who, on the basis of investments in the Latvian economy, wanted to obtain a temporary residence permit (TRP) in our country. Such a possibility is provided for in Section 23, Paragraph 1, Articles 28, 29, 30 and 31 of the Immigration Law.

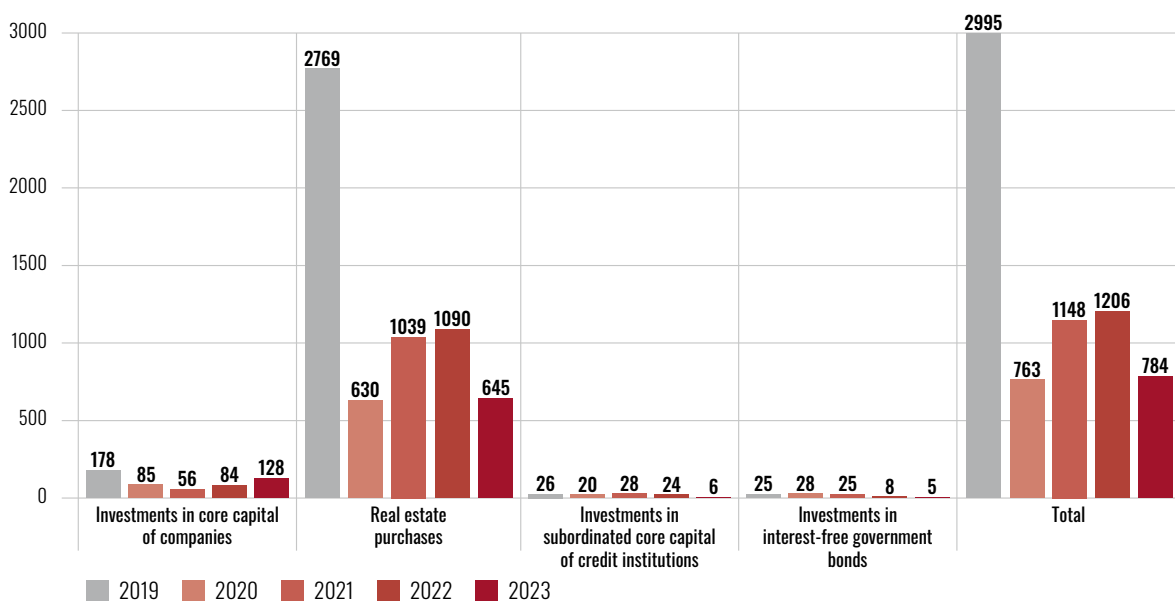
The Service vetted foreigners from so-called risk countries, the list of which is laid down in Cabinet

of Ministers Regulations No. 554 of June 21, 2010 "Regulations concerning countries whose nationals are subject to an additional check when issuing a visa or residence permit". According to its competence, the Service assessed whether the stay of these foreigners in Latvia could cause risks to the national security of Latvia. VDD sent its opinions to the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (OCMA) for a decision on the possibility of issuing a TRP.

Last year, the possibilities of receiving a residence permit for citizens of the aggressor state Russia and its ally Belarus in Latvia were significantly limited. According to the amendments to the Immigration Law adopted on September 22, 2022, a residence permit should be issued to citizens of these two countries only in certain cases, such as humanitarian reasons or family reunification. In turn, the issuance of a residence permit on the basis of investments to citizens of Russia and Belarus was completely suspended last year. Despite the restrictions, a relatively large number of Russian and Belarusian citizens last year continued to submit applications for TRP on the basis of investments. For these persons, the issuance of a residence permit was refused, on the grounds that this did not comply with the provisions of the law.

Last year, VDD vetted 784 foreigners who wanted to obtain a residence permit on the basis of investments. Among them were both investors and their family members (spouses, minor children, etc.). 567 persons reapplied for residence permit on the basis of investments. In turn, for the first time, 217 persons applied for the TRP.

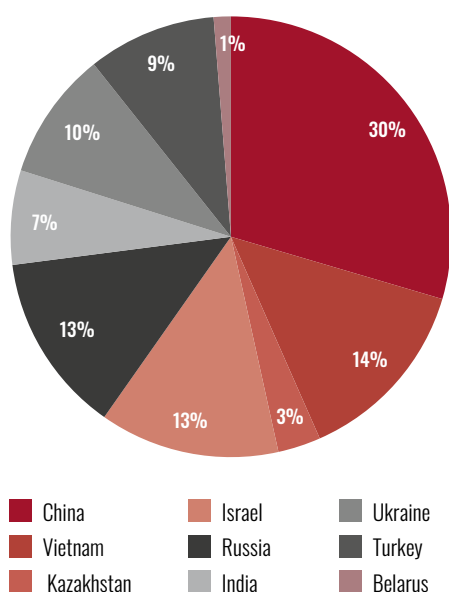
TRP applicants by investment type



As in previous years, last year the overwhelming majority of foreigners vetted by the Service wanted to obtain a residence permit on the basis of real estate purchased in Latvia. In 2023, this was the case for 645 persons, or 82% of all TRP applicants vetted by VDD. The number of foreigners who applied for TRP on the basis of investments in capital companies (128 persons) was significantly lower. As in other years, the interest of citizens of risk countries to obtain a residence permit in Latvia in exchange for investments in the subordinated capital of credit institutions (6 persons) or in interest-free government bonds (5 persons) was small.

Among the citizens of risk countries vetted by VDD who applied for a residence permit in Latvia for the first time in exchange for investments, last year the largest number were Chinese citizens (47). In second and third places with an almost identical number were citizens of Vietnam (22) and Israel (21). Over the past year, VDD performed first time vetting of 15 Ukrainian, 15 Turkish, 11 Indian and five Kazakh citizens. 21 Russian citizens and two Belarusian citizens also submitted first time application for a residence permit in connection with investments made in Latvia.

TRP first time applicants by country



In the process of screening foreigners, the Service cooperated closely with the OCMA. Last year, a total of 205 foreigners who had applied for a residence permit in connection with investments were refused a residence permit. The high percentage of TRP refusals (26% of applicants), compared to other years, is explained by the fact that a relatively large number of Russian and Belarusian citizens, who applied for TRP, in accordance with Section 23¹ of the Immigration Law shall not be eligible for a residence permit on the basis of investment.

It should be noted that last year, in connection with identified risks to national security, VDD recommended that the OCMA annuls the residence permit for two Russian citizens who had been issued a residence permit on the basis of investments.

5.4. ENERGY SECURITY



Illustrative image, Freepik

Last year, under the influence of external circumstances, the situation of energy security in Latvia stabilized, as energy prices in international markets decreased significantly.

In 2023, VDD continued to obtain and analyse information on the availability of energy resources and heat supply tariffs in Latvian municipalities, assessing their potential impact on the socio-economic situation and mood of residents.

According to VDD, the replacement of Russian natural gas with alternative supplies can be assessed as successfully implemented. In addition, last year Latvia continued to take advantage of the Inčukalns underground gas storage facility. In the assessment of the Service, in order to ensure the availability of liquefied natural gas in the future, it is in the interests of energy security of Latvia to continue strengthening regional cooperation with Lithuania, Estonia and Finland, as well as to develop the natural gas storage infrastructure.

In October 2023, damage to the natural gas pipeline “Balticconnector” located on the Baltic seabed reaffirmed the need to pay increased attention to the security of the energy infrastructure and protection against potential physical and cyberattacks. VDD draws attention to the fact that energy infrastructure is one of the traditional targets of the intelligence and security services of countries hostile to Latvia.

Last year, the development of electricity transmission infrastructure continued in Latvia, preparing for the planned desynchronization at the beginning of 2025 of the Baltic States from the power supply circle BRELL, which still connects Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia with Russia and Belarus. In the assessment of VDD, the planned disconnection from BRELL will undoubtedly improve Latvia's energy security, as cooperation with an unreliable and unpredictable partner – Russia – will be terminated. At the same time, it should be taken into account that until the complete desynchronization of the Baltic States from BRELL, Russia will retain the possibilities to cause disturbances to the stability of the operation of the power supply network in the Baltic States by prematurely disconnecting Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia from the unified network. In these circumstances, the Baltic States should continue targeted development of the infrastructure of electricity network balancing equipment in order to reduce the risks caused by Russia.

In 2023, VDD identified the interest of certain Chinese companies to engage in the implementation of renewable energy projects in Latvia as equipment suppliers. In the assessment of VDD, special care should be taken when planning a potential cooperation with Chinese companies. Chinese companies can use Latvia as an initial platform for further expansion of their influence in the EU renewable energy market.

The growth of renewable energy capacities in Latvia's energy production balance remained slow. In the assessment of VDD, Latvia should continue to move towards balanced development of renewable energy capacities, concurrently increasing the capacity of electricity transmission and distribution infrastructure. In addition, potential energy storage solutions need to be further identified.

Last year, VDD issued a positive opinion to the government in relation to the change of owners of a commercial company of significance to national security – natural gas distribution operator JSC “Gasol”. VDD also assessed the planned investments in certain renewable energy projects and informed the country's top officials about the identified risks.

5.5.

TRANSPORT SECTOR SECURITY

In the transport sector, the challenges of reduced freight turnover and uncertainty about the future prospects of the sector's activities continued over the past year.



Illustrative image, Freepik

The volume of cargo transported from Russia and Belarus rightfully continued to decline in 2023. At the same time, VDD still recorded the interest of individual Latvian transport sector companies to continue cooperation with the abovementioned countries.

Although no longer as intensive as in previous years, cargo transportation to and from Russia remained a sufficiently large-scale activity of the Latvian transport sector.

VDD draws attention to the fact that companies in the transport sector, including those owned by the Latvian state, should always carefully assess the compliance of cargo transportation related to Russia or Belarus with EU sanctions regulations, as well as the need for transportation of such cargoes in general, taking into account the crimes committed by Russia in Ukraine. The provision of any kind of resources to natural or legal persons subject to EU sanctions may be assessed as a violation of sanctions that is criminalised. Also, criminal liability may be imposed for violation of prohibitions on the import and export of certain goods.

Within the scope of its competence, VDD last year regularly obtained information on cargoes transported by Latvian companies to or from Russia or Belarus. The Service verified the information obtained with a view to identify cases of violation of sanctions against Russia or Belarus in the transport sector.

Despite the possible risks of circumvention of sanctions, Latvian transport industry companies continued their attempts to develop cooperation with Central Asian countries last year. In this way, the companies tried to partially compensate for the decrease in the volume of cargo from Russia and Belarus. The abovementioned activities once again confirmed the tendency of the Latvian transport sector to focus on cooperation and sources of cargo origin in the former Soviet Union space. This trend last year was especially applicable to

rail freight carriers and ports. There are partly objective reasons for the long-standing trend: the geographical location of Latvia, developments over many years, contacts that have been preserved, etc. At the same time, in the assessment of VDD, these cases reflect the passivity of representatives of the transport sector in the search for alternative cooperation partners.

Last year, VDD, at the request of the responsible ministries, assessed the true beneficiaries and officials of companies in the aviation sector and transport sector.

In the context of the long-term development of the national security and transport sector of Latvia, the strategic importance of the “Rail Baltica” project remained consistently high. The project is essential for the development of the rail freight sector.

Last year, the risks related to the delay in the construction of the rail line “Rail Baltica” so far and the increase in the amount of financing necessary for the implementation of the project became increasingly apparent. In the assessment of VDD, despite the existing difficulties, further delays in the construction of the “Rail Baltica” infrastructure are unacceptable. The project requires targeted risk management.

In 2023, within the scope of its competence, VDD continued to inform the highest state officials about the risks related to the implementation of the “Rail Baltica” project. The Service also provided an opinion on the bidders for the construction of the “Rail Baltica” main line. VDD vetted persons who are involved in the implementation of the “Rail Baltica” project and who have access to critical infrastructure, as well as essential information related to the project.

FORECASTS

- In the assessment of VDD, the risks of circumvention of sanctions related to import, export and transit flows in the eastern direction will continue to pose challenges to the financial security of Latvia. The effectiveness of sanctions will continue to be negatively affected by the possibility of circumventing formally enforceable requirements by manipulating information about actual or planned business transactions in third-country jurisdictions. It is important for both the authorities supervising compliance with sanctions and the companies themselves to critically evaluate transactions with cooperation partners in third countries.
- In the assessment of VDD, in the interests of the economic security of Latvia, it is important to continue to strengthen restrictions against Russia and Belarus by implementing a unified EU foreign economic and sanctions policy. Furthermore, the implementation of common practices in the application and supervision of sanctions in the EU Member States is essential to ensure the effectiveness of sanctions. It is also essential to strengthen individual sanctions against persons and companies in third countries involved in circumventing sanctions.
- In the transport sector, the interest of individual entrepreneurs to continue cooperation with Russia or Belarus is also expected this year, including by looking for opportunities to circumvent the sanctions imposed by the EU. Also, special attention will have to be paid by the supervising authorities to the cooperation of representatives of the transport sector with companies in third countries that have not imposed restrictive measures against Russia and Belarus. Such cooperation may conceal the circumvention of sanctions by using companies from third countries as intermediaries.
- In the field of energy, the latest preparations ahead of the planned separation of the Baltic States from the Soviet-era power supply circle BRELL at the beginning of 2025 will be challenging this year. Latvia will also continue other measures to strengthen the energy security and independence of the country.



06

COUNTERTERRORISM

In 2023, terrorism threat trends broadly remained unchanged. Terrorists and supporters of violent ideologies continued to pose a threat to Europe's security. In Latvia, the terrorism threat level remained low, but in several Western European countries there was a high or elevated terrorism threat.

As in previous years, last year's terrorist attacks in Europe were mostly carried out by so-called homegrown terrorists, who were not directly linked to Islamist terrorist groups. They were influenced by propaganda materials circulated by terrorist groups on the internet or by ideologies justifying violence on the web. On the other hand, the Islamist terrorist groups *Daesh*, *Al-Qaeda* and their affiliates did not have sufficient resources and combat capabilities to carry out attacks outside the direct-action areas in Afghanistan, the Middle East and West Africa.

Last year, services involved in counterterrorism activities in several European countries detained persons who had planned attacks in Europe under the influence of the Gaza-based terrorist group Hamas invading Israel on October 7, 2023. The planned attacks were prevented. At the same time, what happened shows that the armed conflict in the Middle East had a direct negative impact on security in Europe.

The terrorism threat posed by right-wing extremists last year also remained at an elevated level. Right-wing extremists continued to disseminate propaganda materials and were also involved in planning attacks against various minority groups in Europe.

In order to reduce terrorism risks in Latvia, last year VDD continued to implement preventive measures. One of the main directions of the Service's activities in this area was the identification of cases of radicalisation and the prevention of possible threats. To this end, VDD paid increased attention to groups at risk of radicalisation and systematically obtained information on persons whose behaviour showed signs of radicalisation.



Last year, in two unrelated cases of radicalisation of persons, VDD initiated criminal cases on suspicion of justifying and glorifying terrorism, as well as distributing such content on the internet. One person expressed support for right-wing extremism and the other for Islamist terrorism. In both cases, VDD took appropriate measures to address the threat posed by these individuals (more information on the case related to right-wing extremist propaganda can be found in the section about the protection of the constitutional order).

Last year, an increase in terrorist threats in European countries was observed after October 7, when militants from the terrorist group Hamas invaded Israel. The threat posed by terrorists also increased after several protests in European countries last year, during which the sacred writings of the Islamic religion, the Quran, were publicly damaged.

Last year's terrorist attacks and the prevented terrorist attacks showed the presence in European countries of individuals who are ready to engage in violent attacks in retaliation for the desecration of religious symbols or events in the Middle East.

Also in 2023, terrorist attacks in Europe were mostly carried out by homegrown terrorists, i.e. persons who were born, raised and had protractedly lived in Europe, who were radicalised by the propaganda of Islamist terrorist groups. Last year, asylum seekers who had entered Europe from so-called terrorism risk countries were also involved in the planning and carrying out of terrorist attacks. The involvement of such persons in violent activities was facilitated by difficult socio-economic conditions, as well as susceptibility to radical ideologies. Several persons detained last year were diagnosed with mental health problems that may in some cases contribute to radicalisation.

In 2023, the radicalisation of individuals and their readiness to commit terrorist acts continued to be facilitated by propaganda materials of terrorist groups available on the internet. These materials include, alongside ideological content justifying violence, practical advice on committing terrorist acts, which also in the past year motivated supporters of terrorism living in Europe to carry out individual attacks on behalf of terrorist groups.

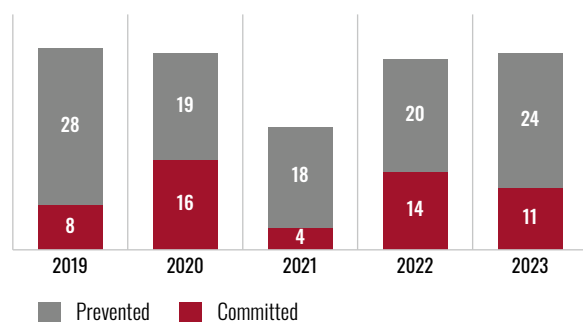
Persons from the Central Asian region continued to come to the attention of the European services. For example, in June 2023, a group of persons of this origin

6.1.

THE TERRORIST THREAT SITUATION IN EUROPE

In 2023, terrorists committed 11 terrorist acts in Europe. These were all small-scale attacks. At the same time, European services involved in counterterrorism activities succeeded in preventing 24 planned attacks. Of these, 21 attacks were planned by radical Islamists and three attacks were planned by followers of other ideologies justifying violence.

Terrorist attacks in Europe



was detained in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands for planning a terrorist attack. These arrests showed that there are still individuals in Europe with links to the *Daesh* branch in Afghanistan. In addition, militants from the region continue to enter Europe, including through the flow of refugees.

It should be noted that persons from Central Asia have close cultural and linguistic ties with the northern regions of Afghanistan, which can facilitate their involvement in terrorism support activities. Especially following the withdrawal of Western armed forces from Afghanistan, people from the Central Asian region are increasingly being detained in Europe for terrorism-related crimes. According to VDD, persons from Central Asia are considered as a group at increasing risk of radicalisation in Europe. At the same time, this demonstrates that terrorists based in Afghanistan continue to strengthen their positions in order to restore their combat capabilities and continue to threaten the security of European countries.

The main target of Islamist terrorist attacks last year remained civilians at mass gathering sites. In turn, the primary targets of right-wing extremist attacks were representatives of various ethnic minorities and objects of critical infrastructure.

In the past year, right-wing and left-wing extremists also continued to pose a terrorist threat in some countries. The threat posed by right-wing extremists was demonstrated last year by three attacks carried out as well as several planned attacks.

In 2023, terrorists continued to prefer simple methods of attack that do not require long and serious preparation. In seven of the 11 attacks that took place, terrorists used sharp objects. In three attacks, terrorists used homemade firelighters. In one case, the attacker used a firearm.

6.2.

TERRORISM THREAT TRENDS IN LATVIA

In Latvia, the terrorism threat level last year remained low. The Service did not identify any individuals or groups of persons in the country who had links to international terrorist groups or terrorism-prone persons in other European countries. At the same time, several persons were identified whose actions showed signs of justification and glorification of terrorism.

In October last year, there was widespread extensive publicity in the media and public concern regarding numerous e-mails with bomb threats received by

educational institutions, but these were not associated with a real terrorist threat. In the assessment of VDD, the threat letters were sent to increase the feeling of insecurity and fear in society and to destabilise the situation in Latvia. To achieve this goal, specific groups of society, namely children, parents and teachers, were put under psychological pressure.

Following the attack on Israel by the terrorist group Hamas, VDD paid increased attention to the impact of the armed conflict in the Middle East on the terrorism threat situation in Latvia. Within the scope of its competence, VDD carried out an analysis of the situation in the Muslim community of Latvia. The Service did not find direct support for the terrorist group Hamas in this environment. Likewise, VDD found no calls to engage in violent activities from within the Muslim community.

The main terrorism threat in Latvia continued to be caused by possible radicalisation of individual residents. VDD found a number of individuals interested in terrorist groups and the ideologies they proclaimed. The identification of two cases of radicalisation last year resulted in the initiation of criminal proceedings, with the Service suspecting the persons of dissemination of content glorifying, justifying and inciting terrorism.

6.3.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES TO MITIGATE TERRORISM RISKS

Last year, VDD continued to systematically take preventive measures in order to reduce terrorism risks in Latvia. The Service implemented measures for the timely identification and prevention of cases of radicalisation, provided recommendations for strengthening the security of terrorism risk objects and public events, as well as participated in the control of the circulation of explosives precursors.

Last year, the Service updated one of the basic elements ensuring the effective functioning of the national counterterrorism system – the National Counterterrorism Plan. This is a classified plan of preventive measures, which defines the measures to be taken by more than 20 institutions depending on the level of terrorism threat declared in the country. Taking into account the current global terrorism threat trends and the conclusions of the inter-institutional counterterrorism exercises organised by VDD, the Service prepared an updated version of the Plan for submission to the Cabinet of Ministers. The plan included some new areas of preventive measures, such as mitigating the threat from the increased usage of unmanned aerial vehicles.

As in other years, last year the Service organized meetings every six months of the Expert Advisory Council of the Counterterrorism Centre. At these two meetings, VDD's counterterrorism experts and representatives of different sectors discussed current trends of terrorism threats in Europe and Latvia, the activities carried out and planned by VDD in the field of counterterrorism and made proposals for improving the counterterrorism system.



Measures to prevent radicalisation

In order to prevent the spread of radicalisation in Latvia, last year VDD also systematically gathered and evaluated information on persons whose behaviour shows signs of radicalisation. Timely identification of persons at risk of radicalisation and assessment of the threat caused by them was one of VDD's priorities for the prevention of terrorist crimes in the state.

In 2023, the Service continued to organise and lead the activities of the inter-institutional working group "Prevent" on the prevention of radicalisation¹⁰. VDD's counterterrorism experts regularly advised the representatives involved in the working group from state and municipal institutions, whose daily work is closely related to groups of society at risk of radicalisation.

In 2023, three meetings of the working group "Prevent" were held, where the trends of radicalisation in Europe and Latvia were analysed. VDD counterterrorism experts and the group's members assessed the impact of various terrorism-related incidents and conflicts that have occurred in Europe and elsewhere in the world on the polarisation of society in Latvia. Recommendations and ideas for further activities to prevent radicalisation were also discussed in the meetings. In addition to promoting cooperation between institutions in the prevention of radicalisation, one of the main directions of "Prevent" was the organisation of training sessions and seminars. Within the framework of "Prevent" activities, last year VDD's counterterrorism experts organised nine briefings on radicalisation for officials of state institutions and other professionals.



Strengthening the security of terrorism risk objects

Also in 2023, one of VDD's priorities in the field of counterterrorism was the evaluation and improvement of the security regime of terrorism risk objects, namely, the critical infrastructure of Latvia and mass gathering sites. Last year, VDD continued to pay special attention to the ability of the staff of terrorism risk objects to identify suspicious activities in the vicinity of the sites in a timely manner and to respond to them in accordance with the recommendations developed by VDD and distributed to such objects.



RADICALISATION DETECTED

One of the risk groups for radicalisation to which VDD pays increased attention is converts, i.e. persons who have converted to Islam during their lifetime. The Service identified a specific Latvian citizen who regularly shared videos supporting the ideology proclaimed by Islamist terrorist groups on the video-sharing platform TikTok.

On August 14, 2023, VDD initiated criminal proceedings against the person pursuant to Section 79⁶, Paragraph 1 of the Criminal Law, namely public glorification and justification of terrorism. In the course of the investigation, the Service established that the person supported radical interpretation of Islam. The Service obtained information that the person supports the terrorist organization *Daesh* and has expressed the readiness to engage in violent activities in the name of ideological goals. The Service also discovered that the person had a pronounced interest in firearms.

On December 15 last year, VDD asked the Prosecutor's Office to prosecute the person, requesting that they be charged with distributing content that glorifies, justifies and incites terrorism.

In the Service's assessment, not enough attention is paid to identify and remove terrorist and other harmful content on TikTok.

¹⁰ In 2019, the inter-institutional working group "Prevent" was established by the Expert Advisory Council of the VDD Counterterrorism Center, which oversees the activities of the group.

As in previous years, VDD inspected terrorism risk objects, evaluating the physical security measures introduced at the objects and compliance with them. In 2023, VDD inspected a total of 91 terrorism risk objects.

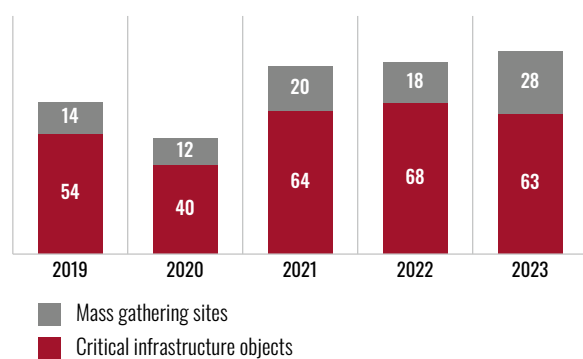
63 of the terrorism risk objects inspected by VDD were objects of critical infrastructure. VDD identified deficiencies in 37 security regimes of critical infrastructure objects and provided recommendations to the representatives of the objects for improving the security. The recommendations of the Service were mainly related to the need to improve internal security procedures, coordination of security work or security systems.

28 of the terrorism risk objects inspected by VDD were mass gathering sites. Last year the Service inspected nine shopping centres, five hotels and 14 entertainment and cultural venues. VDD identified deficiencies in the security regimes of eleven mass gathering sites and provided recommendations and additional consultations to the representatives of the sites for the improvement of physical security measures.

In addition, VDD organised 15 briefings on the security of terrorism risk objects, in which persons from more than 400 terrorism risk objects involved in the planning and provision of security measures participated.

In response to the bomb threats received by many state and municipal institutions last autumn, including terrorism risk objects, last year VDD updated and sent out standard recommendations for emergency action to all critical infrastructure objects, as well as mass gathering sites. The Service conducted a number of notification tests at terrorism risk objects to verify the accessibility of contact persons and their ability to respond to crisis situations.

Terrorism risk objects inspected by VDD



As in other years, VDD vetted and gave approval in accordance with its competence to candidates for positions related to the security of objects at risk of terrorism. The Service also vetted service providers and other persons who had a justified necessity to enter restricted access areas of critical infrastructure objects.

Last year, VDD paid special attention to the physical safety of ionising radiation objects. The Service was involved in the improvement of the regulatory framework related to the safety of these objects, and also reviewed and updated the list of contact persons of objects of ionising radiation. Last year, VDD inspected two ionising radiation objects, evaluating the physical safety regime of these sites and providing recommendations for improvement. In addition, the Service provided advice to six ionizing radiation objects for improving physical protection and transportation security plans.



Improving the security of public events

In order to reduce potential terrorism risks at public events, in 2023 VDD continued to carry out explanatory work with largest event organisers, municipalities and other services regarding the security requirements specified in laws and regulations.

Last year, VDD evaluated and coordinated safety plans for 29 high-risk events. Officers of the Service were present at 12 of these events to verify the correct implementation and effectiveness of the security measures stipulated in the agreed security plans.

As part of its explanatory work, the Service organized a number of inter-institutional meetings and training sessions for major public event organizers. In addition, VDD developed and distributed guidelines for planning, organising and ensuring the safety of high-risk events to municipalities and event organisers via the Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments and the Latvian Events Forum.

In 2023, according to its competence, VDD was involved in ensuring the smooth course of several events of national scale by participating in the planning and implementation of security measures. Last year, VDD paid special attention to reducing potential safety risks during the Ice Hockey World Championship games in Latvia, as well as at the events of the XXVII Nationwide Latvian Song and XVII Dance Festival, which attracted large numbers of visitors.



Control of the circulation of explosives precursors

In recent years, improvised explosive devices or explosives have rarely been used in terror attacks in Europe. At the same time, according to case studies conducted by VDD, the interest of radically-minded persons in the manufacture of explosives and explosive devices remained high in the past year.

Over the past year, the Service continued to perform the function of a contact point for reporting suspicious transactions with explosives precursors, i.e. chemical substances and mixtures that may be used to make explosives.

Under the EU's current regulatory framework¹¹, companies involved in the sale of explosives precursors are obliged to immediately provide the Service with information on suspicious attempts to purchase explosives precursors, for example, if the buyer cannot reliably explain for what purpose he wants to purchase a particular precursor or if the person wants to purchase an unusual amount of a substance or does not want to present an identity document. Companies are also obliged to report thefts or disappearances of explosives precursors. Last year, VDD did not detect any attempts to purchase explosives precursors for terrorist purposes in Latvia.

In 2023, VDD continued its close cooperation with companies selling explosives precursors, providing advisory support for the improvement of internal control systems. In order to inform companies about current events in the field of control of precursor circulation, last year VDD organized the seminar "Reiters 2023". Officers of the Service informed the participants of the seminar about changes in the regulatory framework and safety requirements, as well as gave real examples illustrating the potential dangers of explosives precursors.

INFORM THE SERVICE!

If you have information about plans or attempts to purchase components used for the manufacture of explosives or explosive devices, provide detailed information about the specific case to VDD! The Service can be contacted by writing to the e-mail address kontaktpunkts@vdd.gov.lv or by calling the 24/7 phone number +371 6720 8964.

Last year, VDD regularly exchanged information with the State Revenue Service on cases of transit, import and export of explosives precursors to countries outside NATO and the EU.

6.4.

IMPROVING RESPONSE CAPABILITIES

In order to test and improve the response capabilities of operational services and other institutions involved in the counterterrorism system, VDD also held various types of training in the past year.

The Service continued the cycle of informative seminars and table-top exercises started in previous years for regional units of institutions in Latvia. The aim of this cycle was to strengthen the response capabilities of institutions located in different regions in the event of a terrorist attack. In June 2023, VDD conducted a briefing and table-top exercise in the city of Daugavpils in Latgale region and in September in the city of Jelgava in Zemgale region. Representatives of the regional units of the operational services used the table-top exercise format to plan and coordinate the measures to be taken in the event of a terrorist attack at a mass gathering site.

In September, VDD concluded the regional training cycle with a practical training session in the urban environment in Jelgava, with full-force deployment. More than 300 participants from various institutions responsible for responding to a terrorist attack participated in a counterterrorism exercise "Mītava 2023" organised by the Service. During the training, the response capabilities of the Zemgale regional units of the operational services was tested to respond in accordance with the counterterrorism plan "Crowd" developed by VDD.¹²

The scenario of "Mītava 2023" was developed in accordance with current terrorism threat trends in Europe. It simulated the actions of the services when terrorists attack visitors of a public event and ram a vehicle into the flow of event's departing visitors. During these exercises, the services tested their readiness to implement a wide range of counterterrorism measures: notification of the responsible services, arrival at the scene, coordination of resources, provision of medical assistance, rescue work, performance of operational and investigative actions, neutralization of the attacker, etc.

¹¹ Article 9 of Regulation (EU) 2019/1148 of the European Parliament and of the Council of June 20, 2019 on the marketing and use of explosives precursors, amending Regulation (EC) No 1907/2006 and repealing Regulation (EU) No 98/2013.

¹² "Action Plan in case of terrorist attacks" (Counterterrorism plan "Crowd"), approved by Cabinet of Ministers Order No. 639 of September 7, 2021, which determines the action of the responsible authorities if an attack of a terrorist nature has been carried out in the territory of Latvia in a public place, using a vehicle, cold weapons, firearms, improvised explosives or combined methods of attack.



Photos from counterterrorism exercise "Mītava 2023" organised by VDD, author – VDD

In December, VDD organized the table-top exercise "Code Red 2023" in Riga. The purpose of the exercise was to test and improve the response capabilities of institutions to implement the preventive measures provided in the National Counterterrorism Plan for the prevention of terrorism threats. During the training, special attention was paid to sharing of information and implementation of counterterrorism preventive measures in accordance with the declared terrorism threat level. The focus of the participants was on protecting critical infrastructure objects and mass gathering sites from potential threats, as well as coordinating the resources involved in a changing terrorism threat situation.

In addition, in order to verify the accessibility of the responsible officials of the involved institutions in case of terrorism threats, VDD carried out notification tests.

6.5.

PROCESSING OF AIRCRAFT PASSENGER DATA

In 2023, VDD continued updating and improving the State Information System "Aircraft Passenger Data Register". Along with the rapid increase in the number of flights after the lifting of lockdown measures imposed to overcome the Covid-19 pandemic, the volume of passenger data received and processed by VDD also increased significantly. By analysing the aircraft passenger data accumulated in the system, VDD in cooperation with the intelligence and security services and law enforcement institutions of Latvia and other EU Member States achieved significant results in the prevention of threats to national security, detection and investigation of serious and especially serious crimes, as well as terrorist activities.

As in previous years, upon submitting a justified request to VDD, the authorities responsible for the investigation and prevention of crimes were able to obtain information on flights taken by persons involved in criminal activities. The availability of this type of information provided the competent authorities with substantial support in their investigations.

The Aircraft Passenger Data Register was also successfully used for continuous verification of incoming passenger data, checking them against national and international databases of wanted criminals, as well as watchlists of authorities responsible for detecting and preventing crimes. Upon detection of data matches in the system, VDD officers carried out an in-depth verification of the information and, if necessary,

informed the responsible institutions about the identified risk persons and their flight routes.

In 2023, preventive analysis of passenger data helped to prevent several risk persons from boarding aircraft and prevented illegal entry of persons dangerous to society into Latvia. Also, such processing of information limited the possibilities of wanted persons to leave the territory of Latvia unnoticed by air transport.

Following the judgment of the Court of Justice of the EU in case C-817/19, last year VDD engaged in improving the regulatory framework for the processing of passenger data. The aim of the amendments is to maintain the current high efficiency level for processing aircraft passenger data in Latvia, while fully complying with current EU norms and recommendations in the field of personal data protection.

To promote international cooperation in the field of passenger data analysis, last year VDD also engaged in the international cooperation programmes of the

United Nations (UN) Office of Counterterrorism and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The Service also provided practical support and training in the processing of passenger data to cooperation partners outside the EU, including Ukrainian and Moldovan institutions. In order to strengthen cooperation within the EU, VDD continued to chair the EU Informal Working Group on Passenger Name Record as well as organised a face-to-face meeting of the Heads of Passenger Information Units of the EU Member States in Riga.

Taking into account the increase in the amount of data to be processed and the need for better interoperability of information systems, last year VDD started implementation of a new EU Internal Security Fund project. Under this project, the interoperability of the Aircraft Passenger Data Register with other national and international information systems is being improved in order to strengthen the capacity of the Service in the field of passenger data processing.

FORECASTS

- In Europe, the most significant terrorism threat this year will continue to be posed by supporters of Islamist terrorist groups. As a result of terrorist propaganda spread online by the Islamist terrorist groups *Daesh*, *Al-Qaeda* and their branches, such persons will continue to be involved in both planning and carrying out terrorist acts.
- The armed conflict between Israel and Hamas as well as incidents of desecrating Islamic religious symbols, will continue to promote radicalisation in Europe and keep the terrorism threat at an elevated level. Terrorist organisations and their supporters will continue to use such incidents in their terrorism propaganda materials, which is one of the most important factors contributing to radicalisation.
- The terrorism threat posed by right-wing extremists will also remain at an elevated level in Europe. Right-wing extremists will continue to use social networking sites and direct communication apps to spread their views and promote hostility towards various minority groups.
- Terrorists will continue to use mainly simple methods of operation to carry out attacks, which do not require long-term planning and preparation. Attacks will be directed against publicly available targets using methods that are easy to carry out.
- The information at the disposal of VDD indicates that the terrorism threat level in Latvia will remain low for the foreseeable future. The main terrorism threat will continue to arise from the radicalisation and potential involvement of individuals in violent activities.



KRIMINĀLLIET

07

PRE-TRIAL INVESTIGATION

Last year, according to VDD competence, the Service continued to focus on the detection and investigation of crimes against the national security of Latvia. The overwhelming majority of the criminal cases which VDD investigated last year involved suspected criminal activities in the interests of Russia.

Last year, VDD continued its activities in the international Joint Investigation Team (JIT)¹³, which is tasked with investigating war crimes committed by Russia, as well as crimes against humanity and peace in Ukraine. As part of this group, in cooperation with other authorities, VDD continued the identification of possible witnesses by conducting interviews with war refugees arriving in Latvia. VDD officials paid special attention to the flow of war refugees who entered Latvia through Russia, questioning these persons at border crossings. Also last year, several thousand Ukrainian nationals crossed the border between Latvia and Russia.

VDD investigators continued to focus on obtaining testimonies about specific crime episodes that were potentially significant to international investigation. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, VDD has conducted in-depth interviews with 143 war refugees. 95 of these persons have so far been recognised as witnesses in criminal proceedings. Last year, war refugees mainly provided VDD with testimonies about missile strikes and shelling by Russian occupation forces, destroying Ukraine's civilian infrastructure. War refugees also told the Service about their experiences in so-called filtration camps, i.e. illegal detention centres, the killings and torture of civilians and

¹³ The Joint Investigation Team (JIT) was set up on March 25, 2022 by the authorities of Ukraine, Lithuania and Poland to facilitate the investigation of crimes committed by Russia in Ukraine and to cooperate in identifying witnesses among war refugees who have found refuge in various countries. Latvia, Estonia and Slovakia joined the JIT on May 30, 2022. The JIT also includes representatives from Romania, the United States, as well as the International Criminal Court, the EU Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust) and Europol.



military personnel. In the course of the investigation, five persons have so far been recognised as victims. VDD also continued to add to the criminal case evidence in form of photos and videos obtained from witnesses, that document the crimes committed by Russian occupying forces.

Last year, VDD worked closely with the investigative authorities of other countries involved in the JIT in fulfilling their requests for legal assistance. For example, Service officials, at the request of the investigating authorities of Ukraine and other countries involved in the JIT, conducted interviews of Ukrainian nationals who witnessed specific episodes of crimes recorded in the course of the investigation.

7.1.

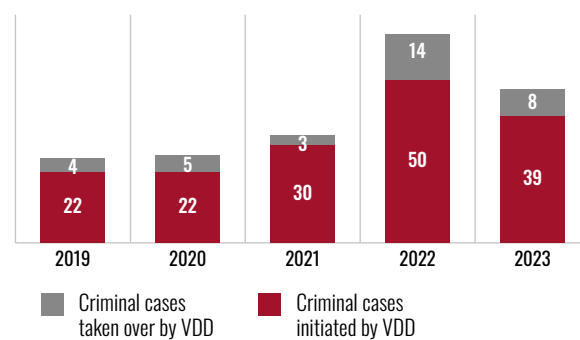
CRIMINAL CASES INITIATED

In 2023, the Service opened investigations in 47 new criminal cases. Of these, 39 criminal cases were initiated by VDD on its own initiative, while eight, according to jurisdiction, were taken over from other institutions: four criminal cases from the Tax and Customs Police Department of the State Revenue Service (SRS), two criminal cases from the State Police and one each from the State Border Guard and the Prosecutor's Office. The Service also continued investigations in criminal cases initiated in previous years.

Last year, VDD initiated the largest number of criminal cases (17 in total) for possible violations of sanctions imposed by the European Union against Russia or, in some cases, Belarus (Section 84 of the Criminal Law). Most of these criminal cases were initiated on suspicion of providing financial or economic resources to natural or legal persons subject to EU sanctions, who are

undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine. Last year, VDD also began investigating several cases of export of goods, with suspicions that the goods in question could be used for the military needs of the aggressor country Russia. In one case, however, criminal case was initiated after the Service obtained information on the sale and supply of a luxury car for use in Russian territory, thus violating the EU's ban on the export of luxury goods to the aggressor country.

Dynamic of VDD criminal cases

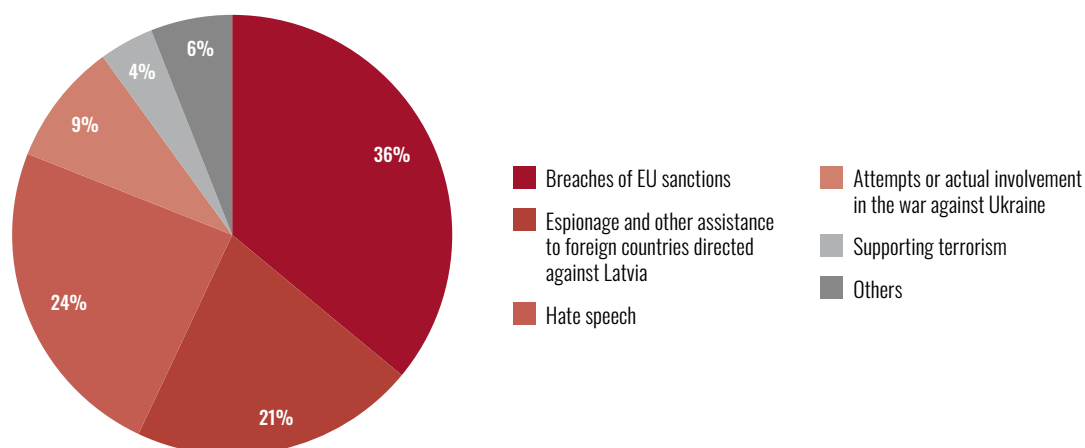


VDD DRAWS YOUR ATTENTION!

Carrying out work for a person subject to EU sanctions may also be regarded as a breach of sanctions.

The second most common reason for initiating a criminal case last year was suspicion of espionage. Last year, the Service opened a total of eight criminal case on suspicion of espionage for the benefit of the aggressor country Russia.

Criminal cases initiated or taken over by VDD by threat type



The third most common reason for initiating criminal cases last year was the so-called hate speech, i.e. public statements which violate the boundaries of freedom of expression, inciting violence against an ethnicity, nation or country, or justifying and glorifying such crimes. In total, 11 such criminal cases were put on Service's records in 2023. At the same time, a significantly smaller number of such criminal cases entered the Service's records last year compared to 2022. In 2022, when the Russia's armed forces began their full-scale invasion of Ukraine, VDD initiated a total of 37 criminal cases relating to hate speech (Sections 74¹ and 78 of the Criminal Law). In the assessment of VDD, the decrease in the number of such criminal cases is explained by the extensive preventive work carried out by the Service. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, VDD has conducted preventive talks with more than 1,200 individuals who spread pro-Kremlin narratives in the public sphere and whose statements were on the limits of freedom of expression. The Service has warned these individuals of the criminal liability for publicly justifying and glorifying Russia's aggression in Ukraine or otherwise violating the boundaries of freedom of expression. Also, in the past year, VDD exercised the rights stipulated in the law to send criminal cases or verification materials for further examination to the State Police in cases where no threat to state security was identified.

Three of the aforementioned 11 criminal cases were initiated by VDD last year pursuant to Section 74¹ of the Criminal Law, in suspicion of possible elements in the public statements of persons of justification and glorification of genocide, crimes against humanity, crimes against peace and war crimes. An identical number of criminal case was initiated by the Service last year pursuant to Section 78 of the Criminal Law, against persons suspected of deliberate triggering

of national hatred or enmity against Latvians or Ukrainians. In turn, five criminal cases were initiated by VDD on suspicion of both of the aforementioned crimes in the public statements of persons.

Last year, VDD also initiated two criminal cases on suspicion of justifying and glorifying terrorism and distributing such content online (Section 79⁵ of the Criminal Law). In one case, VDD found a person was supportive of right-wing extremism, and in the other case, a person supported Islamist terrorism. The person who distributed material supporting right-wing extremism online is additionally suspected of self-training as well as recruiting and training other persons for terrorism (Section 79⁴ of the Criminal Law).

In 2023, the Service also initiated criminal cases on suspicion of other criminal offences: provision of assistance to a foreign state in activities directed against the Republic of Latvia, illegal participation in an armed conflict, financing of armed conflict, deliberate provision of a person with the possibility to legally acquire the right to reside in the Republic of Latvia, etc.

As in other years, the main reason for initiating criminal cases was information obtained as a result of the activities of the Service or information provided by natural and legal persons indicating the commission of a possible criminal offense.

The Service also initiated criminal cases on the basis of information provided by other intelligence and security services. VDD has developed effective exchange of information on possible criminal offences with the Defence Intelligence and Security Service (MIDD), the State Police, the Financial Intelligence Unit and other institutions.

Separate criminal cases were initiated by isolating them from other cases already on the Service's records.

7.2.

IN-DEPTH VERIFICATION BEFORE INITIATING CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS

The Service regularly received reports from both individuals and legal entities regarding possible criminal activities. VDD officers carefully evaluated the information received. In four cases, reports by natural or legal persons served as the basis for initiating criminal proceedings.

In assessing the information contained in the reports and deciding on the necessity of initiating criminal proceedings, in many cases VDD conducted an in-depth examination to obtain more information and clarify the circumstances of what happened. In 46 cases, following investigations, VDD did not obtain confirmation of the information indicated in the report and declined to initiate criminal proceedings. In most of these cases, the reason for the investigation was reports about alleged triggering of national hatred or enmity, violation of sanctions imposed by the EU, or public justification and glorification of war crimes.

In some cases, however, residents provided information to VDD about possible criminal activities, the investigation of which falls under the jurisdiction of other law enforcement institutions. In such cases, the Service forwarded the information provided by the residents to the investigative body responsible for evaluation.

7.3.

CRIMINAL CASES SENT FOR PROSECUTION

Last year, VDD referred the largest number of criminal cases in the last decade (33 criminal cases) to the Prosecutor's Office, recommending the prosecution of 44 persons. Two of these individuals were public officials at the time of the crime.

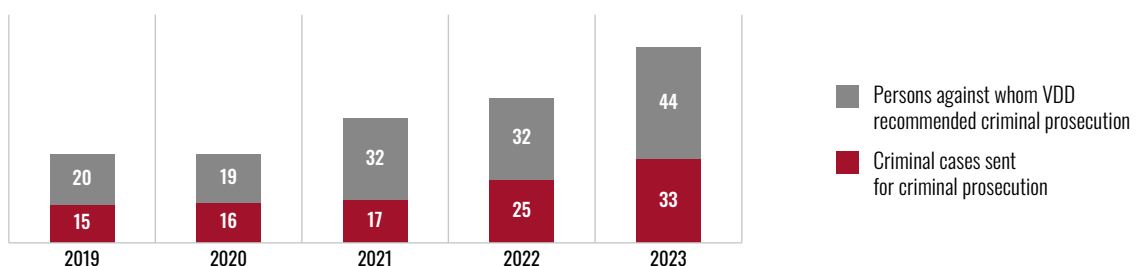
Of the criminal cases referred for prosecution, 13 were initiated last year, 15 in 2022, three in 2021 and two in 2020.

Last year, VDD asked the Prosecutor's Office to initiate prosecution in a significant number of the criminal cases initiated in connection with hate speech. A total of ten such criminal cases were sent for prosecution (more details in the list below). Eight of these criminal cases were initiated by the Service in 2022 and two in 2023.

As for the criminal cases initiated by the Service, a large proportion (eight in total) of the criminal cases sent by VDD for prosecution were related to the violation of sanctions imposed by the EU. Five of these criminal cases were initiated by the Service in 2022 compared with three the previous year. In several of these criminal cases VDD also charged suspects with other criminal offences (more details in the list below).

Last year, VDD sent three of the criminal cases initiated on suspicion of espionage for prosecution, resulting in the prosecution of a total of four individuals.

Criminal cases sent by VDD for criminal prosecution





Illustrative image, Freepik

In one of the criminal cases, in which two persons were accused of espionage, the court has already sentenced the accused to prison terms – three years for the espionage organizer and two years and eight months for the actual perpetrator of the criminal activities (a more detailed description of the case is set out in the section of the counterintelligence chapter titled “Detected cases of espionage”).

Among the criminal cases sent for prosecution, the following stands out:

- two criminal cases for espionage;
- one criminal cases for organizing espionage;
- one criminal case for disclosing non-disclosable information and inciting disclosure of non-disclosable information;
- seven criminal cases simultaneously for justifying and glorifying war crimes and for triggering national hatred and enmity;
- three criminal cases for triggering national hatred and enmity, with one person additionally incriminated with inciting against the Republic of Latvia;
- two criminal cases for justifying and glorifying war crimes;
- five criminal cases for violating sanctions imposed by the EU;
- one criminal case for violation of the sanctions imposed by the EU and for actions to help a foreign country turn against the independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, state power, state order and security of the Republic of Latvia;
- one criminal case for violation of the sanctions imposed by the EU and for illegal moving of strategic goods across the border of the Republic of Latvia;
- one criminal case against several persons for setting up and running a criminal organisation, one of whom is also accused of violating the sanctions imposed by the EU;

- one criminal case for unlawful participation in an armed conflict;
- one criminal case for the dissemination of content glorifying terrorism and inciting terrorism.

In 2023, as a result of VDD investigations, about half a million euros were confiscated following court rulings in favour of the state in criminal cases for violating EU sanctions. A total of 286,000 euros were confiscated as property related to the crime, while 217,000 euros were collected in the form of fines.

7.4.

CRIMINAL CASES SENT TO OTHER AUTHORITIES OR TERMINATED

Eight criminal cases were sent by VDD to other investigative bodies last year according to their jurisdiction. Four criminal cases were sent to the State Police for the continuation of the investigation, three to the Tax and Customs Police Department of the State Revenue Service and one to the State Border Guard.

In 2023, VDD terminated 19 criminal cases on the Service's records. Ten criminal cases were terminated without the Service finding the elements of the crime in the course of the investigation. Five criminal cases were terminated because in the course of the investigation it was not possible to identify the person who committed the crime. Four criminal proceedings were terminated with the investigation establishing that no criminal offence had taken place.

As of the beginning of 2024, there are 29 criminal cases in VDD records.

INCREASED PENALTIES FOR CRIMES AGAINST NATIONAL SECURITY



Illustrative image, *Freepik*

Taking into account the difficult geopolitical circumstances, at the end of 2023, the Saeima adopted amendments to the Criminal Law initiated by the President of Latvia Edgars Rinkēvičs, which provide for harsher penalties for crimes against national security. The amendments entered into force on December 30 last year.

Increased penalties:

- justification and glorification of war crimes – imprisonment for up to six years;
- assistance to a foreign country in activities directed against another country – imprisonment for up to eight years;
- action directed against the state of Latvia – in addition to imprisonment for up to 15 years, confiscation of property may be imposed;
- forming an organized group with the aim of carrying out an action against the Republic of Latvia – imprisonment for up to 10 years, possible confiscation of property;
- incitement against the Republic of Latvia – imprisonment for up to six years;
- assistance to a foreign state in activities directed against the Republic of Latvia – imprisonment for up to 20 years, possible confiscation of property;
- espionage – imprisonment for up to 20 years, possible confiscation of property;
- Organizing and handling espionage – imprisonment from eight years to life imprisonment, possible confiscation of property;
- violation of the prohibition to organise, conduct and participate in training for the performance of military-tactical tasks – imprisonment for up to five years.

More details can be found in the Criminal Law.



08

DIGNITARY PROTECTION

Last year, according to its competence, VDD provided full-time protection of the Speaker of the Saeima and the Prime Minister. The Service also organised security measures during visits to Latvia by high-level foreign officials.

In addition to ensuring the close protection of the Speaker of the Saeima and the Prime Minister in the territory of Latvia, when required, VDD bodyguards accompanied dignitaries on visits to foreign countries. Last year, VDD implemented security measures during 14 trips by the Speaker of the Saeima abroad and during 20 visits of the Prime Minister abroad. These visits included two trips by the protected officials to the war-stricken Ukraine.

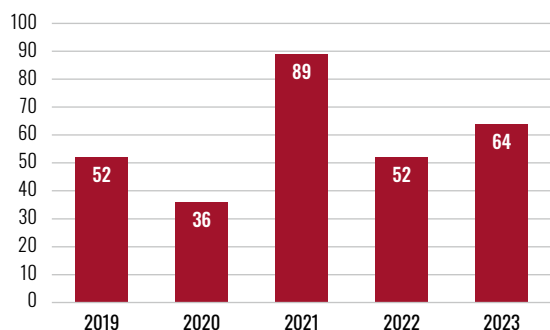
The previous year VDD also ensured the physical safety of the heads of parliaments and governments of foreign countries during their visits to Latvia. The Service also ensured a trouble-free stay in Latvia to other countries' ministers of foreign affairs. In 2023, VDD implemented security measures during a total of 64 visits by foreign representatives to Latvia. Compared to other years, the number of visits by foreign representatives supervised by the Service can be considered high.

The Service provided security escorts of foreign representatives, security at their accommodation and measures to prevent unauthorized extraction of information. The scope and level of security measures was determined individually in each case, based on the results of threat analysis conducted by the Service. A large amount of security measures were implemented by VDD, for example, during the visit by the Chairperson of the Verkhovna Rada (Parliament) of Ukraine Ruslan Stefanchuk on July 9-10, 2023. R. Stefanchuk's two-day visit to Latvia took place without security incidents.



When officials protected by the Service participated in events in Latvia, VDD not only supervised the physical safety of officials, but also coordinated the activities of the State Police and other involved institutions during these events for the maintenance of public order and safety. Last year, VDD oversaw the security at a total of 35 events attended by officials protected by the Service. Among them are the large-scale events of the XXVII Nationwide Latvian Song and XVII Dance Festival, which were also attended by the then Speaker of the Saeima Edvards Smiltēns and Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš. The final concert “Upward Together”, which brought together large masses of people on the Grand Stage of Mežaparks, was also attended by the leaders of several parliaments of other countries: Lauri Hussar, Chairman of the Estonian Riigikogu, Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen, Speaker of the Seimas of Lithuania, Elżbieta Witek, Marshal of the Polish Sejm, R. Stefanchuk, Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, and Bärbel Bas, President of the German Bundestag.

Ensuring the safety of foreign officials during visits to Latvia



Significant resources of the Service were involved in ensuring security during the meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Baltic and Nordic countries on September 6-7 last year. The Ministers of Foreign Affairs of seven countries – Denmark, Estonia, Iceland,

Lithuania, Norway, Finland and Sweden – attended the meeting in Latvia, for the security of which VDD was responsible. There were no security incidents at this event either.

In order to identify risks to the safety of protected Latvian dignitaries, VDD continued to constantly evaluate statements and activities directed against these officials in the Internet environment during the past year. Having identified the threat of violence, the Service conducted an examination of the situation in order to assess and eliminate the likelihood of a real threat. In some cases, VDD conducted talks with those who expressed threats, warning them of potential criminal liability.

Taking into account the aggression and imperial ambitions of Russia, last year VDD improved action plans for the protection of dignitaries, as well as other representatives of the Saeima and the government in case of military aggression against Latvia.

In the past year, as in other years, VDD bodyguards continued to maintain and improve their professional skills by participating in both national and international level training and competitions. Last year, VDD for the 13th time organized the international competition of bodyguards and specialized units “Bearslayer” (“Lāčplēsis”). Teams from partner services of the Baltic States and the US participated in the competition, along with the first-time participant – the Georgian partner service. Teams from Latvian law enforcement and military institutions, with which VDD cooperates on a daily basis in order to ensure the safety of dignitaries, also participated in the competition. The teams competed in driving skills, shooting, as well as strength and endurance tests.

The security of the President of Latvia, as in other years, continued to be provided by the Military Police of the National Armed Forces, with whom the Service continued to maintain close cooperation.

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