

# **Does access to classified information impede public scrutiny of intelligence agencies? Learning from the case study of the Finnish parliament**

Tapio Raunio, Tampere University<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

Legislatures are increasingly investing resources into oversight of intelligence agencies. However, effective control of intelligence is wrought with challenges: while national security is a highly important policy domain, information is often classified, and MPs may feel that public critique of intelligence agencies is not appropriate. The Intelligence Oversight Committee of the Finnish Eduskunta, operational since 2019, provides an interesting case for examining these challenges. Drawing on interviews and a wide range of parliamentary data, the paper investigates how the establishment of the committee impacted parliamentary scrutiny of intelligence. It shows that MPs appreciate the confidential committee debates but struggle to exercise effective oversight of intelligence agencies. The paper concludes by formulating a set of recommendations for parliaments wanting to achieve stronger control of intelligence activities.

## **Keywords**

Intelligence, oversight, parliament, committee, Finland

## **Introduction**

Oversight of the executive is one of the central tasks of a parliament, with oversight occurring through a variety of tools and mechanisms from parliamentary questions and plenary debates to votes of confidence to setting up sectoral committees and investigative bodies (e.g., Martin & Strøm 2023: 291-311). Intelligence is a policy area that can plausibly be viewed as the ‘hardest test’ for oversight.<sup>2</sup> It involves information and activities that are highly sensitive and often legally complex in terms of national security, international cooperation, and citizens’ basic rights (e.g., Born et al. 2005; Bochel et al. 2014; Johnson 2010; Chesterman 2013; Gill 2020). As a result, most of the information is classified, with normally strict legal sanctions for those leaking secret documents.

The governance of intelligence has changed over the past few decades. Scandals about human rights violations were often behind the reforms. After ‘9/11’ and terrorist attacks in different countries attention turned to concerns about the quality and insufficient preparedness of intelligence agencies, while revelations by whistleblower Edward Snowden in 2013 about global surveillance programmes brought to the surface awkward questions about the limits of

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to research assistant Vilma Tossavainen at Tampere University for her help with the empirical material and analysis.

<sup>2</sup> Hegemann (2018: 177) refers to intelligence as a ‘hard case’ for normal politics.

appropriate action in the name of security. Inquiries were conducted, and they increased the feeling that intelligence activities required stronger accountability. At the same time “in the context of the ‘war against terrorism’, states’ intelligence agencies and security apparatuses have witnessed a dramatic extension of their powers and capabilities, resulting in increasingly porous boundaries between military, police, and civilian intelligence” (Rittberger & Goetz 2018: 829-830). In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the fight against terrorism and the conduct of intelligence agencies are therefore salient and often politicized questions. But members of parliament (MP) face a trade-off: in an increasingly turbulent world investing time and effort into scrutiny of intelligence can be rewarding, yet MPs can hardly make any public use of the information available through committee meetings. Citizens may also feel that public critique of intelligence services is not appropriate as it would endanger the national interest.

Despite such challenges, parliaments throughout the world have established specific committees for oversight of intelligence (e.g., Born et al. 2005; Born & Caparini 2007; Born & Leigh 2007; Wills & Vermeulen et al. 2011; Farson 2012; FRA 2023). Some are standard sectoral committees while others are more tied to the executive, such as the Canadian National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP).<sup>3</sup> In bicameral systems the two chambers often have joint intelligence oversight committees, although in the U.S. Congress both the House of Representatives and the Senate have operated large select committees on intelligence since the 1970s. Most of these committees focus on intelligence oversight, but some of them scrutinize also defence or internal affairs policies. Clearly parliamentarians are not willing to leave intelligence matters to the executive branch and specialized agencies. But given that MPs are bound by the secrecy characteristic of intelligence, the obvious question is what are the incentives for individual parliamentarians and for legislatures to spend their resources on scrutiny of such matters? And perhaps more importantly, does parliamentary scrutiny have any impact and facilitate better performance or societal debates of intelligence agencies?

The Intelligence Oversight Committee (IOC) of the Finnish Eduskunta, operational since 2019, provides an interesting case for examining these questions. Drawing on interviews and a wide range of parliamentary and official documents, the paper investigates how the establishment of the committee impacted on parliamentary scrutiny of intelligence. The interviews were particularly important for understanding the political dynamics of IOC and the Finnish intelligence community, while the documents were used for capturing the output and interaction of the committee. The interviews were conducted in spring and summer of 2024 under a strict code of confidentiality, and the interviewed persons represented the ministries and the IOC.

The next section contains the theoretical framework which discusses the dilemma of combining standard patterns of committee and parliamentary work with the specific demands of the intelligence sector. The third section introduces the Finnish context. The empirical

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<sup>3</sup> NSICOP was established in 2017 with a broad remit to review the legislative, regulatory, policy, administrative, and financial framework for Canadian national security and intelligence. Its members are appointed by the prime minister from both chambers of parliament. See [National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians \(NSICOP\) \(nsicop-cpsnr.ca\)](https://www.nsicop-cpsnr.ca/), accessed 16 April 2024.

analysis in the fourth section shows that MPs appreciate the confidential committee debates and find added value in committee scrutiny of intelligence but struggle to exercise effective oversight of intelligence agencies. The paper concludes by formulating a set of recommendations for parliaments wanting to achieve stronger control of intelligence activities.

### **Theoretical framework: why invest resources in oversight of intelligence?**

The requirements for effective oversight of intelligence do not really differ from other policy areas (e.g., Lustgarten & Leigh 1994; Born et al. 2005; Born & Leith 2007; Hegemann 2018; Gill 2020). They include a clear mandate with sufficient investigative powers; independence from the object of scrutiny (the executive and intelligence agencies); motivated MPs that have adequate resources their disposal; and, significantly, the recognition that maintaining secrecy is crucial for both access to classified information and for the actual conduct of intelligence services. As argued in this section, the last point is what makes oversight of intelligence so hard, affecting the capability of MPs to engage in intelligence matters. It is also argued that intelligence oversight committees operate differently from ordinary committees, and that this can impact negatively on their role and status inside parliaments.

### ***Parliamentary culture – debates, contestation, government-opposition divide***

Let us begin by briefly discussing general features of parliamentary work. Parliaments are first and foremost party-political institutions with contestation between government and opposition. The government initiates legislation that is scrutinized in committees and debated and voted upon in the plenary. Individual MPs utilize tools such as parliamentary questions and private member's motions. Parliamentary agendas are dominated by bill proposals and non-legislative items such as topical debates or government reports. Party discipline is normally strong, and MPs are expected not to act against their party either in the committees or in the plenary (Bergman et al. 2021; Bäck et al. 2021).

Parliaments display strong institutionalization in terms of organization and culture, at least in consolidated democracies. This applies also to committees that scrutinize bill proposals and gather evidence from stakeholders — mainly corporatist actors, businesses, and non-governmental organizations (NGO) (Siefken & Rommetvedt 2022). Yet, there are some exceptions to these general patterns. 'Future committees' exist in select parliaments, with their work revolving largely around long-term scenarios debated in a more consensual, semi-academic atmosphere, but the different mode of operation also contributes to their marginalization inside the legislatures (Koskimaa & Raunio 2023). This indicates difficulties in combining atypical parliamentary organs with standard patterns of parliamentary work.

In security and defence policy – an issue area directly related to intelligence — MPs face a serious problem of informational asymmetry as legislatures do not have the same level of information as members of the executive branch or the military. This underlines the importance of (confidential) information-sharing between the executive and legislature, including in Finland (Raunio 2016). Conforming with the securitization argument (Sjöstedt

2024), studies on the U.S. Congress show how the executive can avoid legislative constraints through framing issues as security threats (Howell et al. 2013; Milner & Tingley 2015). Here we also find the trade-off between access to classified information and public oversight: for example, case studies of Belgium, Canada, and New Zealand indicate that MPs gain access to various military and intelligence information on the condition of keeping it behind the closed doors of committees (Lagassé & Saideman 2017, 2019).

Yet, there is evidence of ‘parliamentarization’ of foreign and security policy, with parliaments learning how to make use of their scrutiny powers (Raunio & Wagner 2017; Mello & Peters 2018). Importantly, there is strong contestation in a range of issues – often reflecting the left-right cleavage – from unpopular wars to defence budgets to fight against terrorism (e.g., Wagner 2020). Closely related to intelligence, Owens and Pelizzo (2009) showed that parliaments were not necessarily weakened during the ‘war on terror’ (see also Scott & Carter 2014). Security governance has also become more encompassing, with a wider range of parliamentary committees dealing with such matters (Neal 2021). Overall, MPs have arguably become better at demanding information and are not afraid to publicly challenge the executive even in hard security choices. Nonetheless, MPs themselves seem to acknowledge that the executive must be allowed sufficient autonomy, particularly during crises when, in line with the ‘rally around the flag’ thesis (Mueller 1973), partisan differences are set aside, and nations unite around their leaders. (Raunio & Wagner 2024)

### ***Inevitable trade-offs in oversight of intelligence***

These insights from standard patterns of parliamentary work and security and defence policy are directly relevant for oversight of intelligence, “generally defined as a process of supervision designed to ensure that intelligence agencies do not break the law or abuse the rights of individuals at home or abroad. It also ensures that agencies are managed efficiently, and that money is spent properly and wisely.” (Bochel et al. 2014: 3) Identified above as the ‘hardest test’ for oversight, parliamentary scrutiny of intelligence is not short of problems and trade-offs. Yet, much depends on how oversight is organized and carried out inside the parliament.

Parliamentary involvement in intelligence matters differs from other policy areas. In terms of outputs, intelligence questions fall outside of normal legislative business. As a result, intelligence committees enjoy larger autonomy in designing their own agendas and timetables. But as the case of ‘future committees’ illustrated (Koskimaa & Raunio 2023), atypical committees can easily become marginalized and viewed as less attractive than standard committees. This means that the status, and indeed survival, of intelligence committees may depend on how much they contribute to the overall work of the parliament. As Neal (2021) showed, security questions are often horizontal by nature and processed by multiple parliamentary committees. This implies that there is potential for interaction between intelligence oversight committee and other standing committees. But comparing Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, Defty (2020a: 379) observed that “very little provision is made for the outward role of the committees. Although all four committees are required to produce an annual report, which is published and laid before parliament, there is no requirement that government must respond to these reports or that

they should be debated in parliament. The anomalous status of these committees often ensures that they remain somewhat distant from other parliamentary actors.”

Another difference concerns the role of party politics. Core questions of national security are often marked by consensus. Yet the partisan disagreements and public debates found in security and defence policy suggest potential for ideological contestation in intelligence questions. Scholars at the same time warn that particularly opposition MPs may politicize intelligence matters for purely partisan purposes, underlining that non-partisanship and safeguarding national interests is essential (e.g., Lustgarten & Leigh 1994: 461-462; Ott 2003; Farson 2012). However, arguably a greater danger is abuse of authority: “Most parliamentary committees will be controlled by the majority – or governing – party and therefore may simply be unwilling to criticise the agencies formally controlled by senior members of their party.” (Gill 2020: 977) Particularly the minister responsible for intelligence services may even end up losing her job should misconduct or poorly managed operations become public news.

Contestation depends on the content of issues under scrutiny. More procedural or general approaches are unlikely to generate much interest, whereas concrete cases of intelligence laws or operations – that have become more politicized after 9/11 – are likelier to attract the attention of MPs and the media. Examples of such matters are the report by the U.S. Senate in 2014 on torture practices of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the critical reports by the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) in the United Kingdom. Intelligence tasking is the process of setting key intelligence requirements and priorities that define intelligence agency spending and the collection and analysis of intelligence. This is obviously a job of the intelligence agencies together with the executive, but parliamentary reviews can highlight problems. Among the first tasks of the Canadian NSICOP was a review of intelligence priorities, and its public report<sup>4</sup> identified and issued several recommendations (DCAF 2021: 10-11).

However, the biggest challenge is posed by classified information, with strict rules about access to information and legal sanctions for those leaking it. As summarized by Born and Leigh (2007: 4):

The fundamental difficulty that intelligence oversight poses is the conundrum of how to provide democratic control of a governmental function and institutions which are essential to the survival and flourishing of the state, but which must operate to a certain extent in justifiable secrecy.

MPs typically must pass security clearances before appointments to intelligence committees, and careless use of information might result in lower trust between intelligence agencies and the parliament. As noted by Bolto (2019: 138), “for intelligence services, protecting sensitive capabilities, operations, personnel and international relations are central considerations.” According to Hegemann (2018: 186) in the Bundestag members of the Parliamentary Control Panel (PCP) “confirmed the view that criticizing agencies in public would be detrimental to their control efforts and impede agencies from sharing sensitive information and speaking openly in hearings.” Indeed, intelligence professionals have legitimate concerns about

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<sup>4</sup> NSICOP Annual Report 2018, [National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians Annual Report 2018 \(nsicop-cpsnr.ca\)](https://www.nsicop-cpsnr.ca/Annual-Report-2018), accessed 29 April 2024.

broadening the circle of individuals – elected or non-elected – with access to information. As in the case of military operations (Lagassé & Saideman 2017, 2019), MPs enjoy access to classified information on the condition that it is not used outside the closed doors of committee meetings.<sup>5</sup> Even one leak can jeopardize the legitimacy of the committee. And as Bochel et al. (2014: 6) point out, “those involved in legislative oversight of intelligence agencies may be seduced by privileged access and become too close to those they are responsible for scrutinizing.” MPs can therefore achieve policy-related goals through serving in intelligence committees, but benefitting in terms of votes is more difficult:

...parliamentary intelligence oversight tends to be a technical process that seldom makes headline news and therefore entails few electoral incentives for parliamentarians that cannot boast of possible achievements in public or, if they do, might be criticised for threatening ‘national security’. Governments can also try to co-opt parliamentarians into the ‘ring of secrecy’, thereby distributing responsibility and preventing them from speaking out loudly. (Hegemann 2018: 179)

The literature has tended to emphasize the obstacles impeding effective oversight of intelligence. In the United States the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) and the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (HPSCI) enjoy broad powers and conduct public hearings, but suffer from a range of problems, not least information disadvantage vis-à-vis the executive and representatives that often are not motivated to conduct rigorous scrutiny (Kibbe 2010; Zegart 2022). In many cases parliamentary assertiveness is linked to external developments. For example, in Germany the rise in terrorism and intelligence scandals resulted in growing public presence of the PCP, with its work more actively referred to in plenary debates. Public societal debates in turn triggered more active and open oversight and contestation among political parties (Hegemann 2018: 186-187).

Parliaments or their intelligence committees can also set up specific investigative committees or inquiries into individual cases, with their findings then presented in public. Here an example is the temporary committee in the European Parliament (EP) that examined the role of European countries in ‘extraordinary renditions’ in its report published in 2012. The right to scrutinize and launch inquiries into specific cases or practices is thus an important tool. In his generally positive evaluation of Australia’s Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security (PJCIS), Bolto (2019: 150) concluded that “the PJCIS’s limited mandate and inability to initiate inquiries were more problematic, curtailing accountability exchanges to particular or constrained discussions and inhibiting a prominent democratic and constitutional role.”

The British case is also informative of these dilemmas. The prerogatives of ISC were substantially strengthened in 2013, but its legitimacy and practices are constantly questioned.

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<sup>5</sup> Some MPs may find this compromise unacceptable. In the Netherlands MPs of the Socialist Party refused to take seats in the intelligence oversight committee as they could not use classified information in public. In the United States just 12 members of the House of Representatives made use of the right in 2006 to read the classified intelligence bill (which was adopted with 327 to 96 votes in April 2006) as they were not allowed to disclose any classified information in the plenary debates, not even if the media had already reported on those matters. (Born & Leigh 2007: 13)

Appointment of ISC after elections has been delayed, the prime minister has refused to appear before the committee, and plenary involvement is lacking. Overall, the relations between ISC and the government have been strenuous, with the executive clearly not comfortable with the committee's inquiries and activities. (Bochel et al. 2014; Defty 2019, 2020a, 2020b)<sup>6</sup> Attracting motivated MPs to intelligence committees can therefore be challenging, but having high-profile members is perhaps not ideal either. In the Netherlands the Committee on the Intelligence and Security Services (ISS) consists of the leaders of the parliamentary groups, with the result that the committee has remained rather passive and has met infrequently (Hijzen 2013).

In the end it comes to the mandate and the political will of MPs to exercise scrutiny. But here is another tradeoff: as the illustrative examples above indicate, more in-depth approaches, not least inquiries and reports into specific cases, facilitate stronger oversight and may result even in public scandals, but the intelligence agencies and the executive branch can fear that such actions endanger their operations and legitimacy. As Gill (2020: 973) aptly summarizes:

Oversight must be of all aspects of organisation, information gathering, analysis, dissemination and operations within the intelligence 'web' but is not for micromanagement: there is a danger if, for example, parliamentarians seek to determine targets because it politicises, in a bad way, agency operations leading potentially to inefficiency and corruption.

The discussion in this section has on the one hand underlined the challenges involved in achieving meaningful parliamentary oversight of intelligence. On the other hand, intelligence is a salient and potentially contested issue area, implying that organizational choices inside parliaments can either impede or facilitate both effective scrutiny and public debates of intelligence activities.

## **The context**

The Finnish political system has experienced a major transformation since the late 1980s, with presidential dominance replaced with leadership by majority governments (Karvonen et al. 2016).<sup>7</sup> Finland's politico-administrative culture emphasizes adherence to formal and informal rules. The same applies to the Eduskunta, where decision-making is based on interaction between party groups and sectoral committees that scrutinize all issues before plenary debates and votes (Aula & Raunio 2022; Raunio 2022). Political parties are used to cross-party cooperation in the government and parliament, although recently Finland has experienced the rise of populism and increasing polarization within its party system. Elite coherence has further facilitated pragmatism in policymaking (Ruostetsaari 2022). Finland is

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<sup>6</sup> For interesting updates on the ISC and reflections on the general challenges facing parliamentary oversight of intelligence, see the Watching the Watchers blog, [Watching the Watchers | Parliamentary scrutiny of the British intelligence and security agencies \(lincoln.ac.uk\)](https://www.lincoln.ac.uk/watching-the-watchers/), accessed 16 April 2024.

<sup>7</sup> The Constitution of Finland, 11 June 1999 (731/1999). An unofficial English version is available at <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/kaannokset/1999/en19990731.pdf>.

known for its stable administrative machinery and a neo-corporatist policymaking style with a significant role for major interest groups (Pekkola et al. 2023).

Yet Finland's semi-presidential regime shares foreign policy leadership between a directly elected president and the government. Here a key role is performed by the Ministerial Committee on Foreign and Security Policy (chaired by the president, TP-UTVA is the acronym in Finnish) as well as Government Security and Defence Policy Reports. A strict code of confidentiality is observed in security policy decision-making, where consensus has been the norm. Underlining the Finnish appreciation of consensus is the belief that such a small country is vulnerable if it shows internal differences of views, especially when dealing with Russia. The decision to apply for NATO membership reflected this consensus tradition, with hardly any dissenting voices in public debates (Koskimaa & Raunio 2024).

In 2013, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was revealed to have been the target of undetected cyber espionage for years. In this context and against the background of worsening security environment it was deemed that existing intelligence legislation was insufficient. In line with the programme of the right-wing government appointed after the 2015 elections, a working group under the Ministry of Justice was appointed to draft the guidelines for new legislation (Oikeusministeriö 2017), with another working group in the Eduskunta focusing on the parliamentary dimension of intelligence oversight (Eduskunta 2017). The working groups examined intelligence oversight mechanisms in select other countries and noted that almost all other European Union (EU) countries had a specific parliamentary body carrying out scrutiny of intelligence. There was strong cross-party support for the new legislative framework and oversight of intelligence, although the political left and some journalists and academic experts voiced concerns about extending the powers of intelligence agencies (Kortesoja 2023). There was also discussion of establishing some other type of a parliamentary oversight organ than a standard committee, but the preparatory groups ended up recommending the setting up of a parliamentary intelligence oversight committee with a broad mandate. It was argued that such a broad mandate was an essential prerequisite for effective scrutiny of intelligence.

The new legislation entered into force in 2019. According to Lohse (2020: 68) the "intelligence reform represents the most profound change ever made in the Finnish security sector, and it will have a major impact on the work of Finnish intelligence authorities in the years to come."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The new civilian intelligence legislation consisted of several different laws: Police Act 872/2011, Telecommunications Intelligence Act 582/2019; Act on the Processing of Personal Data by the Police 616/2019 (unofficial translation available at <https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/2019/en20190616.pdf>); and Government Decree on Civilian Intelligence 709/2019. See Civilian Intelligence Act to enter into force on 1 June, Ministry of the Interior, press release, [Civilian Intelligence Act to enter into force on 1 June - Finnish Government \(valtioneuvosto.fi\)](https://valtioneuvosto.fi). Regarding military intelligence, the legislation comprises Act on Military Intelligence 590/2019 (unofficial translation available at <https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/2019/en20190590>); Act on the Processing of Personal Data by the Finnish Defence Forces 332/2019; Government Decree on Military Intelligence Methods 711/2019; and Decree of the Ministry of Defence on the Oversight of Military Intelligence in the Defence Administration and on Oversight Reporting 1000/2019.

The laws strengthened oversight both through the introduction of the Intelligence Ombudsman and the IOC of the Eduskunta.<sup>9</sup> Finland therefore belongs to the category of countries where parliamentary oversight is combined with specialist oversight bodies. In such systems the specialist body – in Finland the Intelligence Ombudsman – carries out more detailed oversight while the parliamentary committee focuses more on general performance of intelligence agencies (e.g., Fuor 2020b; Gill 2020).

Finland's security threats are assessed at the highest level jointly by the government and the president in TP-UTVA, which also annually prepares the priorities with respect to military intelligence targets and the priorities of The Finnish Security and Intelligence Service (SUPO is the acronym in Finnish). The Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence (MOD) formulate these priorities for TP-UTVA based on inputs from SUPO and military intelligence authorities. These two ministries are therefore in a powerful position in shaping intelligence priorities, yet the intelligence services enjoy broad autonomy in daily work and operational decisions. In general, there is close interaction between the ministries and the intelligence agencies, with ex ante assessment of threats and ex post evaluation of activities.

SUPO is responsible for civilian intelligence and the Intelligence Division of Defence Command and the Finnish Defence Intelligence Agency<sup>10</sup> for military intelligence. The duties of SUPO and the military intelligence authorities include the prevention and detection of offences threatening national security, and they carry out routine internal supervision of their functions. Civilian and military intelligence activities and the prevention and detection of offences by SUPO fall within the jurisdiction of the Intelligence Ombudsman, while the Data Protection Ombudsman controls the intelligence authorities' record-keeping and processing of personal data. The system of external supervision is complemented by the Parliamentary Ombudsman and the Chancellor of Justice: the former supervises the operative dimension of intelligence activities, and the latter supervises them at the strategic level. The use of intelligence gathering methods that most interfere with fundamental rights require authorization of the Helsinki District Court.<sup>11</sup>

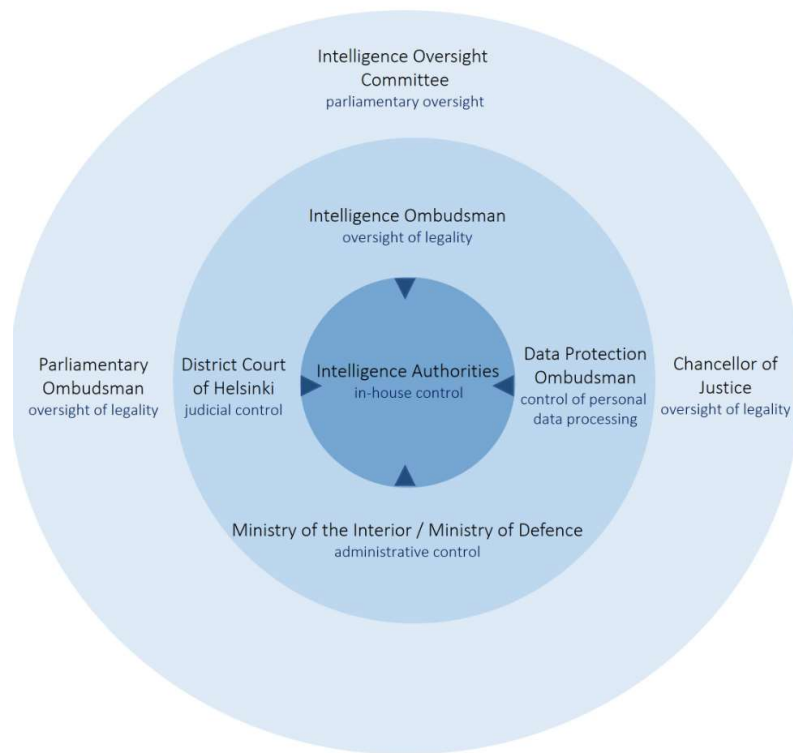
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<sup>9</sup> Laki tiedustelutoiminnan valvonnasta 121/2019 [The Act on the Oversight of Intelligence Activities], available in Finnish at [Laki tiedustelutoiminnan valvonnasta 121/2019 - Säädökset alkuperäisinä - FINLEX®](#).

<sup>10</sup> On military intelligence authorities, see the websites of the Intelligence Division of Defence Command ([Intelligence Division - Puolustusvoimat - The Finnish Defence Forces](#)) and the Finnish Defence Intelligence Agency ([Finnish Defence Intelligence Agency - Puolustusvoimat - The Finnish Defence Forces](#)), accessed 29 April 2024.

<sup>11</sup> For more detailed information on intelligence services, see Lohse (2020), and websites of the Intelligence Ombudsman ([Front page | Tiedusteluvalvonta](#)) and Supo ([Frontpage | Supo](#)), accessed 29 April 2024.

Figure 1. Oversight of intelligence in Finland.



Source: Oversight of intelligence, website of the Intelligence Ombudsman, [Oversight of intelligence | Tiedusteluvalvonta](#), accessed 15 April 2024.

While the other parliamentary committees are appointed after each election, IOC is established once the government has entered office after the elections, unless the Eduskunta decides otherwise based on a proposal from the Speaker's Council. The rationale here is that IOC does not have to handle any urgent matters, and this also enables the 'vetting' of committee members.<sup>12</sup> IOC serves as the parliamentary watchdog of civilian and military intelligence operations and of other activities of SUPO; oversees the proper implementation and appropriateness of intelligence operations; monitors and evaluates the focus areas of intelligence operations; monitors and promotes the effective exercise of fundamental and human rights in intelligence operations; prepares reports by the Intelligence Ombudsman and processes the supervisory findings of the Intelligence Ombudsman; and participates in the appointment of the Intelligence Ombudsman and the Ombudsman's deputy by expressing its opinion on the matter to the government. IOC may, on its own initiative, bring up any matter

<sup>12</sup> Before an MP can serve in the committee, the Data Protection Ombudsman checks if SUPO's operational information system referred to in Section 5 of the Act on the Processing of Personal Data by the Police (761/2003) contains data on the MP in question.

within its authority for processing and prepare a report on the matter for the plenary session if it regards the matter significant enough.<sup>13</sup>

The Eduskunta has 17 committees. Each has 17 members and 9 alternate members, apart from the Grand Committee (25 members and 13 alternate members), the Finance Committee (21 and 19), the Audit Committee (11 and 6), and IOC (11 and 2). Committees normally convene two to four times per week, with meetings held behind closed doors unless specifically decided otherwise. This is a common feature of Nordic parliaments that emphasizes trust-based negotiation in closed settings where exchange of views and party-political bargaining can happen more easily among committee members (Seo 2017). Normally only a condensed version of committee minutes, containing agenda items and related documents, participants, heard experts, and final decisions, is publicized after a meeting.

### **Empirical analysis**

The empirical research design follows several other studies in this field, notably the in-depth analysis of Bochel et al. (2014) on ISC. A wide variety of parliamentary documents is utilized to understand the role of intelligence oversight in parliament and MPs' interest in such questions, while interviews are particularly useful in terms of learning about IOC's culture and modes of operation. The analysis is divided into four parts. The first focuses on resources and the second on outputs of IOC, the third explores its interaction with other parliamentary organs and external stakeholders, and the fourth part provides a summary of the findings.

### **Resources**

Intelligence oversight committees have often less members than other committees, as small size means less MPs with access to classified information. In Finland some experts argued in favour of a normal-sized committee to have broad representation of views (Widlund 2023: 80), but IOC is small, bringing together 11 MPs based on the rule of proportionality between the parties. The primary motivation behind the small size was maintaining confidentiality, but it was also justified on the grounds of the committee's functions (Eduskunta 2017). IOC's chair was in 2019-2023 Mika Kari (Social Democrats) and after the 2023 elections the post is held by Joakim Strand (Swedish People's Party). Pauli Kiuru (National Coalition) has served as vice-chair since IOC was established. Observing the backgrounds of the MPs, only some of them have specific educational or professional ties to the intelligence, law enforcement, or security sectors (as reported by MPs themselves on the Eduskunta website). Currently IOC is very much a man's world, with 9 out of 11 members being male, but in 2019-2023 only 5 out of 13 who

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<sup>13</sup> Eduskunnan työjärjestys [Eduskunta's rules of procedure], 17.12.1999/40 v. 2000, 31 b § (20.12.2018/123 v. 2019), available in Finnish at [Eduskunnan työjärjestys 40/2000 - Ajantasainen lainsäädäntö - FINLEX®](#); website of the Intelligence Oversight Committee, [Intelligence Oversight Committee \(eduskunta.fi\)](#), accessed 15 April 2024. For a detailed examination of the legal powers and mandate of the IOC, see Widlund (2023).

served in the committee during the electoral term were men.<sup>14</sup> IOC has one committee clerk, whereas other Eduskunta committees have several clerks.

IOC has met roughly once per week when the parliament is in session. The number of meetings was 14 in 2019 (the committee was established after the elections held in April), 19 in 2020, 33 in 2021, 33 in 2022, and 16 in 2023 (shorter time in session due to election year). This is much less frequently than any other committee. For example, in 2022 the other committees convened between 82 and 158 times.<sup>15</sup>

These resource constraints manifest themselves in several ways. Less MPs means less diversity of views represented in the committee. It can also impact the experts heard by IOC, as Eduskunta committees – beyond their list of ‘usual suspects’ – try to accommodate the wishes of MPs regarding who is invited to hearings (Seo 2017). And there are simply less persons and less time to perform scrutiny. Notable is the assignment of only one secretary to IOC, as it indicates from the outset that the Eduskunta views the tasks of the IOC less demanding in comparison with the other committees (see also Widlund 2023: 84). As argued for example by Fuor (2020a: 80):

It is generally accepted that it takes probably 18-24 months to understand the functions and technicalities of intelligence, and this is dependent on the services’ willingness to cooperate and share information. Given the inevitable turnover of committee members after elections, the development of a strong expert staff capacity within the parliament is essential. In the absence of staff, committee’s research possibilities are limited, obliging members to rely mainly on information provided by the government and the security agencies, the very institutions the committee must oversee.

## **Outputs**

IOC’s output is meagre, with just three reports (issued to the plenary) and five statements (issued to other committees that are responsible for producing the reports) from 2019 to 2023. For example, in 2022 the Eduskunta committees issued a total of 413 reports and the IOC one report, with the other equally low-output committees being the Committee for the Future and the Constitutional Law Committee (which produces a lot of statements). That same year the total number of committee statements was 548 while the IOC issued one statement, clearly the lowest among the committees.

In terms of IOC agenda items, the annual distribution from 2019 to 2023 was largely the same. The annual report of the Intelligence Ombudsman topped the list, followed by topical intelligence issues (not specified). The work of IOC therefore revolves around the report of the

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<sup>14</sup> According to Defty (2020b) women are significantly under-represented on intelligence oversight committees. He points out that this matters also in terms of diversity within intelligence agencies themselves. For example, in the UK the ISC has conducted inquiries into diversity in the intelligence community and monitors recruitments in the agencies, practices initiated by female ISC members.

<sup>15</sup> The data on committee meetings, reports, and statements is from statistics released by the Eduskunta, available in Finnish at [Aiemmat vaalikaudet \(eduskunta.fi\)](https://eduskunta.fi/aiemmat_vaalikaudet), accessed 29 April 2024.

Intelligence Ombudsman<sup>16</sup> that is complemented by reports from the Ministry of the Interior and MOD. The annual IOC report is effectively a reply to the report of the Intelligence Ombudsman. The report has contained recommendations, for example that the Ombudsman could use his prerogatives more assertively. Thematically its coverage is broad, the focus is on general features and procedures of intelligence, and it does not deal with individual cases or operations. In the words of the IOC secretary Sami Manninen (2023), "the report has evolved into a broad document describing and evaluating intelligence oversight".

IOC does not attempt to steer intelligence activities. It monitors and evaluates the focus areas of intelligence operations, but such focus areas are strictly chosen by the intelligence agencies and the ministries. All detailed information received by the Intelligence Ombudsman is not made available to IOC members, underlining the crucial gatekeeping role of the Ombudsman. As argued by former IOC member Markus Mustajärvi (Left Alliance): "IOC should also examine concrete cases ... how the authorities responded to actions of a particular person. Receiving such process descriptions would clarify our work." (Uosukainen 2020)

IOC reports and statements have been approved unanimously, and party politics appears not to have played any role in the committee. When preparing the report and hearing experts, there is even active debate. Committee members seem to be motivated to conduct scrutiny, but the general problem is limited information which makes it difficult to ask the right questions. These challenges are in line with experiences from other countries.

### ***Interaction***

Plenary debates and tools available to individual MPs are good indicators of interest in intelligence matters. The processing of the intelligence laws in 2017-2019 sparked lively debates in the Eduskunta, but IOC reports submitted to the plenary in 2019-2023 produced hardly any debates. IOC could, on its own initiative, take up any issue and prepare a report on it for the plenary. And according to Section 35 of the constitution, the Eduskunta can appoint "ad hoc [committees] for the preparation of, or inquiry into, a given matter." As one of the interviewees stated, there would need to be a major scandal for the IOC to utilize such avenues. IOC members presented one written question about intelligence matters in 2019-2023, and in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century only 13 written questions focused directly on intelligence (see also Kettinen 2016). Oral question time, televised live and attracting broad media coverage, has not featured intelligence matters.

IOC seems to have a set of usual suspects invited to hearings. Between 2019 and 2023 it heard a total of 170 individuals. In addition to the Intelligence Ombudsman, they mainly represented the Ministry of Interior, MOD, SUPO, Defence Forces, The National Bureau of Investigation, courts, and other ministries. Beyond hearing individual academics (professors of law), IOC has not reached out to a broader circle of stakeholders even though the conduct of intelligence agencies is bound to interest various actors, not least human rights NGOs.<sup>17</sup> IOC has visited

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<sup>16</sup> The annual reports are available at [Vuosikertomukset | Tiedusteluvalvonta](#), accessed 7 May 2024.

<sup>17</sup> When processing the government proposal for the law on intelligence oversight, the Eduskunta committees heard a much wider variety of individuals and organisations. See Valiokuntien asiantuntijalausunnot, [HE 199/2017 vp Asiantuntijalausunnot \(eduskunta.fi\)](#), accessed 2 May 2024.

intelligence agencies and the respective ministries in Finland, as well as the defence forces and the president. After COVID restrictions were removed a delegation of IOC members participated in May 2022 in Stockholm in a gathering of Nordic intelligence oversight bodies and visited intelligence oversight actors in the Netherlands in September 2022. IOC does not scrutinize the operation of EU level intelligence agencies.

IOC remains an isolated organ in the parliament. The very small number of statements to the other committees indicates that IOC falls outside of normal legislative or indeed parliamentary business. The Administrative, Defence, Foreign Affairs, and Constitutional Law committees continue to also handle intelligence-related matters, and surely “any kind of cooperation between the five committees involved in intelligence oversight can help to increase the overall effectiveness of oversight” (Widlund 2023: 74). The simple fact that MPs seated in IOC cannot reveal anything to their colleagues, not even inside their own party groups, makes it very difficult to connect intelligence questions to other policy areas. Committee members have respected the code of confidentiality. This fosters trust between intelligence agencies and IOC, but maybe secrecy is taken too far. A good example is from January 2023, when the IOC chair Kari said that he is not allowed to comment on whether the committee had discussed and heard experts regarding the activities of SUPO employee Matti Saarelainen in arranging citizenship to a Russian oligarch – a very sensitive topic in Finland (Liski 2023).

### **Summary**

Clearly the IOC is struggling to make an impact. Its resources are limited, output is meagre, interaction with the rest of the Eduskunta or broader society almost non-existent, and in general there is arguably timidity and lack of ambition standing in the way of more effective oversight. MPs nonetheless appreciate the insights and information acquired through IOC, and one can legitimately argue that the mere existence of a parliamentary committee instills accountability to this highly sensitive and secretive issue area. As several of the interviewees underlined, the key is having parliamentary control of intelligence.

Prior to IOC, control of intelligence was spread out between several committees, with mainly the Constitutional Law, Defence, and Administration Committees handling such matters, but MPs paid only sporadic attention to intelligence agencies (Piispanen & Wiberg 1997; Kettinen 2016), so the situation has improved. More broadly, the major reform of the legislative framework of intelligence was enacted only a few years ago in 2019, and it probably takes time for a national ‘culture of intelligence’, including public debates and critique of intelligence practices, to take hold (Koivula 2020). And here IOC could play a significant role.

It is not a question of mandate, but of what to make of it. IOC’s mandate is broad, as intended by the preparatory working groups, the Act on the Oversight of Intelligence Activities, and as for example emphasized by Vashakmadze (2020: 49) in his comparison of intelligence oversight committees. IOC also enjoys basically unlimited access to information. But MPs must have the political will to utilize such formal powers. As for example Norton (2000: 3) has stressed more generally about legislatures:

... changes in powers, structures and procedures are by themselves not sufficient to strengthen Parliament as a scrutinising body. There has to be a change in the

culture of Parliament. MPs elected to support a government have to be willing to question that government and, if necessary, say no to it. For new structures and procedures to be effective, MPs have to be willing to make use of them.

According to Widlund (2023: 90) “the specific tasks of parliamentary oversight of intelligence were left somewhat ambiguous on purpose, the intention being that this would allow the oversight and the IOC to evolve naturally through experience.” These are early days yet, but it is telling that IOC members themselves have in the plenary questioned whether the committee is really needed. When debating the Intelligence Ombudsman’s 2021 report on 9 September 2022 the speakers, including IOC members Kiuru, Mari Rantanen (Finns Party), and Päivi Räsänen (Christian Democrats), pondered publicly the need for IOC. Kiuru opined that “perhaps it is too early to evaluate the added value of IOC for the Eduskunta. After the second electoral term we should consider whether a specific intelligence oversight committee is needed. A lighter alternative could be that the Intelligence Ombudsman reports to the Administration Committee.”<sup>18</sup> The Eduskunta (2017:20) itself remarked that the “committee’s mode of operation will evolve once it has begun its work”, and specifically noted that IOC should on its own initiative take up topical issues and report about them to the plenary. However, such possibilities have not been seized.

Of course, Finland is not the United States or a larger, more powerful European country, and its intelligence agencies are less likely to get their hands dirty in scandals. The consensual and confidential policymaking culture around security and defence policy probably also matters, particularly in recent years due to Putin’s war in Ukraine and Finland’s NATO membership. However, such factors should not discourage MPs from exercising rigorous scrutiny. As the conflictual process resulting in the new intelligence laws showed, there are genuine concerns about the appropriate role and conduct of intelligence agencies, primarily along the left-right cleavage. The election manifestos of the parties in the 2019 and 2023 Eduskunta elections did not mention intelligence matters<sup>19</sup>, although intelligence does surface in more specific foreign and security policy papers, with the Green League and Left Alliance raising questions about the protection of human rights and usage of mass surveillance techniques.<sup>20</sup>

In its report on the new intelligence legislation framework, the government stated that “from a societal perspective parliamentary control [of intelligence] is important and it has functioned well” (Valtioneuvosto 2021: 27).<sup>21</sup> But this positive assessment can also be interpreted as meaning that IOC has been comfortably harmless. When that report was debated in the plenary, Kimmo Kiljunen (Social Democrats), who had in 2007 tabled a written question about establishing an intelligence oversight committee, observed that “the biggest problem – also

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<sup>18</sup> PTK 88/2022 vp, [PTK 88/2022/5 vp \(eduskunta.fi\)](#), accessed 3 May 2024.

<sup>19</sup> The party programmes are available at Pohtiva - Poliittisten ohjelmien tietovaranto, [Pohtiva - Etusivu \(tuni.fi\)](#), accessed 29 April 2024.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Green League, Ulko- ja turvallisuuspoliittinen ohjelma, 24 September 2023, [Ulko- ja turvallisuuspoliittinen ohjelma - Vihreät \(vihreat.fi\)](#); Left Alliance, Suomen turvallisuus rakennetaan yhdessä, 8 November 2017, <https://vasemmisto.fi/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Vasemmistoliiton-ulko-ja-turvallisuuspoliittinen-ohjelma.pdf>; accessed 29 April 2024.

<sup>21</sup> The report, including a summary in English, is available at [National security has improved along with legislation on intelligence \(valtioneuvosto.fi\)](#), accessed 24 April, 2024.

for the committee chair to consider – is can we always ask the right questions. This is the major issue, that we MPs must have the courage to delve into matters.”<sup>22</sup> This dilemma goes to the very heart of what IOC and how the whole parliament sees its role in intelligence matters: an independent branch of the political system or part of the state administration, an extension of the executive or even of the intelligence agencies?

A pertinent question is if the focus on ‘overseeing the overseer’ is the optimal solution. IOC is dependent on information provided by the Intelligence Ombudsman and the intelligence community. At the same time the right of the IOC to be consulted on the appointment of the Ombudsman is important as it brings at least some democratic legitimacy to an overseer nominated by the executive (Widlund 2023: 75). There is no single minister responsible for intelligence matters, and while IOC has invited cabinet ministers to its meetings, a more direct line of accountability between IOC and the government could facilitate more meaningful scrutiny.<sup>23</sup> Enlarging the circle of organizations and individuals heard by IOC would result in greater diversity of viewpoints, while conducting inquiries into specific topics or cases would undoubtedly spark interest in the committee. This might not please the intelligence agencies, but if current practices continue the Eduskunta will remain on the fringes of intelligence oversight (Figure 1).

## Conclusions

This paper on intelligence oversight in the Finnish parliament has provided further evidence of how organizational choices matter. Atypical committees such as IOC are not part of the normal legislative cycle, but they are also freer to organize their activities as their agendas are not tied to government proposals. IOC has largely sat back, waiting for information to arrive from the Intelligence Ombudsman and the intelligence services. As a result, it does bring a degree of parliamentary oversight to intelligence, but there is room for improvement. IOC has all the necessary tools, “although it will be the willingness and expertise of the committee in using those tools that will determine its success as an overseer” (Widlund 2023: 93).

Secrecy is a big challenge for parliaments and for media, and for democratic accountability in general (Rittberger & Goetz 2018). Intelligence oversight committees easily become part of the ‘ring of secrecy’ characteristic of intelligence community. Yet, as noted in the theoretical discussion, particularly more independent actions such as investigative inquiries and reports on individual cases can illuminate questionable practices that may result in changes to legislation or to how intelligence agencies operate. Such inquiries would also facilitate party-political debates that would attract media coverage and elevate the status of the committee. The lessons from parliamentary engagement in security and defence policy indicate that normal patterns of partisan contestation are found even in core areas of national interest. MPs should also demand justifications for secrecy, as the executive and intelligence agencies may

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<sup>22</sup> Notable here is the implied critique of IOC and its chair Kari. PTK 6/2022 vp, [PTK 6/2022/5 vp](https://eduskunta.fi/PTK_6/2022/5_vp) ([eduskunta.fi](https://eduskunta.fi)), accessed 3 May 2024.

<sup>23</sup> The challenge is the logical division into civilian and military intelligence. The former cannot really be in the jurisdiction of MOD that is a natural home for military matters.

use classified information for their own purposes – governments referring to it when defending new policies, or intelligence agencies when asking for more resources. But this does not change the larger dilemma facing MPs: information acquired in intelligence oversight committees is confidential, and thereby parliamentarians can hardly use it outside of the committee rooms.

Oversight of intelligence is unlikely to get any easier. International cooperation is essential for intelligence agencies, but it creates further challenges for accountability as MPs need to consider the interests of foreign entities. At the same time governments are delegating intelligence activities to private companies. (E.g., Aldrich 2009; Aldrich & Richterova 2018; Gill 2020.) In the EU cooperation between national and European level intelligence agencies is becoming increasingly important, and this provides further incentives for control by the EP and for coordination between parliamentary intelligence committees (Wills & Vermeulen et al. 2011; Bochel et al. 2014: 177-194).

Kniep et al. (2024) highlight the significance of ‘non-official’ intelligence oversight, particularly through litigation, whistleblowing, and advocacy, and argue that we should go beyond formal institutions such as parliaments and reconsider what is (legitimate) intelligence oversight.

...the dominant frame of oversight as a well-ordered, institutionalised and secret arrangement often masks how the history of intelligence oversight has largely been driven by scandals unleashed by whistleblowers, and struggles by activists or investigative journalists, with new oversight structures often being created in response to public pressure and following the delegitimation of intelligence agencies’ practices” (Kniep et al. 2024: 211).

Often the inquiries and reports of intelligence oversight committees have been based on revelations by NGOs, investigative journalists, or individual activists, and this indicates that the Finnish IOC and other intelligence oversight committees need to cultivate links with such actors. Overall, any moves in the direction of making intelligence oversight more inclusive will surely also benefit MPs.

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