

SFSB 100 years!

Published: 11.05.2021.

The State Forensic Science Bureau of Latvia (hereafter – SFSB) is a forensic science institution under the authority of the Ministry of Justice providing forensic science services in criminal, civil and administrative proceedings to the law enforcement agencies and private persons.

SFSB was founded on 10 October 1921 by the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia. In its 100 years' history SFSB has survived the Second World War, several political regimes and the name changes, nevertheless, the main task has remained essentially unchanged as it was defined on 3 May 1929 in the Law on the Forensic Science Institute – “perform scientifically based examination of material evidence in criminal and civil cases, to foster resolution of crimes and detention of offenders, to inform the law enforcement employees about the latest achievements in forensic science and to perform scientific research”.

Despite its humble beginning – in 1921 the whole institution was accommodated just in one room, today SFSB is one of the major forensic science service providers in Latvia offering a wide variety of forensic examinations - soil, plants, fingerprints, documents, identification numbers, road accidents, information technology, paint and polymer materials, metals and alloys, oil products and inflammable liquids, glass and ceramics, fibres and animal hair, gun shot residues, linguistics, handwriting and marks.

Traffic accident analysis, biological and chemical examinations, and handwriting examination rank among the most demanded types of SFSB examinations, although the demand for information technology examination is growing rapidly in recent years.

The most of the SFSB forensic examinations, e.g. 84%, are provided in criminal proceedings and the main clients are the State Police, courts, State Revenue Service and Internal Security Bureau.

84% of SFSB forensic examinations and 58% of forensic examination methods are accredited according to requirements of the standard ISO/IEC 17025:2017 “General requirements for the competence of testing and calibration laboratories”.

SFSB is an active member of the European Network of Forensic Science institutes (hereafter – ENFSI) since 1998, participating in 11 expert working groups - Document Experts Working Group (hereafter - EDEWG), European Network of Forensic Handwriting Experts (hereafter – ENFHEX), Forensic Information Technology Working Group, Digital Imaging Working Group, Textile and Hair Group (hereafter – ETHG WG), Paint & Glass Working Group, Fire and Explosion Investigation Working Group, Animal Plant and Soil Traces expert working group (hereafter – APST WG), Firearms/GSR Working Group, Expert Working Group Marks, Road Accident Analysis Expert Working Group and Quality and Competence Liaison Group. SFSB is also represented in the Steering Committees of 4 expert working groups - EDEWG, ENFHEX, ETHG WG and APST WG.

SFSB participates in ENFSI Monopoly Programme projects promoting creation of the European forensic science area. SFSB experts have contributed to development and improvement of best practice manuals, development of databases, training of experts and improvement of forensic management.

SFSB is a founding member of the Network of Baltic States Forensic Institutions (hereafter – NBSFI) created on 7 May 1999 by forensic institutes from Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. Within the framework of NBSFI, SFSB has organized and participated in meetings, workshops and experience exchange visits. One of the best co-operation examples between the Baltic countries is the Baltic Register of Forensic Science Experts (hereafter – Register) created in 2018 in the framework of the project “Find a Forensic Expert” funded by the Justice programme of the EU. The project was implemented under the management of SFSB with co-operation from Estonian and Lithuanian forensic institutions. The Register is available online <https://eksperti.ta.gov.lv> (Latvian interface), <https://kohtuekspert.just.ee> (Estonian interface) and <https://ekspertai.ltec.lt> (Lithuanian interface).

SFSB is engaged in activities provided by the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement (hereafter – CEPOL) since 2016. This is another valuable instrument for experience exchange and knowledge building. SFSB experts have participated in the CEPOL exchanges with colleagues from Poland, Germany, Slovakia, Cyprus, Norway, Hungary and Czech Republic and in the CEPOL courses and webinars on questioned document examination, IT forensics, forensic examination in CBRN contaminated

environment and other forensic related subjects.

Another important direction of SFSB activities closely related to co-operation with other European forensic institutes is research and development. SFSB does not have a separate structural unit devoted to research and development. Instead, each of three SFSB forensic departments – Biological and Chemical Investigation Department, Technical Investigation Department and Document Investigation Department, is encouraged to find time and resources for the work on research. The efforts are focussed primarily on improvement of existing examination methods and development of new ones. SFSB experts are also engaged in various scientific research activities within ENFSI expert working groups and other co-operation platforms and financing instruments, to mention a few:

European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) action “Multi-modal Imaging of Forensic Science Evidence - tools for Forensic Science”;

European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, project “Real-time on-site forensic trace qualification”;

European Union’s Internal Security Fund, project “Towards the European Level Exchange of Facial Images”.

Among the latest SFSB investments in development it should be mentioned:

capacity building of the document examination, equipment and training workshops within the framework of the project “Operational capacity building of the forensic document examination”.

capacity building of the plant examination, installation of a plant DNA examination laboratory and organization of workshops within the framework of the project “Operational capacity building of forensic examination of tobacco and other plant-based substances”.

Both projects are co-financed by the EU *Hercule III* programme.

The forensic examination capacity building in SFSB is focused in three main interconnected directions – equipment, knowledge and methods. Quality assurance system keeps all three together ensuring reliability of examination results. Each of capacity building activities are usually accompanied by training and knowledge sharing events with colleagues from other forensic laboratories.

Forensic science is a science of constant development. It requires extensive investment in technological and human capacities. Given the fast pace of scientific development, the equipment becomes outdated in a blink of an eye, so does the knowledge. Keeping up with the time and getting ahead of it – this will be the greatest challenge for SFSB in the next 100 years. Fight against the crime will never be done, so the need for impartial, scientifically sound and legally valid forensic evidence will never be exhausted.

<https://www.vteb.gov.lv/en/sfsb-100-years>