

Hostile special services



Threat assessment: The aggressiveness of Russian intelligence services' hybrid activities has increased and may continue to change over the course of the year, but the likelihood of an event directly threatening national security remains low. Compared with the previous assessment, the overall threat level has not changed.

The threat to Estonia's constitutional order continues to stem primarily from Russia's aggressive foreign policy goals. To achieve these objectives more quickly, the Kremlin seeks to destabilize Western societies from within and to weaken the international cooperation that upholds Western values. Russia's strategic aim to expand its influence, is to divide NATO and EU member states by exploiting disinformation campaigns and influence operations to amplify domestic and international problems, undermine trust in Estonia and its allied organizations, polarise communities, and incite tensions between states and peoples.

Toward Estonia, Russia attempts to achieve its goals primarily by manipulating the Russian-speaking community, with particular focus on young people whose mother tongue is Russian. Countering hostile influence activities requires greater domestic and international awareness of influence attempts, methods, and channels, as well as the ability to recognize influence operations and prevent or block the escalation of threats.

In 2024, one of the recurring narratives in Russia's weakened policy of division was to accuse Western states of allegedly widespread and systemic discrimination against Russian-speaking residents. This included politicizing the detention and deportation of Russian citizens who had committed crimes. These are not new tactics in Kremlin propaganda; similar accusations have previously been used to influence domestic politics in the Baltic states and to apply international pressure. However, reputational damage, loss of credibility, and sanctions imposed due to the war have limited Russia's reach in Europe.

THREATS

- ✓ Since the start of the full-scale war, Russian intelligence services have pursued increasingly aggressive recruitment efforts. The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) has good oversight of individuals entering Russia due to visa applications and border controls. When crossing the border, the FSB frequently inspects people's electronic devices to copy their contents. In addition, people are compelled to provide written statements, signed under obligation, declaring whether they know anyone working in Estonian state services, what their views are on the EU and

- ✓ Ukraine, and whether they know anyone directly involved in combat on Ukraine's side.
- ✓ For decades, Russian intelligence services have cynically exploited the principle of academic freedom in democratic countries, using it for espionage and influence operations. All of Russia's intelligence agencies monitor foreign citizens in Russian universities: practically all international research cooperation projects, as well as foreign students and lecturers coming to Russian universities, are under scrutiny.
- ✓ After Kremlin-controlled information channels were restricted in Estonia, Russia's influence operations shifted to social media. Increasingly, we see deepfakes and manipulations using artificial intelligence and algorithms. Social media is shaping how we perceive the world and directing us into particular information spaces through algorithmic manipulation. As a result, information consumers may find themselves trapped in propaganda echo chambers or minefields of lies, as verifying the authenticity of content becomes ever more difficult.
- ✓ While modern technology offers many methods of gathering intelligence, the oldest method – human intelligence – remains the most widespread. Hostile espionage networks typically target government officials, politicians, businesspeople, journalists, researchers, military personnel, opinion leaders, as well as athletes and youth.
- ✓ Ideological and media cooperation between China and Russia has become closer and more targeted. This cooperation is coordinated at the highest political level, with news reporting considered the top priority. One concrete outcome is the portrayal of the war in Ukraine in a light favorable to Russia within China's public information space.
- ✓ Investments by Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in Estonia must be assessed with awareness of their strong political connections and ties to the CCP. The CCP regularly sends inspection teams to overseas branches of Chinese SOEs to oversee party cell activities. This means that the more Chinese SOEs operate in Estonia – alongside private companies with strategic expertise – the greater the risk of technological dependence on China.
- ✓ For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), international educational and research cooperation plays a special role in strengthening ties between Chinese and foreign universities, with the primary goal of benefiting China's innovation and technological development. The CCP views education as a key field where China can gain access to Western knowledge through international cooperation.

ACTIONS

- ✓ To strengthen resilience against hybrid threats, a broad security approach remains necessary. This requires contributions from multiple policy areas and sectors – public, private, and third sector – as well as from communities and individuals, supported by coordinated cooperation. Domestic security

- ✓ needs must continue to be considered in the development of all policy fields.
- ✓ In response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the heightened activity of its intelligence services in Europe, Western states have expelled hundreds of spies working under diplomatic cover from Russian embassies. More recently, intelligence officers posing as scholars, businesspeople, and other professionals have also been arrested.
- ✓ Increasing societal resilience requires not only strategic development of domestic security but also effective education and integration policies and consistent communication by the state. These efforts support stronger cohesion and shared values among different national groups in society, promote mutual understanding, improve knowledge of the national language, expand a shared information space, and strengthen a collective state identity. In this way, risks to security are mitigated alongside other social risks. It is therefore essential to continue a well-considered education, migration, adaptation, and integration policy based on existing principles, and to further develop strategic communication and threat awareness.

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