

2026

RANKING OF EUROPEAN INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES



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This document provides a comprehensive synthesis of recent assessments regarding the operational effectiveness and reputation of European intelligence services, based on a peer-reviewed study conducted by the French publication *L'Express*.

The analysis incorporates expert commentary on institutional strengths, technological capabilities, and systemic vulnerabilities across the continent's security apparatus.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A landmark survey of **60 current and former intelligence professionals from 25 countries** has established a definitive peer-perception ranking of European intelligence services. The findings identify the United Kingdom's Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or MI6) as the preeminent agency in Europe, **characterized by its long-term human intelligence (HUMINT) strategies and elite recruitment**. France's DGSE follows in second place, lauded for its global reach and integrated operational capacity.

The study highlights significant **"over-performers," most notably the Netherlands' AIVD (3rd) and Estonia's Foreign Intelligence Service (8th)**, both of which have leveraged high-end technological expertise and cyber capabilities to compensate for smaller budgets. Conversely, **the German BND (5th) faces internal and external criticism regarding its operational efficiency and recent failures to predict regional conflicts**, leading to significant legislative reforms. The analysis also identifies a "zero-point" tier of services, with Slovakia singled out for systemic incompetence and political nepotism.

2. METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT

The ranking was compiled through a three-month survey modelled on the "Ballon d'Or" and Eurovision Song Contest points systems.

- 💡 **The jury:** Comprised 60 intelligence professionals, including **17 current or former heads** of secret services.
- 💡 **Scoring:** Each juror selected a top five; the first-place service received five points, decreasing to one point for fifth place.
- 💡 **Criteria:** Evaluations were based on **"efficiency and reliability."**

- 💡 **Reputational value:** Experts note that while the survey is subjective, **peer perception is a critical metric** because it dictates liaison trust, information-sharing access, and diplomatic leverage within the intelligence community.

3. THE TOP THREE

United Kingdom: Secret Intelligence Service (MI6)

MI6 secured **251** points, finishing significantly ahead of its nearest rival.

- **HUMINT primacy:** The agency is praised for its "long game," maintaining and cultivating high-level informants in Russia, China, Iran, and Turkey for a decade or more.
- **Recruitment pipeline:** The service continues to draw heavily from elite institutions, specifically Oxford and Cambridge.
- **Strategic foresight:** Its reputation was bolstered by accurately predicting the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, a development many continental services missed.

France: Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure (DGSE)

The DGSE earned **169** points, recognized as the only continental service with a truly global operational reach.

- **Integrated capabilities:** It effectively combines technical surveillance, human intelligence, and specialized operational units.
- **Counterterrorism and neutralization:** The service is noted for its best-in-class counterterrorism capabilities and its ability to "discreetly neutralize" foreign targets.
- **Regional expertise:** Its historical and operational depth in Africa remains a significant strategic asset.

The Netherlands: Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst (AIVD)

Ranking 3rd with **97** points, the AIVD is considered the most efficient service relative to its budget.

- **Cyber excellence:** Through a joint cyber team with the military service (MIVD), the AIVD has successfully infiltrated high-security environments in Russia and China.

- **Operational history:** Key historical successes include the 2007 deployment of the Stuxnet virus and the 2015 penetration of the Russian-linked "Cozy Bear" hacking group.
- **Liaison strategy:** The Netherlands maximizes its influence through strategic collaborations with the United States and specialized partners like Estonia.

4. REGIONAL SPECIALISTS

The truth is that SIS and DGSE are the only European intelligence agencies which can be considered global actors. The following regional specialists are highlighted in the study.

Ukraine: Foreign Intelligence Service (FISU/GUR)

Ranked 4th (77 points), Ukraine's intelligence apparatus is characterized as having a "Mossad-like" evolution.

- **Operational Hardening:** The service has transitioned from a Soviet-legacy mentality toward a high-tempo, special-operations-capable force, heavily supported by the CIA since 2014.
- **Rear-Area Sabotage:** Colleagues value Ukraine's ability to conduct precision strikes and intelligence-led operations within enemy territory.

Estonia: Foreign Intelligence Service (VLA)

Ranked 8th (27 points), Estonia is described as a "dark horse" of the intelligence world.

- **OSINT and Cyber:** The agency is a leader in Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) and cyber reconnaissance.
- **Russia Expertise:** Its annual reports on Russian strategy and hybrid threats are considered essential reading by partner agencies across Europe.
- **Small-State Model:** Estonia demonstrates how specialized expertise can provide significant liaison value despite limited national resources.

This is the table with the whole ranking:

Ran k	Country / Service	Point s	Core Strengths and Supporting Evidence
1	United Kingdom (MI6)	251	Elite Oxbridge recruitment; 10-year "long game" human source cultivation; high-level

			infiltration in Russia, China, and Iran.
2	France (DGSE)	169	Global operational reach; integrated technical and human intelligence; superior counterterrorism and "neutralization" capabilities.
3	Netherlands (AIVD)	97	World-class cyber/hacker teams; strategic US/European collaborations; high ROI on intelligence spending; infiltration of "Cozy Bear."
4	Ukraine (GUR/FISU)	77	"Mossad-style" special operations; extensive combat experience; successful rear-area sabotage and targeting.
5	Germany (BND)	62	Large budget; currently undergoing reform to gain offensive cyber and active defense powers; criticized for diplomatic (vs. spy) style.
6	Sweden (MUST/SÄPO)	40	Recognized for counterintelligence; recently dismantled an SVR network targeting political decision-making.
7	Norway (ET/PST)	34	Strong regional focus and reliable partner within the Nordic/Baltic intelligence bloc.
8	Estonia (VLA)	27	Excellence in OSINT and cyber reconnaissance; authoritative annual assessments of Russian hybrid threats.
9	Poland (AW/ABW)	22	Regional weight; however, penalized by peers for perceived domestic political interference.
10	Denmark (FE/DSIS)	16	Reliable partner in the northern tier with specialized regional insights.
11	Romania (SIE)	15	Emerging regional presence with increasing peer recognition.

12	Spain (CNI)	13	Noted for Mediterranean and regional security.
13-14	Finland / Switzerland (NDB)	11	Professional but smaller-scale operations; Switzerland noted for financial intelligence.
15-17	Italy / Belgium / Czechia	9	Core European services; Belgium noted for its role as a diplomatic/intelligence hub.
18	Lithuania (AOTD)	—	Regional contributor to Baltic security and Russia monitoring.
19	Portugal (SIED)	—	Historical maritime and regional expertise.
20	Austria (DSN)	—	Recovering from past infiltration scandals (e.g., the 2018 Martin Möller case).
21	Latvia (SAB)	1	Received a single point from an expert placing them in a personal top five.
N/A	Zero-Point Services	0	Slovakia: Labelled worst for nepotism/Russian ties; Malta: Crime ties; Cyprus: Foreign intel convergence; Ireland/Luxembourg: Financial crime focus; Greece: Turkey expertise.

5. OUTLIERS

It is disconcerting the ranking position of some of the agencies.

German **BND** is an entity of significant controversy within the intelligence community.

- **Efficiency deficit:** Critics point out that only 2% of German terrorism warnings originate from the BND, with the remainder provided by the CIA.
- **Analytic failures:** The service was criticized for maintaining that Russia would not invade Ukraine as late as early 2022, suggesting they were victims of Russian disinformation.
- **Legislative reform:** A 700-page reform bill was recently introduced to grant the BND offensive cyber authorities

and expanded surveillance powers to **modernize its "passive" posture**. This is clearly exposing that even the German government is aware of the **limited efficiency of the BND**. There are several reasons for it although budget is huge. Germany is the first economy of the EU and requires a better performing intelligence agency to support governmental decisions.

Spanish CNI ranks behind its expected performing arts as the fourth economy of the EU with a population of 50 million citizens.

As illustrated in the table below, Spain's security culture ranks below those of several key European counterparts:

Agency	Country	Members/ populati on	Budget/popu lation (USD)	Budget/me mber (USD)	%GDP(x1.00 0)
CNI	Spain	12,864.86	7.14	91,891.89	0.226
DGSE + DGSI	France	6,200	43.98	272,727.273	1
BND+BfV	Germany	7,339.13	17.18	126,086.957	0.345
ABW+AW	Poland	6,333.33	21.05	133,333.333	1.066
AISI + AISE	Italy	8,428.57	27.11	228,571.429	0.720
AIVD	The Netherla nds	11,866.66	19.66	233,333.333	0.318
MI5 + SIS (MI6) + GCHQ	United Kingdom	3,982.35	51.69	205,882.353	1.093

The table has been built with available data that may not be completely accurate due to the characteristics of the subjects of the investigation.

As shown in the table above, key European benchmarks highlight opportunities to strengthen Spain's organizational security culture. At least, **CNI should play a role in the Middle East but without a doubt, in Latin America**.

CNI ranks poorly in concepts such as the **number of agents per citizens**, as well as in terms of the **budget allocated to comply with the tasks assigned to the agency**.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The current landscape of European intelligence is defined by a **shift toward technological specialization**. Smaller nations like the Netherlands and Estonia have proven that **mastery of the cyber domain and open-source data can grant**

a service "Tier 1" influence that far exceeds its national footprint.

Concurrently, the study underscores that **institutional independence is as vital as operational skill**; services in Poland and Slovakia are viewed with scepticism by their peers due to political encroachment. Finally, the "primacy" of SIS suggests that traditional, long-term human intelligence remains the gold standard by which global professionals measure the effectiveness of an intelligence organization.

British SIS (MI6) is often said to benefit from its special relationship with the CIA and the Five Eyes Community. These comments try to downplay the performance of an external foreign service that supports its government decision making process in a pivotal and decisive manner.

SIS is innovative, fed with Oxford and Cambridge (Oxbridge) graduates who are eager and honoured to serve at the MI6. British Intelligence Community is flexible. It's common to exchange experiences among agencies (MI5, MI6, JTAC, GCHQ) and it is an enriching experience for all of them.



Captain (RN) Sir George Mansfield Smith-Cumming, the founder of the MI6 (1909), built the agency thinking of the representations of the agency abroad as though they were vessels at sea on the other side of the globe. Therefore, he was adamant of the independence of action of the leaders of those units. He understood that guides of action should be clear and not too narrow. It was more important to draw the red lines which were not acceptable than defining courses of action. That idea still leads those offices nowadays and it works.

Oxbridge individuals maybe posh but the ambition, innovation and determination that both universities instil in them

seems to be key for success.

Overseas intelligence requires an aggressivity to look for the information you are asked for. It defines the difference between a domestic and a foreign intelligence service. Domestic intelligence is more reactive than proactive,

defensive rather than aggressive (a weapon). Tow souls cannot cohabitate the same structure. This idea should be applied to the CNI if it aspires to better perform in future rankings.

