

Belgium strives to meet intelligence and security challenges

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Belgium faces a high risk of terrorism and a persistent threat from foreign espionage. *Kenneth Lasoen* examines the scale of these challenges and the intelligence and security services' efforts to respond

Key Points

- The Belgian government has invested in personnel and technology for the Belgian security and intelligence services since the terrorist attacks in Brussels in 2016.
- Nonetheless, the services face ongoing organisational challenges and remain under-resourced given the scale of the espionage and terrorist threat to the country.
- The effectiveness of the reforms to the services will largely depend on continued political engagement to maintain momentum, particularly in the face of emerging challenges.

Belgian intelligence has come under considerable scrutiny since 2015. After the attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015, which had a Belgian connection, followed by attacks in Brussels on 22 March 2016, the performance of the two Belgian security services was questioned in the media and in parliamentary committees.

The Belgian State Security service is known under its combined Dutch and French acronyms as the domestic Veiligheid van de Staat – Sûreté de l'Etat (VSSE). The military General Service for Intelligence and Security (GISS) is known in Dutch as the Algemene Dienst Inlichting en Veiligheid and in French as the Service Général de Renseignement et de Sécurité.

The GISS attracted international attention in February 2019 after a report emerged in the Belgian media, initially in newspaper *De Morgen*, detailing allegations of internal ructions within the service and the possible compromise of a counterintelligence officer by an agent of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (Sluzhba Vneshney Razvedki: SVR).

Jane's assesses that the initial reporting on these cases contained factual errors, some of which were corrected in later reporting. Nonetheless, these reports have focused attention on the challenges facing the Belgian intelligence and security services, which despite improvements remain under-resourced compared to the scale of the threat posed by terrorism and foreign espionage.

Changes since 2015

In the three years since the Paris attacks, the Belgian intelligence and security services have undergone adjustments to address the problems that hindered their performance. A parliamentary inquiry into the failure to detect the Paris and Brussels attacks identified multiple issues within the services and made extensive recommendations, which the government is carrying out under the oversight of a parliamentary monitoring commission.

The most pressing issues – the lack of budget and manpower – were met with investment and an ongoing recruitment drive. Between 2016 and 2018, the VSSE hired 140 new personnel, and as of January 2018 it was staffed by 627 employees, according to the VSSE 'Activity Report 2017–18'. *Jane's* understands from discussions with senior GISS officials that the military service had more than 650 employees as of February 2019, and still had vacancies to fill.



Armed soldiers stand guard during the trial of the prime suspect in the November 2015 Paris attacks, Salah Abdeslam, at the Palais de Justice courthouse in Brussels, on 5 February 2018. The Belgian connection to the Paris attacks led to renewed scrutiny of the country's intelligence services. (Riccardo Pareggiani/AFP/Getty Images)

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These two services are also being reorganised in response to the inquiry's recommendations. The focus of those recommendations was on improving inter-service co-operation and operational capability.

Jane's understands that the VSSE is struggling to implement changes in human resources procedures as part of this process. The contracts and regulations setting out the terms of employment for VSSE personnel impede internal and external mobility, establish different pay levels (which affect morale), and prevent analysts from becoming field agents and vice versa. The VSSE is attempting to rectify these anomalies but the changes have resulted in dissatisfaction within the service.

In March 2017, the Intelligence Services Act of 1998 was revised to adjust the legal framework regulating the work of the services. The legal changes gave both services the ability to collect intelligence through more intrusive means, mainly related to signals and other forms of technical intelligence.

Matching the technical capabilities of the services to their expanded legal remit has necessitated investment in equipment and data processing tools. In March 2019, Belgian broadcaster VTM reported that the government had acquired a data management system for open-source intelligence. However, because of existing infrastructure problems, the report stated that the new system was taking longer than expected to become fully operational.

At the ministerial level, the National Security Council (NSC), which was formed in January 2015, has improved co-ordination between the services, with its work accelerating following the Paris attack in November of that year. The NSC is supported by two subsidiary committees, with input from the intelligence services, the police, and the Belgian threat analysis fusion centre, the Coordination Unit for Threat Assessment (CUTA), known in Dutch as the *Orgaan voor de Coördinatie van de Analyse van de Dreiging* and in French as the *Organe de coordination pour l'analyse de la menace*.

The first of these two subsidiary committees, the Strategic Committee for Intelligence and Security, considers current and future security and intelligence questions from a broader perspective. The second, the Coordination Committee for Intelligence and Security, translates the goals agreed by the Strategic Committee and the NSC into daily courses of action. Through the NSC, the National Strategic Intelligence Plan has been developed to form the basis of a national intelligence strategy that seeks to efficiently deploy the means and personnel of the services.

In May 2019, the government continued to implement the Joint Intelligence Centres, a co-operative venture between intelligence, CUTA, the police, and the judiciary to exchange information on terrorist threats. A JIC has been operational for Brussels since 2016 and has enabled the services to exchange terrorism-related information in a structured, efficient, and rapid way.

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