



# Surveillance and Protection- Insights from the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia

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International Centre for  
Counter-Terrorism

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### About This Report

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## Abstract

1. Protection systems in Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) are different from the Dutch system. They are older and initially, i.e., pre-World War II, were built to counter the threat of politically motivated violence. Post-1989, it changed to threats from organised crime, and since the 2010s, it is changing again towards countering politically motivated acts.
2. Each of the three systems had its own turning points – be it 2010/2018 or 2024. These energised the systems and spurred them into action, but often this is happening in a “we should have seen it coming” fashion. The most obvious case of this is Slovakia in the aftermath of the assassination attempt on Prime Minister (PM) Robert Fico, with the head of *Úrad pre ochranu ústavných činiteľov a diplomatických misií MV SR* – (Ministry of Interior’s) Department for the protection of “constitutional authorities” and diplomatic missions (UOUC) now admitting they failed to imagine something like this happening and failed to train for this eventuality. This now leads to a hyperactive approach from the unit and the tightening of standards.
3. Each system is seemingly available throughout the whole country and groups protected persons (PPs) into three categories: VIPs, witnesses and crown witnesses, and harmed or threatened persons. There is also the military option for the ministers of defence – these are protected by the military gendarmerie, and there have been instances of given ministers using such units too eagerly, while, for example, attending their sports facilities or even sending them to shop for them.
4. Two of the three systems (Czech and Slovak) are run by the unified, hierarchical police forces. In Poland, there is also the SOP (*Sluzba Ochrony Panstwa* or State Protection Service), which protects VIPs. Nonetheless, the organisational flowcharts are very clear and similar across the three case studies.
5. The first group of PPs is the most visible, with ample literature available on it. The second is surrounded by a proverbial wall of silence and for the right reasons. Indeed, recent literature coming out on the topic is sometimes written by the former crown witnesses who undermine the integrity of the system as they overstress the system’s shortcomings and failures. The third layer seems most neglected – some police forces almost habitually refuse to work on this layer of the protection system, others are more zealous in this regard. Herein, however, lies the biggest difference between the three case studies – the Slovak system encourages a victim to report a crime and the police will then go after the criminal, the Polish system has seen a boom in the number of “harmed/threatened persons,” the Czech system finds itself in between the two.
6. The command and control of the systems is centralised and hierarchical and almost totally in the hands of the police – the only exception being the Polish VIP protection unit, SOP. Hardly any other institution features in the system at all, except the prosecutor’s office, if there is a complaint against a person allegedly being the source of a given threat, or the military police, if protection is about the Minister of Defence or the chief of the general staff. State resources are also used to protect the buildings and some of the personnel from “state assets,” i.e., nationalised companies running, for example, electricity, water, gas, etc. These develop their own protection services and obtain them using, effectively, state funds, but shop for these on the proverbial market.

7. The systems have not undergone any devolution – even in the light of threats and attacks against local figures. One might be working with the local police or its elements to counter these locally, but the command and control is very much in the hands of, at least, regional commands of the police force and the proverbial buck always stops with the police president/police commander and, subsequently, the Minister of Interior and the Prime Minister. Moreover, if local figures are to be protected (as in the aftermath of the Adamowicz assassination in Poland), this is still ordered “from on high” and then sent down the chain of command. Again, one size fits all is more evident here with police units across the countries working from a centrally ordained script. Local variations are possible and available, but there is an attempt to synchronise options and protection packages.
8. The police forces rely on tested modalities, but allow for a degree of flexibility, depending on the situation and the resources at hand in all three sub-elements of the systems. There is a tendency to start low and upgrade if need be – the case of Lucia Plavakova in Slovakia is telling in that regard. Police forces will not share the rules and regulations governing the packages offered to a given protected person.
9. There is a tendency to legislate for each type of PPs separately and/or enshrine the regulations governing the protection systems in, for example, police bills.
10. Police forces suffer from recruitment issues all around the region. Its protective departments belong to the most overworked, but this is also due to the fact that some have focused on recruiting members close to retirement and not individuals keen on moving up the proverbial ladder of a given police force. As a result of this, relatively few policemen want to join these and consequently, they are understaffed. More elite units within the protection systems, for example, focusing on the protection of crown witnesses or within regional commands and working towards the protection of harmed persons, remain relatively unknown, which prevents them from leaking information but also disrupts their recruitment efforts as fellow policemen often do not know about them or their work and are thus unlikely to join them.

**Keywords:** protection, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Netherlands, VIPs, witness, assassination

## Introduction

In 2023, Edwin Bakker and Marieke Vos wrote that “threats against politicians, civil servants, public figures, and threats in interpersonal relationships are not unique to the Netherlands; the same applies for attacks, liquidations and other forms of violence. Other European countries are also struggling with these phenomena.”<sup>1</sup> As if on cue, 15 May 2024 saw a headline-grabbing incident of that type in Slovakia, a Central-Eastern European (CEE) country seemingly unaccustomed to political violence, i.e. assassination attempt against Prime Minister (PM) Robert Fico.<sup>2</sup> The event shook the country and was said to have put it at a “pivotal moment.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, this report comes out at a unique moment and offers the snapshot of the issues and challenges related to the protection systems in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia. It can be read as a standalone piece but also picks up its inspiration from the 2023’s *Reflection on Surveillance and Protection* by Bakker and Vos, which looked at the situation in Denmark, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom.

ICCT had the support of the authors of the previous report, who forwarded a questionnaire, which they ran via their interviewees – members of the protection and surveillance systems in the aforementioned countries. Consequently, ICCT aimed to achieve a research result which would allow to produce a report akin to that written by Baaker and Vos. However, this proved challenging and at times difficult to accomplish. As will be shown through this report, the security and protection structures in the CEE region are less open than those of the countries covered by Bakker and Vos. Moreover, especially in the case of Slovakia, current political developments often influence how the protection systems of the region operate and leave a mark on both the behaviour of the people working for them and their preparedness to engage with a non-governmental research team from abroad. For all these reasons, one should not expect the case study elements for the three countries to consistently develop the same level of detail on themes developed by Bakker and Vos. In certain situations, the research team was unable to cover a given research point but, ironically, was able to inquire about it while in another country. Nonetheless, it is the hope of the author here that the report provides an insightful look into how CEE EU Member States (EU MS) organise for protection issues delivered by, what was called by one of the Polish interviewees, a “protective formation.”<sup>4</sup>

The report is organised as follows: first, the author presents the research design and serious research challenges (alluded to earlier in this introduction). Then, a stage setting cultural disclaimer follows, which should allow for a better understanding of the situation in relation to protection systems in CEE. It then proceeds with the presentation of the three cases studies: Slovakia (which sets the scene for the totality of the report due to aforementioned events of 15 May 2024), Poland (the Polish protection system has been shaped by an earlier event [or events] comparable to the assassination attempt in Slovakia), and then finally, the Czech Republic. These three sections, which constitute the bulk of this report, are then followed by a comparison between CEE and the Netherlands, a lessons learnt section – a collection of good practices from the region –, and a summary of the current report.

1 Edwin Bakker and Marieke Vos, *Reflection on Surveillance and Protection. EXPERIENCES FROM DENMARK, THE UNITED KINGDOM, ITALY AND GERMANY*, (Apeldoorn: Politieacademie, 2023), p. 3.

2 *The Financial Times*, “Slovakia’s PM Robert Fico injured in assassination attempt,” 15 May 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/3508cf1b-2b5f-4cfb-b287-6b41c3641afc>.

3 Sarah Rainsford, “Slovakia at pivotal moment after Robert Fico shooting,” *BBC*, 18 May 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c89z7ll532xo>.

4 Author’s interview with a member of the Polish protection system who wished to remain anonymous. The author would like to thank the people who acted as gatekeepers and helped with organisation of interviews before and during his research trips to the three countries covered by this report, namely: Michal Stepinski, Artur Dubiel, Jaroslaw Cymerski, Lukasz Piotrowski, Jan Kazbunda, Miroslav Mares, Mojmír Mamojka, Radovan Branik. Heartfelt thanks also go out to the interviewees who, due to sensitivity of the matter – at least in the CEE, will remain anonymous.

## Research Design

The research started with a wide-ranging literature review of the sources on protection and surveillance of the three countries covered by this report. The ICCT research team was able to acquire and then study original bills, regulations, and secondary sources (books and academic articles) in the native languages of the three CEE countries (Czech, Polish, and Slovak). This enabled the Principal Investigator (PI) to, then, get in touch with local academics and experts, who have published on the issue and/or, for example, taught at the police academies of the three countries. They effectively acted as proverbial gatekeepers into the systems and were, then, instrumental in providing introductions to the practitioners. Simultaneously, the PI reached out to his contacts in the security sectors of the three countries, which he had acquired through his participation in the activities of the Radicalisation Awareness Network or the European Expert Network on Terrorism Issues.

The desk-based research was guided by the research themes covered by Bakker and Vos and focused on the following elements of the protection systems:

- Threat assessment: From which angle and with what type of threat is one confronted?
- Governance: Who has what role and task in the field of surveillance and protection and how is the implementation organised?
- Legal framework: What laws and regulations underlie the system?
- Threat analysis: Which methodology is used and how is information used in the implementation?
- Responsibility: What is one's own responsibility, employer's and government's responsibility when individuals (or organisations) are threatened?
- Measures: What type of measures are taken and are there packages or customisation?
- Public-private cooperation: Are private actors involved in surveillance and protection?
- Good practices: Which practices and experiences are good examples that we can learn from or that we would even like to adopt?<sup>5</sup>

The aforementioned thematic approach prepared the PI for study visits to the three countries. Each allowed for a string of interviews with a wide ranging group of interviewees, namely: policemen (as the protection systems of these countries are predominantly in the hands of the police), members of specialised units tasked with the protection of the highest authorities, individuals who received protection – former ministers and their family members, security experts, and consultants –, and veterans of the police forces, currently working in the private sector. The last group, no longer concerned with the effect their sharing of knowledge might have on their careers within a given police force, proved to be the most accessible and ready to share insights unavailable to researchers. All agreed to speak about their experiences and share their insights on the condition of anonymity and thus, the report is largely based on the data gleaned from the interviews and features some quotes from these interviewees, which, however, will not be attributed to them.

A disclaimer is in order at this stage – CEE countries do not have “surveillance” and protection systems, like, for example, the Netherlands. The first of these terms is taboo in the region as it is too vividly connected with the activities of the internal security structures during the 1945-1989

<sup>5</sup> Bakker and Vos, *Reflection on Surveillance and Protection. EXPERIENCES FROM DENMARK, THE UNITED KINGDOM, ITALY AND GERMANY*, p. 4.



period. As a consequence, the local laws and regulations and practices speak of *ochrona* or *ochrana*, which means “protection” in Polish, and Czech, and Slovak, respectively. This protection is granted or offered to individuals (*ochrona osob* or *ochrana osob* – “protection of individuals”) and, although it might include an element of surveillance activities, these will not be referred to as such throughout the report.

## Research Challenges

As was already mentioned, the research for this report faced certain challenges, which influenced its delivery and shape, contributing to, at times, uneven analytical standards. This was mostly due to:

1. Policemen in the countries under study are not familiar with researchers and, therefore, are less than forthcoming as far as meeting with them is concerned – if they respond to an initial meeting request at all. In short, inquiries from “civilians,” i.e., individuals outside security structures, are suspicious.
2. Consequently, there is a tendency not to return calls or hide behind the assumption that the information requested is “classified” or “top secret.” Alternatively, a common occurrence is the proverbial kicking of the matter upstairs and referring to a given researcher to the police HQ, or “the centre,” or “the capital.”
3. The difficulty in researching this is further compounded by the researchers in question being foreign – as was the case for the PI in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. It must also be admitted, however, that this fact also assisted the PI in certain situations as it allowed for a less stiff conversation and a more open dialogue.
4. Given the aforementioned difficulties, the PI had to rely on his own professional network in the three countries to build up the roster of interviewees who would be able to meet more informally or would be less suspicious of an external researcher. This allowed for the development of a snowball method to obtain more interviews. Moreover, fellow experts and academics, who, for example, work on policing issues in the three countries, also provided introductions to relevant members of the protection systems of the three countries, which allowed for a bigger roster of interviewees.
5. This approach worked well and allowed the PI to interview not only the active policemen but also retired policemen or civil servants, security consultants, people who found themselves as recipients of protection packages, and other Czech, Polish, or Slovak academics, experts, and journalists.
6. The key difficulty came while researching the Slovak case as the police force there is under severe political pressure. The governing coalition has effectively dismantled NAKA (National Crime Agency), the Slovak equivalent of a Central Investigative Department of other police forces (CID) and thus, sank the morale of the totality of the force. The dismantlement was part of the agenda of Prime Minister Robert Fico’s returning government in 2023 and finally carried out throughout the summer of 2024. The rationale for this was that this department was allegedly led or influenced by the previous government’s politicians, who directed it to investigate, for political reasons, Fico and his closest circle. For this reason, the targeted interviewees went to great lengths to actually hide the fact that they were meeting/being interviewed by an outsider, especially a foreigner. This meant that the interviews took place outside the police HQ and were arranged using their private emails or their private phone numbers. While to some extent, it did not hamper the efforts of the PI or the ICCT, it demonstrates how easy it is to undermine and unsettle a given police force in the 21st century in general, and in this part of Europe in particular.

## Setting the Stage: A Cultural Disclaimer

CEE outlook related to asymmetric threats, such as terrorism, and spectacular threatening incidents, such as assassination attempts against politicians, has long been shaped by the perception that certain things do not happen in the region.<sup>6</sup> This is not only an observation related to security or protection issues, but also a facet of the local, cultural, and social lives with the Slovenian poet, Ivan Cankar, summarising it perfectly in his “Scandal in St. Florian Valley” (*Pohujšanje v dolini Šentflorjanski*) of 1908. In his play, the aforementioned valley serves as a metaphor for his native Slovenia, a place where people live together, surrounded by mountains and hardly ever face any intrusion or scrutiny from the outside.<sup>7</sup> In such an idyllic place, “nothing ever happens” and, effectively, a “St. Florian syndrome” related to all things develops.<sup>8</sup> In practice, this effectively amounts to a simple, low-key, removed, and rural existence being held up as a model and also a protective shield against (externally developed) evils of the world. To some extent, throughout the 20th and the early 21st century, the syndrome cemented itself as one of the defining facets of life in the region.<sup>9</sup> As will be shown, especially in the case of Slovakia, in relation to the assassination attempt against PM Fico, this reality is also present in the protection systems of the CEE countries.

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6 See: Kacper Rekawek, “Referenced but Not Linear?: Counterterrorism in Central-Eastern Europe in Theory and in Practice,” *East European Politics and Societies* 31, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/08883254166786>.

7 See: [https://sl.wikisource.org/wiki/Pohuj%C5%A1anje\\_v\\_dolini\\_%C5%A1entflorjanski](https://sl.wikisource.org/wiki/Pohuj%C5%A1anje_v_dolini_%C5%A1entflorjanski) for the full text of the play in Slovenian.

8 Rekawek, “Referenced but Not Linear?: Counterterrorism in Central-Eastern Europe in Theory and in Practice”.

9 See, e.g.: Juraj Buzalka, *Postsedliaci. Slovenský ľudový protest* [Post-Peasants. Slovak Popular Protest] (Bratislava: mamas, 2023), for a detailed study of the phenomenon.

# Slovakia

## Introduction – 15 May 2024

On 15 May 2024 the Slovak government held its “away day” in Handlova, central Slovakia. This is a tradition in Slovakia, where different governments decide to, at times, travel outside of Bratislava to hold their weekly meetings in this fashion. Such a move is seen as a gesture of support and a chance for a given town to shine on a national stage in this largely centralised country, the capital of which is located in the country’s Westernmost corner, right on the Slovak-Austrian and Slovak-Hungarian borders.

As the PI was told by the interviewees, Handlova was a place dear to PM Fico, who had been personally involved in saving the local mining industry and winning funds to help the miners ease into new jobs and roles after the closure of a local mine. Consequently, he did not mind holding a governmental “away day” in the town and was also used to being partly co-protected by the private companies which used to offer this service to the coal mine. Potentially, all of this contributed to the fact that, on 15 May, the guard of his protection detail must have been down. It seemed that everyone had known the place, reconnoitred it well, no incidents were expected and nothing seemed to have suggested that the small crowd which gathered outside the local House of Culture, where the government had its session, would feature a shooter intent on killing the PM. As it later turned out, it was not the first time Juraj Cintula travelled to a governmental “away day” and stood outside waiting for the PM to appear. This time, he had his opportunity as the PM went outside and moved towards the crowd, standing behind a barrier, to greet his supporters. Cintula then proceeded to shoot at the PM five times. The reaction of his security details, caught on camera, was a disappointing sight as it took full 25 seconds to evacuate the PM from the scene of the shooting.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, as the PI was later appraised, Fico’s security failed to properly reconnoitre Handlova and was convinced that the local hospital, effectively a clinic, would be able to handle the situation after the PM’s shooting, from an emergency and medical point of view. This, as was later proven, was not the case and the PM was flown in a helicopter to a hospital in Banska Bystrica, the largest nearby city. Later on, more controversy hit the protection detail as it transpired that its members leaked a video from the police precinct in which the suspect was held.<sup>11</sup>

The shooting sparked a political earthquake in Slovakia – the PM, who ultimately survived, and his ministers held the opposition politically responsible for the event. According to the PM, the opposition contributed to the polarisation of the society via its political activities, which subsequently led to him being shot at. Ironically, Fico’s shooter had earlier been seen at opposition demonstrations, but also speaking at gatherings of Slovak paramilitary formations, which would be vehemently opposed to the pro-Western and liberal Slovak opposition.<sup>12</sup> He had

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g.: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZx8MOUVBFE>.

<sup>11</sup> Veronika Prusova and Maria Benedikovicova, “Video s útočníkom na premiéra nahral príslušník ochranky. Z úniku zatiaľ nie je nik obvinený” [Video of the attacker has been filmed by one of the bodyguards. Its leak, so far, has not been punished], *Denník N*, 20 May 2024, <https://dennikn.sk/4002854/video-s-utocnikom-na-premiera-nahral-prislusnik-ochranky-z-uniku-zatial-nie-je-nik-obvineny/>.

<sup>12</sup> See an X post by Szabolcs Panyi who broke the story of the shooter’s connections first: Szabolcs Panyi,

“Wow. Looks like Slovak PM Robert Fico’s reported assailant, writer Juraj Cintula, was associated with pro-Russian paramilitary group Slovenskí Branci (SB). Their leader was even trained by Russian ex-Spetsnaz soldiers. Read more on @VSquare\_Project <https://t.co/2lzSHwq54d>,” X, 15 May 2024, [https://x.com/panyiszabolcs/status/1790789652078526939?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etwemtembed%7Ctwterm%5E1790789652078526939%7Ctwgr%5E55c51f7cdab907920edd80a61bb941869c94f6d3%7Ctwcon%5Es1\\_c10&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.euronews.com%2F2024%2F05%2F15%2Fwhat-is-known-about-suspect-allegedly-involved-in-shooting-of-robert-fico](https://x.com/panyiszabolcs/status/1790789652078526939?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etwemtembed%7Ctwterm%5E1790789652078526939%7Ctwgr%5E55c51f7cdab907920edd80a61bb941869c94f6d3%7Ctwcon%5Es1_c10&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.euronews.com%2F2024%2F05%2F15%2Fwhat-is-known-about-suspect-allegedly-involved-in-shooting-of-robert-fico).

also written and published books, the contents of which would theoretically put him somewhere within the realm of the broader Slovak nationalist or post-communist far-right but also expressed his admiration for Zuzana Caputova, the liberal Slovak President of 2019-24.<sup>13</sup>

## The Threat

The predominant assumption on the Slovak side has been, up until 15 May 2024, that the threat to protected persons is low and one should not expect a sudden change in conditions. Of course, all of this altered in the aftermath of the attack on PM Fico in Handlova with the head of the *Úrad pre ochranu ústavných činiteľov a diplomatických misií MV SR* – (Ministry of Interior’s) Department for the protection of “constitutional authorities” and diplomatic missions (UOUC), a unit that protected PM Fico in Handlova, admitting that “we lacked imagination. Had we thought of this, then we would have been better prepared.”<sup>14</sup> Ironically, the warning signs had been there as the PM himself was on the record while speaking about threats to his life before the attempted assassination.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the October 2022 terrorist attack against the LGBTQI bar in downtown Bratislava, was likely to have been ordered by the Terrorgram.<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, the protection system was caught off guard and found itself in the state of shock on 15 May 2024, from which it is now still trying to recuperate. As the protective measures around the PM tighten, and the governing coalition continues to profess the conviction that the opposition could be held responsible for the attack,<sup>17</sup> the threat is now perceived as coming from the politically motivated actors, loners, who would strike against chosen targets after being radicalised in the more and more antagonistic socio-political climate of Slovakia.

## Challenges to the Protection System

Two challenges are emerging as key for the Slovak protection system: 1) the aftermath of the shooting of the PM on 15 May 2024; and 2) the changes introduced to the police force by Fico’s government after coming to power in October 2023.

Regarding the first point, UOUC, at the time of the shooting, no longer had a reputation as a “quality” unit of the Slovak police. The police’s top operators and functionaries gravitated towards the so-called *elitne zložky* or “elite components”, such as NAKA (*Narodna Kriminálna Agentúra* or the National Crime Agency).<sup>18</sup> UOUC in this context was seen as a calm posting where “not much happens” – in line with the aforementioned “St. Florian syndrome.” Some of the interviewees, veterans of the Slovak police force claimed that this allowed for a lowering of the standards in UOUC, which became a quiet posting for policemen wanting to wait out their time

<sup>13</sup> Martin Leidenfrost, “Prekvapenia v levicej knižnici. Prečítal som si včera knihy slovenského spisovateľa Juraja Cintulu,” [Surprises in the Levice library. I have just read books by the Slovak writer Juraj Cintula], *Postoj*, 17 May 2024, <https://www.postoj.sk/155893/precit-al-som-si-vcera-knihy-slovenskeho-spisovateľa-juraja-cintulu>.

<sup>14</sup> Veronika Prusova, “Správa štátnej ochranky o atentáte: Fico náhle zmenil plány. Namiesto odchodu sa išiel zdravieť s ľuďmi,” [Protection unit’s case on the assassination attempt: Fico suddenly changed plans. Instead of leaving, he went to greet the people], *Denník N*, 10 November 2024, <https://dennikn.sk/4296178/sprava-statnej-ochranky-o-atentate-fico-nahle-zmenil-plany-namiesto-odchodu-sa-isiel-zdravit-s-ludmi/>.

<sup>15</sup> Henrieta Michalkova, “Predpokladal Fico svoj atentát? O vražde niektorého z vládných politikov hovoril už pred týždňami,” [Has Fico foreseen the assassination attempt? He spoke about murders of one of the government’s members a few weeks ago, already], *Pravda*, 15 May 2024, <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/710188-predpokladal-fico-svoj-atentat-o-vrazde-niektoreho-z-vladnych-politikov-hovoril-uz-pred-mesiacmi/>.

<sup>16</sup> Julia Kupper, Kacper Rekawek, and Matthew Kriner, *TERRORGRAM’S FIRST SAINT. Analyzing Accelerationist Terrorism in Bratislava*, Accelerationist Research Network, March 2023, <https://www.accelresearch.org/accreports/terrorgrams-first-saint>.

<sup>17</sup> The shooter from Handlova was apparently seen at rallies of the centre-right opposition shortly before the assassination attempt against PM Fico. At the same time, however, he also spoke at rallies of organisations of a very different political and ideological profiles such as Sloveny Branci – a pro-Russian paramilitary organisation profiled in ICCT’s *Russia and the Far-Right* (<https://www.icct.nl/publication/russia-and-far-right-insights-ten-european-countries>). Ironically, the latter organisation, its followers, members of backers were more likely to vote for the current governing coalition of Robert Fico than the opposition.

<sup>18</sup> Author’s interview with the veterans of the Slovak protection system who wished to remain anonymous.

until retirement. This, to some extent, was visible on 15 May, when no UOUC member shielded the wounded PM and, instead, they proceeded to effectively fight it out with the shooter while attempting to grab his gun.

In the post-15 May political atmosphere in Slovakia, the UOUC went back to basics, i.e., its members are now in a demanding retraining regime and the unit is allegedly purchasing properties around Bratislava, while it had earlier allowed people, whom it protected, to continue living in their own flats or houses. That requires not only a certain bureaucratic but also practical effort as the unit now also needs to prepare the evacuation routes and prepare its members accordingly for crisis eventualities on the way. Moreover, the country allegedly holds its breath as the government is still, at the time of writing - December 2024, insisting that it will publish more information on the 15 May attack.

Regarding the second point, the government of PM Fico came into power in the Autumn of 2023 determined to make some far-reaching changes to Slovakia's justice and security systems. This included a wholesale reform of the aforementioned NAKA, which was effectively disbanded in August 2024 and its units dispersed around three new organisations. Moreover, 500-600 of NAKA's personnel were to be either fired or distributed among, e.g., regional or local police precincts.<sup>19</sup> Some see it as a direct revenge of this political class against the actions of NAKA against Fico's party, *Smer* (Direction), during its time in opposition (2020-3), when the police authorities conducted a string of corruption investigations resulting in, e.g., jailing of high ranking *Smer* figures. All of this contributed to the sinking morale of the police, which was demonstrated by its loss of up to 2,000 functionaries (of 19,000 in total) opting for voluntary retirement by the end of 2024.<sup>20</sup>

The police's low morale, however, is not solely the product of the developments post-October 2023, when the current government came to power in Slovakia. The proverbial rot set in earlier, especially after the summer of 2021, when NAKA's investigation into corruption at the highest level of power in Slovakia – especially targeting individuals close to the 2012-2020 governments – reached the ranks of the Slovak Information Service – SIS, *Slovenska Informacna Sluzba*. It finally led the investigators towards the arrest of the head of SIS, Vladimir Pcolinsky, which, as was attested by the then Slovak police president, led to a counter-investigation of elements of NAKA by SIS.<sup>21</sup> In these efforts, SIS was allegedly assisted by the internal investigations department of the police itself, which was allegedly tasked to find “dirt” on the elite investigative squad of NAKA led by Jan Currilla.<sup>22</sup> This duel came to be known as the “war within the police” and was later used by the new Slovak government as an excuse to liquidate NAKA in 2024.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Veronika Prusova, “Deväť mesiacov totálnej neistoty a demotivácie,” [Nine months of total insecurity and demotivation], *Dennik N*, 8 September 2024, <https://dennikn.sk/4178823/devat-mesiakov-totalnej-neistoty-a-absolutna-demotivacia-byvaly-vysetrovatel-naka-hovori-co-zazivali-po-nastupe-novej-vlady/>.

<sup>20</sup> *Refresher.sk*, “Situácia v policajnom zbore je alarmujúca,” [Situation in the Police HQ is alarming], 1 October 2024, <https://news.refresher.sk/167971-Situacia-v-policajnom-zbore-je-alarmujuca-Do-konca-roka-odide-2000-policajtov-obciana-budu-na-vyjazd-cakat-aj-styri-hodiny>.

<sup>21</sup> Maria Benedikovicova, “Bývalý policajný prezident Hamran: Zatiaľ to vyzera na fatálne zlyhanie ochranky premiéra,” [Former police president Hamran: so far this looks like a fatal failure by the protection unit], *Dennik N*, 15 May 2024, <https://dennikn.sk/3993240/byvaly-policajny-prezident-hamran-zatial-to-vyzera-na-fatalne-zlyhanie-ochranky-premiera/>.

<sup>22</sup> For more on this see: Marek Vagovic, *Čurillovci. Policajti v prvej línii boja s mafiou* [Curilla boys. Policemen in the front line of their fight with mafia] (Bratislava: Svabach, 2024) for more on this issue.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g.: Veronika Prusova, “Vojna v policii sa presunula na sud,” [The war within the police goes to court], *Dennik N*, 22 November 2024, <https://dennikn.sk/4320996/vojna-v-policii-sa-presunula-na-sud-spustil-ju-vladimir-pcolinsky-potvrdil-byvaly-policajny-prezident/>.

## Command and Control of the System

Slovakia possesses a three layered system, as is also the case in Poland and the Czech Republic:

### *The VIPs or “constitutional authorities”*

This part of the system resides completely in the hands of the UOUC (which is also a part of the police force). The protection of designated persons in Slovakia is carried out by police officers of the Department of Personal Protection of the Office for the Protection of Constitutional Authorities and Diplomatic Missions of the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic, in cooperation with other organisational components of the office and other services of the Police Force of the Slovak Republic.<sup>24</sup> This office primarily ensures the personal security of the President of the Slovak Republic, the Chairman of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, the Minister of the Interior of the Slovak Republic, and other persons designated by law or the Government of the Slovak Republic. It also ensures the protection of diplomatic missions and other objects designated by law or government and cooperates in the physical protection of nuclear facilities. The protection of designated persons is carried out in accordance with Act (or Bill) NR SR no. 171/1993.<sup>25</sup> In fulfilling its tasks, including the protection of designated persons, the Slovak police force cooperates with public authorities, armed security forces, armed forces, SIS, legal entities and natural persons, and with territorial authorities.<sup>26</sup>

The protection of a given “constitutional authority” begins on the day of their taking the oath of office. Right in the aftermath of this ceremony, a new president, PM or minister is introduced to one’s protection officers. Depending on the position held by the given “authority,” these officers may be armed or unarmed (e.g., ministers of foreign affairs do not have armed protection). The protection detail works in pairs with one officer effectively driving a given “authority’s” government assigned car, while the other, as was revealed to the members of the research team by one of Slovakia’s former “authorities,” “actively scans the surroundings and accompanies his PP wherever they might be going.”<sup>27</sup> A family member of one of the former “authorities” took an issue with this and complained to the researchers that this, at times, amounted to too much intrusion in one’s private life, stating that they “could not calmly shop for whatever in the supermarket.”<sup>28</sup>

The UOUC has its own, although not as fully blown as SOP in Poland, operational capability and has, as a part of the police force, access to intelligence while making its plans and providing packages to PPs. The same is available to the rest of the police force, which is involved in protecting other types of PPs.

### *(Crown) Witnesses*

A specialised department operating out of the police HQ is responsible for this part of the protection system, similar to these functioning both in the Czech Republic and Poland. The one unique arrangement is the fact that Slovakia up until this day maintains an exchange of witnesses or crown witnesses with Belarus, with, e.g., some of the Slovak PPs travelling to Minsk and some

24 Ministerstvo Vnitra Slovenskej Republiky, “História a činnosť ochranky,” [History and activities of the protection unit], [https://www.minv.sk/?historia\\_ochrany\\_ustavnych\\_cinitelov#:~:text=Dnes%20C3%BArad%20pre%20ochranu%20C3%BAstav%C3%BDch%20C4%8Dinite%C4%BE-ov%20a%20diplomatick%C3%BDch,v%20Slovenskej%20republike%2C%20a%20ochranu%20a%20prepravu%20](https://www.minv.sk/?historia_ochrany_ustavnych_cinitelov#:~:text=Dnes%20C3%BArad%20pre%20ochranu%20C3%BAstav%C3%BDch%20C4%8Dinite%C4%BE-ov%20a%20diplomatick%C3%BDch,v%20Slovenskej%20republike%2C%20a%20ochranu%20a%20prepravu%20)

25 Mario Majercik, *Postavenie osobneho ochrancu v bezpecnostnych sluzbach Slovenskej Republiky*, [The Role of the personal bodyguard in the security services of the Slovak Republic] (Bratislava: Police Academy, 2018), p. 16.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

27 Author’s interview with a former Slovak minister who was protected by the police and wished to remain anonymous.

28 Author’s interview with a partner of a former Slovak minister who wished to remain anonymous.

Belarusian PPs now in Slovakia. It was explained to the author that this makes a lot of sense as no one would be likely to look for such Slovak witnesses in Belarus, to a large degree a pariah state in Europe of 2024.

In terms of decision-making, as stated in Law no. 256/1998 Coll. Act on Witness Protection and Amendments to Certain Acts (96/1998), in Slovakia there is a Commission (*Komisia*) formed by the Chairman plus four people. One member and their alternates are appointed and dismissed by the Minister of the Interior of the Slovak Republic from among the members of the Police Force. Two members of the Commission and their alternates are appointed and dismissed by the Minister of Justice of the Slovak Republic from among subordinate employees, who have experience in the field of justice and prisons, and one member and his alternate are appointed and dismissed by the Prosecutor General of the Slovak Republic from among the prosecutors of the Prosecutor General's Office of the Slovak Republic.<sup>29</sup> Such a commission is in charge of deciding who gets special protection after receiving proposals for protection by the affected party. In connection with the protection of witnesses, the Police Force in Slovakia is “authorised to use special methods of handling state property under the administration of the Ministry when carrying out operational and investigative activities.”<sup>30</sup>

It is important to mention that, based on the above-mentioned 256/1998 Coll. Act, in Slovakia, protection to a “witness at risk, a protected witness and their loved ones” will be provided “on a voluntary basis”, only as there is “no legal entitlement to the provision of protection... under this Act”. In Slovakia, a protected witness is included in the so-called “protection programme” upon the Commission's (*Komisia*) approval - a motion for protection in a case in which the Commission has already ruled negatively may be resubmitted, only if it contains new facts that justify the provision of protection and assistance.<sup>31</sup> On 10 October 2024, a Draft Act on Witness Protection and on Amendments to Certain Acts was approved, whereby the Police Force of the Slovak Republic now “ensures and provides protection and assistance to threatened witnesses and protected witnesses and carries out inspections ... and provides short-term protection to persons in criminal proceedings whose life and health are at risk in connection with criminal proceedings.”<sup>32</sup>

Regarding implementation – protection gets deployed by the police, although such an implementation is overseen by the above-mentioned Commission (*Komisia*). The Commission is also in charge of determining the rules for implementing the above-mentioned “protection programme” and the extent to which “it will provide protection and assistance to the protected witness.”<sup>33</sup>

## *Harmed Persons*

This part of the protection system is handled at the level of police regional commands (eight in the totality of Slovakia) and a special unit for the protection of crown witnesses within the police HQ. All in all, the totality of the work is controlled by one organisation. Of course, on the tactical level, local police assists or effectively runs a given protection package but the command and control is still centralised. The Slovak police will also prioritise not so much the protection, but the elimination of the threat, i.e., in the case of harmed persons, they will be encouraged to fill a criminal complaint and this will allow for a more robust approach to the issue. The logic here

<sup>29</sup> The Commission is bound to add one more member, totalling 5 commissioners, but who this member might be is to this date unclear. See: <https://www.zakonypreludi.sk/zz/1993-171>.

<sup>30</sup> See: <https://www.slov-lex.sk/ezbierky/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/1993/171/20200101> for the Slovak police bill of 6 July 1993.

<sup>31</sup> See: <https://www.slov-lex.sk/ezbierky/pravnepredpisy/SK/ZZ/1998/256/20160101?ucinost=06.11.2024> for the bill on witness protection of 8 July 1998.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*



is that the elimination of the source of the threat, mitigates the citizens' main issue/problem and thus, serves the ultimate goal of providing protection. In the process, the police might offer to house a given witness or a harmed person in their buildings, provide them with a relevant panic button, or increase the patrols around one's place of domicile. Such an approach is adopted after a given citizen submits the aforementioned complaint either with the local or regional police command, or with the prosecutor's office. There is also the possibility of sending the complaint online, anonymously, and name a given individual or individuals as a source of threat. Depending on the severity of the case arising out of the complaint, if it is judged warranted, either the local police (at the level of *okres* or district – there are 79 such administrative and police units in Slovakia) or its regional equivalent will address the issue at hand. The marker is usually the potential punishment one could receive for a given threat – if it is above five years, the case remains in the hands of the latter (regional) command. If below, it stays at the district/local level. At the same time, however, certain cases might be referred to an even more “upstairs” level, i.e., to the UOUC, which will be tasked to protect an extraordinary PP. This was the case with Lucia Plavakova, a prominent opposition MP, who had received a high number of threats for her liberal stance on LGBTQI issues in Slovakia. Her political party initially wanted to hire a private security company, but the matter was quickly referred to the UOUC, which, despite the fact that it technically does not protect MPs, was brought onto the case by the police president.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Author's interview with a high-ranking member of Plavakova's party, *Progresívne Slovensko*, who wished to remain anonymous.

# Poland

## The Threat

The interviewees stressed a major change in the threat landscape. In their recollection, the 1990s were “tough”, a “shootout” with the organised crime, and “whoever was left standing won.”<sup>35</sup> They all stressed that the times were different now and so were the means of countering the threats. One could see an indication of this from the interviewees’ readiness to discuss the issue of a “protective formation/unit” (*formacja ochronna*) or the VIP protection team in the light of terrorist threats.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, they also seemed more prone to appreciate the threat from political violence in general, especially sabotage and diversionary acts by, for example, Russia: “yes, we have seen this coming here, directly from Russia via individuals sent by Moscow or attempts to control this on a long leash via online platforms and here you have all the attempts to recruit and task people on telegram and the like.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, one can surmise that threat perception, as far as the protection system is concerned, and just like in other countries covered by this report, has undergone a profound change, i.e., away from that posed by the organised crime and towards more politically oriented deeds, either conducted by sub-state groups, state-sponsored actors, or lone-actors.

As is the case with the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the interviewees often discuss the protection system in light of seminal developments or watershed events that influenced its evolution. In Poland, the marker, a “turning point,” especially as far as the protection of the VIPs or high-level state officials is concerned, is the 2010 Smolensk Air Crash, in which the then president of Poland, Lech Kaczynski, perished.<sup>38</sup> This provided the political impulse towards the reform or reconstitution of the VIP protection unit, BOR or *Biuro Ochrony Rządu* (Government Protection Bureau), as the SOP or *Sluzba Ochrony Panstwa* (more on its history and evolution below), which was eventually founded in 2018. A year later, 13 January 2019, saw the murder of Pawel Adamowicz, the mayor of Gdansk during a charity concert, which was transmitted live on TV. Adamowicz had faced a long campaign of harassment and vilification in parts of the media, which likely directly contributed to him being targeted as a standard bearer by the killer, who allegedly loathed the mayor’s political party.<sup>39</sup> Policemen interviewed for this project stressed that this event brought home the threat from politically minded lone actors (as was the case with Adamowicz’ killer) and in its aftermath all mayors of major Polish cities, regardless of their political affiliations, were granted extraordinary protection by the police. A similar situation arose in 2010, during another politically motivated murder, that of Marek Rosiak in Lodz, an assistant of Janus Wojciechowski, MEP. In its aftermath, BOR, the predecessor of SOP, was deployed to provide security to “dozens of individuals and not only politicians.”<sup>40</sup> In short, the previous decade has already been marked by at least two notable acts of political murder conducted by lone actors. These, alongside the Smolensk Air Crash, served as symbols of the fact that the country is not immune to political violence/terrorism and its security, but also protection, services should be

35 Author’s interview with a former high ranking police member in Poland who wished to remain anonymous.

36 See e.g.: Jaroslaw Cymerski, *Wspolczesna formacja ochronna wobec zagrozen terrorystycznych* [Modern protective formation vis-a-vis terrorist threats] (Warsawsza: ASPRA-JR, 2023).

37 Author’s interview with a serving high level member of the regional police command in Poland who wished to remain anonymous.

38 The crash of “katastrofa Smolenska” (Smolensk catastrophe) has been the subject of a string of controversies and theories in Poland. There is broad literature on the subject and the subsequent attempts at investigating it. See, e.g.: Jan Osiecki, Robert Latkowski, and Tomasz Białoszewski, *Ostatni lot. Przyczyny katastrofy smoleńskiej. Śledztwo dziennikarskie* [The Last Flight. Reasons Behind the Smolensk Catastrophe. A Journalistic Investigation] (Warsaw: Prószyński i Spółka, 2010).

39 For more on the assassination and the murderer see: Katarzyna Włodkowska, “Zabójca Pawła Adamowicza: Posiedzę dwa lata i wyjdę” [The Killer of Pawel Adamowicz: I will be in for two years and then I am out], originally published by *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 13 January 2020, <https://katarzynawlodkowska.pl/zabojca-pawla-adamowicza-posiedze-dwa-lata-i-wyjde/>.

40 *Gazeta Wyborcza*, “Szef BOR: nie pamietam tak wysokiego poziomu zagrozenia,” [The commander of BOR: I do not recall such a high threat level], 26 October 2010, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,8570454,szef-bor-nie-pamietam-tak-wysokiego-poziomu-zagrozenia.html>.

vigilant while surveying the threat landscape and re-assess their preparedness for extraordinary events, or to drop the “St. Florian syndrome.” To some extent, this has been demonstrated in the Slovakia section of this report, a similar effect has also been achieved elsewhere.

## The Challenges to the System of PP

The challenges of the Polish protection system are manifold. First of all, most VIPs are said to be uninterested in being protected. They are allegedly concerned that this puts them in the electorate’s bad books. Some, however, seem to crave it as it is a confirmation of their status. The most paradoxical of these situations was the fact that one of the past defence ministers not only welcomed the protection of the military gendarmerie but also abused this for inappropriate purposes, such as ensuring the protection detail would be on duty while ferrying him to the gendarmerie’s swimming pool outside its operating hours.<sup>41</sup>

As far as the protection of witnesses is concerned, some interviewees stressed that there was simply too much information out about its functioning. This results from the fact that some of the individuals in this particular protection programme went public with their “stories” and effectively became mini celebrities. The interviewees stressed that this harmed the protection system as it suddenly felt vulnerable and/or exposed.<sup>42</sup>

At the level of protection provided to ordinary citizens in unordinary situations, the main issue was the long learning curve of institutions involved in the process, which had to absorb the changes introduced in the legislation of 2015 on “harmed persons” or Act on Protection and Assistance for Injured Parties and Witnesses.<sup>43</sup> The act allowed for the regional police commander (*komendant wojewodzki* – voivodeship police commander) to approve applications for protection that is presented by the injured party or witness, the court, or another body conducting operational and reconnaissance activities or verification proceedings with the consent of the injured party.<sup>44</sup> When the case for protection concerns a VIP or state official, the decision falls under the Polish Ministry of Internal Affairs.<sup>45</sup> The introduction of such a law necessitated a process of, as was recalled by one of the interviewees, “learning the new reality by different units of the police force but also the prosecutor’s office and the courts.” Eventually, this led to “a ballooning number of cases we [police protection units] had to deal with. I cannot give you an exact number as this remains classified but let’s just say that in 2015 this was X. In 2024 the number is, well, I would say 10 times the X of 2014.”<sup>46</sup>

The police units handling applications for protection, situated in the regional police commands, also report on the difficulty of the task at hand – these are very small and specialised formations, which are also unknown within the broader police force and thus, sometimes have a challenging time while attempting to recruit into their ranks. This, however, also speaks to their efficiency, as they manage to successfully stay in the proverbial shadows while conducting some of the most sensitive police work. At the same time, less secrecy surrounds the work of the local police units, which are also at times drafted by the regional commands to help with the provision of security for threatened or harmed persons. Unfortunately, their members, more because of omission than commission, leak the information out as one is unable to keep protection related developments once it is out into a force of up to 100,000 individuals.

41 See: Edyta Zemla, *Armia w ruinie* [Army in ruins] (Warszawa: Czerwone-Czarne, 2024), pp. 8-29.

42 See: Artur Gorski, *Masa o życiu świadka koronnego* [Masa speaks on the life of a crown witness] (Warszawa: Prószyński, 2017).

43 See: <https://sip.lex.pl/akty-prawne/dzu-dziennik-ustaw/ochrona-i-pomoc-dla-pokrzywdzonego-i-swiadka-18155905> for the bill on protection and support for the harmed persons and witnesses of 28 November 2014, valid from 7 January 2015.

44 *Ibid.*

45 *Ibid.*

46 Author’s interview with a Polish police officer responsible for witness protection who wished to remain anonymous.

Moreover, as reported by the mainstream media in recent months, the police force finds itself in a crisis with thousands of its members attempting to retire and its members effectively on informal strikes, while, for instance, refusing to use their own mobile phones for work purposes or refusing to issue tickets for reckless driving.<sup>47</sup> Apparently, it is becoming evident that the motivational system, structured around pay,<sup>48</sup> is no longer working. At the same time, calls for a thorough police reform and work in better conditions, not only financial, as well as clear career and growth paths of a paramilitary and rigidly led formation, are getting louder.<sup>49</sup> If the police force loses members, such as those who retire early, this will also put protection tasks under a severe strain and hamper the force's ability to efficiently handle the issue of PP.

## Command and Control of the Protection System

As was shown earlier, the protection system focuses on three types of PPs:

### *For the VIPs*

SOP - *Sluzba Ochrony Panstwa* (State Protection Service) plays the central role. It has the capability to involve itself in "operational activities", such as collection or collation of intelligence on threats to persons it is protecting, and is also kept apprised, and appraises itself, of intelligence collected by other security agencies of the country.<sup>50</sup> In short, SOP is allowed and does "peek into" the investigations, but is not leading them. This allows for a multi-faceted protection of a select group of individuals in the country, but SOP also liaises with the police force and private entities, e.g., by protecting buildings that "their" VIPs are visiting. It takes the lead in such situations but also delineates areas of responsibility between different forces.

As was mentioned before, SOP is a successor to the BOR, which in turn was preceded by the police's "protection brigade" (*brygada ochronna*), formed in 1924, also as a reaction to the late 1922 assassination of President Gabriel Naturowicz in Warsaw by a politically motivated lone actor.<sup>51</sup> The SOP has been responsible for protecting persons and objects of key importance for the functioning of the state.<sup>52</sup> The SOP is authorised, trained, and dedicated to counteract threats to the lives of individuals and their families, including threats of a terrorist nature, independently or with the use of information from inter-ministerial exchange and cooperation with other institutions of the state security system. For example, by the provisions of Art. 4 para. 4 of the Act of 8 December 2017 on the State Protection Service, the Commander of the SOP is not in a position to determine the threat level of a protected person without referring to other institutions of the executive subsystem, in order to obtain expert opinions in the given areas of threat, among others indicated above, as well as Article 6.1. of the Act on the SOP – "government administration bodies, territorial self-government bodies and state and other organisational units shall provide the SOP with the necessary conditions to perform the tasks specified in the Act".<sup>53</sup>

Pursuant to Article 3 of the Act on the SOP, the tasks of SOP include – with respect to persons – protection of the President of the Republic of Poland; the Marshal (speaker) of the Sejm (lower house of parliament); the Marshal of the Senate; the President of the Council of Ministers; the

47 Zbigniew Borek and Juliusz Cwieluch, "Zmęczony jak pies" [Tired like a dog], *Polityka*, 21 November 2024.

48 See: Paweł Karabela, "Struktura i funkcje sformalizowanego systemu motywowania w Policji" [Structure and functions of the police force's formalised motivational system], *Przegląd Policyjny* 141, no.1 (2021):121-135.

49 Borek and Cwieluch, "Zmęczony jak pies" [Tired like a dog].

50 Cymerski, *Współczesna formacja ochronna wobec zagrożeń terrorystycznych* [Modern protective formation vis-a-vis terrorist threats], pp. 123-9.

51 *Rzeczpospolita*, "Służba Ochrony Państwa zamiast BOR - prezydent podpisał ustawę," [SOP instead of BOR. The president has signed the bill], 1 February 2018, <https://www.rp.pl/sluzby-mundurowe/art2144861-sluzba-ochrony-panstwa-zamiast-bor-prezydent-podpisał-ustawe>.

52 Daniel Pozarski et al., „Rola i istota Funkcjonowania Służby Ochrony Państwa”, [Role and functioning of the State Protection Service], *Przegląd Policyjny*, no. 3 (147): p.123.

53 *Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.

Deputy Prime Minister; the Minister for Internal Affairs; the Minister for Foreign Affairs; as well as former Presidents of Poland and persons forming part of delegations of foreign states staying on the territory of Poland; persons having the status of the head of state; head of government and their deputies; and the speaker of parliament or speaker of the chamber of parliament or the Minister of Foreign Affairs.<sup>54</sup>

### *Crown Witnesses*<sup>55</sup>

This part of the protection system falls under the domain of CBSP – *Centralne Biuro Sledze Policji* (the Central Investigative Bureau of the Police formed in 2000) –, which is a special, centralised unit addressing all aspects of combat against organised crime throughout the country.<sup>56</sup> The protection of the crown witnesses is provided by CBSP's *Zarząd Ochrony Świadka Koronnego*, ZOSK (Department for the Protection of the Crown Witness) – a secretive sub-unit of an already elite element of the police force,<sup>57</sup> which numbers up to 200 policemen (out of 2,000 in CBSP).<sup>58</sup> It resides outside the main police compounds in major Polish cities and has a deliberately miniscule force on its roster (so no secretaries, logisticians, or cleaners) – all in order to strengthen secrecy. It maintains units within the regional commands of the police force and these are then responsible for handling a given PP in their voivodeship (*województwo* – highest administrative level in Poland, there exist sixteen voivodeships in the country). The legislation about the crown witness came online in 1998 and was said to have been influenced by the American advisors to the Polish Minister of Justice and the fact that groups of security services personnel and prosecutors would be trained in the US on how to combat organised crime.<sup>59</sup> However, other members of CBSP also stress the German influence, which was brought to bear during the working visits to this country in the Spring of 1998.<sup>60</sup> In 2020, CBSP had 81 crown witnesses dotted around Poland, which it protected.<sup>61</sup> The decision on granting of this status is made by the prosecutor, but its implementation, the how and the practicalities, falls on CBSP and its commandant. The protection packages differ, and the system is flexible, with the prospective witness identifying the direction from which the threat is coming and suggesting how far protection should be extended (i.e., if other family members or friends should also be provided such protection).<sup>62</sup> Regularly, their protection is 24/7 in nature at the beginning of the programme, but this can subsequently change. The crown witnesses are then shuffled around to a different part of the country – to minimise the risk of being recognised, usually to a neighbouring *województwo* (voivodeship). Sometimes, they are being exchanged to, for example, Germany, Lithuania, or Latvia.<sup>63</sup> There is also the category of the “small crown witness.” This one can count on a reduced sentence, but usually is not being protected while on the outside.<sup>64</sup>

### *Harmed Persons*

Regional police commands develop a special section tasked with the protection of witnesses and harmed persons. These consider applications from ordinary citizens who ask for protection packages. With the agreement of the regional commandant of the police (one per Polish voivodeship), the relevant police department is then allowed to task the local police to work

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Gazeta Policyjna*, Świadek koronny – korzyści i zagrożenia [Crown witness – gains and threats], Issue 90, September 2012, <https://gazeta.policja.pl/997/archiwum-1/2012/numer-90-092012/80430,Swiadek-koronny-korzysci-i-zagrozenia.html?search=41797>.

<sup>56</sup> Gabriela Jatkowska, *Skruszony Gangster czyli jak sie zostaje swiadkiem koronnym* [Remorseful Gangster or how to become a crown witness] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo WAB, 2021), 16-19.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

on the execution of protection for a given individual. This execution arrives in different forms – from provision of a so-called panic button alerting the police to more sophisticated packages, including permanent protection or temporary relocation, and is exercised on the basis of existing models but also via the officers' discretion. The aforementioned sections enlist the so-called “uniforms” with PP tasks – quite often elements of the SWAT units of the regional police commands (*Samodzielne pododdziały kontrterrorystyczne Policji* or Independent Counterterrorism Units of the Police, SPKP). Consequently, members of the SPKPs are often drafted or poached by the special sections tasked with the protection of witnesses and harmed persons as they already partly know the job.

The command structure's flowchart is very clear – hierarchical with the Prime Minister and the “relevant” minister, i.e., Minister of the Interior and administration at the top of the pyramid. On a practical level, there is a tendency for each unit or SOP to keep things in house so that the PP is not threatened via potential leaks of information. In short, specialised units are in control of the process of organising or of providing protection. Consequently, they will be looked up to while assisted by “regular” police locally or, for example, private entities protecting a given area or a building.

## Universality of the Protection System

The system is geographically universal across the country, but, for instance, certain regions will not have a fully-fledged squad of ZOSK on their territory and would be covered by a neighbouring region. The marker here is thus not geography, as this is mostly provided by a unified and hierarchical police force, but the availability of certain police resources in a given region or voivodeship (*województwo*).

## Public/Private Partnership

Public or private cooperation is available in the case of SOP protecting a given VIP, e.g., within a building secured by a private security company. The rule of delineation is then applied, but the company usually happily defers to the SOP which has more resources. Private security is not at all involved nor allowed in the provision of security for the crown witnesses. While protecting the threatened or harmed persons, the policemen encounter private security operators, who, for instance, protect the families of the given persons they are protecting. As long as they are not protecting the same individual, the two sides delineate and do their best not to come into conflict. The police will, however, maintain that its role and actions have priority and primacy in the totality of protection arrangements. Members of regional command sections tasked with the protection of witnesses and harmed persons are adamant that they do not share intelligence with the private contractors.

## Suspension or Rejection of Protective Measures

There is a possibility to reject offered protection, both for harmed/threatened persons and the VIPs. Crown witnesses ask for this or are given the suggestion of having been given such a status. As was mentioned by the interviewees, the rejection usually arrives due to the fact that the given persons wish no interference to their private lives or, e.g., in the case of criminals released from jail, they are keen not to accept protective measures so “they can get their affairs

in order or perhaps get back to their criminal ways.”<sup>65</sup> The latter option is, of course, the result of a specific individual weighting their options and calculating that the gain from illicit activity will compensate for the risk of not receiving protection.

A VIP can reject this for a period of six months, but there is a possibility of protection being reinstated. The refusal, however, is only valid for what is called “physical” protection, i.e., the more or less visible elements of the package (patrols, convoys, etc.), but not for “operational” protection during which the relevant units will continue their collection, collation, and analysis of intelligence related to threats to a PP.

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<sup>65</sup> Author’s interview with a Polish police officer who is charged with witness protection #2 and wished to remain anonymous.

## Czech Republic

The analysis of the Czech case must start with an important disclaimer, itself a key difference between how the country and Slovakia organise their protection systems : the Czech Republic has two units responsible for the protection of its VIPs, namely a unit called *Ochranna Sluzba Policie Ceske Republiky* – (OS) Protection service of the Czech Republic’ Police –, which is the main unit protecting VIPs in the country, and *Utvor pro Ochranu prezidenta Ceske Republiky* (UOP) – the unit for the protection of the President of the Czech Republic. In Slovakia, this element of protection system is represented by one structure.

### Introduction

The Czech system displays a string of features, which have also been in evidence while describing its counterparts in Poland and Slovakia. In short, it is completely in the hands of one institution – the police force, as in Slovakia, is highly centralised but more receptive of bottom-up requests from harmed persons than in Slovakia (more comparable to the Polish case).

The key difference, however, is the fact that no breakthrough moment has defined its evolution in the last decades. As was shown, the situation is different in Poland (with 2010 Smolensk air crash indirectly leading to a thorough reform of the VIP protection unit) and in Slovakia (the very recent assassination attempt against PM Fico serving as a watershed moment for the Slovak protection system). That is not to suggest that individual events, not as deadly as the aforementioned air crash or shocking as the assassination attempt from Handlova in Slovakia, have not played a role in the development of the Czech system. At the same time, and as was the case with the terrorist attack in Bratislava in 2022, the Czech Republic also had to come to terms with deadly shooting incidents in Ostrava in 2019 (eight dead),<sup>66</sup> Klanovice and Prague in December 2023, in which the same person played the role of a murderer (in the first case with two dead) and an active shooter (second case, fourteen dead).<sup>67</sup> Such events, both happening in the Czech Republic and the neighbouring and culturally, historically, and socially connected Slovakia, destroyed the notion that no incident of deadly and possibly politically-motivated violence would happen in CEE. If you add to that attacks on the President (with an air-soft gun in 2012)<sup>68</sup> and his residence (with a satirical troupe lowering the presidential flag in 2015 and replacing it with red underpants or, in their words, “the flag of a man [presumably, the Czech President] who is not ashamed of anything”),<sup>69</sup> one is suddenly faced with an environment which is not free of threats and should not enjoy or continue displaying the aforementioned “St. Florian syndrome.” Moreover, the ongoing polarisation of the Czech socio-political environment was reflected by a string of other potentially deadly incidents – such as alleged Russian sabotage actions

66 *EuroZpravy.Cz*, “střelba ve Fakultní nemocnici v Ostravě,” [Shooting at the University Hospital in Ostrava], 10 December 2019, <https://eurozpravy.cz/wiki/strelba-ve-fakultni-nemocnici-v-ostrave-10-12-2019>.

67 *CT24*, “Střelba na pražské filozofické fakultě má čtrnáct obětí, 25 lidí je zraněných,” [Shooting at the Prague Philosophical Faculty has 14 victims, 25 people are wounded], 21 December 2023,

<https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/clanek/domaci/sledujte-policejni-prezident-a-ministr-vnitra-ke-strelbe-na-karlove-univerzite-344375>.

68 Michal Hron, “Muž střelil na Klause plastovou pistolí, prezident jel do nemocnice,” *iDNES.cz*, 12 September 2012, [https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/prezident-klaus-utok-strelba-plastova-pistole.A120928\\_152501\\_domaci\\_hro](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/prezident-klaus-utok-strelba-plastova-pistole.A120928_152501_domaci_hro).

69 *iDNES.cz*, “Ztohoven na místo Zemanovy vlajky vyvěsili trenky. Fašizace, uvedl Hrad,” [Ztohoven replaced Zeman’s flag with underpants], 20 September 2015, [https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/rude-trenky-vlajka-na-hrade.A150920\\_081042\\_zahranicni\\_jw](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/rude-trenky-vlajka-na-hrade.A150920_081042_zahranicni_jw).



against infrastructure,<sup>70</sup> serious threats against the government,<sup>71</sup> or other public institutions.<sup>72</sup> This worsening of the socio-political climate was also preceded by the discovery of Russian nefarious activities in the Czech Republic. These led to the death of two Czech citizens in explosions of ammunition depots in Vrbětice (these stored ammunition which was to be sold to Ukraine for its defensive war against Russia in Donbas).<sup>73</sup> The fallout from that incident led to a radical worsening of the Czech-Russian relations, including expulsions of diplomats,<sup>74</sup> and had an impact on the protection system of the former country.

One of the protagonists of the political fallout from the Czech-Russian diplomatic dispute was Ondřej Kollar, the mayor of Prague 6, a municipal district of the country's capital city. He became associated with the drive to remove the monument to Ivan Konev, Soviet marshal whose troops "liberated" Prague in 1945, from his part of the capital. This generated a high number of threats and Russian attempts to prosecute Kollar, who ended up under police protection, apparently at first "on his own, just with some policemen", but continued to give email interviews to the press. He also expressed his frustration at being "locked up" and the police not going after the sources of the threat, which, as will be shown, is often the case in the Czech Republic and Slovakia in the case of harmed persons.<sup>75</sup>

## Threat Level

As is the case with other countries covered by this report, the interviewees were not keen to dwell on the specifics of the threat as far as the local protection system is concerned. However, indications as to where the threat is coming from have appeared throughout the conversations in implicit forms. The main indicator is the fact that the OS and UOP, units responsible for the protection of VIPs and the Czech President respectively, sometimes receive their personnel from the counter-terrorism or counter-extremism units/commands of the Czech police in general, and individuals who used to work on the extremist portfolio (understood predominantly in the Czech Republic as far-right extremism) in particular. They are seen as an addition to the ranks of the OS or UOP, which are thus more attuned to the threat emanating from the ranks of this milieu.

## Challenges to the Protection System

The police, as is the case with the forces in surrounding countries, suffers from shortage of reliable candidates for its ranks. The police lacks circa 6,700 officers in a force that should include 46,000. This is, of course, reflected in the ranks of a unit such as OS, which should theoretically number 1,200 members, but in reality includes circa 1,000.<sup>76</sup> This leads to a situation in which each police officer works overtime – for the OS it has been on average 320 hours per year

70 Kristina Vejnbender, "Deset tisíc korun za zapálení auta v Praze. Telegramový kanál nabízí útok na objednávku," [Then Thousands Crowns to burn a car in Prague. Telegram channel offers you to purchase an attack], *INVESTIGACE.CZ*, 17 June 2024, <https://www.investigace.cz/zharsky-utok-na-objednavku/>.

71 February 2024 saw an arrest of an anti-LGBT and anti-Roma activist who publicly threatened that he would protest against the government with his gun. As it later turned out, the said gun was not legally held. See: Vaclav Janous, "Roky vyhrožoval Romům i gayům. Kdo je muž, který chtěl vzít samopal na vládu," [For years he threatened the Roma and gay people. Who is the man who wanted to use a rifle against the government], *iDNES.cz*, 21 February 2024, [https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/neonaciste-soud-samopal-vlada.A240221\\_094508\\_domaci\\_vja](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/neonaciste-soud-samopal-vlada.A240221_094508_domaci_vja).

72 *iDNES.cz*, "Hrozili smrtí a sekáním hlav, poslali desítky výhrůžek. Manžele čeká soud," [They threatened to cut off heads and sent tens of other threats. Couple awaits trial], 28 November 2023, [https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/cerna-kronika/vyhruzky-nenavist-datove-zpravy-podpora-terorismus-poprava-soud.A231128\\_082744\\_krimi\\_iri](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/cerna-kronika/vyhruzky-nenavist-datove-zpravy-podpora-terorismus-poprava-soud.A231128_082744_krimi_iri).

73 Ondřej Kundra and Jaroslav Spurný, "Za výbuchem muničního skladu ve Vrběticích stojí ruští agenti, kteří se pokusili zabít Skripala," [They explosion of ammunition depot in Vrbětice is the work of Russian agents who attempted to kill Skripal], *Respekt*, 17 April 2021, [www.respekt.cz/agenda/za-vybuchem-municniho-skladu-ve-vrbeticich-stoji-rusti-agenti-kteri-se-pokusili-zabit-skipala](http://www.respekt.cz/agenda/za-vybuchem-municniho-skladu-ve-vrbeticich-stoji-rusti-agenti-kteri-se-pokusili-zabit-skipala).

74 *Seznam Zpravy*, "Nejen vyhoštění diplomatů opustili Česko. Rusko v tichosti stáhlo dalšího agenta," [Not only did the expelled diplomat leave the Czech Republic. Russia also called back a further agent], 21 April 2021, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/nejen-vyhosteni-diplomat-opustili-cesko-rusko-v-tichosti-stahlo-dalsiho-agenta-151490>.

75 *iDNES.cz*, "Necháváme Rusko, aby si tu dělalo, co se mu zlíbí, říká starosta Kolář," [We let Russia do whatever it wants here, says Mayor Kolář], 27 April 2020, [https://www.idnes.cz/praha/zpravy/starosta-ondrej-kolar-policejni-ochrana-socha-marsala-koneva.A200427\\_135810\\_praha-zpravy\\_rsr](https://www.idnes.cz/praha/zpravy/starosta-ondrej-kolar-policejni-ochrana-socha-marsala-koneva.A200427_135810_praha-zpravy_rsr).

76 Tereza Veselá, *Role Ochranné služby v systému Policie České republiky*, Prague, 2023, p. 52.

(data from 2022), which makes the unit the “leader” amongst all other police departments in the country.<sup>77</sup> Some interviewees also expressed doubts as to the morale within the force, which is allegedly stretched thin. A fascinating insight into the OS is offered by a thesis submitted to one of Prague’s private universities in mid-2023 by an officer working for the unit.<sup>78</sup> Not only does it dwell on the OS’ structure and history, which are mostly beyond the scope of this study, but it also quotes operatives who have been asked questions on morale, financing, and the rationale behind the existence of two separate VIP protection units. Calls for more “market friendly” pay are dotted throughout the interview material and are perhaps not surprising, given similar asks in the other countries covered by this report. Moreover, one interviewee mentions that “policemen join the OS to get through the finishing line of their service,” i.e., shortly before retirement, with very few young, upcoming police members transferring there.<sup>79</sup> A similar problem plagues the Slovak UOUC – the protection unit for all VIPs, including the President of the Slovak Republic – and might have contributed to its dismal performance on 15 May 2024 in Handlova when the Slovak PM was shot by a lone attacker (this is explored in more detail in the section on Slovakia). Last but not least, the thesis touches upon the controversial subject of the potential merger between OS and UOP, which often, as was pointed out by one of the interviewees, developed parallel and similarly performing work sub-units. Some of the interviewees, however, are adamant that protecting OS’ independence is key and should take precedent over any “excel good feeling,” i.e., rationalisation and a merger of these two units. At the same time, others found the division and the duplication non-sensical and would not mind the seemingly logical step of bringing the UOP under OS – whether the members of the former unit would see it that way remains an open question.<sup>80</sup>

## Organisation and Command and Control of the System

As was shown in the Slovak case, the protection system is effectively a collection of three elements, each designated for a distinct PP category:

### “Constitutional authorities” (*ustavni cinitiele*) or VIPs

This protection is available to a select group of top authorities and a select group of buildings. At the same time, the Minister of Defence and the commander of the army are protected by the military gendarmerie (as is the case in Poland). The Czech exception here is that two sub-units of the police perform that function (OS and UOP), with one dedicated solely to the protection of the Czech President (UOP). The latter sub-unit finds itself in a peculiar cohabitation with the Honorary Castle Guard (*Hradní stráž*), which ensures protection of the residences of the head of state – the permanent one at the Prague Castle and the Summer residence at Zámek Lány or Chateau Lany.

OS and UOP, which protect the “constitutional authorities” and the President respectively, are units of the Police of the Czech Republic (*Policie České republiky* - PCR), established on 15 July 1991.<sup>81</sup> Subordinated to the Ministry of the Interior, the PCR is a unified armed security force consisting of a Police Presidium headed by a Police President, who is responsible to the Minister of the Interior.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>78</sup> Tereza Veselá, *Role Ochranné služby v systému Policie České republiky*, Prague, 2023.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45-52.

<sup>81</sup> Petr Selepa, “VÝVOJ POLICIE V ČESKÉ REPUBLICE OD ROKU 1918 PO SOUČASNOST S DŮRAZEM NA ÚTVAR OCHRANNÉ SLUŽBY,” [“The Development of the Police in the Czech Republic from 1918 to the Present with an Emphasis on the Protective Service Unit”], Prague: Cevro Institut., 2022, pp. 14-27.

<sup>82</sup> David Šmíd, “Vznik a vývoj specializovaných útvarů Policie ČR s důrazem na Ochrannou službu Policie ČR,” [“The establishment and development of specialized units of the Police of the Czech Republic with an emphasis on the Protective Service of the Police of the Czech Republic”], Prague: 2016, p. 37.

According to the 468/2008 Coll. Government Regulation on Ensuring the Security of Designated Constitutional Officials of the Czech Republic, the PCR (via the two aforementioned specialised units) is responsible for ensuring the protection of the President of the Republic (during and after presidency); the Chairman of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic; the Chairman of the Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic; the Prime Minister; the Minister of Finance; the Minister of Foreign Affairs; the Minister of the Interior; the Minister of Justice; and the Minister of Industry and Trade. More generally, the police of the Czech Republic serves the public, in particular by ensuring its safety, the protection of property, public order and the prevention of crime. This may also include providing personal and episodic protection and security transport to permanently protected constitutional officials of the Czech Republic and persons who are granted protection in accordance with international agreements during their stay in the territory of the Czech Republic; ensuring the protection of diplomatic buildings (embassies and residences of ambassadors) and the protection of protected buildings and spaces of special importance for internal order and security approved by the government; carrying out hygienic-toxicological protection (ensuring the safety of food intended for protected persons); and organising measures to ensure the safety of persons and objects in connection with the protection of protected persons.<sup>83</sup>

All of the aforementioned tasks fall on the OS with the UOP protecting the President of the Czech Republic as well as the President Elect.<sup>84</sup> Historically, this office was merged with OS, a merger that lasted until 2002. However, while “the two bodies could possibly function as one,” they have been operating separately for over twenty years.<sup>85</sup>

### *Crown Witnesses*

These individuals are protected by a specialised and centralised unit at the police headquarters responsible for moving and resettling such individuals both within the Czech Republic and abroad.

### *Harmed/threatened or Regular Persons*

These protected by specialised units in regional police commands (as is the case in Poland as well, but not necessarily in Slovakia), which opine on a given application and then offer, if granted, different protection measures. Responding to regulations no. 468/2008 Coll. (re: constitutional officials) and 273/2008 Coll. (short-term protection) for the most part, it is up to the police, a judge, or a prosecutor, to submit an application for protection, although instead of doing so to the Police Commander – as is the case, for example, in Poland, they send it to the Ministry of the Interior, which is in charge of approving or rejecting the request.<sup>86</sup>

The Czech 273/2008 Coll. Regulation, in particular Section 50, specifies that in justified cases, the Czech police shall provide short-term personal protection to a person (and those close to them, but not without their consent) who is apparently at risk of harm to health or other serious danger, but cannot be provided with special personal protection. Based on this Regulation, preliminary physical protection would also be provided to a person who suffers from an “imminent attack on [their] life or health”.<sup>87</sup> The Czech police may further ensure the safety of

<sup>83</sup> See: <https://www.policie.cz/clanek/ochranna-sluzba-policie-cr.aspx> for the website of “Ochranná služba Policie ČR”, i.e., protection services of the Czech police.

<sup>84</sup> Veselá, *Role Ochranné služby v systému Policie České republiky*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>86</sup> See: <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/2008-273> for the article 50 of the Czech police bill of 11 August 2008.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

other persons designated by the Minister within the framework of the performance of their tasks. The scope and method of such security provision shall be determined by the Minister upon the proposal of the Chief of Police.<sup>88</sup>

The Czech police law also mentions the so-called short-term protection of a person (*kratkodoba ochrana osoby*), which is administered by one of the fourteen regional commands of the police. A given individual might be offered “physical protection, a short-term change of address, usage of protective technology, or consulting-preventive activities.”<sup>89</sup> This can also be extended to the said person’s family. These protective measures cannot be offered, if a given individual rejects them. Moreover, there exists the so-called “special protection” (*zvlastni ochrana*), which is offered to “witnesses, accused, experts, interpreters, or persons close to them, who are likely to be at risk of bodily harm or other serious danger in connection with criminal proceedings.”<sup>90</sup> The decision to grant this protection rests in the hands of the Minister of the Interior or the Minister of Justice, if demanded by judges and prosecutors. Again, it is possible to reject such a protection which “[interferes] with the fundamental rights and freedoms of persons and the entire life of the protected person, and without voluntary self-limitation and cooperation, such protection is unthinkable.”<sup>91</sup> This can be indefinite and include new addresses and jobs or a move abroad.

## Public/Private Cooperation

As in other countries of the region, one cannot have multiple layers of security – public and/or private (although the report will later discuss cases when this happens, e.g., while a given VIP visits a museum with their own security arrangements or when a given witness is protected by the police and their family enjoys privately obtained protection). At the same time, however, if the two layers or groups come into contact, they attempt to delineate their respective tasks, so that they, at the end of the day, do not overlap or come into conflict.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> See the police’s website on short-term protection:

<https://policie.gov.cz/clanek/kratkodoba-ochrana-otazky-a-odpovedi.aspx>.

<sup>90</sup> See: <https://www.policie.cz/clanek/zvlastni-ochrana-a-pomoc-otazky-a-odpovedi.aspx> for the police website on “special protection.”

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

## CEE Protection Systems and The Netherlands

Interviewees working in the CEE protection systems, and veterans of these systems, were generally in agreement that the Dutch “surveillance and protection” system features a “significantly higher number of players.”<sup>92</sup> Moreover, they pointed out that it might result in a “divided command model,”<sup>93</sup> whereas their systems are characterised by “a centralisation of command,”<sup>94</sup> with the majority of each system effectively in the hands of one, hierarchical organisation – the police force. They also pointed out that the threat perception seems different – the Dutch are mostly looking in the direction of the organised crime as the source of violence, whereas the CEE countries seem now to be abandoning the “St. Florian syndrome” and learning of the threats of politically motivated violence perpetrated by lone actors. In addition, the interviewees underlined that the focus of the Dutch system seems to be geared towards ensuring efficacy, co-operation between different players, effectiveness, proper oversight. The CEE models, since they are dominated by one organisation, are seen by the interviewees as “just another type of police work, really.”<sup>95</sup>

Thus, CEE systems are reactive, formed, and developed in the aftermath of major events. This process, however, started almost a century ago, in the interwar period of 1918-39. This is now most evident in Slovakia, where the UOUC, the VIP protection part of the Slovak police, is now engaged in a frenzy of activity to “make up for its mistakes”<sup>96</sup> brought to light on 15 May 2024 and the shooting of PM Fico in Handlova. To some extent, this compares with the Dutch rapidly moving to develop their system in the aftermath of the assassination of Pim Fortuyn in 2002.

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92 This has been the opinion of literally all of the author’s interviewees when they were confronted with some background knowledge on the Dutch system.

93 *Ibid.*

94 *Ibid.*

95 Author’s interview with a member of the Slovak protection system who wished to remain anonymous.

96 *Ibid.*

## Lessons Learnt from Protective Systems of the CEE

This part of the report will discuss the lessons learnt and best practices emerging from the three case studies. As the three systems feature a high number of similarities, it is more relevant to discuss these jointly.

- a) Ensure recruiting in different pools and consequently featuring officers/members/operators of different age groups and profiles in order to avoid groupthink.
- b) Train your force for the unexpected and be ready to challenge the ongoing assumptions – so that you avoid “surprises”, such as the one from Handlova on 15 May 2024 or the seemingly harmless, or even satirical, incidents targeting the Czech president and his residence.
- c) Prepare to readjust the system, if need be, away from concerns related to lone actor attackers and towards potential other threats, such as organised crime or more organised anti-government entities.
- d) Keep information close to you and compartmentalise – share it with “regular” police on the need to know basis – so that there is no risk of it being leaked. Protection is about ensuring security of given persons and broadening a circle of knowledge is detrimental to the process. This does not, however, mean that lessons learnt should not be discussed or shared more openly within a given protection system in the aftermath of specific operations or termination of given protection programmes.
- e) At the same time, keep elements of the “regular” police close – you might recruit from their ranks, e.g., Polish witness protection units in regional commands reaching out to members of SWAT teams who had earlier been involved in protection duties.
- f) Be patient with the effectiveness of the new legislative protection measures – it takes time for them to be absorbed by all members of the protective systems (policemen, prosecutors, judges) so that they can have an effect on the ground.
- g) Protect the crown witness programme – ensure its former clients do not turn into “whistleblowers”, who would provide seemingly tantalising stories to the media after they emerge from the programme, as these are detrimental to its standing and the morale of people working in it.
- h) Be imaginative (but not too imaginative) as to where you are sending your crown witnesses – going abroad is to some extent an underexplored option here, but sending one’s protected witnesses to Belarus is a step too far in the current political situation, as such witnesses could be used by the hostile intelligence services for intelligence collection and propaganda purposes.
- i) Boost the protection capabilities of the regional police commands to make sure they are capable of delivering protection packages without burdening the proverbial “centre.”

## About the Author

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### Kacper Rekawek

Dr. Kacper Rekawek is a Senior Research Fellow and Programme Lead (Current and Emerging Threats) at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague. Prior to joining the ICCT, Kacper worked on issues related to countering terrorism and countering violent extremism while in academia (at C-Rex, the Center for Research on Extremism at the University of Oslo, the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St. Andrews; SWPS University in Warsaw, and a PhD at Queen's University Belfast), think tanks (the Polish Institute of International Affairs, PISM, and secondments to RUSI, London and Al Ahram Centre, in Cairo) and the third sector (Countering Extremism Project in New York/Berlin and GLOBSEC in Bratislava).

Kacper's research interests encompass a vast field related to terrorist organisations and networks, and means of countering them. He originally started as a researcher focusing on terrorism in Europe in general, and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in particular. His PhD was a comparative study of the factions of the IRA. Since 2011, in his job as a terrorism analyst at PISM, he focused almost exclusively on global jihadism, which was also the focus of his major projects while he was at GLOBSEC between 2016 and 2019. Since 2014, he has also published extensively on the Western (extremist) foreign fighters in the Russo-Ukrainian war. From January 2020, he has been conducting research on the pre-war lives of such fighters which was supported by the Counter Extremism Project. While at C-Rex (2021-3) he also studied the "afterlives" of the aforementioned fighters who returned home after the first phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Rekawek has successfully led multinational research projects related to international security in general and terrorism and countering terrorism in particular (e.g. the comparative analyses of the state of European jihadism, supported by PMI Impact and Counter Extremism Project, which involved partners in eleven countries). He has worked on a number of other international projects, including efforts supported by the European Commission and NATO. He is a member and participates in the activities of the Society for Terrorism Research, European Expert Network on Terrorism Issues and the Radicalisation Awareness Network.

He is the author of four books: "Irish Republican Terrorism and Politics: A Comparative Study of the Official and the Provisional IRA", published by Routledge; a popular book on terrorism titled "A Man With a Small Bomb" which came out in Poland in 2017; and the first systematic study of the phenomenon of foreign fighting in the Russo-Ukrainian war, "Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: The Brown-Red Cocktail", published by Routledge in December 2022. In 2024, "Russia and the Far-Right: Insights From Ten European Countries" was published by the ICCT.



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