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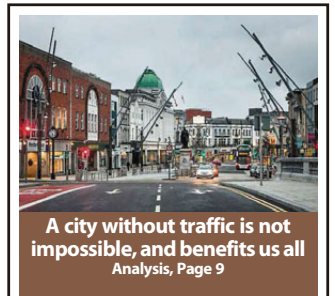
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## Putt to the test



Leona Maguire of Team Europe celebrates after winning her match on the 15th hole during Day Three of the Solheim Cup at Finca Cortesin Golf Club, Casares, Spain. Europe retained the cup after the contest ended in a draw.  
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Picture: Stuart Franklin/Getty



A city without traffic is not impossible, and benefits us all  
Analysis, Page 9



An only child doesn't mean a lonely child

Dáithí Ó Sé, Page 11

## Gardaí monitor group linked to IS

**Cormac O'Keeffe**  
Security Correspondent

Garda security services are monitoring a small group of individuals in Ireland associated with an Islamic State (IS) offshoot that is causing "growing" concern across Europe over its violent intent.

The Garda's intelligence chief also told the *Irish Examiner* that his officers are investigating around 60 cases of suspected financing of terrorism every year, most relating to monies destined for IS-type terror groups.

Assistant Commissioner Michael McElgunn said there is particular concern around an expanding network — known as Islamic State Khurasan Province

■ Has 'small presence' here and is of 'growing' concern in Europe

(ISKP) — which, he said, has a "small presence" in Ireland.

The head of the Garda National Crime & Security Intelligence Service (NCSIS) said his officers achieved significant success earlier this year after they blocked entry into Ireland of a key ISKP player. In a wide-ranging, and rare, interview, Asst Comm McElgunn said:

■ Key individuals involved in violent Islamist groups number in the "low double figures" in Ireland, while known supporters of such groups number in the "higher end of double figures";

■ Garda intelligence has indicated departments assessing and investigating threats from four countries, with Russia and China understood to be the main actors. Gardaí are investigating so-called 'illegals' associated with these states — people who are living in the wider community and not officially attached to diplomatic missions;

■ The NCSIS is investigating what country or group is behind a recent fake Department of Justice letter targeting the Ukrainian community here;

■ US extremist groups are providing funding to Irish

far-right groups;

■ Covid lockdowns and restrictions created "an unsettling" of people leading to disrespectful, hurtful, and objectionable behaviour that was once largely unknown before the norm;

■ Asst Comm McElgunn said a particular threat has emerged from an offshoot of IS, which has its base in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

"There has been a concern for a while, and its growing, around one element of Islamic State, this Islamic State Khurasan Province," he said. "This group has emerged and has a threat in over half of EU states and has a small presence here. This is a group that certainly has an intent of concern."

Recently working with the Government we took

steps to ensure that one individual associated with that group — a person of concern not just to us but to others — was not successful in attempts to come to Ireland. He did try, but he was unsuccessful.

On a wider front, across all IS-type groups, Asst Comm McElgunn said numbers are relatively small in Ireland compared to many European countries: "I would say in terms of key individuals of concern we're talking about low double figures and then, the wider grouping, support for them who come on our radar from time to time, you're bringing it up to the higher end of double figures."

Around the same time the interview was taking place details of a separate and

lengthy counter-terrorism operation emerged, with six foreign nationals appearing before the Special Criminal Court on terrorism financing charges.

"About five years ago, we set up a group within Special Branch (Special Detective Unit) to investigate terrorist financing and they are now investigating, on average, 60 cases of terrorist financing a year," he said.

On funding coming from abroad to far-right groups here, he said: "We assess that some funding to groupings to the right of the political spectrum has its origins in like-minded US groups or individuals."

Special report: 6&7

## Co-driver killed at rally as five die on roads at weekend

**Pat Flynn, Martin Walsh, and Sally Gorman**

One man died and another suffered a broken leg in a crash during a rally in Co. Clare on another horror weekend on the roads.

The rally competitor, Damien Fleming from Co. Kerry, was one of five people to die in crashes since Friday and his death brings to 137 the total number of fatalities so far in 2023.

That is 30 more than in the corresponding period in 2022. A nine-year-old boy is among the latest victims.

At the Clare Stages Rally, Mr Fleming, aged 37, was the passenger in one of the competing cars in the rally.

It is believed he may have been outside the vehicle due to a technical issue, and was hit by another car at around 1.30pm at Glencolumbkille near Carron during the fourth stage of the rally.

Gardaí confirmed the collision involved two vehicles and that Mr Fleming was pronounced dead at scene.

The driver of the second car sustained a broken leg and was taken to University Hospital Limerick for treatment.

Motorsport Ireland described Mr Fleming, a native of Kilkummin, as a highly experienced co-driver who had competed in more than 150 events since 2006.



The scene of the collision in North Clare. Picture: Press 22

"The thoughts of everyone at Motorsport Ireland, and within the wider motorsport community are with the Fleming family, Clare Motor Club [the event organisers] and the members of the motorsport community who were present at the scene and reacted so quickly and professionally to the incident."

It added that it would conduct a full investigation with the relevant authorities to establish how the accident occurred.

As part of their investigation, gardai have asked any witnesses to contact them at Ennis Garda Station on 065 684 8100.

Separately, gardai in Co. Donegal were last night questioning a man aged in his 20s in connection with a hit-and-run incident with a Bannard that claimed the

life of Roman Wilson, aged 9.

Roman, whose family is from Kildress in Co. Tyrone, was killed instantly when he was hit by a car at around 9.20pm on Saturday at Atlantic Way in the seaside town.

He had been staying in Bundoran with his family.

In the early hours of yesterday in Co. Kerry, a male pedestrian aged in his 20s died after being struck by a taxi shortly after 2am on the R553 at Ballydonoghue, Liselton, near Ballybunton.

He was pronounced dead a short time later.

The driver, a man in his 40s, did not require medical treatment.

Gardaí in Listowel have appealed for any witnesses, particularly road users with camera or dashcam recordings from that area between 1.30am and 2.15am, to contact them on 068 50820.

A short time later in Dublin, a motorcyclist aged in his 20s died after colliding with a pedestrian just before 2.45am at a roundabout on Whitestown Way in Talaght.

The pedestrian was taken to hospital with non-life-threatening injuries.

Gardaí investigating that incident have asked anyone with information to contact Tallaght Garda Station on 01 666 6000.

In Co. Donegal on Friday, a woman aged in her late 50s died when her car collided with a lorry on the R238 at Moville at approximately 8am.

The lorry driver, a man aged in his 50s, was taken to hospital for assessment.

## 'Rot' of far-right protests sparks safety fears for TDs

**Tadhg McNally**  
Political Reporter

Ceann Comhairle Seán Ó Fearghail has said he fears Irish politicians could meet the same fate as murdered MPs in Britain unless the "rot" of far-right protests is not tackled.

"If this particular rot is not dealt with it will inevitably extend and it's a fear I have and the fear many of my colleagues have that we will reach a point where we have some awful events such as happened in Britain with the late Jo Cox and the late David Amess," Mr Ó Fearghail said.

Mr Amess was stabbed multiple times in 2021.

During the trial at which he was convicted of Mr Amess's murder, it emerged that Islamic State fanatic Ali Harbi Ali had planned attacks on other MPs.

An extreme right-wing terrorist, Thomas Mair, was sentenced to prison for life for shooting and stabbing Labour MP Jo Cox in 2016.

Referencing the violent

scenes outside the Dáil last Wednesday, Mr Ó Fearghail told *Newstalk* radio: "It is, I think, virtually inevitable that some of the cohort that we saw in action during the week will try to gain access to Leinster House."

During the protest, representatives and parliamentary staff were prevented from going about their business and certain politicians were subject to verbal abuse.

Independent TD Michael Healy-Rae required a robust Garda escorts protesters yelled insults and a thrown missile narrowly missed his head.

Gardaí arrested 13 people at the protests and they have been charged.

Meanwhile, it has emerged that the decision by the Garda Commissioner Drew Harris last October to bolster security for Cabinet ministers by giving them Garda protection drivers has seen the cost of providing travel for the politicians more than double from €2.5m to more than €8.1m.

News: 2, 6

## Cost-of-living package talks

Coalition leaders will meet this evening to hammer out the size and scope of the cost-of-living element of the budget.

Sources are already ruling out a significant rise to the renters' tax credit. Higher Education Minister Simon Harris last week called for it to be doubled to €1,000.

News: 2

## State's fertility scheme opens

Referrals for the first State-funded fertility treatment programme open from today. Eligible women will be able to receive treatment through approved private fertility clinics with the cost covered by the State.

The current scheme gives access to one full cycle of IVF or ICSI treatment.

News: 4

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News: 4

# Special report

# Intelligence as threats to public

**M**OST people would not think the threat to Ireland from Islamic State (IS) had died off in recent years. Apart from the high-profile prosecution of Lisa Smith in 2022, who was convicted in the Special Criminal Court of membership of IS, most security concerns have moved to the emerging threat from the far right and a resurgent threat from Russia.

Yet, the overall threat of terrorism in Ireland is still assessed as "moderate", including the threat from international terrorism, which mainly relates to IS and associated groups.

In an interview with the *Irish Examiner*, An Garda Síochána's Intelligence Chief Assistant Commissioner Michael McElgunn says that the international threat is mixed in with other modern phenomena including migration flows and online radicalisation.

He says that when the IS inspired caliphates in Syria and Iraq collapsed during 2018 and 2019, there was widespread concern across the EU, including the return of its citizens who had gone to fight there, including with violent Islamist groups.

"There were the risks associated with returning foreign fighters and the risk they might pose, that risk didn't materialise to any great extent," Asst Comm McElgunn says.

## Islamic State threat

As head of the Garda National Crime & Security Intelligence Service (GNCSIS), Asst Comm McElgunn says that most of the IS-inspired attacks across Europe since 2019 have been by "lone wolf-type" individuals. "So we are mindful now that we find ourselves in a situation where we have a number of people are in custody of the Kurds in northern Syria and Iraq and in the near future those people will be released from custody," he says.

"And the issue then is where do they return to and what threat is associated with them."

He says there were "some people with Irish connections" and that these people could come to Ireland. "So, we need to keep on eye of that."

Asst Comm McElgunn says two of his senior people from Security & Intelligence, the core intelligence section of the GNCSIS, recently returned to a "conference to examine international terrorism threats, intelligence sharing, needless to say, is central for all of us," he says.

One issue that has been emerging is an assessed threat from an offshoot of IS, which has its base in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

"There has been a concern for a while, and its growing, around one element of Islamic State, this Islamic State Khorasan Province [ISKP]."

"This group has emerged as a threat to half of EU states and has a small presence here. And this is a group that certainly has an intent of concern."

One piece of research by the US Institute of Peace, published last June, found the group poses a "growing threat to the West".

Back in March a number of military and intelligence leaders said the ISKP could launch an attack in the West before the end of this year.

US Central Command's General Michael Kurilla said, "They can do external operations against us or Western interests abroad in under six months with little to no warning."

Asst Comm McElgunn says that, in the last six

In a rare interview, An Garda Síochána's Intelligence Chief Assistant Commissioner Michael McElgunn talks to Security Correspondent **Cormac O'Keefe** about a renewed threat from Islamic State, the rise of the far right, a resurgent threat from Russia, the twin problems of disinformation and self-radicalisation, and a new oversight body for national security

months, his service organised a major operation to prevent a key figure in this group from arriving into Ireland.

"Recently working with the Government, we took steps to ensure that one individual associated with that group — a person of concern — did not go to Ireland. That was not successful."

On a wider front, across all IS-type groups, Asst Comm McElgunn says numbers are relatively small in Ireland compared to many European countries. "I would use terms of key individuals of concern we're talking about low double figures and then, the wider grouping, support for them, who come on our radar from time to time, you're bringing it up to the high end of double figures.

"That's the range but it can flex up or down."

## Terror funding

Around the same time as this interview was taking place, details of a separate and lengthy counter-terrorism operation were being reported, with six foreign nationals appearing before the Special Criminal Court on terrorism financing charges.

Asst Comm McElgunn says this is just one of a spate of operations in recent years, targeting groups and individuals suspected of funding IS groups abroad.

"About five years ago, we set up a group within Special Branch [Special Detective Unit] to investigate terrorist financing and they are now investigating, on average, 60

## Islamic State Khorasan Province has emerged and has a threat in half of EU states and has a small presence here

cases of terrorist financing a year," he says.

Asked this is a lot of activity, he says: "There's a lot of activity in the financial world and a lot of these are small transactions."

He says the intention of people looking to keep the numbers small in a bid to avoid alerting suspicious transaction monitoring systems.

Both individuals and organised groups are involved, he adds.

Asst Comm McElgunn says the SDU is assisted by the Terrorist Financing Intelligence Unit in the Garda National Economic Crime Bureau.

Tied into this threat is the speed at which radicalisation is taking place online, he says.

"What we've seen in the counter-terrorist world is a very rapid radicalisation process."

"Historically, this was a slow process and then, radicalisation is taking place online, associated with Islam."

He says the presence of staff from the establishment moderate Muslim communities

and the relationship built up with mosques through community policing.

He says over time this has allowed leaders and members of those communities to alert gardai if ever they have concerns about a person.

"That's why the greater concern is around individuals radicalising themselves," he says.

The National Security Intelligence Unit travel abroad to engage with sister security agencies and even "embed" in them to ensure Irish practices meet the best practice abroad.

"Most importantly we have that secure network where we share intelligence on an ongoing basis," he says.

Subjects can be identified on online chat rooms, through intelligence gathered via the Covert Human Intelligence Sources (CHIS) system and other means, including alerts from partner agencies.

"We're constantly gathering in this country," he says, "so it's not just what's shared or what tips come from the community, there is gathering around online activity and physical groups and we have professional analysts to work through the material to try and identify individuals who are potentially of concern."

"It would be something like adding a comment to a thread sometimes."

## Rise of the far right

Asst Comm McElgunn says the threat from online radicalisation crosses the various threats the GNCSIS deal with, including the threat posed by what the service describes as political extremism, including from the far right.

"For a few years now we have seen online radicalisation in counter terrorism, including in the political, particularly those with the far-right ideology," he says.

Proponents identify people "who are a little bit vulnerable or more isolated", who, in some cases, might have conditions or disorders that lend themselves to being "consumed" with an ideology.

Observers of some far-right organised protests in recent years have said indicators of this are:

- Amid regular criticism from anti-fascist groups and other organisations, gardai are standing too far back from clamping down on the increasingly aggressive, even violent, right-wing protests.
- Asst Comm McElgunn spends out the role of his service in the protests, which tend to fall into three categories:
  - Legitimate protests, which even violent acts are allowed. Middle category where behaviour may fall foul of the criminal law, such as breaches of public order laws.
  - A third category, where there is an intent or plans to use "political violence".
  - "It is that third category that very much falls into our bailiwick as a national security matter," he says.
- His interview was conducted before the anti-ugly protest outside the Dáil, where elected representatives and parliamentary staff were prevented from going about their business.

## Self-radicalisation

Asst Comm McElgunn is concerned at the impact the public figures on the far right can have on particular individuals.

"A lot of research would suggest that those who are prepared to take violent action of one sort or another are not necessarily high-profile individuals who do plenty of pieces to camera

"These protests with this level of visibility have been taking place all over the country over the last two or three years," said Mr O'Gorman told RTE's *The Week* programme.

"Outside refugee accommodation, outside LGBT events, even outside our libraries and the people who've attended those protests are far more vulnerable than TDs and senators."

"I think it's really important in terms of our response that we're not just looking at the situation outside of Leinster House, as important as that is, it's the wider response as well."

Asked if gardai are taking the right approach, Mr O'Gorman said it was "important" that there were 13 arrests on the day of the demonstrations outside Government Buildings.

and certain politicians were subject to intimidation and verbal abuse."

Independent TD Michael Healy-Rae required a robust garda escort to get to safety during which he was pushed and a thrown missile narrowly missed his head.

"Speaking after, he said there was 'no coherent' message from those protesting other than to hurl verbal abuse and racist language at the Garda Síochána."

The Cathaoirleach of the Seanad, Jerry Buttimer said the protest was "an attack on the institutions of the State".

The group, around 200 strong, was comprised of a mix of far-right agitators, including prominent figures from Dublin, Cork, and Galway and small groupings from Dublin and Cork, including those involved in recent anti-migrant protests in East Wall, Ballybrack, and Phoenix Park.

Gardaí arrested 13 people at the protests and they have been charged.

Justice Minister Helen McEntee, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, and Tánaiste Micheál Martin all issued strong statements about the incident, with Mr Martin describing it as close to "fascist".

Last Friday, Ms McEntee requested Garda Commissioner Drew Harris conduct a security review of Leinster House and a protection review of TDs, senators, and parliamentarians.

Asst Comm McElgunn says it is very difficult to put numbers on those on the "far right" spectrum who are aware of and monitoring.

But he says the "big upsurge" in these people attending protests during covid across a wide range of issues associated with the far right — from public health restrictions and vaccines to migration, housing, abortion, nationalism, trans rights, and a range of conspiracies — has seen a "huge fall off" since the pandemic lifted.

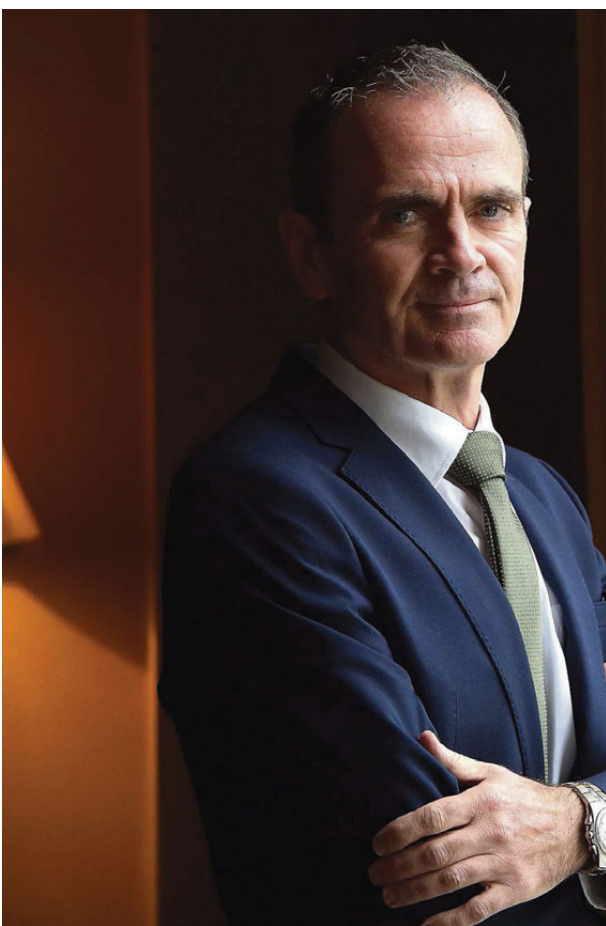
"This is a view shared by anti-fascist groups that welcomed the relatively small numbers who attended the Dáil protests last Wednesday."

The views come in the wake of an analysis in *The Economist* magazine on the advance of the "hard right" across much of Europe, which found that parties that were once "relegated to the fringe" are going from "struggling to strengthen their hold on power".

It said four of the five most populous countries in the EU have hard-right parties in government or polling above 20%.

Ireland, Iceland, and Lithuania are the only countries to have political parties of the far right elected, to date.

The economist said hard right parties are exploiting various issues — migration and the demographic make-up of the countries, gender equality, and trans rights, but also energy costs, fuel prices, and climate change costs.



and understanding in the public," he says.

"So, if you go back to the self-radicalised individual we were just talking about — the lonely person, not too many friends, isolated, maybe with some mental health issues or certain conditions — they get consumed by an idea and slowly then plan an attack."

"The high-profile people are who pose a threat to women and children."

"Part of our remit is to look at people who come to the country to assess who they are and what the risk might be."

"And, we are not seeing any significant risk around the people who have come here for international protection in recent years, but we continue to monitor that."

"I think that's a comfortable narrative for some, but not in any significant way."

"There are some men and you would expect that we will take an interest in some, certainly some of them, but not in any significant numbers."

Funding for far-right groups is another concern for the GNCSIS, an issue that was raised in a 2020 report by Europol, the EU police coordination agency.

"We assess that some funding to groupings to the right of the political spectrum has its origins in like-minded US groups or individuals," Asst Comm McElgunn says.

"The issue of funding came into the spotlight recently in the bizarre internal row within the National Party over 'missing' gold bullion deposits."

The gold, valued at around €400,000, was moved from one safe in the National Party Offices to another safe.

Some sources suspect the party could be on the verge of "imploding" and that even smaller offshoot groups could form.

Asst Comm McElgunn would not comment on the case, pointing out that they are conducting an investigation into the moans used to purchase the gold.

## Disinformation

Another investigation the GNCSIS is conducting is into a fake Department of Justice letter stating that Ukrainian men in Ireland are to be deported back to Ukraine to

fight in the war against Russia.

Asst Comm McElgunn says there are three possibilities around who was behind the letter.

"There is certainly one that a state actor is behind this, the reasoning being it might be designed to change attitudes here towards people from Ukraine — that's one possibility," he says.

"Though he is reluctant to name the hostile state that might be behind this, it is clear Russian ops the suspect list. More on Russia anon."

However, Asst Comm McElgunn says it is "equally possible" that people with political extreme views, who are hostile to migrants, might be behind it.

"I clearly falls into malign intent, so we will investigate that," he says.

He says a third category is "others", including people who "sit in their bedrooms" and come up with ideas like this but who might be not in any particular group.

He says while the information are happening around the letter was fake, it was on the face of it "reasonably convincing".

"The circulation of the letter came around the same time a fake newsletter — purporting to come from Hounslow Minister Barragh O'Brien — was pushed into letterboxes in Malahide, north county Dublin."

"The minister said the leaflets were an 'obvious attempt at sowing discontent through disinformation' and that the persons involved had gone to great lengths to produce and circulate the leaflets."

Asst Comm McElgunn says similar attempts at disinformation are happening around the West: "It's all part of what's going on out there."

"Because of its truly international dimension it can be difficult to get a handle on and where did it originate and who starts it and then you move from disinformation to misinformation because it is further disseminated by people who don't have a malign intent and are simply passing on something they see online."

"He says the traditional "discerning" approach of Irish people to the media and information appears to be changing: "I think it is."

"Maybe we have a generation now who will make assessments about current

# Ceann Comhairle fears far-right escalation

**Tadhg McNally**

Ceann Comhairle Sean Ó Fearghail has said he is concerned about threats to the lives of politicians if the "rot" of far-right protests is not dealt with.

Speaking to Gavan Reilly on *NewsTalk*, Mr Ó Fearghail said he feared an escalation that would lead to a situation similar to the one in Minneapolis, where US MPs — Jo Cox and David Amess — were assassinated.

"If rot sets in and it's not arrested, then what happens? It spreads," Mr Ó Fearghail said.

"If this particular rot is not dealt with it will inevitably expand and it's a fear I have and the fear of many of my colleagues here is that we will reach a point where we have some awful

events such as happened in Britain with the late Jo Cox and the late Sir David Amess."

"We can't go down that road."

Following aggressive protests outside Leinster House on Wednesday, security is to be kept under review.

"It is, I think, virtually inevitable that some of the cohort that we saw in action during the week will try to gain access to Leinster House," Mr Ó Fearghail said.

"So it is important that our staff are prepared, are alert, can identify and deal with those people because they are very readily identifiable."

"I think we need to anticipate that, we need to be prepared for it, and we need to ensure that the dignity of the Dáil and the Seanad is protected."

Mr Ó Fearghail added that protests similar to last Wednesday "can never be allowed to happen again", but that traditional demonstrations need to be facilitated.

He said the State "should have been far more diligent" when it came to far-right protests outside Leinster House and refugee centres.

"This highlights the fact that maybe we as a society, and maybe our agencies should have been far more diligent when it comes to the people in the libraries and postboxes around the country when they were being intimidated," Mr Ó Fearghail said.

Children's Minister Rodric O'Gorman said the protest seen outside Leinster House last week "isn't unique".

# come from within and without



“It is very difficult to put numbers on those on the ‘far right’ spectrum that [gardai] are aware of



A garda watches members of the public protest outside Leinster House last Wednesday. Picture: Gareth Chaney/Collins Photos

“The work of counter-intelligence officers is not just in and around missions of hostile states but also others who might be in a community who might be associated with them

concerns that so-called “illegals” are increasingly being used by Russia to continue espionage and other activities. Asst Comm McElgunn says the work of his counter-intelligence officers is “not just in and around” missions of hostile states “but also others who might be in the community who might be associated with them”. He adds: “This brings in the notion of ‘illegals’ in the community as well. So, sometimes, if certain state actions put pressure on a mission, well, then there’s cause and effect and may be a threat emerges elsewhere in the wider community and that’s something we have to be alert to.” He declines to comment on the case of Marina Sologub, who is subject to a deportation order by the Australian government after her visa was revoked last February following national security concerns raised by Australian intelligence. Ms Sologub, an ethnic Russian, grew up in the Cork suburb of Glanmire and worked for a number of years in the Oireachtas before working for seven years in the National Space Centre in Cork and subsequently three years in Gas Networks Ireland and Irish Water. In September 2020, she was granted a visa to work in Australia where she worked in the space industry and then a local authority. It is understood that Garda Intelligence were aware of her work in Ireland and provided information to their Australian counterparts when she moved there. “I’m aware of the case, but it is before the court, I think, by way of an appeal in Australia,” says Asst Comm McElgunn. “So, in those circumstances, I won’t make any further comment.” She fails in her appeal. Australian authorities will deport her back to Ireland. What level of monitoring the NCISIS will apply will be based on evidence and a risk assessment and what is permitted in law. Speaking generally, he says certain countries do recruit people to work in certain industries. “Ultimately, what it is about is seeking access, building relationships and then seeking to influence,” he says. “That can be in the commercial world, in the government sector and in the third level.” Last July, a British parliamentary intelligence body published a report documenting the serious threat posed to British universities and industry by Chinese intelligence. It led to concerns, as reported in the Irish Examiner, from a number of Irish academics about a “very real” threat to academic integrity and economic espionage



Former Irish soldier Lisa Smith was found guilty of membership of the Islamic State. Picture: Niall Carson/PA

Michael McElgunn, Assistant Commissioner of the Crime and Security Intelligence Service, says his team recently carried out a major operation to stop a key Islamic terror figure coming to Ireland. Picture: Moja Nolan

Europe not least in relation to its unprovoked war on, and destruction of, Ukraine.

### Russia

Asst Comm McElgunn is reluctant to specify countries that pose a threat to Ireland. He does state that there are certain “foreign state actors” that his service concentrates its counter-intelligence units on.

“Lots of states spy on each other and we’re no way immune from that,” he explains. “So, then there is the question of who among them are the malign actors?” He says Ireland works with partner countries in making this assessment.

“This is something that we collaborate very closely, internationally on, so we have a collective understanding of who those actors might be. “So, in terms of state ac-

tors here, there are certainly four different state actors that we have an interest in and that we have a department dedicated to, assessing and investigating their behaviours in the state.”

He says he is mindful that Ireland maintains diplomatic relations with a lot of these countries and that the whole issue of national security is “something that belongs to Government”.

“That [ENISA] is a statement that is certainly out there,” says Asst Comm McElgunn. “Those countries that I didn’t mention, but I alluded to, we are dedicated to investigations around them.”

He confirms that four people associated with the Russian mission in Ireland were asked to leave the country in March 2022 because their behaviour was not in accordance with diplomatic protocols — code for engaging in espionage activities.

The widescale expulsion of known spies from Russian embassies across Europe, and an assessment that remaining spies were being “kept to barracks”, has led to

understands that these three countries, along with Iran, form the four departments GNCISIS have, although some other EU states also have Turkey included.)

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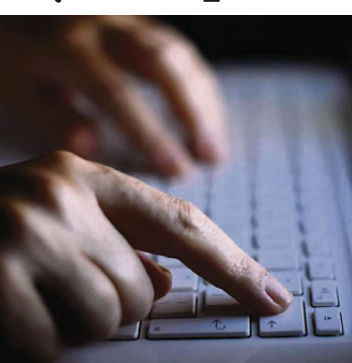
in the national psyche.” He says some people are now openly “disrespectful, hurtful, and objectionable”, behaviour, he adds, they would not have expressed as easily before. “I think that does call for wider societal debate,” he says. “I’m always conscious, if I’m speaking as a senior policeman, people might say ‘of course you want stronger laws about this, that and the other’, but I do think it needs to be considered. Are we, as a society, comfortable enough with some of this behaviour?” The European Commission has a number of agencies and research projects targeting disinformation, including the European Digital Media Observatory and the EU v Disinfo, a task force run by the EU diplomatic service. Both projects have highlighted the prominent role of Russia in disinformation

“We currently work with High Court judges on covert activities and our default option has always been full disclosure,” he says.

“So, we won’t hold anything back unless there is a pressing national security concern around it. But we haven’t actually reached that point. So whatever the judges have wanted to see we are disposed towards transparency insofar as possible.

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tion of NCISIS, and based in its own secure facility in Garda headquarters. S&I has three main sections — the National Security Intelligence Unit (NSIU), the National Criminal Intelligence Unit (NCIU), and the National Surveillance Unit.

The NSIU conducts all liaison with overseas intelligence agencies, such as MI6, CIA, and FBI.

NSIU and NCIU have a shared

specialist skills unit, including language and analysts. Spinning off S&I are two operational divisions — the Special Detective Unit and Special Tactics & Operations Command (STOC), which includes the Emergency Response Unit, the Armed Support Units and the National Negotiators.

The fourth division is Liaison and Protection, which deals with Government security and international liaison with police agencies.

Asst Comm McElgunn is in the process of restructuring the NCISIS to align sections for the examiner’s oversight, versus those under the Policing Authority and the justice minister.

He points out that the Garda National Crime & Security Intelligence Service is responsible under legislation for “internal” security and that national security as a whole is a Government responsibility.

He says the National Security Analysis Centre (also recommended by CoFPI) was tasked with coordinating the country’s security and intelligence agencies, including the gardai, the Defence Forces, and the National Cyber Security Centre.

“That was a recommendation and that hasn’t developed yet,” says Asst Comm McElgunn, “but there’s more to be done.”

“Monitoring doesn’t always mean 24-hour surveillance,” he says. “It depends on the risk level. It can be dipping in and out, it can be ongoing assessment and the cases are reviewed. If you have people under 24-hour cover it becomes a big deal — and it’s a big deal in any country, no matter what resources you have.”

He says 24-hour surveillance can come into play where there is a threat under Article 2 of the European Convention of Human Rights, which places a legal obligation on states to act in order to protect people’s right to life.

“That’s a concern, where there is an immediate risk to life,” he says. “Where there is an immediate risk to life then, regardless of the cost, we are obliged to put the resources in place.”

He says the numbers subjected to this high level of surveillance are “small” and cover a range of threats, including Northern Ireland-related terrorism.

He says his service adopts a more modern approach, including the old-fashioned “doorsteps” to let suspects know they are being watched.

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## Balancing resources, security, and personal freedoms

ASSISTANT Commissioner Michael McElgunn recently said that when he first joined what was then called Crime & Security in the late 1990s he knew very little about what they did and that their workings were “highly secretive”. “That view persists to this day among observers and academics, and, to a large extent, even within the policing side of An Garda Síochána.

However, Asst Comm McElgunn, who took charge of the National Crime & Security Intelligence Service (NCISIS) last February, believes it has changed. He is currently preparing for the first ever oversight body for national security, in the shape of the Independent Examiner.

The examiner, recommended by the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland (CoFPI) in September 2018, is provided for in the Policing, Security and Community Safety Bill currently going through the Oireachtas.

The exact powers available to the examiner have been the subject of some scrutiny and even controversy, but have gained only limited interest within the Oireachtas.

The bill legally protects the NCISIS if it refuses to provide intelligence information to the examiner if it believes it will jeopardise the flow of crucial information from security agencies abroad. This is unlike other agencies abroad, including the oversight body in Australia, which is legally entitled to see everything.

However, Asst Comm McElgunn stresses that his policy is one of transparency.

As he prepares for Ireland’s first national security oversight body, Asst Comm McElgunn’s policy is one of transparency, he tells **Cormac O’Keefe**

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