

THE SUNDAY TIMES



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Culture



Santa's Extra Nice List

Part three
(N to Z)

Spy agency tells universities to beware China

Intelligence service highlights sensitive research areas

John Mooney
Investigations Editor

The Irish Military Intelligence Service has provided confidential briefings to university leaders, warning them about the risks associated with Chinese engagement in sensitive areas of research, particularly in fields that could be adapted for military use.

In the first authorised interview by the organisation, a senior IMIS officer said Ireland's relationship with China posed a unique challenge, as the country enjoyed a beneficial economic relationship with Beijing, but said Irish universities had been warned about the potential consequences.

"It can be hugely detrimental to the West if you empower them [China] by educating them simply because they come to a university with funds. This can be hugely detrimental to the West if you teach them how to twist a knot to the left or right, which helps them to develop a weapon or military application. We made these points to the universities and it was very successful. It's done discreetly to empower and protect our democratic institutions," he said.

Irish third-level institutions have collaborated with Chinese universities, which have been linked to cyberattacks and nuclear research.

The intelligence service also identified Russia as one of the primary threats to the state's national security and confirmed it had successfully disrupted the activities of foreign spies operating here, forcing some to leave the country.



THE SILENT LINE OF DEFENCE
FULL INTERVIEW, PAGES 6-7

Spies have been made to "pack their bags and go home" after their activities were "disrupted", the officer said, which made it untenable for them to continue operating here without the need to make an arrest.

"They don't necessarily know that we've been in the background but we have had a lot of success doing that," he said.

The intelligence officer revealed that covert operations by the Defence Forces, which works alongside gardai, have neutralised espionage and state-sponsored subversion, while warning that hostile activity against Ireland had intensified to levels that it could no longer remain hidden from public view.

In the wide-ranging interview, the officer also outlined how IMIS had established an internal

security branch to monitor soldiers who were being approached and asked to provide information by states while serving abroad. "We've had soldiers in Lebanon approached by various nations looking for information or trying to recruit them, and we've worked against them because the soldier involved declared what happened," he said.

IMIS has also been scanning the ranks for signs of soldiers becoming radicalised by extremists, a problem faced by military forces across Europe.

"The internal group within my house looks into the Defence Forces for flags which may indicate there might be a problem, if it's a particular unit, and that then is acted on by us. And if you have something there that is found, and if we don't have the capacity, we'll talk to the gardai."

The IMIS leader said the public should rest assured that the military was capable of monitoring activity across its maritime, air and land domains, contrary to the impression being created in the public mind.

He said the Defence Forces mounted operations continually to protect Ireland's territory using surveillance technology, naval vessels, spotter planes and specially trained officers. Resources were deployed as necessary to safeguard the country in conjunction with European allies.

IMIS is responsible for covert operations which involve intrusive surveillance, eavesdropping on telephone calls and intercepting

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IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFFEY

BRYAN MEADE FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



Santa Claus and one of his elves swapped the traditional reindeer and sleigh combination for a curragh yesterday, making their way down the River Liffey in Dublin while singing Christmas songs

Threefold increase in non-EU homeless

Jennifer Bray Political Editor

The number of people from outside the EU who are presenting themselves to homeless services has more than trebled since the pandemic, ministers have been warned in a confidential briefing.

The cabinet committee on housing met last Monday to discuss new trends in homelessness, and officials were told that non-EEA adults accounted for the most significant increase in terms of the profile of those presenting for accommodation in recent years.

Ministers and officials were presented with a review which shows 971 people from outside the EU sought emergency accommodation in January 2022, and the number grew to 3,114 by June 2025. This represented a 221 per cent rise.

In comparison, the number of Irish people seeking emergency shelter rose from 4,818 to 5,913 in the same time period, a 23 per cent increase. The homeless data review was carried out by the Local Government Management Agency and presented to ministers.

The review also found a 64 per cent increase in the overall number of households seeking emergency accommodation between January 2022 to September 2025, and recorded the fastest-growing reason for presentation was that the person had been discharged from another service. In the vast majority of cases, this related to people leaving direct provision or HSE childcare services.

As part of last Monday's private meeting, the County and City Management Association also gave a

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For its entire existence, Ireland’s military intelligence service has operated in the shadows. Its leaders are known as the men without faces, their identities a guarded secret. Now for the first time, one of its leaders has been authorised to talk candidly about how it protects Ireland in a rapidly changing world. What is disclosed is a remarkable tale of secrets, counter-intelligence and covert operations – with the aim of showing the public how well the military guards the state.

Here, Ireland’s military intelligence service set the record straight and speak about confronting a range of threats to the nation’s security, including espionage and state-sponsored subversion by foreign powers such as Russia.

My interviewee is one of the senior leaders in the Irish Military Intelligence Service (IMIS). He is a tall, rugged-looking man who has no public profile. Years working in conflict zones have turned him into someone who measures words carefully and weighs consequences before acting. He is among those who brief the government on national security and can authorise covert operations.

The man’s colleagues say he carries an experienced calm earned while under intense pressure; he is a leader accustomed to operating far from recognition, focused not on visibility but on his mission, as well as the men and women who depend on his judgment. Soldiering and intelligence work are in his DNA.

He told me the scale and complexity of the threats facing Ireland were impossible to overstate. Hybrid warfare practised by hostile states, which can involve espionage, disinformation and influence campaigns, are very real. He said: “They are weaponising the state, I won’t say against itself, but certainly influencing the debate. We are being portrayed as the weak underbelly of Europe, which is not the case.”

IMIS, like the other intelligence services across Europe, is taking on and watching a variety of actual and would-be opponents. “Russia would be one hostile state actor we have a key concern about. China is another. We have a huge relationship with China, economically the EU [trades] with them, but there is also the Chinese Communist Party’s concept for One China 2049 [which includes national rejuvenation and reintegration with Taiwan]. If you look at that, and how that fits into the rest of the world, that would be a concern we are interested in,” he said.

IMIS is constantly finding and monitoring foreign agents that are then discreetly forced to “pack their bags” and leave without the need for an arrest. “They don’t necessarily know we’ve been in the background, but we have had a lot of success doing that,” the man said.

Another actor is Hezbollah, the Iran-backed terrorist organisation which operates in Lebanon, where Irish troops are deployed. “Anything that may have an effect on Irish troops or Irish ambassadors is of concern to us. Certainly it is something we would look at.”



A Defence Forces veteran with experience in Afghanistan and Mali explains to *John Mooney* how ‘the fish people’ of the Irish Military Intelligence Service guard the country from Malin to Mizen

The silent line of defence

FISHING FOR INFORMATION

It is almost impossible to overstate how the Russians’ full invasion of Ukraine affected Irish military doctrine and security thinking. It caused the Defence Forces to look at every conceivable threat to the state and its own integrity. Counter-intelligence and internal security have become the priority.

“We have counter-intelligence that looks into the Defence Forces. We’ve had soldiers in Lebanon approached by various nations looking for information or trying to recruit them, and we’ve worked against them because the soldier involved declared what happened,” he said.

IMIS is also aware of the potential for extremism to take hold in our armed forces, as has happened across Europe. The service monitors members for signs of radicalisation should they post something untoward on social media. “We can’t have that with the Defence Forces of any sort. And that is something we’re also tasked with, looking into the Defence Forces.”

IMIS has existed in various forms since



We’re being portrayed as the weak underbelly of Europe

the civil war, with General Michael Collins serving as its first director of intelligence. Known initially as G2 and later as J2, the organisation was officially given its new name last year after a restructuring of the Defence Forces, although intelligence services across the world have always used IMIS.

Ag Faire, Irish for “watching”, is its motto, and the Salmon of Knowledge from Irish mythology is its emblem. Its staff are jokingly called “fish people” as they are “always fishing for information”.

The interviewee was appointed to rebuild, restructure and professionalise the service after the publication of the report on the future of the Defence Forces in 2022. His appointment coincided with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which rapidly changed the security landscape.

My interviewee has worked in various branches of the military serving in Afghanistan, Mali and other conflict zones. For security reasons, the specifics of various operations cannot be made public but he has dealt with everyone from the Taliban to Hamas. Like most

members of the Defence Forces, his tours abroad were educational and showed him the value of being an Irish soldier.

“In Afghanistan, I worked on the border near Pakistan. We had to reintegrate some of the Taliban. I remember meeting one of the Taliban leaders who had become disaffected. Then he saw my flash, the small national flag on my uniform. He went, ‘You are Irish,’ and began asking about the Irish cricket team.

“He went on about a man called Murphy being such a great bowler. He then spoke about Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness and the Good Friday agreement. He had an awareness of the peace process. For me, it taught me how the world is about the same size as a mobile phone,” he said.

The intelligence service is based in a red-brick building at McKee Barracks, Dublin. There are signs everywhere warning people not to take photos or park their cars. It is double-hatted: it is a military intelligence service and an external service combined. It provides threat analysis and assessments to the government, general staff and all Irish embassies.

“Whoever needs it. This work has now become a lot more staff-enabled, tech-enabled and partner-enabled. Our links go from north to south and east to west. We always have someone who I can telephone if [we] happen to have a problem. If it’s an area we don’t have somebody in, I will know someone who does,” he said.

IMIS works similarly to the Department of Foreign Affairs, using contacts and offers of help to build alliances. The scale of its reach is truly international. It recruits inside the Defence Forces but is also interested in people with no military background. Applicants are vetted.

“There’s no just straight in. There’s a process. Not everybody is best fitted for it. You can do nine million push-ups and be good with a bow and arrow but it doesn’t make you an analyst. But the guy in the basement with an Xbox might be. Our

Russia and China, led by presidents Putin, above left, and Xi respectively, are flagged up as threats to national security by the IMIS officer

people reflect our goal, which is the protection of Ireland, its citizens, the reputation of the Defence Forces,” he said.

To fulfil its mission, IMIS works in conjunction with Europe’s intelligence services including Germany’s BND and France’s DGSE. In Ireland, it liaises with Garda Headquarters. Which agency takes responsibility for a specific operation is sometimes complicated because of the ever-evolving nature of threats. “Look at GRU [Russian military intelligence] activities all over Europe, if it’s proxy-based or if it’s overt. If it’s via a defence attacker crew, we have an expertise in it but we would alert the gardai as appropriate. If it’s not appropriate, we don’t.”

THE RUSSIAN THREAT

The threat posed to Ireland by Russia is continually escalating. Ireland has already fallen victim to the Kremlin’s hybrid efforts. He points to the deployment of a Russian tactical group of warships off the south coast four years ago and Moscow’s engagement with Irish fishermen. The event, he says, was organised to embarrass Ireland. “The area they chose had cables underneath it, hugely valuable and important to a variety of multinationals,” he said.

“They were undermining the government, ridiculing the Defence Forces, creating the impression we can’t do anything. The Russian embassy involved itself, they met fishermen and suggested they saved the day. If you remember, the former chief of staff had met the Russian defence attaché at the time and they published his photo online. The net result was a media outcry about how the navy can do nothing.

“The hybrid activity that they conducted was hybrid IOI and they were really good at it. The Russians are excellent at it. That was four years ago and they’re still going on about how fishermen saved Ireland.”

Stakeknife secrecy ruling ‘won’t stop case against state agencies’

Jason Johnson

Litigation linked to Freddie Scappaticci, the brutal IRA enforcer and British agent known as Stakeknife, will continue despite a court ruling last week that yet further strengthens the UK government’s hand in keeping intelligence material secret, a leading Belfast lawyer has said.

The development comes alongside a posthumous veil around Scappaticci’s affairs that seals his will under rule 58, a probate provision never before used in the UK outside the monarchy.

Legal representatives are preparing to enter mediation talks with British officials on behalf of 24 families whose cases have been issued, and they hope a further six cases will be brought into the process. Kevin Winters, the Belfast solicitor acting for families, said “all the extant litigation will continue against state agencies”, as will the mediation process confirmed in November.

The meetings are intended to test whether claims can be resolved before potential hearings. “Mediation isn’t just about compensation. It can involve so much more than that, including access to additional information not hitherto made available to

families and other plaintiffs,” Winters said.

“We have 24 issued cases which will progress to mediation and a further six not yet issued, which we hope will also be included.”

Last week’s Supreme Court ruling, in the separate Paul “Topper” Thompson case, tightened the threshold for any court-ordered disclosure where ministers say national security is at stake, reinforcing in practice the state’s reliance on its “neither confirm nor deny” (NCND) policy around agents and informers. Via Winters, a challenge to NCND continues on behalf of the next of kin of Anthony McKiernan, a Belfast IRA bombmaker who was interrogated by Scappaticci for hours before being shot four times in the head in 1988.

Litigation is also planned in up to three other cases challenging NCND.

The secrecy wall around Scappaticci now runs on two tracks, with the rule 58 order sealing his will and the Supreme Court’s Thompson judgment tightening the threshold for court-ordered disclosure where ministers cite national security.

Scappaticci’s will, its details sealed until 2095 and believed to be worth about £500,000, has a bespoke order that even restricts the

normal inspection process by UK tax authorities. The probate provisions, which Winters has said are “a matter of concern”, are in line with those around Prince Philip’s will, which has been sealed under rule 58 for 90 years following his death in 2021.

Last week’s judgment came days after the release of the final Operation Kenova report, which explored Stakeknife’s activities while he controlled the IRA’s internal security unit, known as the “nutting squad”, in the 1980s. The report included a call for an “exception” to be made and Stakeknife, who died aged 77 in 2023, to be named due to the “compelling ethical case” and suggesting that the identity of the father of six was already widely known anyway.

Sir Iain Livingstone, leading Kenova, said the NCND policy “cannot be used to protect agents who commit grotesque serious crime”, with Scappaticci suspected in 14 murders, 15 abductions and of torturing some of those he accused of being informants within the IRA.

Hilary Benn, the Northern Ireland secretary, said then that he would wait until after the Thompson judgment before deciding, and that ruling has been in favour of secrecy. Benn said last week

that the government was still considering “the request made by Operation Kenova ... to name Stakeknife”.

In July Julian Flaux, then chancellor of the High Court, granted the rule 58 sealing the will of Frank Cowley – Scappaticci’s later name – for 70 years after a private application by an individual using the pseudonym Michael Johnson, whose identity is not known.

The arrangement allows the inheritance tax account to be filed without the will being provided to officials, thinning out the paper trail.

Exploring that case, Judith Swinhoe-Standen of the London legal firm Stewarts said: “There was a risk to the lives of those named in the will as they were likely to be viewed as guilty by association. This dynamic is unlikely to be at play in most people’s lives.”

Winters said he remained hopeful of securing information, adding: “We are confident the Thompson case won’t hinder that in our wish list for mediation.”

The Malone House Group, which seeks tighter limits on legacy litigation, welcomed the Supreme Court’s reinforcement of NCND. It said the decision kept national security assessments with ministers, not courts.



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ILLUSTRATION: TONY BELL

tion campaign that sprang from nowhere as the Dublin riots unfolded. "Where was a lot of it coming from? Middle America, parts of Russia, Africa, Australia."

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

The IMIS officer believes no one country can protect itself alone but they must offer and seek help from neighbours and partner agencies. "You have international networks and friends for a reason. What's wrong with using friendships and networks? We have very good relationships with other agencies," he said.

To this end, IMIS provides and shares intelligence with neighbouring countries to help safeguard them. It is now being asked to assist other militaries to protect their citizens. Only last week a delegation from another country flew to Ireland after IMIS alerted it to a threat. European military schools are also keen to send students to attend courses at the new IMIS intelligence college at McKee Barracks which provides training in everything from maritime security to spy tradecraft.

“We have to recognise that the picture has changed. Geopolitically, we can never exist like we did before. If I have the capacity to prevent something in a neighbouring country why would I not share it? That’s how we work. We will help because we’re intent on playing our piece within Europe as good Europeans. We are militarily neutral but we’re not politically neutral. I would posit that I’m not taking military action against anyone, but I’m making sure that if there is information to protect our neighbours, that information will be passed on,” he said.

The same policy applied to the security and intelligence branch of the garda, which deals with internal security. The two services are seamlessly integrated to create a "shield to protect the country". IMIS is no longer involved in confronting jihadist or dissident groups inside the state but focuses on external and hostile forces. If it discovers something relevant to the gardaí, it will be shared. "If there's intelligence on a bomb or weapon areas, we will share with whoever needs to be shared with to ensure that no man or woman is blown up or no man or woman suffers," he said.

The IMIS officer rejected the suggestion that Ireland represented a weak point in European security. "We may not have every toy in the box," he conceded, "but we are building capacity." In recent years, he said, the Defence Forces and IMIS had reached a high level of sophistication: professionalised, properly managed and significantly expanded. It is an intelligence service, he said, that Ireland can be proud of, one that is doing its utmost to provide the country with a quiet but essential blanket of security.

"That," he said simply, "is what we are about."

Part of the reasoning behind the decision for IMIS to emerge from the shadows is to help Ireland to strengthen its resilience. Rather than fall victim to hybrid activities, my interviewee said society needed to learn how to respond proportionately rather than in haste. He pointed to the presence in Irish waters of the Russian shadow fleet, used to transport Russian oil to beat international sanctions.

“You will read or hear there’s a shadow fleet. The headlines say, ‘They’re coming, they’re coming.’ We need to get used to the fact that there’s 500 or 600 of these vessels. Not every single one of them is going to be a threat to us. Not every one of them has the capacity to launch drones,” he said.

Contrary to the impression created in the public's mind, IMIS is always made aware of such arrivals, often well in

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You can do millions of push-ups but it doesn't make you an analyst

advance, and takes action when required. "We would be aware of what's coming, where it is. Everything is profiled," he said. Operations involving aircraft or naval vessels are usually put in place to create a "choke point" to have maximum effect.

The men and women of IMIS are world-class in monitoring Russian vessels using a variety of methods. The organisation is keen to ensure that the public understand the types of threats posed by Russia's shadow fleet and how the Defence Forces will respond. He pointed to the presence of two specific shadow-fleet vessels that passed by Ireland last week. Shadow-fleet vessels are usually uninsured, dangerous and unseaworthy. Their hulls are often single-skinned, meaning that if they hit rocks, they leak oil.

"Aircraft went out to monitor them.

The biggest problem we have with the shadow fleet is if one of them breaks up off the Aran Islands – then we have no more Wild Atlantic Way. You would have a sludge and we don't have a coastguard or a community that's empowered with the kit to clean it up. A whole economy could be destroyed. We would have an ecological disaster that we'd never recover from," he said.

Although the Defence Forces have a limited number of aircraft and vessels, IMIS and the Naval Service say they have full coverage of what is happening in the maritime domain and are more than capable of responding to any situation.

He pointed to the operations that the Defence Forces have pulled together to monitor Yantar, the powerful Russian spy ship that has been mapping Ireland's undersea infrastructure in recent years.

Two weeks ago, media reports suggested the ship was travelling towards Ireland. “We had looked at, designed, devised, created a complete surveillance plan that would have controlled and monitored that ship from the minute it went to the top of Malin to the time it left Mizen.

"I have a team of analysts who have huge operational credibility behind them. They have been trained to analyse and create the best result for our resources, where to deploy to A, B or C, and they do that. That was all in place ready," he said. The ship never arrived but IMIS and its colleagues across the military were waiting.

Bearing this in mind, the necessity to build resilience to hybrid and influence campaigns is imperative: they could have real consequences for Ireland's reputation. He pointed to the online disinforma-

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