

Threat of spies is increasing in Europe.

A series of high-profile cases that have recently led to arrests and convictions shows that the threat posed by spies seems to have increased in Europe over the past decade.

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Note: The article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the views of the Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS).

“In times of geopolitical tension, the activity of different countries’ intelligence organisations increases,” says Michael Jonsson, Deputy Research Director at FOI.

Together with analyst Jakob Gustafsson, Michael Jonsson has conducted the study, *Espionage by Europeans 2010–2021*, where they analyse openly known cases of infiltration or insider espionage. Of the 62 individuals involved, 42 were convicted of espionage during the studied period, something that Michael Jonsson himself describes as “the tip of an iceberg.”

“We have chosen to use open sources, mainly newspaper articles, and focus exclusively on cases that resulted in convictions in court, to avoid the discussion about whether this is really about espionage or not. It’s a complex subject. There is very little data and more basic research is needed. This is a narrow selection, but it still provides a relevant picture of the situation.”

Russia is behind the vast majority of all spy cases.

From the time period in question, there are spectacular examples of operations believed to have been carried out by Russian intelligence services, such as the poison attack in Salisbury, the assassination attempt on a Bulgarian arms dealer and the explosion of weapons stores in the Czech Republic. The new study also shows that Russia is behind the vast majority of all spy cases in Europe.

“It is difficult to describe a typical spy, but in our study, it is clearly a man, with a Baltic background. It is also true that Russia is the absolutely dominant recipient of espionage in Europe. And then there are different

types of spies, who we describe in our study as different clusters who engage in espionage,” says Michael Jonsson.

One such cluster is men with a background in the military or intelligence services. Another group consists of consultants, researchers or government officials. The researchers also found a group of petty criminal smugglers, in Estonia, who were used as spies. Potential spies can also be recruited from among those who for ideological reasons are “friends of Russia.”

“The most valuable spies are probably those who have access to classified material about combat forces, weapons and defense capabilities. But you can also be interesting as a spy if you have information about new research, innovations and new technology,” says Michael Jonsson.

A spy’s life is pretty unglamorous.

So, what makes some people take the plunge and become a spy? The study has found some common denominators, such as a feeling of being disadvantaged, either at home or at work, and struggling with financial difficulties.

“These are people who can be a little bitter about their careers, for example if they haven’t been promoted as they’ve expected. There are certain narcissistic traits, and the role of spy makes them feel important and needed. We also saw that several had problems with debts,” says Michael Jonsson.

The recruitment of a new spy often begins cautiously, with the intelligence officer asking for innocuous information that is already available from open sources. Gradually, the demands for information increase and then it can often be difficult to withdraw. The study shows some cases of extortion and threats against relatives when someone tries to withdraw.

“Initially, you also pay for less valuable information, so that the spy gets used to the approach and is incriminated early. The intelligence officer who handles the spy is also very friendly, to build trust. By then, someone who still wants to withdraw can be blackmailed; we have for example a case of an Estonian spy with a military background who had small children, where his family was implicitly threatened,” says Michael Jonsson.

It is a rather unglamorous picture of the spy life that emerges in the study, and it is not about huge sums of money, either. A study from the US shows that not even the most well-paid spies earned more than a million dollars in total.

“Given the enormous risk-taking it entails and the relatively limited remuneration in relation to the stakes, being a source is not a very good deal. Rather, it is a cynical exploitation of vulnerable individuals. Our study is also about failed spies because they have all been caught.”

When asked if there is no truth in all the spy movies and books involving corrupt women, alcohol and luxury hotels, Michael Jonsson replies that they nevertheless contain a grain of truth.

“For a certain group of spies, mainly the most valued sources, the handover of information often takes place in third countries. That’s when the alcohol, restaurant visits and hotel stays come in. In the case of the Swede who spied on Volvo and Scania, for example, he was arrested in a restaurant and in possession of a large sum of cash,” he says.

War breeds more spies

The study finds that most convicted spies are found in Northern Europe, particularly the Baltics. In this context, Sweden has a vulnerable geographical location. When asked how many spies there may be in Sweden, Michael Jonsson answered that in addition to the one who spied on Scania and Volvo, two more people have been arrested pending trial in a separate case.

“It’s not possible to say for certain, but the Swedish Security Service, SÄPO, estimates that a third of the staff at Russian embassies are usually intelligence officers. That would mean 10–15 people at the Russian embassy in Stockholm.”

Michael Jonsson believes that cases of espionage will continue to increase, not least in light of Russia’s war in Ukraine. History shows that war always produces more spies. For example, during World War II, in neutral Sweden, Stockholm was a tumultuous place for spies. Today, Brussels, with all its international institutions, is probably a similar place.

“This is a threat that we must take seriously! And as the global political situation deteriorates, espionage will only increase. Just in the time since we completed the report, there have been a number of new European cases that are likely to go to trial,” says Michael Jonsson.