



REPUBLIC OF LATVIA
CONSTITUTION
PROTECTION
BUREAU



2023 ANNUAL REPORT

FOREWORD

It would be a relief if, summarizing the last year's events and achievements, I could conclude that the security situation has improved, and the level of threats has normalized. Unfortunately, this is not the case. It is much rather the opposite – the security in the world and in our region continues to balance on a fragile thread, and the future prospects do not inspire much optimism either.

Even though Russia did not manage to defeat Ukraine and return it to the Kremlin's sphere of influence in 2023, Moscow will continue its imperial efforts to completely subjugate Ukraine.

The economic, military and political interdependence of Russia and Belarus continues to increase. In 2023, Belarus continued its hybrid operation against Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, exploiting migrants from third countries and facilitating illegal border crossing. Authoritarian regimes' propaganda media later portrayed the Latvian response to this hybrid threat as inhumane and violent against migrants. There are currently no indications that this could change in the foreseeable future. As in 2022, Belarus led by Alexander Lukashenko continued to extensively support Russia's armed forces and has to be considered as co-responsible for the war crimes committed by Russia. In the medium term, both of these countries will continue to pose a threat to European democracies through various manifestations of hybrid warfare.

China's interests and political and economic presence have also become more noticeable in our region. It should be noted that cooperation with China may pose risks not only to the involved parties, but also to national security.

According to Russia's perception of threats, the war remains part of the global confrontation with the West, which is supposedly trying to destroy Russia. At the moment, the Kremlin does not have the capability to gain an advantage on the entire front line that would allow it to dictate the rules of the game. Therefore, the war has entered a new phase, becoming a marathon rather than a sprint. Any further development will primarily be determined by the ability of the parties to gain a higher level of combat capabilities over the long term. Ukraine is already in critical need of Western military and political support, but over the next year it may become a matter of existential importance.

Without a substantial increase of Western support for Ukraine, Putin's regime will gain confidence in its ability to influence the West and Russia's imperial appetite will only grow in the foreseeable future. Whereas the

Russian army will have gained enormous combat experience, including fighting against Western military equipment. Together with the planned expansion of the Russian army, this will significantly increase the risk of Russia's military aggression against NATO.

NATO protects all its members, including Latvia, with each country contributing to strengthening the alliance. Together with our partners, the Constitution Protection Bureau (SAB) actively works on obtaining timely information to safeguard the security of NATO allies.

If there is one lesson to take from Latvian history, it is that our freedom and security are not to be taken for granted. With this in mind, we are always working in the name of our freedom and security.



Egils Ziedris

EGILS ZVIEDRIS

Director, SAB

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2023, Russia continued its imperial efforts to completely subjugate Ukraine, and there is no sign of that changing. The Kremlin does not consider Ukraine to be a real country, but rather a continuation of the Russian Empire which has turned away under the influence of the West. According to Russia's heightened perception of threats, the war in Ukraine remains a part of the global confrontation with the West, which is supposedly trying to destroy Russia. This is why the West will have to reckon with Russia's military aggression in Ukraine in the long term.

Russia will try to use any opportunity to improve its position. At the moment, the Kremlin does not have the capabilities to gain an advantage on the entire front line that would allow it to dictate the rules of the game. Therefore, the war has entered a new phase, becoming a marathon rather than a sprint. Any further development will primarily be determined by the ability of the parties to gain a higher level of combat capabilities over the long term.

To achieve this, Russia is constantly spreading propaganda messages about Ukraine being an unreliable partner who cannot effectively use the Western military and financial support or even misuses it. Moscow is also trying to influence the Western society and political leadership by emphasizing the huge financial burden that is supposedly created by the support for Ukraine.

Ukraine is already in critical need of Western military and political support, but over the next year it may become a matter of existential importance. Even though Ukraine is able to maintain its defensive positions, no increase or even a decrease in the military support over the next year would significantly deteriorate its combat capabilities.

In 2023, Moscow maintained the foreign policy course of 2022 - there were continuous efforts to lower international support for Ukraine and reduce the international isolation of Russia and its political leadership, and further attempts to gain, or at least not lose, support for the invasion of Ukraine.

In March 2023, Russia published its new foreign policy concept, explaining the international situation and the main directions of its foreign policy. In the new concept, Moscow's foreign policy has been adapted to the current geopolitical conditions. Unlike similar documents in the

past, the concept of 2023 offers a negative assessment of the relations between Russia and the West, labelling the latter as confrontational.

Changes in the European security system caused by the invasion of Ukraine continued in 2023, with Sweden and Finland seeking to join NATO (Finland becoming a member of the alliance on 4 April 2023). Given that historically Russia has negatively perceived any expansion of NATO, the two hitherto militarily neutral countries of the Baltic Sea joining the alliance can be considered as a geopolitical loss for Moscow.

The war in Ukraine and the related international pressure resulted in a continued increase of Russian influence in Belarus in 2023. The economic, military and political interdependence of the two countries became even clearer due to the sanctions imposed by the European Union and the United States.

Belarussian society remained highly dissatisfied with the political situation in the country, but the widespread repressions against the political opposition, media, non-governmental organizations and civil society have significantly reduced the possibility of any wider protests.

China is increasingly trying to position itself as an economic superpower and an alternative to the Western model of governance. To achieve this, Beijing strives to improve its image in other countries and gain an economic and political influence or even dominance over them. Latvia, especially as a member of the European Union and NATO, is among the targets of China's influence. Historical and ideological reasons make it relatively difficult for China to achieve political influence in this region, so the main emphasis is placed on economic cooperation as a tool of influence. However, any potential or existing cooperation with China poses significant risks. Although economic cooperation with China is beneficial, other goals might be hidden within it, endangering not only the parties involved, but also the national security.

In 2023, the Russian regime remained stable and demonstrated resilience even in the face of unexpected upheavals. Moscow continued to work on the prevention of potential threats, stepping up repressions to further neutralize the society and opposition, increasing state control over private military companies and stabilizing the economy. The consequences of Russia's protracted war, as well as the Ukrainian and Western resistance, are still being felt. Some of Russia's solutions, especially in the economy, are not sustainable, and tensions are rising. Even though there is no active preparation for a change of power, discussions about the 'life after Putin' have intensified among Russia's elite.

Despite the current stability of Russia's political system, the regime will probably have to face new challenges, dealing with economic problems, unexpected incidents and manifestations of public tensions and dissatisfaction.

The war has cost Russia enormous resources. Also, in much of the world it has shattered illusions about the Kremlin's true intentions, revealing Putin's idea of Russia's place in the world and the role of its neighbours. Unable to achieve its initial goals in Ukraine, the Kremlin is now preparing for a long battle both on the front and beyond. In 2023, the international community was mainly focused on Russia's hostilities, changes in the front line and support for Ukraine. In the meantime, Russia continued targeting the Western countries, including Latvia, with increasingly frequent and aggressive influence operations.

The war in Ukraine has made the Western society more observant and knowledgeable. Western countries have taken a series of decisions to limit Russia's aggressive actions, for example, imposing sanctions, limiting the propaganda media, exposing and expelling dozens of intelligence officers, and strengthening the energy independence. Despite that, Russia has not become completely isolated and is still able to pursue its interests. The Kremlin's ability to harm and destabilize has diminished, but not disappeared. It is expected that Moscow will continue to implement influence measures. Russia has not become indifferent to the West, but it no longer wants (or can) pretend to be friendly, so it is increasingly ready to demonstrate a hostile attitude.

Decreasing Western support for Ukraine could mean not only a significant Russian military superiority over Ukraine and the occupation of new territories, but also destruction of the already significantly wounded security architecture of Europe. Without a substantial increase of the Western support for Ukraine, Putin's regime will gain confidence in its ability to influence the West. This might further increase Russia's imperial appetite, while the Russian army will have gained enormous combat experience, including fighting against the Western military equipment. Together with the planned expansion of the Russian army, this will significantly increase the risk of a potential Russian military aggression against NATO.

RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE



LOOKING BACK TO 2023

In 2023, Russia continued its imperial efforts to completely subjugate Ukraine, and there is no sign of that changing. The Kremlin does not consider Ukraine to be a real country, but rather a continuation of the Russian Empire, which has turned away under the influence of the West. ***According to Russia's heightened perception of threats, the war in Ukraine remains a part of the global confrontation with the West, which is supposedly trying to destroy Russia. This is why the West will have to reckon with Russia's military aggression in Ukraine in the long term.***

Last year brought a stabilization of the front line with no strategic changes in the control of the territory gained on the battlefield. This does not, however, mean that there cannot be significant changes to the front line in 2024. Russia will try to use any opportunity to improve its position. At the moment, Moscow does not have the capabilities to gain an advantage on the entire front line that would allow it to dictate the rules of the game. Therefore, the war has entered a new phase, becoming a marathon rather than a sprint. Any further development



will primarily be determined by the ability of the parties to gain a higher level of combat capabilities over the long term.

Despite the stabilization of the front line, active hostilities continued in 2023, with Ukraine and Russia periodically liberating and occupying new territories, but later losing control over them. Russian forces were able to occupy areas of marginal importance in the Donetsk region, while losing positions in the Zaporizhia region. The equal distribution of forces on the front line (mainly in terms of manpower) meant that both sides were more effective at defending their positions rather than attacking the other side.

The Kremlin's pompously announced winter offensive was relatively unsuccessful. Russian forces were unable to move any closer to one of the tactical goals of the war – occupation of the Donbass. For a long time, the offensive went on unnoticed. There was no sign of Russian attacks until the second half of May, when they culminated in the painful and exhausting occupation of the strategically and even tactically insignificant town of Bakhmut in the Donetsk region.

As usually, Moscow's information activities greatly exaggerated Russia's victories and Ukraine's losses, and continued to vilify Ukraine internationally. In the propaganda intended for the domestic audience, Russia even went as far as to compare the capture of Bakhmut to the capture of Berlin in 1945. After the failed offensive, Russia was in a desperate need of any kind of victory, and Bakhmut served just that purpose. However, the primary goal of information operations and campaigns was – and will continue to be – diminishing the Western military support for Ukraine: Moscow sees any war fatigue in the West as a successful outcome to their efforts. To achieve that, Russia is constantly spreading propaganda messages about Ukraine being an unreliable partner who cannot effectively use the Western military and financial support or even misuses it. Russia is also trying to influence the Western society and political leadership by emphasizing the huge financial burden that is supposedly created by the support for Ukraine.

Even though Russian forces have failed to achieve any noteworthy gains on the front during 2023, it would be a mistake to underestimate the Russian military capabilities. Ukrainian counteroffensive was a clear example of Moscow's ability to adapt to the changing conditions. In anticipation of the counteroffensive, the Russian army began to build defensive lines and redeploy military personnel to the south of Ukraine, while maintaining offensive capabilities in the east. Similarly, while there was a long-standing belief that Russia could not renew

its stockpiles of missiles and drones, in fact, these were deliberately gathered for a new missile campaign in late 2023 when Russian forces launched the largest missile and drone attack on Ukraine since the beginning of the war.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF HOSTILITIES

In 2024, Russia will not change its ultimate goal to completely subjugate Ukraine, ensuring that it returns to Russia's self-proclaimed sphere of influence. At the end of 2023, this was repeatedly mentioned by a number of Russian officials, including President Putin. The Russian leader stated that the goal has not changed, and Russia will continue to fight until Ukraine is defeated. The regime believes it has a sufficient military capacity to sustain the war in the long term. Therefore, ***Russia's current strategy is to wage the war until Ukraine is no longer able to resist.***

Russia's future military plans, including attacks, will be determined not so much by the objective reality as the regime's perception thereof. Putin's regime is currently convinced that the West is tired of the war and not ready to support Ukraine in the long term, while the Russian forces are decisively winning. This is why the Russian elite believes that now is the right time to signal a false desire to start peace talks with Ukraine, which would allow Russia to end the war from a position of strength. Russia wants to gain time to rebuild its military forces, not to freeze the situation in Ukraine. Even if a truce were to be achieved, Russia would resume an even stronger attack on Ukraine after regaining its strength. The Minsk agreements of 2014 and 2015 is a fitting example of a false truce proposed by Russia: the Kremlin achieved a partial freeze of the conflict until it had sufficient military capabilities to launch a full-scale war across Ukraine.

Russia is both capable and determined to sustain hostilities in the long term. The 2024 State Budget boosts the largest military spending in the Russian history - approximately one-third of the budget will be spent on the military. Russia has mobilized its military-industrial complex, with some of the industries already being able to outproduce the entire European Union. In the coming years, Russia also plans to expand its army, which, among other things, includes increasing its presence towards Europe, especially Northern Europe and the Baltics.

Ukraine is already in a critical need of the Western military and political support, but over the next year Western aid may become a matter of existential importance. Even though Ukraine is able to

maintain its defensive positions, no increase or even a decrease in the military support over the next year would significantly deteriorate its combat capabilities.

Decreasing Western support for Ukraine could mean not only a significant Russian military superiority over Ukraine and the occupation of new territories, but also destruction of the already significantly wounded security architecture of Europe. ***Without a substantial increase of the Western support for Ukraine, Putin's regime will gain confidence in its ability to influence the West. This might further increase Russia's imperial appetite, while the Russian army will have gained enormous combat experience, including fighting against the Western military equipment. Together with the planned expansion of the Russian army, this will significantly increase the risk of a potential Russian military aggression against NATO.***



FOREIGN POLICY OF RUSSIA



In 2023, just like in the year before that, the Kremlin's foreign policy was mostly determined by the invasion of Ukraine and the resulting changes in the way Russia (and the threats it may pose) is viewed both around the world and in its neighbouring regions. In 2023, Moscow maintained the foreign policy course of 2022: there were continuous efforts to lower the international support for Ukraine and reduce the international isolation of Russia and its political leadership, and further attempts to gain, or at least not lose, support for the invasion of Ukraine.

In March 2023, Russia published its new foreign policy concept, explaining the international situation and the main directions of its foreign policy. In the new concept, Russian foreign policy has been adapted to the current geopolitical conditions. Unlike similar documents in the past, the concept of 2023 offers a negative assessment of the relations between Russia and the West, labelling the latter as confrontational. The greatest potential is attributed to cooperation with Asia, Africa and South America.

This reorientation was also regularly emphasized in the rhetoric of the top officials and demonstrated by Russia's partial withdrawal from the institutional framework regulating its relations with the West, e.g., agreements of the Council of Europe and treaties on arms control. The internal decree on building pragmatic relations with the Western countries was also cancelled.

Despite the apparent shift in focus, relations with the West remained an important part of the Russian foreign policy in 2023. Sanctions introduced as a response to the invasion of Ukraine continued to create challenges for the Russian military industry, economic and financial sectors. Thus, there was also a continuous need for the softening or cancellation of these sanctions, which Russia tried to achieve by using grain export as a topic that is especially relevant in developing regions and can put an additional pressure on the West.

Changes in the European security system caused by the invasion of Ukraine continued in 2023, with Sweden and Finland seeking to join NATO (Finland becoming a member of the alliance on 4 April 2023). ***Given that historically Russia has negatively perceived any expansion of NATO, the two hitherto militarily neutral countries of the Baltic Sea joining the alliance can be***

considered as a geopolitical loss for Moscow. The application of the two countries to join NATO earned condemnation and even threats from the Russian top officials, with plans being announced to deploy more troops in the north-western part of the country.

Russia also tried to change the position of the West through decisions and rhetoric on use and testing of nuclear weapons and arms control issues. Over the last year, Moscow suspended its participation in the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty between Russia and the United States (New START), withdrew from the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, and concluded an agreement on the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. In this way, Russia is updating its nuclear capabilities and reducing formal restrictions on the use of nuclear weapons in an attempt to gain more attention from the West by creating an apparent need for negotiations.

In 2023, Russia's role in neighbouring regions was diminishing. Moldova's rapprochement with the European Union continued, reinforced by the start of accession talks with Moldova and Ukraine at the end of the year. With Russia's military resources and strategic attention drawn to the war in Ukraine, Azerbaijan invaded Nagorno-Karabakh and took control of the region. Azerbaijan's actions, despite the presence of Russian peacekeepers, illustrated Moscow's inability to guarantee the security of its allies in the region. Russia was primarily increasing its role in Belarus, continuing the process that began in 2020 with violent suppression of the protests and Belarus's withdrawal from the cooperation with the West.

Russia maintained its influence in Central Asia mainly through economic ties. There were indications that the Central Asian countries attempted to strengthen other foreign policy directions as an alternative to cooperation with Russia, holding high-level meetings with the leaders of China and United States.

A lot of attention was paid to relations with China, with high-level visits in both directions. The parties concluded new agreements and agreed to extend the strategic partnership between Russia and China until 2030.

Several high-level visits showed Russia's desire to reduce its international isolation by building relations with the Middle East, Africa and South America. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov went on several longer visits to Africa and South America in an effort to update the partnerships from the Cold War era and create new ones.

In 2023, Russia symbolically strengthened foreign policy ties with Africa by holding the second Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg. The first Summit in 2019 was attended by 45 African leaders, while the last year's Summit gathered only 17 African leaders. The low attendance was caused by both Russia's war in Ukraine and the active work of the Ukrainian and Western diplomats, explaining the invasion and its role in restricting grain exports. Another reason behind the low number of attendees was also the slow development and limited future opportunities of cooperation between Russia and African countries.

In South America, the Kremlin focused both on traditional partners like Venezuela and Cuba, as well as Brazil – the region's largest country and member BRICS format. The goal was to strengthen relations with these countries and prevent them from siding with Ukraine, while showing the White House that Russia is able to step up its activities in regions close to the United States, especially by supporting countries critical of Washington's policies.

Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East was determined by a dilemma created by the need to continue military cooperation with Iran, while maintaining relations with other countries in the region. Visits to the Middle East were paid by the Russian Minister of Defence and Minister of Foreign Affairs, as well as the Prime Minister. President Putin visited Saudi Arabia to discuss cooperation mainly in the fields of economy and defence.

As Russia's war in Ukraine continues, it can be assessed with high probability that Russia will continue the foreign policy course started in 2023. ***The main goal of this policy will be to create international conditions that would facilitate Russia's victory in the war. To ensure this, Russia will likely try to reduce Western support for Ukraine by using, among other things, information operations,*** especially in countries with upcoming elections. Military threats, including heightened rhetoric of nuclear threats, cannot be ruled out either, especially after concluding Sweden's accession to NATO and the continuous strengthening of defence capabilities in the alliance's Eastern flank. To reduce its international isolation, Russia will continue to look for alternatives to cooperation with the West, such as the BRICS format. The gradually accumulating effect of Western sanctions will decrease Russia's economic attractiveness and importance, which may motivate some of its partners to look for alternatives.



POLITICAL SITUATION IN BELARUS

The current situation in Belarus started to evolve after the illegitimate presidential election and the widespread public protests in 2020. The following repressions have virtually eliminated any alternative political directions. The war in Ukraine and the related international pressure resulted in a continued increase of Russian influence in Belarus in 2023. The economic, military and political interdependence of the two countries became even clearer due to the sanctions imposed by the European Union and the United States.

As in 2022, the government led by Alexander Lukashenko continued to extensively support the Russian armed forces. Belarus has been providing logistical support, training of troops, supplies of weapons and ammunition, treatment and rehabilitation of wounded Russian soldiers, as well as repair of equipment and machinery. Belarus is also co-responsible for the war crimes committed by Russia, as it has been participating in the deportation of children from the occupied territories of Ukraine and their placement in camps, including in Belarus.

An important turning-point in 2023 was President Putin's announcement of the intention to move Russia's tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus. Even though Lukashenko has repeatedly stated that Belarus should have a say on the use of these weapons, they would undoubtedly remain under the Kremlin's control, thus further reducing Belarus's autonomy in matters of security and defence. There is, however, no information unambiguously confirming that the process has been completed and Russia's tactical nuclear weapons have been deployed in combat readiness in Belarus.

Another significant event was the relocation of the Wagner troops to Belarus after the attempted military coup of its leader Yevgeny Prigozhin. This move was initially supposed to ensure Wagner's continuous operation, involving the fighters in the training and preparation of the Belarusian Armed Forces and Internal Troops. Lukashenko also used Wagner's deployment in Belarus as a tool of psychological warfare to create anxiety and provoke a reaction in the neighbouring countries. After

the liquidation of Prigozhin in August 2023, the number of Wagner troops in Belarus has considerably shrunk. According to some estimates, it no longer exceeds around 500 fighters. The available information shows that the contingent is employed mainly in the training of the internal security forces, and has also been provided an opportunity to integrate into the Belarusian security forces and even form separate units. It is expected that the number of Wagner fighters in Belarus will continue to decrease in the near future. Their presence in Belarus no longer poses a significant threat to the neighbouring countries.

In 2023, Belarus continued its hybrid operation against Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, exploiting migrants from third countries and facilitating illegal border crossing. Belarusian regime and its propaganda media intensified the information campaigns portraying Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish response to this hybrid threat as an inhumane and violent attack against migrants. There are currently no indications that this trend could diminish in the foreseeable future. ***Belarus, alongside Russia, will continue to pose a threat to Latvia, using various forms of hybrid warfare.***

Despite the regime and the political elite supporting Russia, the Belarusian society maintains a rather reserved attitude towards the rapprochement of the two countries, especially in matters of security and defence. As most of the society has a negative attitude towards the war, especially a direct Belarusian involvement in hostilities, it has been important for Lukashenko and his government to emphasize that it is their policies that have helped the country to avoid direct involvement in Russia's war against Ukraine. It should be emphasized that the Belarusian society disapproved of the transfer of Wagner fighters and the deployment of Russia's tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus.

2023 marked a new trend in Belarusian politics with a much greater focus on defence and strengthening of the armed forces. The defence spending increased by more than 50%, which is the most significant increase in recent years, accounting for approximately 1.4 to 1.6% of the GDP. Despite the significant increase, the funds allocated to internal security still form a larger share of the budget expenditures. This indicates that the Belarusian regime attributes a greater risk to the internal security related threats.

Another important part in Belarus's cooperation with Russia is the so-called Union State project. It provides funding for various programs, giving Russia an opportunity to invest in the Belarussian military infrastructure and thus further strengthen its presence and influence in Belarus.

Despite the challenges, the Belarussian government has actively sought to present a more optimistic picture of the expected economic growth. However, in our assessment, the forecasts made by the government do not correspond to the reality. Belarussian economic development and budget forecasts for 2024 are overly optimistic, predicting unhindered economic development and a possibility for continuous loans in external financial markets, despite such external factors as the effect of the EU and US sanctions.

Belarussian economic and financial situation is already showing the opposite trends. Even though Minsk sees China as one of its most important economic cooperation partners, the sanctions imposed by the EU and USA have significantly reduced the attractiveness of Belarus for potential investors. As a result, China is more cautious about potential loans and joint projects of a regional importance.

Although the economic cooperation between Belarus and Russia remains very close, the Kremlin has also become more cautious, focusing more on the stabilization of its own economy and financial system. All of this has forced Belarus to actively look for new international partners and potential export markets.

Another important issue is the 2024 parliamentary elections in Belarus. The regime will try to ensure the highest possible public support and participation. The government will probably try to improve the public satisfaction by increasing the budget spending for local infrastructure projects and social programs. As it is important for strengthening the legitimacy of Lukashenko's regime and reducing possible internal instability and protests before the upcoming elections. Even though the government is aware of the need for broader structural reforms to ensure competitive wages in the public sector and a better quality of the public services, until now there have been no successful efforts to address the issue.

Belarussian society remained highly dissatisfied with the political situation in the country, but the widespread

repressions against the political opposition, media, non-governmental organizations and civil society have significantly reduced the possibility of any wider protests.

Most of the civil society and political opposition have gone underground. Belarusian authorities have maintained a very high level of repressions since the illegitimate presidential election and the subsequent widespread protests in 2020. There are more than 1500 political prisoners in Belarus, but the scope of the repressions goes much further.

The government will continue to restrict any Belarusians abroad who have actively opposed the Lukashenko's regime. In 2023, Belarus introduced changes in the legislation, no longer allowing its embassies to issue Belarussian nationals new identity documents or documentation for managing their real estate in Belarus. Minsk is taking a more active stance against the democratic movement of Belarus outside its borders and limiting the activities of democratically-minded Belarusians.





STABILITY OF THE RUSSIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

In 2023, the Russian regime remained stable and demonstrated resilience even in the face of unexpected upheavals. Moscow continued to work on the prevention of potential threats, stepping up repressions to further neutralize the society and opposition, increasing the state control over private military companies and stabilizing the economy. The consequences of Russia's protracted war, as well as the Ukrainian and Western resistance, are still being felt. Some of Russia's solutions, especially in the economy, are not sustainable, and tensions are rising. Even though there is no active preparation for a change of power, discussions about the 'life after Putin' have intensified in the Russian elite.

Over the past year, the regime has taken aggressive steps against any form of political opposition and independent media, changing laws and expanding the freedom of action of the Russian law enforcement and security services. The possibility of mass protests has significantly decreased. The broadly applicable laws allow the Russian authorities to freely crack down on the slightest expression of criticism of the regime and its policies. 2830 administrative cases on discrediting of Russia's armed forces were brought to court in 2023, with 140 of these resulting in an imprisonment for up to 77 months. At the end of the year, a new law came into force requiring certain Russian nationals to hand over their foreign passports, thus legally preventing them from leaving Russia.

The Russian political elite is not likely to turn against Putin – there is no widespread dissatisfaction with the war, its consequences or the President. The elite sees the war rather pragmatically, as a means to improve their position and increase access to resources. For example, the bans imposed on foreign companies and banks open up new opportunities for the Kremlin-aligned elite to take these companies over on particularly favourable terms, thus at least partially compensating for the losses caused by the Western sanctions. Personal involvement in solving problems important to the Kremlin (such as mitigating the impact of economic sanctions and saving the Russian economy) may not increase somebody's influence but will at least boost their importance.

Russia has managed to soften the impact of the war and Western sanctions on its economy in the short term, avoiding economic collapse and adapting to this new reality.

High prices of energy resources have ensured financial stability, while war-related expenses have contributed to the economic growth.

Russian economy is currently quite stable and robust, stabilized by the relatively high oil and gas prices, constituting approximately one-third of the Russian budget revenues, and the import and export markets in the Middle East and Asia. The military industry is also contributing to sustaining the economy, albeit at the expense of the state budget, with war-related expenses reaching as much as 9% of the GDP. SAB expects these factors to contribute to structural problems for the Russian economy in the medium and long term. Russia's manufacturing and extractive industries are dependent on the Western technologies, the procurement of which is difficult under sanctions. The lack of qualified labour is another limiting factor. Economic development requires structural reforms which are impossible due to the Kremlin's policies. Prioritizing the war is depleting resources in other areas, potentially contributing to the primitivization of the economy. In SAB's assessment, Russian economy, being integrated into the global economy and controlled by the state, will not collapse in the short term. The state budget confirms Russia's readiness to win the war against Ukraine, but increasing stagnation and economic dependence on China is to be expected.

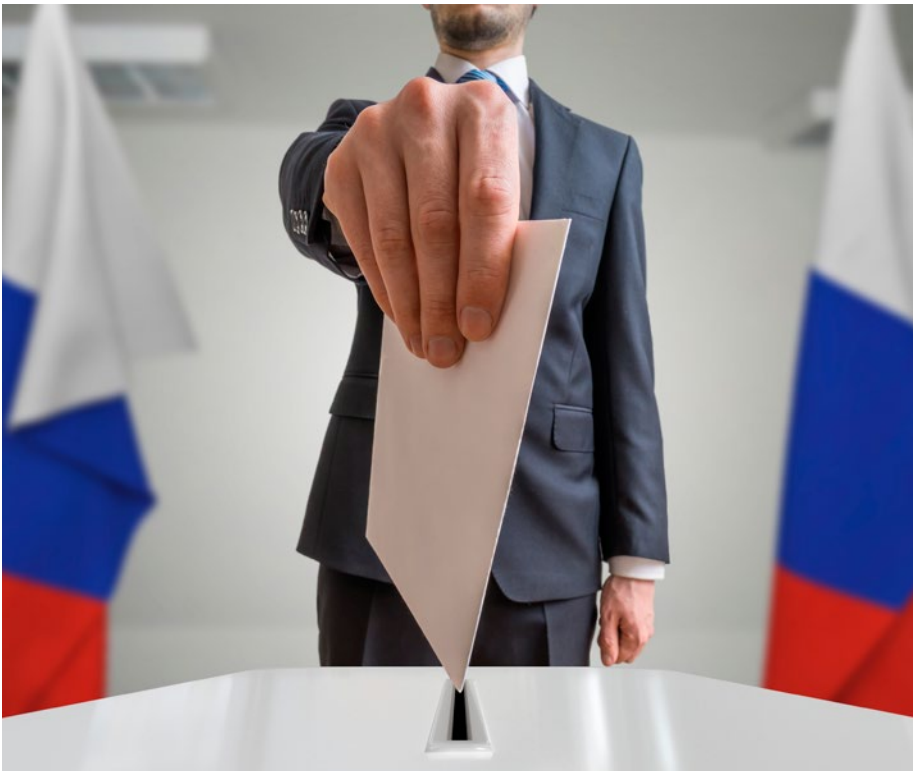
The tension caused by the war is also noticeable in the Russian society, which must live with the increasing repressions, the war coming inside Russia, continuous mobilizations and the Western sanctions. The internal struggles of the Russian elite are no longer limited by any apparent boundaries: until recently, they did not exceed public scandals and criminal charges, allowing the state to maintain a monopoly on power and force. In the new reality, the elite's power struggles can escalate to the involvement of military personnel and combat equipment.

Prigozhin's military coup in June 2023 was an escalation of the internal political tensions and struggle for influence and resources among various groups. Even though it was not directed at Putin himself, the coup was the biggest internal upheaval against the Russian political system in the last 20 years. At the same time, Prigozhin's actions demonstrated the stability of the regime. The revolt showed

that the state no longer had a monopoly of power, focusing the Kremlin's attention on institutionalizing private military companies and subjecting them to the state control. The events in June might have also illuminated a lack of tools for a possible change of power. Even though the government's hesitation during the revolt might have allowed the situation to escalate into a coup d'état, the favourable conditions were not utilized.

There are discussions among the Russian elite about the 'life after Putin', possible future leaders and ensuring continuous influence in the event of a change of power. Similar discussions have previously intensified every time when it was not clear how Putin plans to maintain his influence, for example, before the 2020 constitutional reform. While the elite's confidence in Putin's ability to protect their interests could be declining, there is no active preparation for an early change of power.

Despite the current stability of the Russian political system, the regime will probably have to face new challenges, dealing with economic problems, unexpected incidents and manifestations of public tensions and dissatisfaction (as was already demonstrated during the anti-Semitic riots in Dagestan).



RUSSIAN INFLUENCE MEASURES



The war has cost Russia enormous resources. In much of the world, it has also shattered illusions about the Kremlin's true intentions, revealing Putin's idea of Russia's place in the world and the role of its neighbours. Unable to achieve its initial goals in Ukraine, the Kremlin is now preparing for a long battle both on the front and beyond. In 2023, the international community was mainly focused on Russian hostilities, changes in the front line and support for Ukraine. In the meantime, Russia continued to target the Western countries, including Latvia, with increasingly frequent and aggressive influence operations.

An integral part of the Kremlin's hybrid capabilities, Russia's influence measures are diverse and cannot be tied to any particular area. Specifically targeted political decisions, disinformation campaigns, provocations and cyber-attacks are just some of the Russian influence measures. There is also a wide range of Russian state and non-governmental organisations involved in the planning, coordination and execution of these measures: Russian intelligence and security services, government institutions, state-controlled media, supposedly 'non-governmental' organizations, think tanks and individual activists or their groups. The connection between the perpetrators and Russia is often hidden to deliberately mislead about the origin of the offense. The general guidelines for influence measures are usually planned and approved in advance, but Russia is also able to flexibly respond to circumstances that are favourable for influence measures, e.g., situations in which there is a lack of complete and reliable information after an unexpected and significant event.

Russian influence measures abroad might have various displays and perpetrators, but they are united by a common goal – to discourage, disrupt and damage. This can manifest as efforts to reduce international unity, divide societies, or hinder the adoption of decisions unfavourable to Russia. The Kremlin often uses influence measures to demonstrate its position and divert attention from important issues. For example, a favourable outcome of the Russian influence measures would be Latvia or its allies questioning their strength and unity. Every successful (or at least publicly presented as such) influence measure strengthens Kremlin's ambitions by making it look like Moscow is calling the shots. Influence

measures and their resonance also provide Russia with a valuable insight into the general mood of society and attitudes towards the particular issues these measures have been aligned to.

Russia uses disinformation to achieve its goals, e.g., reducing the support for Ukraine. Following the broadcasting restrictions of the state-controlled media, Russia's diplomatic representations and delegations to international organizations, as well as social media platforms, especially Telegram and TikTok, have become important and mutually complementary mouthpieces for the Kremlin's propaganda and lies. The messages of Russian Embassy in Latvia have also become more aggressive and provocative. The Embassy's social media accounts are regularly spreading false and misleading information on topics like Latvian domestic policy or history. It is a common practice authorised and encouraged by Moscow, but the Embassy's rather small audience and limited ability to attract new followers prevents these messages from causing much damage.

Despite their limited access to foreign audience, Russian media still carry out specific disinformation campaigns against Latvia and its top officials. In 2023, extensive and blatantly false films were broadcast about the former President of Latvia Egils Levits (in May), the at the time newly elected President Edgars Rinkēvičs (in July) and the Prime Minister Evika Siliņa (in October). One of the "leading experts" commenting the statements made in the films was Dmitry Yermolaev, a SAB identified Russian intelligence officer, who was assigned to work in the Russian Embassy in Riga from 2002 to 2005. While this content is primarily intended for the domestic audience as a confirmation for the politicians' statements on the "degenerate" Latvian officials and their hostile attitudes towards Russia, it is also used by Moscow to maintain a negative attitude towards Latvia and its top officials among people in Latvia who still consume pro-Kremlin media content.

There are countless Russian organizations and individuals engaged in disseminating the Kremlin's messages, using modern technologies, including machine translation, artificial intelligence and deepfakes. Addressing the audience in its native language and creating an impression of genuine information, the Russian empire of lies can still find listening ears. In line with the changes in the Russian foreign policy, the disinformation is now more widespread in Africa and Latin America.

Disinformation distribution networks are constantly being discovered and closed down in Western countries. In June 2023, the

French agency responsible for combating external digital influence shed light on a major Russian disinformation campaign where the perpetrators had created nearly identical copies for the websites of the country's leading newspapers to spread anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian messages, passing them as genuine information provided by reliable media. Technology is also helping the so-called pranksters to reach their goals by making them more convincing. In September 2023, taking advantage of the uncertainty about the future of the so-called African Grain Deal (Black Sea Grain Initiative), Russian pranksters made a series of fake calls to the heads of governments of several European countries, including Latvia, masquerading as high officials of the African Union.

Influence measures are also often carried out by hacktivists who use cyber methods to act in Russia's interests. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there has been an increase of distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks on websites both in the public and private sector. They have not, however, caused significant and lasting damage. The timing and intensity of the attacks indicate that they are often aligned with statements made by Latvian officials or decisions that are unpopular with Russia, thus intended to both punish and create impression of Russia's seemingly unlimited possibilities and Latvia's vulnerability. This could be observed during the widely covered extensive bombing threats in Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian schools and public institutions in October 2023. The e-mails containing fake threats not only burdened the law enforcement and rescue services, but also made the public feel insecure and doubt the preparedness for a potential crisis.

Russia also continued to use the land border to put pressure on neighbouring countries and demonstrate an aggressive stance or displeasure regarding certain events or decisions. At the end of the year, Finland as the newest member of the NATO alliance experienced an increase in the flow of migrants on its border with Russia, similar to the one on Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish borders with Belarus in autumn 2021 and Russian border with Finland and Norway in 2015. In October 2023, Russia determined that Vientuļi in Latvia would be the only crossing point for Ukrainian nationals to enter Russia from the European Union. By deliberately diverting a potentially large flow of people to one of the smallest border control points on the EU-Russia border, Russia tried to create tension not only for decision makers in Riga, but also for the local municipalities.

The war in Ukraine has made the Western society more observant. Western countries have taken a series of decisions to limit Russia's aggressive actions, for example, imposing sanctions, limiting the propaganda media, exposing and expelling dozens of intelligence officers, and strengthening the energy independence. Despite that, Russia has not become completely isolated and is still able to pursue its interests. The Kremlin's ability to harm and destabilize has diminished, but not disappeared. ***It is expected that Moscow will continue to implement influence measures. Russia has not become indifferent to the West, but it no longer wants (or can) pretend to be friendly, so it is increasingly ready to demonstrate a hostile attitude.*** At the same time, the increased ability of the West to recognize and adequately respond to the Russian influence measures has significantly reduced Moscow's possibility to achieve its goals.



THE RISKS POSED BY CHINA TO THE NATIONAL SECURITY OF LATVIA



China is increasingly trying to position itself as an economic superpower and an alternative to the Western model of governance. To achieve this, Beijing is trying to improve its image in other countries and gain an economic and political influence or even dominance over them. Latvia, especially as a member of the European Union and NATO, is among the targets of China's influence. Historical and ideological reasons make it relatively difficult for China to achieve a political influence in this region, so the main emphasis is placed on economic cooperation as a tool of influence. It has to be understood that any potential or existing cooperation with China poses significant risks. Although economic cooperation with China is beneficial, other goals might be hidden within it, endangering not only the parties involved, but also the national security.

CHINESE INVESTMENT, ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE

To weaken competitors and strengthen its own position, Beijing is trying to increase economic domination over other countries and gain a wider and freer access of its companies to the EU market. China is expanding its economic influence abroad by investing in foreign companies and establishing its own companies. Investments in existing foreign companies give China a relatively easy access to the EU market, while offering financial benefits for the companies. However, cooperation with China can leave the company vulnerable by contributing to its financial dependence. In strategically important sectors (e.g., renewable energy, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals), this may also pose risks to the national security.

Lately, Beijing tends to establish new companies in the European Union, employing Chinese nationals instead of local residents. This gives China access to the EU market while maintaining a full control over the company's operations, as Chinese nationals abroad are also subject to Beijing's control. Lack of operational transparency in Chinese-founded companies creates security risks for the country in which the company operates, by making it difficult to control the company and putting China in an advantageous position.

To prevent an excessive economic dependence on China and its adverse influence in strategic sectors which would pose threats to the national or EU security, Chinese investments are examined both at the respective Member State and EU level. Still, companies themselves should also be critical of Chinese

labour or investment, considering not only the expected benefits but also the potential risks. A short-term economic gain can turn into a long-term loss.

RESEARCH AND ACADEMIA

Potential threats must be carefully evaluated not only in business but also in academia. China often cooperates with universities, research institutes and think tanks in foreign countries, including Latvia. Both parties seem to benefit: Chinese students and researchers gain experience and knowledge and develop skills, and the knowledge they provide in turn contributes to the Latvian academic environment and research. But there is another side to this cooperation. Chinese nationals, even when abroad, are subject to state control, maintaining a regular contact or reporting back on their activities and impressions. Upon returning to China, they may also be forced to hand over the information and knowledge they have acquired, if it is regarded as potentially contributing to the Chinese security and prosperity. The risk is particularly high when cooperating with students who have been awarded a Chinese scholarship for studying abroad, as these students are often subject to various conditions, such as the obligation to work in the public administration for a certain period of time after their studies or maintain a contact with the Chinese Embassy to report on their activities. This is why cooperation and joint projects with Chinese nationals may prove risky, while jointly developed technologies and acquired knowledge – vulnerable. We advise to carefully evaluate whether the intended benefits of the cooperation outweigh the potential risks.

Potential partners should be especially cautious in areas related to China's strategic interests, especially military and technological development. Over the recent years, Beijing has shown an increased interest and invested resources in the fields of biotechnology, artificial intelligence, quantum technology, green energy, etc. Competitiveness in these areas allows China to compete with other great powers and increase its economic and military capacity, or even dominate these sectors. The development of emerging and disruptive technologies provides a unique opportunity to gain an absolute advantage in a specific sector, establishing a new market and having control over it. This creates a dominance that is very difficult for other countries to catch up with or surpass. That is why we want to be mindful of working towards Latvia and its allies winning the technology race, instead of other actors, including China.

RISKS WHILE RESIDING IN CHINA

People should be especially careful when cooperating with the Chinese while staying in China. State control over the public, including foreign nationals residing

in China, is extremely extensive. It is necessary to realize all the ways in which a person may expose themselves to potential threats while staying in China.

There are general risks for any Latvian national or resident who chooses to travel to China. The Chinese authorities keep a close eye on the profile and purpose of travel for each person entering the country to identify people who could be useful for performing actions beneficial to China, e.g., promoting Chinese investments in Latvia and the EU or sharing useful information. These people can be contacted while in China, or the electronic devices brought with them can be used to obtain information. Any person with access to information of interest to China, such as people in influential political or economic positions, scientists and researchers, should be especially aware of this risk. ***Western entrepreneurs or media representatives are often invited to various seminars in China that are paid for by the hosts. It is important to realize that these trips may include more than a friendly presentation of opportunities for potential cooperation, concealing targeted attempts to make contact with individuals whose knowledge, influence or access to information is attractive to China.***

Furthermore, there are particular risks for those who stay and do business in China for a longer period of time. Foreign companies operating in China may be required to form a so-called Party Cell, consisting of representatives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The Party Cells are significantly involved in personnel matters, they spread CCP messages within the company and conduct economic intelligence. It should be noted that in July 2023, a new version of the Chinese Counterintelligence Law entered into force; there the definition of “intelligence” has been widely expanded. The law mandates protection of any information that could be related to the national security and expands the range of activities that can be considered as intelligence. To ensure effective implementation of the law, China’s security authorities have been granted broader investigative powers against both its own and foreign nationals and organizations. Also, there are wide-ranging penalties for violations of the law. Activities that have hitherto been considered normal commercial practice (e.g., market research or the use of cloud data) may now be considered as intelligence. As a result of this, companies have become particularly vulnerable and their operation and existence – unpredictable and unstable. The Counterintelligence Law also puts the work of journalists and researchers at risk, as interest in topics sensitive to China is now forbidden. In addition, the law has also made the work of analytical professions more dangerous, expanding the possibilities of political oppression.



CYBERSECURITY

The situation in Latvian cyberspace remains stable. Like in previous year, the attacks have been carried out in waves, with a varied intensity. ***In most cases, the source of cyber threats was Russia.***

At the individual level, the most common cyber-attacks include various financial schemes, attempts to gain control of social media accounts or obtain private information or access data by sending invitations to open links or attachments via e-mails or SMS. Messages are sent on behalf of public authorities, shipping services or streaming platforms. It is not uncommon for people to get scammed because the schemes look credible, e.g., the website created to gain access data looks very similar to the original.

As before, imposters also attempted to communicate with the Latvian highest officials, which resulted in a prank call with the Prime Minister. Such manipulative activities have recently been regularly targeted against all European countries, including Latvia. It is a way for Russia to expand its foreign policy activities by discrediting the representatives of other countries. SAB regularly informs and warns the Latvian top officials about these threats.

The manipulative activities are mostly well designed with a particular target in mind, allowing the fraudsters to occasionally reach their intended targets. Timely information about suspicious communication attempts with the highest state officials allows SAB to provide support in such situations. As the probability of encountering various manipulative activities will remain high, SAB advises to be especially cautious to avoid these as much as possible.

Hactivists supporting Russia's aggressive policy have also continued regular activities in Latvian cyberspace. There has been a varying intensity of DDoS attacks against government institutions, critical infrastructure, including financial institutions and transport and communications services, as well as various businesses. Even though the number of attacks has periodically decreased, their general intensity has gone up. The DDoS attacks have been successfully repelled and have not caused long-term disruptions to the exposed systems.

In 2023, the cyber units of unfriendly countries tended to carry out attacks using personal devices that have, e.g., the Internet of Things

(IoT) or wireless (Wi-Fi) access. Cyber-attacks were targeted at the state-owned industrial facilities and government institutions as well as individuals, gaining access to their bank accounts, etc. To minimize such risks, it is recommended to change the default passwords and install updates regularly.

Cyber-attacks have also been carried out against software development companies. Having gained access to a company's computer network, hackers try to access the customer computer networks, as these companies often have access to them as well. To prevent this, IT companies should pay more attention to their computer networks, update software regularly, and eliminate unnecessary servers. Customers are advised to ensure that IT companies can only access certain development servers which are not connected to the organisation's general computer network. If possible, two-factor authentication should be implemented.

Cyber-attacks tend to be preceded by research, looking for vulnerabilities of the digital victim. Well-protected systems usually experience fewer attacks as it is more time-consuming. Internet users in Latvia are invited to use the DNS firewall developed by CERT.LV and NIC.LV. It is a free active protection tool to which fraudulent links are promptly added.

In March 2023, the Cabinet of Ministers approved the Cybersecurity Strategy of Latvia for the period from 2023 to 2026, which was developed by the Ministry of Defence in accordance with the Paragraph 2 Article 11 of the Law on the Security of Information Technologies. The Strategy describes the cybersecurity situation in Latvia, identifies future challenges, and defines the key directions of the national cybersecurity policy. The goal of the cybersecurity policy is to strengthen the security of Latvia's cyberspace through the development of cyber defence capabilities, bolstering resilience against cyber-attacks and fostering public awareness of cyber threats. The policy is guided by the following priorities: protection, deterrence, and development.

In 2023, a working group led by the Ministry of Defence continued the development of the National Cybersecurity Law. The draft law will include the requirements set out in the Directive on measures for a high common level of cybersecurity across the Union (NIS2 Directive)¹. In addition to implementing the requirements of the NIS2 Directive, the National Cybersecurity Law will also apply to the critical infrastructure of information and communication technologies supervised by SAB.



PROTECTION OF NATIONAL, NATO, EU AND FOREIGN CLASSIFIED INFORMATION

Latvian national classified information – the Official Secret – is information the loss or unlawful disclosure of which may harm the security, economic or political interests of the state. In accordance with the Law on Official Secret, protection of national classified information is carried out by all three state security agencies – SAB, State Security Service and Defence Intelligence and Security Service. SAB as the Latvian National Security Authority (NSA) is responsible for protection of NATO and EU classified information in Latvia. The ability to provide protection of NATO and EU classified information is a prerequisite for Latvia to be considered a full-fledged partner in these organizations. Regular assessment visits are conducted to check the compliance of the Latvian system for protection of NATO and EU classified information with NATO and EU security requirements. SAB is also responsible for the protection of classified information of foreign states and institutions, including the drafting of international agreements on exchange and protection of classified information.

VETTING FOR ACCESS TO NATIONAL, EU AND NATO CLASSIFIED INFORMATION

Vetting for access to national classified information is carried out by all three state security agencies. Security clearances for access to SEVIŠĶĻI SLEPENI (Latvian national TOP SECRET) information are issued only by SAB, based on the vetting carried out by all three state security agencies. ***In 2023, SAB issued 1047 security clearances for the access to national classified information,*** including 333 security clearances for access to SEVIŠĶĻI SLEPENI information.

In 2023, SAB denied access to the national classified information in six cases and revoked one previously issued security clearance. The decision of a state security agency to deny access to the national classified information can be contested to the Prosecutor General whose decision can be further appealed to the Regional Administrative Court. In 2023, none of the decisions taken by SAB to deny access to the national classified information was contested to the Prosecutor General or appealed to the Regional Administrative Court.

Security clearances for access to NATO and EU classified information can only be issued to people who have already been granted access to the national classified information. NATO and EU clearances are issued only by SAB based on a vetting that includes analysis of the vetting materials for access to the national classified information and gathering of additional information necessary to make the final decision regarding granting access to NATO and EU classified information. ***In 2023, SAB issued 2284 security clearances for access to NATO classified information, and 2313 security clearances for access to EU classified information.***

In 2023, SAB denied access to NATO and EU classified information in eight cases. SAB's decision to deny access to classified information of foreign states and international organisations is final and cannot be further appealed.

In 2023, the SAB has also conducted 1018 security checks in accordance with compliance criteria set in other regulations, e.g., for people applying for the post of honorary consul, persons needing access to critical infrastructure, etc.

SAB would like to highlight the following as particularly high-risk criteria for people who were vetted for access to both the national and NATO and EU classified information in 2023: gambling, excessive debts (including the so-called quick loans) and/or unclear financial transactions, regular contacts and/or trips to Russia, Belarus and other CIS countries, China, certain negative personality traits as well as provision of false information or concealment of information during the vetting process.

INDUSTRIAL SECURITY

Facility Security Clearance (FSC) confirms the right of a company to participate in public procurements involving access to the national, NATO and EU classified information as well as the ability of the company to protect such information. The vetting of companies for access to the national classified information is carried out by all of the three state security agencies, whereas the vetting for access to NATO and EU classified information is carried out only by SAB. The decisions on issuing FSCs are only taken by SAB.

As of January 2024, there were 87 valid FSCs for access to the national classified information, five for access to NATO and three for access to EU classified information. In 2023, SAB has issued 22 FSCs and made changes to five previously issued FSCs.

In 2023 SAB refused to issue an FSC in three cases, revoked one previously issued FSC and issued an FSC with a reduced validity period in

eight cases. The decision of SAB to refuse the issuance of an FSC or revoke a previously issued FSC can be contested to the Prosecutor General whose decision can be further appealed to the Regional Administrative Court. In 2023, SAB's decision to refuse or revoke an FSC has been contested to the Prosecutor General in two cases. In one case, the decision taken by SAB was overturned, while the other case is still being evaluated by the General Prosecutor's Office.

We would like to highlight the following among the main reasons for refusal of an FSC or its issuance for a reduced period of validity in 2023: company's violations regarding protection of the classified information or its failure to comply with the requirements for protection of classified information, concealment of the true beneficiaries or provision of false information to the state security agencies, unclear financial transactions, violations of tax policy as well as systematic violations of national legislation.

PHYSICAL SECURITY AND MANAGEMENT OF CLASSIFIED INFORMATION

The inspection and certification of premises of government institutions and companies used for handling of the national classified information is done by all of the three state security agencies, while the premises for handling of NATO and EU classified information are only certified by SAB. The certification process includes inspection of the physical, electronic, procedural and personnel security as well as management of classified information. SAB also advises government institutions and private companies on issues regarding physical security of premises and management of classified information as well as emergency evacuation and/or destruction of the national, NATO and EU classified information. SAB supervises and controls the management and protection of all NATO and EU classified information released to Latvia in accordance with the systems and procedures introduced and maintained by SAB Central Register.

In 2023, SAB carried out 36 security inspections in 13 institutions and their territorial units, including the premises of four companies. SAB certified 10 sub-registries and 12 control points for handling and storage of NATO and EU classified information as well as 11 classified registries for the handling and storage of the national classified information.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF LEGISLATION

SAB negotiates and drafts bilateral agreements on the exchange and protection of classified information (agreements). When developing the agreements, SAB takes into account the areas where a regulatory

framework for exchange of classified information is currently needed, such as the presence of NATO forces in Latvia within the framework of Enhanced Forward Presence or cooperation with a country in the field of industrial security. It should be noted that drafting of agreements is a long-term process involving two countries with a different regulatory framework, both regarding the protection of classified information and drafting and ratification procedures of the agreements.

In 2023, SAB successfully completed the negotiation process with Poland on the conclusion of a new bilateral agreement and started the development of the draft agreement. SAB also initiated and completed the negotiation process with Malta on the conclusion of a bilateral agreement and started the development of the draft agreement. Negotiations on the development and/or signing of bilateral agreements continued with the USA, Belgium, Croatia, the Netherlands and North Macedonia. In 2023, the Cabinet of Ministers approved the authorization for the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the Government of the Republic of Latvia and the European Space Agency on mutual protection of DIENESTA VAJADZĪBĀM and ESA RESTRICTED information.

SAB represents Latvia in NATO and EU forums where member states develop a unified framework for protection of classified information: NATO Security Committee, the Security Committee of the Council of European Union, the Security Expert Group of the European Commission, and the Security Committee of the European External Action Service.

In addition to that, SAB also represents Latvian interests in the Multinational Industrial Security Working Group (MISWG), participating both in the ad hoc working groups and the annual plenary session. MISWG was established in 1985 to develop common principles and procedures for international cooperation in the field of defence and industrial security. These principles and procedures are incorporated in MISWG documents which serve as guidelines for cooperation between countries, defining a common understanding of the protection of national classified information in the performance of international classified contracts. Most of the procedures and documents developed by MISWG are also used by NATO and EU.

In 2023, SAB concluded the work on a new regulation on protection of classified information. On 19 December 2023 the Cabinet of Ministers adopted the regulation No. 822: Regulation for the Protection of Official Secret, as well as Classified Information of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the European Union and Foreign Institutions.



LEGAL MOBILE INTERCEPTION

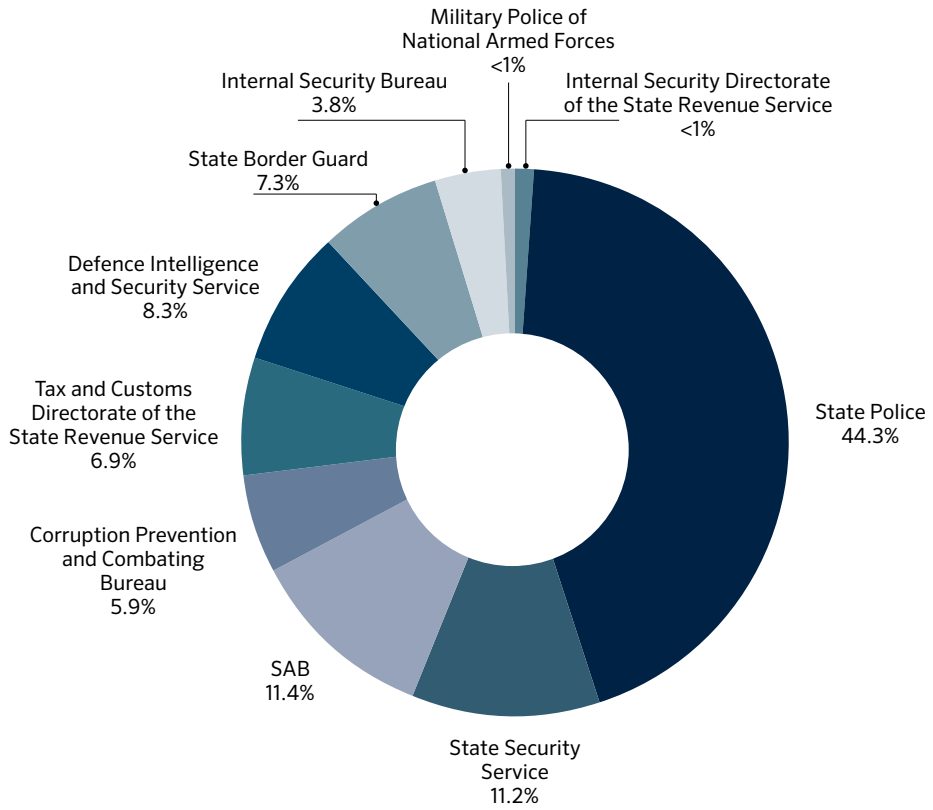
SAB hosts the technical facilities and equipment that provides legal mobile interception for law enforcement agencies and state security agencies. The data obtained during an interception are transferred to the initiator of the particular interception who has received a warrant from the Justice of the Supreme Court. The competence and responsibility of SAB include legal interception, protection of technical parameters and methodology of the interception as well as the protection of the obtained data from an unauthorized disclosure before the data are delivered to the initiator of the interception.

Prior to the beginning of a legal interception, SAB receives the necessary documentation from the initiator of the interception stating the following:

- Registration number of the initiating decision;
- Official who has taken the decision;
- Head of the institution who has confirmed the decision;
- Justice of the Supreme Court who has issued the warrant;
- Telephone number to be intercepted;
- Duration of the interception.

The legal supervision of mobile interception is provided by the Prosecutor General and specially authorized prosecutors. Parliamentary control is exercised through the National Security Committee of the Parliament.

As in previous years, SAB has not committed any violations regarding mobile interception in 2023. The proportional usage of the legal interception by law enforcement agencies and state security agencies is provided in the following chart.





CONTACT US

CONSTITUTION PROTECTION BUREAU (SAB)

Post Box 286, LV-1001, Riga, Latvia

www.sab.gov.lv

Phone: +371 67025407

E-mail: pasts@sab.gov.lv

X account: @SAB_LV

FOR MEDIA CONTACTS:

Phone: +371 28386600

E-mail: prese@sab.gov.lv