COUNTERING RUSSIAN INFORMATION INFLUENCE IN THE BALTIC STATES: A COMPARISON OF APPROACHES ADOPTED IN ESTONIA, LATVIA, AND LITHUANIA

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ABSTRACT. Since 2016, various studies have been conducted and articles published on the characteristics, prevalence, and causes of information influence activities (primarily regarding mis- and disinformation) but very few have studied the means that democratic countries have to counter information influence. The main objective of this article[1] is to examine and compare the approaches adopted by Estonian, Lithuanian, and Latvian governments in responding to Russian information influence activities. The article will concurrently provide a comprehensive overview of the countermeasures applied by these three small countries. The author examines how the Baltic States perceive responding to information influence activities in strategic documentation, focusing on three areas: the general composition of strategic communication, the integration of media literacy into national curricula, and media policy and other regulative activities.

Keywords: information influence, Russia, propaganda, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, government office, media, journalism, Hellman, Nothhaft

1. Introduction

The vulnerability of our media space regarding misinformation and information influence such as trolling, botnets, or astroturfing should not come as a surprise to anyone in 2021. In addition to the Coronavirus pandemic, the past year has been marked by a so-called infodemic: an information disorder that undermines the efforts of governments across the world to manage the virus by questioning their reliability, for example, by contesting the obligation

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to wear protective masks or the safety of vaccines[2]. In 2018, over 80% of European citizens perceived dis- and misinformation as a problem in their country and for democracy in general[3]. Lying is not illegal in democratic societies built on the principle of free thought, just like all false information that is spread is not necessarily condemnable. There are plenty of domestic interest groups (e.g., lobbying, public relations) with legitimate rights and intentions that may use tactics similar to the purveyors of disinformation. Therefore, there is a risk of restricting public debate while countering information influence.

While people can express opinions about leaders such as Bolsonaro or Trump at the ballot box, coordinated information operations originating from abroad seeking to manipulate public debate threaten overall state security and, thus, require a more straightforward response. For the Baltic States, there was really no need for another crisis to remind them of the possible threat mis- or disinformation might pose on their societies. Since regaining their independence, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have had to resist Russian information campaigns that especially intensified after the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Since 2016, when "fake news" became the new buzzword, numerous studies and articles have been published on the nature, prevalence, and causes of information influence activities—mainly dis- and misinformation. At the same time, relatively little emphasis has been put on examining the ways democratic countries can effectively manage or counter information influence. As Biola and Pamment[4] point out, less than one percent of the more than a thousand articles on false information published in recent years focus on countering it.

Without the perspective and understanding of other countries' approaches, it is difficult for democratic countries to formulate effective policies to combat information influence activities. This work seeks to contribute to this research. The main aim of this study is to examine and compare the approaches adopted by Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian governments in responding to

[2] **Hansson, S.; Orru, K.; Torpan, S.; Bäck, A.; Kazemekaityte, A.; Meyer, S. F.; Ludvigsen, J.; Savadori, L.; Galvagni, A.; Pigrée, A**. 2021. COVID-19 information disorder: six types of harmful information during the pandemic in Europe. – Journal of Risk Research, Vol. 24 (3–4), pp. 380–393. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13669877.2020.1871058 (18.06.2022).

[3] **European Commission** 2018b. Flash Eurobarometer 464. Fake news and disinformation online. April. https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2183 (18.06.2022).

[4] **Bjola, C.; Pamment, J**. (eds.) 2018. Countering Online Propaganda and Extremism: The Dark Side of Digital Diplomacy. London, New York: Routledge, p. 174. [**Bjola, Pamment** 2018]

Russian information influence activities whilst at the same time providing a comprehensive overview of the countermeasures undertaken by these three small countries. The focus of this study is strictly on analysing governmental approaches, excluding media and third sector activities such as independent fact-checking initiatives or educational projects. Also, comparing the Baltic approaches notwithstanding, the study does not seek to understand why the countries act the way they do, i.e., the underlying reasons for their behaviour.

By mapping and comparing the countermeasures undertaken by the Baltic States, i.e. frontline states of Russian information operations, the research aims to generate additional understanding of the best practices that other countries could draw from when designing similar policies. Although the focus of the work is on countering hostile information influence originating from Russia, the author believes that the insights gained from the thesis will also prove fruitful in managing the "disorderly information space" in general[5].

In order to understand the various ways in which countries might respond to information influence, the author relies on the analytical framework by Maria Hellman and Charlotte Wagnsson[6] who have also focused on the Baltic States to a large extent. They propose four ideal-type strategies that democracies use to counter Russian information warfare: confronting, naturalising, blocking, and ignoring. So far, the author is not aware of any major work actually applying Hellman and Wagnsson's categories to real cases.

For the purpose of apprehending information influence activities, the author also relies on the theoretical model of systemic vulnerabilities by Howard Nothhaft, James Pamment, Henrik Agardh-Twetman, and Alicia Fjällhed[7] that helps to understand what makes information influence

[5] Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) use the term information disorder as an umbrella term for all false information. Within their framework, false information is divided into misinformation (non-malignant false information), disinformation (malignant false information), and malinformation (malignant but true information). See **Wardle, C.; Derakhshan, H**. 2017. Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making. Council of Europe. https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-researc/168076277c (12.09.2022). [**Wardle, Derakhshan** 2017]

[6] **Hellman, M.; Wagnsson, C**. 2017. How can European states respond to Russian information warfare? An analytical framework. – European Security, Vol. 26 (2), pp. 153–170. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09662839.2017.1294162 (18.06.2022). [**Hellman, Wagnsson** 2017]

[7] **Nothhaft, H.; Pamment, J.; Agardh-Twetman, H.; Fjällhed, A**. 2018. Information influence in Western democracies: a model of systemic vulnerabilities. – Bjola, C.; Pamment, J. (eds.). Countering Online Propaganda and Extremism: The Dark Side of Digital Diplomacy. London, New York: Routledge, pp. 28–43. [**Nothhaft *et al***. 2018]

illegitimate to the point that it must be considered a hostile act. The model also explains the predicament of Western liberal democracy in responding to information influence. The authors claim that, with the advent of the digital age, the Western model of opinion-formation is increasingly being "turned against the very societies it supports," as information influence (e.g., trolls or botnets) is increasingly difficult to discern. They also offer a diagnostics tool[8], a so-called DIDI criterion (deception, intention, disruption, interference), to determine whether communication techniques fall outside of what might be considered legitimate communication.

In the conclusion section, the author will answer the following research questions:

- First, how do Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania understand countering information influence?
- Second, what measures have Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania undertaken to counter information influence?
- Third, how are Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian approaches different?

On the following pages there is, first, an overview of academic publications that have analysed the means that governments have to respond to information influence and the aspects that make it so complicated. After that, there is an overview of the sources and methods used to answer the research questions. The questions are answered in the chapter that begins with an overview of how the Baltic States apprehend information influence in their strategic documents. Then, there is a closer look at how the three countries respond to information influence, focusing on three areas: the general setup and understanding of strategic communication, the integration of media literacy into national curricula, and media politics and other regulative activities. The results are followed by a short chapter of discussion.

[8] **Pamment, J.; Nothhaft, H.; Agardh-Twetman, H.; Fjällhed, A**. 2018. Countering Information Influence Activities: The State of the Art, Version 1.4. Research Report. Department of Strategic Communication, Lund University, pp. 16–17. https://www.msb.se/RibData/Filer/pdf/28697.pdf (18.06.2022).

2. Options available to governments in responding to information influence activities

The new information environment in which the control of political space is more important than the control of physical space has also transformed the strategies and techniques to gain access and control over the "hearts and minds" of the people. As Bjola and Pamment[9] note, the same tools that allow states to build "digital" bridges with foreign audiences with the intent of enhancing international cooperation or stimulating trade can also be used to "undermine the political and social fabric of these countries."

According to Nothhaft *et al.*, the illegitimacy (but not necessarily illegality[10]) of information influence activities is derived from three moral aspects[11]: (1) they break the rules (e.g., they lie); (2) they exploit vulnerabilities and hack weaknesses (e.g., the anonymity of contributors in social media makes it "impossible to judge whether political comments represent a real majority of citizens or foreign influence"); and (3) they rely on deception by mimicking legitimate forms of public debate to take advantage of people.

Pamment *et al.*[12] have proposed another four factors to determine whether the influence acts constitute an information influence campaign requiring a response: deception (e.g., disinformation), intention (actor conducts acts with perceived hostile intent), disruption (acts undermine, harm or hinder the functioning of societal institutions), and interference (e.g., foreign actors that have little or no business to interfere with the issue at hand). These so-called DIDI criteria in the chain of events that they are part of must be viewed holistically as the presence of a single criterion might be part of a completely legitimate political or activist activity. "It is not a coincidence that techniques employed in information influence activities overlap with journalism, public affairs, public diplomacy, lobbying and public relations; mimicry of these techniques is part of the modus operandi."[13]

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[9] **Bjola, Pamment** 2018, p. 2.

[10] Legitimacy, according to the author, is the compliance of information campaigns with societal (behavioural) norms. Even though campaigning can be perfectly legal, it might not be accepted or ethical in the eyes of the society.

[11] **Nothhaft *et al***. 2018, p. 42.

[12] **Pamment *et al***. 2018, pp. 16–17.

[13] *Ibid.*, 17.

These actors involved in influence activities do not necessarily have to be hostile or in the service of foreign adversaries (although they might act hand in hand). As Wardle and Derakhshan[14] note, the motivations of "masterminds" devising disinformation campaigns are very different from those people who eventually post. In addition to political motivations (e.g., Russian influence operations), financial and social/ideological factors also play a role in motivation actors[15]. Entire disinformation businesses might be set up for advertising (clickbait) revenue[16].

Much more is known about the techniques and nature[17] of information influence activities than is known about the effective measures to counter them. According to Bjola and Pamment[18], literature that takes *countering* as the point of departure constitutes less than one percent of the whole literature on information influence.

This entire situation is complicated by the fact that information campaigns are difficult to verify. Since it is more difficult to distinguish between war and peace in information warfare, it is also more difficult to react to information operations[19]. "In the absence of any other visible crisis, we do not wish to see influence activity as it is – an attack" and thus "we do not find the strength

[14] **Wardle, Derakhshan** 2017, p. 23.

[15] **Marwick, A.; Lewis, R**. 2017. Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online. Data & Society Research Institute. https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline.pdf (18.06.2022); see also **Wardle, Derakhshan** 2017.

[16] **Tambini, D**. 2017. How advertising fuels fake news. – LSE Media Policy Project Blog, February 24. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2017/02/24/how-advertising-fuels-fake-news/ (18.06.2022).

[17] **Darczewska, J**. 2014. The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare: The Crimean Operation, a Case Study. – Point of View, OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, No. 42. https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/point-view/2014-05-22/anatomy-russian-information-warfare-crimean-operation-a-case-study (18.06.2022); compare with **Giles, K**. 2016. Handbook of Russian Information Warfare. Fellowship Monograph Series. Rome: NATO Defense College. https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/NDC%20fm_9.pdf (18.06.2022); also compare with **Helmus, T. C.; Bodine-Baron, E.; Radin, A.; Magnuson, M.; Mendelsohn, J.; Marcellino, W.; Bega, A.; Winkelman, Z**. 2018. Russian Social Media Influence. Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2200/RR2237/RAND_RR2237.pdf (18.06.2022). [**Helmus *et al***. 2018]

[18] **Bjola, Pamment** 2018, p. 174.

[19] **Jantunen, S**. 2018. Infosõda. SA Kultuurileht. First published in 2015, p. 38. [**Jantunen** 2018]

to defend ourselves against it."[20] Pamment *et al*.[21] note that the problem of proving information influence activities is complicated by the fact that foreign actors seek to exploit societal vulnerabilities working through domestic proxies who are legitimate actors and, thus, cannot be precluded from discussions. As they say, "On the one hand, a *laissez-faire* attitude might lead to ever more blatant attempts to exert unfair influence; on the other hand, demands to crack down endanger open and free debate as one of the greatest strengths of liberal society."[22]

Thus, the main question for democracies is how to counter information influence without undermining democratic institutions and processes while respecting freedom of expression. Since governmental interference can be criticised for hindering free speech, there are some[23] who argue that countering information influence should not be the task of governments at all.

Since there are no simple solutions, a successful response to information influence must involve all parts of society[24]. The main tenet of that whole-of-society (or "total defence") approach should be building trust. According to the European Commission[25], "highly polarised societies' low levels of trust provide a fertile ground for the production and circulation of ideologically motivated disinformation." Societies should strive towards a state of resilience where there is high trust in public institutions and media (so that people are

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[20] **Jantunen** 2018, p. 204.

[21] **Pamment *et al***. 2018, pp. 87–88.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[23] For example, **Gordon, G**. 2017. Canada's government shouldn't be in the business of policing 'fake news'. – CBC News, February 22. https://www.cbc.ca/news/opinion/government-fake-news-1.3993128 (18.06.2022).

[24] **Althuis, J.; Strand, S**. 2018. Countering Fake News. – Althuis, J.; Haiden, L. (eds.). Fake News: A Roadmap. Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, pp. 68–77. https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/fake-news-a-roadmap/137 (18.06.2022) [**Althuis, Strand** 2018]; compare also **European Integration Studies Centre** 2018. Lithuanian-Swedish Roundtable Expert Discussions on Social Resilience and Psychological Defence. Policy Brief. http://www.eisc.lt/uploads/documents/files/EISC_policy%20brief(1).pdf (18.06.2022) [**EISC** 2018]; **Milo, D.; Klingová, K**. 2016. Countering Information War Lessons Learned from NATO and Partner Countries: Recommendations and Conclusions. Bratislava: Globsec. https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2017-09/countering_information_war.pdf (18.06.2022); **Pamment *et al***. 2018.

[25] **European Commission** 2018a. A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation. Report of the independent High level Group on fake news and online disinformation. Luxembourg: The Publications Office of the European Union, p. 11. https://coinform.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/EU-High-Level-Group-on-Disinformation-A-multi-dimensionalapproach-todisinformation.pdf (18.06.2022). [**European Commission** 2018a]

more critical of manipulative content), and the state is both prepared and knowledgeable about the potential threats, but also empowered to act upon them[26].

The key to achieving a resilient society is raising awareness through strategic communication (stratcom). According to Bolt and Haiden[27], strategic communication is "a holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment." Effective stratcom should dispel disinformation, propaganda, and lies that seek to mislead public opinion, aggravate social tensions, and undermine trust in governments[28].

In the end, stratcom is merely a tool in the wider framework of psychological defence, a concept that in Sweden, for example, is based on countering deception and disinformation, ensuring that public authorities have an accessible platform for disseminating information in case of crisis and strengthening the will of citizens to protect their country[29]. Various training events and media campaigns can, for example, be organised for the purpose of raising public awareness but the emphasis should also be on encouraging the personal liability of people through education and media literacy[30].

In order to raise awareness, it is crucial to focus on the target groups of information influence to understand the factors that make these groups susceptible to influence (motivation, fears, and expectations), and the ways of reaching out to them with resonating narratives. Pamment *et al*. stress that "Particular focus should be placed on informing decision-makers, journalists, public officials, and other key communicators in society."[31] The literature[32]

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[26] **EISC** 2018.

[27] **Bolt, N.; Haiden, L**. 2019. Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/improving-nato-strategic-communications-terminology/80 (18.06.2022).

[28] **Shea, J**. 2016. Resilience: a core element of collective defence. – NATO Review, March 30. https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2016/03/30/resilience-a-core-element-of-collective-defence/index.html (18.06.2022).

[29] **EISC** 2018, p. 4.

[30] **Pamment *et al***. 2018; **Polyakova, A.; Fried, D**. 2019. Democratic defense against disinformation 2.0. Atlantic Council. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/democratic-defense-against-disinformation-2-0/ (18.06.2022). [**Polyakova, Fried** 2019]

[31] **Pamment *et al***. 2018, p. 92.

[32] **Jantunen** 2018; **Paul, Chr.; Matthews, M**. 2016. The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html (18.06.2022).

also points out that, since people tend to resist persuasion and might, instead, reinforce their pre-existing beliefs even further, it is more productive to uncover the ways information influence is propagated, instead of fighting specific manipulations. According to Jantunen[33], there is no better way to counter hybrid threats than having frequent and systematic societal discussions about it.

Polyakova and Fried[34] point out that the governments of Western countries have only recently discovered the importance of countering information influence activities. The authors[35] write that governments have started to move beyond "admiring the problem" to a period of "trial and error" in which new ideas and solutions for countering and building resilience against disinformation are being tested, albeit unevenly and with setbacks." Some European countries such as the Baltic States, the Nordic Countries, and the United Kingdom have for some time been determined to counter Russian influence activities. Others—such as North Macedonia after Russia's efforts to foil the Greek-North Macedonia agreement, or Spain after Russia's influence operations in Catalonia—have only recently "woken up"[36]. In Spain, for example, special units were launched ahead of the 2019 elections to combat hybrid threats[37].

Turning our attention to the strategies and measures that societies have at their disposal to counter information influence, Stray[38] admits that, even though there are good accounts of Cold War counter-disinformation institutions, there is a shortage of publications and literature offering a framework

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[33] **Jantunen** 2018, p. 244.

[34] **Polyakova, Fried** 2019.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 1.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[37] **Abellán, L**. 2019. Spain launches unit to fight disinformation ahead of elections. – El País, March 11. https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2019/03/11/inenglish/1552290997_611483.html (18.06.2022). – A more thorough and up-to-date overview of legislations adopted for managing disinformation and information influence can be found in the following publications: **Robinson, O.; Coleman, A.; Sardarizedh, S**. 2019. A report of anti-disinformation initiatives. Oxford Internet Institute. https://issuu.com/anselmolucio/docs/oxtec-anti-disinformation-initiatives__2019_ (18.06.2022); **Plasilova, I.; Hill, J.; Carlberg, M.; Goubet, M.; Procee, R**. 2020. Study for the "Assessment of the implementation of the Code of Practice on Disinformation". Brussels: European Commission. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/study-assessment-implementation-code-practice-disinformation (18.06.2022).

[38] **Stray, J**. 2017. Defense Against the Dark Arts: Networked Propaganda and Counter-Propaganda. – Medium, February 27. https://medium.com/tow-center/defense-against-the-dark-arts-networked-propaganda-and-counter-propaganda-deb7145aa76a (18.06.2022). [**Stray** 2017]

that deals with the networked world. Comparing the actions of the EU's East StratCom Task Force, Facebook, and the Chinese information regime, Stray[39] groups their activities into six strategies: refutation (debunking), exposure of inauthenticity (e.g., discrediting bot networks), alternative narratives, algorithmic filter manipulation (e.g., deranking by social media), speech laws (e.g., fines for sharers of disinformation), and censorship. Regarding the specific tools that states can employ, Althuis and Strand[40] argue that governments are mainly concerned with two types of activities. First, they implement regulations to restrain the dissemination of fake news. Second, they support the institutions and entities responsible for raising societal awareness and increasing public knowledge about the impact of fake news. In a simplified manner, this means that governments have regulative and non-regulative levers in their hands.

A more holistic theoretical approach about the devices of democratic governments to counter hostile strategic narratives as part of information warfare is proposed by Hellman and Wagnsson[41] in their analytic framework. The authors propose four ideal models that represent the strategies democratic governments can employ against Russian information influence activities: confronting, naturalising, blocking, and ignoring.

Studies of governmental responses are examined in two dimensions (Figure 1): engagement-disengagement and inward protection-outward protection. By "engagement", Hellman and Wagnsson[42] regard the government as actively confronting hostile narratives by producing or disseminating narratives of its own or by setting up channels for this purpose. "Disengaging", on the other hand, means that hostile narratives are not given much attention; they are ignored. This might also result from, for example, states not being aware of the narratives targeted at them. The second dimension divides strategies into those targeting domestic and foreign audiences[43]. For example, states might want to project narratives to foreign audiences to improve their reputation, promote a certain worldview, and gain a great amount of power. They might also focus on a domestic public by protecting the national discourse from alien influence (e.g., blocking media channels) or not adopting

[39] **Stray** 2017.

[40] **Althuis, Strand** 2018, p. 69.

[41] **Hellman, Wagnsson** 2017.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 157.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 158.

specific countermeasures. At the same time, they rely on the ability of democratic institutions to protect their information space and ignore external narratives[44].

	Outward projection	Inward projection
Engaging	Confronting	Blocking
Disengaging	Naturalising	Ignoring

Figure 1. Four ideal-type strategies for democracies to employ in information warfare on engaging-disengaging and outward-inward scale (Hellman and Wagnsson 2017)

Hellman and Wagnsson bring the establishment of a Russian language public broadcasting channel in Estonia in 2015, ETV+, as an example of the confronting strategy. The target audience of the channel is the Russophone minority in Estonia who mainly get their information from rebroadcast or adapted versions of Russian-owned television channels in the Baltic States. As Helmus *et al.*[45] point out, "the production value and entertainment level of Moscow-funded media tend to be significantly higher" due to government subsidies and greater economies of scale. According to Hellman and Wagnsson, the purpose of ETV+ is "to decrease Russian information influence by balancing and countering the narratives produced by these Russian-owned television channels," and "to prevent these [Russian disinformation campaigns] from exercising influence on the Russian minority."[46]

Latvia and Lithuania are mentioned by Hellman and Wagnsson[47] as examples of adopting the blocking strategy where the existence of an "other" is clearly recognised and dealt with. Instead of countering false information by projecting its own versions of reality, the state protects its own narratives by blocking those of an opponent. This strategy is, therefore, inward-looking and protective with no aspiration to engage with foreign audiences: "The practical emphasis is on restrictions and control measures such as the strategies of selective blocking of information."[48] Latvia and Lithuania have chosen this strategy and are temporarily restricting the right of retransmission of

[44] **Hellman, Wagnsson** 2017, p. 158.

[45] **Helmus *et al***. 2018, p. 67.

[46] **Hellman, Wagnsson** 2017, p. 159.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 161.

[48] *Ibid.*

Russian television channels (e.g., RTR Planeta and REN TV), thus restricting the circulation of unsuitable narratives. In 2013–2021 Lithuania and Latvia blocked access to Russian television channels ten and five times, respectively, predominantly sanctioning violations related to incitement to hatred or war[49].

According to Hellman and Wagnsson[50], it is unlikely that these four ideal-type models truly reflect the way governments engage in information warfare. Rather, the authors claim that states are expected to mix strategies. For example, Latvia also has the public television station LTV7 that broadcasts partially in Russian. In Estonia, on the other hand, the Sputnik news agency was forced to cease operations in December 2019, even though the government of Estonia referred to breaking the Ukrainian sanctions' regime as the reason behind the closure, as opposed to content (disinformation) broadcasted on the channel.

3. Sources and methods

The empirical part of this article is based on an analysis of six strategic documents and 13 expert interviews. Document analysis involved a comparison of strategy documents that constitute the basis for countering hostile information influence in the three Baltic States. These include publicly available national security and defence strategies that have mostly been approved by the parliament or the government (see Table 1). The author analyses the emphasis

[49] The strictest punishment assigned by Latvia was on RTR Planeta in April 2016 when the National Electronic Mass Media Council of Latvia (NEPLP) halted the right of retransmission of the channel for six months. The Council detected signs of incitement of ethnic hatred in "Sunday Evening with Vladimir Solovyov" that aired on 18 and 19 January 2015, and in "Vesti" that aired on 6 July 2015. For example, in "Sunday Evening with Vladimir Solovyov" that aired on 18 January, the host and almost all participants condemned Ukraine and the aggression of President Poroshenko that received support from Europe and USA. According to the Council, the participants of the show were hostile towards Ukraine by referring to it as an aggressor and supporting the Donbas separatists. For example, in a discussion about the situation in Ukraine, V. Rogov said, "Nazi, non-Nazi, fascist: that's all just rhetoric. You have to realise – Ukraine is a territory occupied by Nazis (or fascists, whatever you call them). You cannot agree on anything with them. You can only defeat them." **NEPLP** 2016. NEPLP restricts the rebroadcasting and distribution of Rossiya RTR in Latvia for six months. April 19. http://neplpadome.lv/en/home/news/news/neplp-restricts-rebroadcasting-and-distribution-of-rossiya-rtr-inlatvia-for-six-months.html (18.06.2022).

[50] **Hellman, Wagnsson** 2017, p. 158.

given to information influence activities devised in the documents and the countermeasures envisaged. It is important to emphasise that relying only on strategic documents cannot give an adequate picture of states' approaches and measures regarding information warfare as much of the information is either classified or not publicly available. Even some publicly available documents, for example "The Estonian National Defence Development Plan for 2017–2026" (2017), include classified parts. Document analysis, therefore, is only meant to serve as a complement to interviews with state officials.

Table 1. Strategic documents used for document analysis

Country	Strategic documents analysed
Estonia	• National Security Concept of Estonia 2017. *Compiled by the Government and approved by Riigikogu.* • National Defence Development Plan 2017–2026. *Approved by the Government.*
Latvia	• National Security Concept 2019. *Approved by Saeima.* • National Defence Concept 2020. *Compiled by the Ministry of Defence, approved by the Cabinet of Ministers and adopted by Saeima.*
Lithuania	1. National Security Strategy 2017. *Approved by Saeima.* 2. The White Paper of Lithuanian Defence Policy 2017. *Compiled by the Ministry of National Defence*

Semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with representatives of national institutions that have either a direct or indirect role in responding to hostile information influence activities (see Table 2). Besides providing insight into the general understanding, setup, and coordination of strategic communication, the discussion also focuses on governmental activity in areas that are not related to state security in the narrow sense, i.e., media literacy and cultural policy. During peacetime, ministries of education and culture play a far greater role in enhancing societies' long-term resilience to information threats compared to the armed forces. Also, examining the defence and security activities is complicated as much of the information is classified. The author conducted 13 interviews in total.

Table 2. Division of expert interviews by institutions and countries

Country	Institution	Tasks of institutions
Estonia	1. Government Office	Coordinating and developing strategic communication, developing media competency in society, crisis communication.
	2. Ministry of Culture	Creating media policy.
	3. Ministry of Education and Research	Integrating media literacy into the curricula of basic and secondary schools.
	4. Defence Forces	Strategic communication in the field of defence.
Latvia	1. State Chancellery	Coordinating and enhancing communication, crisis communication.
	2. Ministry of Culture	Creating media policy, developing media competency in society.
	3. National Centre for Education	Integrating media literacy into the curricula of basic and secondary schools.
	4. Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Establishing the positions of the European Democracy Action Plan, international cooperation, communicating with foreign auditoriums.
	5. Ministry of Defence	Strategic communication in the field of defence.
Lithuania	1. Office of the Government of Lithuania	Coordinating and enhancing communication, crisis communication.
	2. Ministry of Culture	Creating media policy, developing media competency in society.
	3. Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Establishing the positions of the European Democracy Action Plan, international cooperation, communicating with foreign auditoriums.
	4. Armed Forces	Strategic communication in the field of defence.

Information campaigns and, more specifically, disinformation has been a field of interest for the academic community primarily since Brexit and Donald Trump winning the American presidential elections. Thus, the author is not aware of any other theory-driven comprehensive case studies focusing specifically on government activities to counter information influence. There have been country-by-country overviews published in recent years however, e.g., "Disinformation resilience in central and eastern Europe" (2018) by Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism" and the EAST Centre, which focused on national vulnerabilities and preparedness in 14 East and Central European countries, including the Baltic States, for combating false information spread

by foreign countries[51]. That study, however, was neither comprehensive (e.g., it does not cover media literacy in formal education) nor in-depth (the country chapters are short and condensed). Also, it focused on resilience to disinformation without taking into account other types of information influence activities, for example, fake social media accounts (trolls etc.).

4. Results

Based on the research, there will first be an overview of the results of document analysis, outlining the ways how Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania comprehend countering information influence activities. Then, based on the semi-structured expert interviews with state officials, the author will move on to give an overview of the methods used by the Baltic States to counter information influence activities, and the characteristic traits of the approaches of the three countries, focusing on three areas in which the countries operate: the overall setup of strategic communication, the integration of media literacy into formal education (school curricula), and media policies and other regulative activities.

4.1. Information influence in strategic documents

An analysis of strategic documents serving as the basis for security policy decisions reveals that countering information influence activities can be approached from multiple terminological angles. Estonians regard security from a broad perspective and see the neutralisation of information threats as part of the wider concept of "psychological defence" that serves as a tool to build a resilient, coherent and united society. Lithuanians, on the other hand, approach the issue from a more traditional standpoint: according to their national security strategy[52], information security must be guaranteed in concordance with economic, energy, environmental, cyber, and social defence. Latvians, just as geographically, are somewhere in-between in a transitional

[51] **Damarad, V.; Yeliseyeu, A**. 2018. Foreword. – Damarad, V.; Yeliseyeu, A. (eds.). Disinformation resilience in central and eastern Europe. Kyiv, pp. 5–12. http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf (18.06.2022).

[52] **National Security Strategy of the Republic of Lithuania** 2017. Approved by the Seimas, p. 12. https://www.newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/2017-nacsaugstrategijaen.pdf (18.06.2022). [**National Security Strategy of the Republic of Lithuania** 2017]

phase, having only in October 2020 introduced the new Comprehensive National Defence System that is similar to the Estonian system. Terminological differences, however, do not reflect principal differences in countering information influence. As several interviewees acknowledged, people are just talking about the same thing with different names. One respondent from the Lithuanian Armed Forces, for example, said that what they call psychological defence essentially means educating the society against hostile propaganda.

Contrary to what one would expect from security documents that follow the idea of a broad security concept, Estonian source documents never mention educating the society about information threats, not even by developing media literacy. The Estonian National Security Policy 2017 is primarily focused on developing a resilient and cohesive society that is achieved with the integration of all segments of society and effective strategic communication, intertwined with psychological defence. The security policy documents[53], however, remain relatively abstract and do not get any more specific than stating, "The preferred tools of psychological defence are informing the public of attacks, manipulation, and false information, and guaranteeing all segments of society access to multifaceted information."

The most comprehensive and detailed package to counter Russian information influence is presented in the Latvian National Security Concept[54]. In addition to developing and coordinating strategic communication (like Estonia), the document mainly relies on regulatory and non-regulatory media policy measures (including suspending the retransmission of television channels) to curb Russia's information space[55]. The Concept also includes a separate paragraph[56] about conducting media policy discussions at a European Union level (mostly instructions for social media companies to prevent the circulation of false information, primarily through the European Democracy Action Plan).

[53] **Eesti julgeolekupoliitika alused** 2017. Riigikogu otsuse „„Eesti julgeolekupoliitika alused" heakskiitmine" lisa, p. 19. https://www.riigiteataja.ee/aktilisa/3060/6201/7002/395XIII_RK_o_Lisa.pdf (18.06.2022).

[54] **On Approval of the National Security Concept** 2019. Approved by the Seimas. https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/309647-on-approval-of-the-national-security-concept (18.06.2022). [**On Approval of the National Security Concept** 2019]

[55] *Ibid.*, pp. 17–20.

[56] *Ibid.*

4.2. General composition of strategic communication

The general set-up of the strategic communication of the Baltic States is relatively similar in all three states, concerning both understanding and activities. Interviews with experts revealed that all three countries have significantly increased the resources spent on strategic communication and established relevant departments within government offices to coordinate strategic communication. In Lithuania, the specific interinstitutional procedure for responding to information incidents such as disinformation, set up in August 2020, is also publicly available[57]: every state institution monitors their own information space, assesses incidents based on given criteria[58] and, if needed, reports to the Government Office that coordinates further communication between agencies. The most forceful response would require the involvement of the prime minister and members of the government. In Estonia, Siim Kumpas from the State Chancellery said that a model for coordinating interinstitutional messages has been in place already since the early 2000s. In Latvia, however, according to Daiga Holma, head of the Strategic Communication Coordination Department of the Latvian State Chancellery, a similar model is currently in the process of being set up.

The setup of strategic communication is not, however, identical in the Baltics. This results partly from different balances and centres of gravity when it comes to ministries of defence and the armed forces. In Estonia and Lithuania, the armed forces play a bigger role in assessing the information environment fighting disinformation; in Latvia on the other hand, there is a joint Military Public Affairs Department in the Ministry of Defence. Dace Kundrāte from the Latvian Ministry of Defence explained that this system was established during the financial crisis that brought big personnel cuts in the armed forces. One supporting factor probably is the fact that, in contrast to Estonia and Lithuania, there is no conscription in Latvia, which means that the general impact, reputation, and capability of the armed forces are smaller. The absence of conscription also necessitates different possibilities

[57] **Nutarimas dėl strateginės komunikacijos nacionalinio saugumo srityje koordinavimo tvarkos aprašo patvirtinimo** 2020. The Government of Lithuania, No. 955, August 26. https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/3f019ef4eb8511eab72ddb4a109da1b5?jfwid=-kyrux9aae (18.06.2022).

[58] Evaluations of information incidents (Nutarimas dėl strateginės komunikacijos … 2020) involve the source (ability to spread information, effect), the content (potential for affecting the public or the decision-making processes regarding national security), and the context (can a (geo)political context have an impact on decision-making).

for developing psychological defence in the armed forces. A senior officer in the Estonian Defence Forces, for example, said that all reservists are given a basic overview of modern information warfare and psychological defence. Latvia has no such possibility.

4.3. Integrating media literacy into national curricula

In the long term, the most effective way to manage the "disorderly information space" is to raise people's awareness and develop their critical thinking skills. An integral part here is played by media and information literacy that, in order to be most effective, must be integrated into formal education. Latvia and (to a smaller extent) Estonia have been more successful in integrating media literacy into formal education than Lithuania. In Latvia, media literacy has been integrated into media policy planning documents since 2016, and the country is currently introducing a new curriculum. By September 2022, all basic and high school students should already be following the new curriculum. As Ansis Nudiens, head expert at the National Centre for Education in Latvia, said, media literacy was largely absent in the old curricula, last revised in 2013 and 2014. When new curricula were compiled, however, an integration of media literacy was considered a priority, at least in social education. The sections on social and civil studies in primary and secondary school curricula now include a separate section for source criticism. Linguistic studies in secondary school include a separate section "Media, language and influence" that expects students to be able to identify "influencing techniques and manipulation tools" in texts[59].

In Estonia, media literacy competences are mostly concentrated in the upper secondary school level. One of the compulsory courses in the Estonian language there is "Media and influence" that seeks to shape critical media users. The learning content of the course includes, among other things, an overview of the differences between quality journalism and entertainment, the characteristics of a democratic information society, demagogy and manipulation techniques, media ethics and media criticism, and also advertising[60]. At

[59] **Noteikumi par valsts vispārējās vidējās izglītības standartu un vispārējās vidējās izglītības programme paraugiem** 2019. Government regulation, No. 416. Entry into force on 1 September 2020. https://likumi.lv/ta/id/309597-noteikumi-par-valsts-visparejas-videjas-izglitibas-standartu-un-visparejas-videjas-izglitibas-programmu-paraugiem (18.06.2022).

[60] **National curriculum for upper secondary schools**. Annex 1, subject "Language and Literature". Regulation No. 2 of the Government of the Republic of Estonia of 6 January

the basic school level, media literacy is not a priority, although most classes involve working with sources and assessing their credibility. The Estonian curricula, however, are currently being revised and new versions should be adopted in the following years as confirmed by Britt Järvet, Chief Expert for General Competencies at the Department of Primary and Basic Education of the Ministry of Education and Research.

One shortcoming identified in the Estonian basic and upper secondary school curricula is the lack of media and information literacy components for students who study Russian as their mother tongue, compared to those who study in Estonian. The aforementioned compulsory "Media and influence" course, for example, a cornerstone of media and information literacy in secondary education, is not available to those who have opted for Russian language and literature. In order to give a more general context, we can take a look at elaborated data: according to the education statistics website Haridussilm, 4,966 students (22% of all students) learned Russian language and literature as native Russians on a secondary school level in the 2019/2020 academic year. A similar discrepancy, although to a lesser degree, is detectable in the learning content of the basic school level: while the curricula of native Estonian students involve an overview of primary linguistic influence techniques, the nature of media and its present-day objectives, central principles of media ethics, the principle of freedom of speech and its boundaries, quality journalism, advertising, and public and hidden influence[61], these topics are not expected to be covered for Russian students in Estonia. The author did not discern similar discrepancies in Latvian and Lithuania school curricula.

There is slightly less emphasis on media and information literacy in the Lithuanian curricula, and it is not as clearly structured in one place as it is in the Estonian and Latvian curricula. Compared to Estonia and Latvia, there is no special paragraph or course for the contemporary information environment or media literacy topics in secondary education. In basic education, another factor why media and information literacy components seem to be sparser is that they are not as strongly integrated into cross-curricular topics or competences as in other Baltic States.

2011. Entry into force on 1 September 2014, pp. 9–10. https://www.riigiteataja.ee/aktilisa/1280/7202/0013/2m_lisa1.pdf (18.06.2022).

[61] **National curriculum for basic schools**. Annex 1, subject "Language and Literature". Regulation No. 1 of the Government of the Republic of Estonia of 6 January 2011. Entry into force on 1 September 2014, p. 15. https://www.riigiteataja.ee/aktilisa/1030/3202/1012/1m%20lisa1.pdf (18.06.2022).

4.4. Media policy and regulative activities

Whilst there are more similarities than differences in the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian approaches to countering Russian information influence activities when it comes to the overall setup and coordination of strategic communication and the integration of media literacy into school curricula, this is not the case when examining and comparing countries' cultural policies. To be more precise, Estonians have a considerably different understanding about the extent to which the state (or the government) should regulate, guide, and interfere in the media to achieve its goals, compared to that of Latvia and Lithuania. This relates to perceiving media policy as a tool of psychological defence, a part of the general toolbox for countering information influence in the wider sense, but also to the narrower understanding of using media support measures to prop up media literacy or restricting the broadcasting of Russian television in the Baltic States to prevent the spreading of Kremlin narratives among the (Russian-speaking) population.

Distinctive understandings in perceiving media policy as a tool to counter information influence ultimately boil down to different regulatory cultures in Estonia and the other Baltic states. This is most conspicuous when comparing how actively the governments try to influence or guide the media. For example, Estonia does not have any distinct strategy to influence the media space, except the development plan for 2021–2024 of the Estonian public broadcaster (ERR) that sets the vision and objectives for public broadcasting[62]. Unlike Estonia, Latvia has the Mass Media Policy Guidelines for 2016–2020 along with the Implementation Plan, approved by the government[63]. Lithuania also has the Strategic Directions of the Public Information Policy 2019–2022[64], approved by the Minister of Culture. In addition to developing media literacy and critical thinking, one of the goals of which is to enhance the distribution and availability of quality, analytical, and trustworthy public information to

[62] **Eesti Rahvusringhääling** 2020a. Eesti Rahvusringhäälingu arengukava 2021–2024. https://files.err.ee/info/Arengukava_2021-2024.pdf (18.06.2022). [**ERR** 2020a]

[63] **Plan for Implementation of the Mass Media Policy Guidelines of Latvia 2016–2020**. Approved on 8 November 2016. Decision No. 666 of the Latvian Government. https://www.km.gov.lv/en/media/1355/download (18.06.2022). [**Plan for Implementation of the Mass Media Policy Guidelines of Latvia 2016–2020**. 2016]

[64] **Įsakymas dėl visuomenės informavimo politikos strateginių krypčių 2019–2022 metams patvirtinimo** [Lithuanian Strategic Directions for Public Information Policy 2019–2022]. Approved on 19 February 2019. Regulation No. IV-91 of the Minister of Culture. https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/95c4cf60344211e99595d005d42b863e (18.06.2022).

reduce the information gap of groups and national communities that are in the most unfavourable social positions.

According to Kõuts-Klemm *et al*.[65], Estonian media policy can be characterised with Freedman's[66] concept of "negative policy", the core idea of which is that if a country feels the need to organise anything, it should be minimal and not intrusive. The fact that Estonia has no media strategy was also noted by an interviewee from the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture. "It is a message to me that Estonian media policy is about not regulating media at all," said Deividas Velkas, head of the Media and Copyright Policy Unit. There are regulatory (legal) prescriptions detailed in the Lithuanian and Latvian security strategies to counter information influence activities, whereas the Estonian National Security Concept and National Defence Development Plan are devoid of these and, instead, focus on building a cohesive and resilient society that is tolerant and united. For example, the Latvian National Security Concept[67] clearly states, "From the perspective of national security, the current legal framework of media operations does not solve the topical challenges related to the security of the information space of Latvia."

A more liberal attitude also means that Estonia lacks the possibilities to prop up media outlets and enhance media literacy or investigative journalism (or quality journalism in general). Latvia and Lithuania do have such media support measures. Latvia, for example, has established the Mass Media Support Fund to increase the diversity of the media environment by allowing the commercial media to receive state funds to create content of public significance[68]. According to Kristers Pļešakovs, head of the media policy division of the Ministry of Culture of Latvia, the program received a funding of 1.2 million euros in 2020 which was used to support projects in nine categories including media literacy, media criticism, minorities, and investigative and analytical journalism. Lithuania has a similar media support fund to support cultural, educational, public information security, and media literacy projects with an annual budget of approximately 2.6 million euros, as

[65] **Kõuts-Klemm, R.; Harro-Loit, H.; Ibrus, I.; Ivask, S.; Juurik, M.; Jõesaar, A.; Järvekülg, M.; Kauber, S.; Koorberg, V.; Lassur, S.; Loit, U.; Tafel-Viia, K**. 2019. Meediapoliitika olukorra ja arengusuundade uuring. The University of Tartu Institute of Social Studies, MEDIT-TLU Centre of Excellence in Media Innovation and Digital Culture. Tartu, Tallinn, p. 20. https://www.digar.ee/viewer/et/nlib-digar:399372/341746/page/1 (18.06.2022). [**Kõuts-Klemm *et al***. 2019]

[66] **Freedman, D**. 2014. The Contradictions of Media Power. London: Bloomsbury.

[67] **On Approval of the National Security Concept** 2019, p. 19.

[68] **Plan for Implementation of the Mass Media Policy Guidelines of Latvia 2016–2020**. 2016.

confirmed by Deividas Velkas, head of the Media and Copyright Policy Unit of the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture.

On the other hand, the mere fact of having a sophisticated policy document such as a security or a media strategy does not automatically mean that its clauses are followed. For example, the National Security Concept of Latvia[69] states that the root cause behind the vulnerability of Latvian information space is media, especially the public media that is "continuously and systematically suffering because of low financing." This, together with a relatively small market size and insufficient income from advertising, has limited the media in creating high-quality content[70]. "From year to year we have to deal with this problem that the government does not allocate enough funds for public media," said Kristers Pļešakovs, head of the media policy division of the Ministry of Culture of Latvia. Underfinancing is not an exclusively Latvian problem, of course. The Development Plan for 2021–2024 of the Estonian public broadcaster ERR states that, according to an assessment from the National Audit Office of Estonia, the current financing model is not sustainable and endangers the quality, stability, and journalistic independence of the programs of ERR[71].

Another discrepancy in the 2019 Latvian National Security Concept between what is prescribed and what the real action is, pertinent to countering hostile information influence, is the planned discontinuation of LTV7's Russian-language content and moving it online to a dedicated platform. However, the Latvian Security Concept states the need to invest in public and commercial media in order to offer a long-term alternative to Russia's information space. Even more specifically, according to the section of public broadcasting in the Strategy[72], a comprehensible alternative of good quality to the sources of information representing the information space of Russia should be created to provide freedom of choice for minorities. But since the Russian-language PBK ended its locally produced evening news program in March 2020, the

[69] **On Approval of the National Security Concept** 2019, p. 16.

[70] According to Reporters Without Borders (2019), the Latvian public media is financed significantly less than the Estonian or Lithuanian media. National financing comprises only 0.1% of GDP, whereas the European average is 0.17%. See **Reporters Without Borders** 2019. Crise au sein de l'audiovisuel public letton: RSF appelle les autorités à résoudre le conflit. July 25. https://rsf.org/fr/crise-au-sein-de-l-audiovisuel-public-letton-rsf-appelle-les-autorit%C3%A9s-%C3%A0-r%C3%A9soudre-le-conflit (18.06.2022). In Estonia, the public broadcasting financing comprised 0.14% of GDP in 2020. See **ERR** 2020a, p. 21.

[71] **ERR** 2020a, p. 18.

[72] **On Approval of the National Security Concept** 2019, pp. 17–18.

discontinuation of the LTV7 Russian news program means that, for a considerable part of the Latvian population, there would be no serious alternative to news from Russia-based television channels such as RTR-Planeta or REN TV. This would predominantly affect the older generation of Russophones whose Latvian is poor and who do not feel comfortable using the Internet. According to the Security Concept[73], the reduction or disappearance of media diversity, particularly in Russian-speaking regions, may pose a serious risk and endanger national security.

As the interviews showed, there are divergent attitudes within Latvian state institutions regarding the move. Interviewees from the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Culture were very critical of the discontinuation of Russian content on LTV7. For example, according to Dace Kundrāte, head of the Military Public Affairs Department of the Ministry of Defence of Latvia, it hinders the state's ability to efficiently communicate with all of its residents, while Kristers Pļešakovs, head of the media policy division of the Ministry of Culture of Latvia, believes that it will push a section of society into the Russian infosphere. On the other hand, Daiga Holma, head of the Strategic Communication Coordination Department of the Latvian State Chancellery, supported the decision, arguing that more and more people, including the older generation, are moving to the Internet to seek information, and that a modern Internet platform is better than providing a couple of broadcasts per day on LTV7.

Compared to Latvia where the proportion of Russian-language public broadcasting is being reduced, Estonia has chosen a different approach. Even though this is not stated in any of the official strategies, the interviewees at the Estonian Ministry of Culture said that a long-term alternative to the Kremlin information space in Estonia is the Russian-language content of ERR, which includes television (ETV+), radio (Raadio 4), and the Internet (rus.err.ee). The main problem for ETV+ is similar to that of the Latvian LTV7: low ratings. In February 2021, ETV+ was among the ten least popular channels in Estonia[74]. Non-Estonians believe the channel to be as trustworthy as PBK or other Russian channels[75]. The interviewees from the Ministry of Culture pointed out that, during the COVID-19 crisis in spring 2020, viewership of

[73] **On Approval of the National Security Concept** 2019, p. 16.

[74] **Kantar Emor** 2021. An overview of television audiences. https://www.kantaremor.ee/tele-auditooriumi-ulevaade/ (18.06.2022).

[75] **Kaldur, K.; Vetik, R.; Kirss, L.; Kivistik, K.; Seppel, K.; Kallas, K.; Masso, M.; Anniste, K**. 2017. Eesti ühiskonna integratsiooni monitooring 2017. The Institute of Baltic Studies, Praxis

the evening news programme at ETV+ grew threefold[76], indicating that, even if the channel is not followed daily, from a psychological defence point of view the channel has still succeeded in earning the trust of non-Estonians and being a reliable source of information for them in crisis situations when there really is need for it.

Unlike Estonia and Latvia, there were no public broadcasting television or radio channels in Russian (or in Polish) in Lithuania as of 2021, and there were no plans to establish any either. Lithuanian public broadcaster LRT provides news online in Russian, however, in addition to Lithuanian and English. As Tomas Čeponis, an analyst of the Lithuanian Armed Forces Strategic Communication Department, said, establishing a Russian language public broadcasting channel has been abandoned since a separate television channel is considered too expensive to compete with well-funded Russian channels. He also said that Lithuania, where national minorities make up about 16% of the population, "plays by different rules" compared to Latvia and Estonia where national minorities account for 38% and 30%, respectively, in the sense that it is more difficult for Russia to mobilise and influence the minorities there and achieve political change.

One of the main differences in the Baltic approaches to countering Russian information influence lies in restricting the retransmission of (i.e., blocking) Russian television channels, as was also pointed out by Hellman and Wagnsson[77]. This measure is also featured in the national security strategies of Lithuania and Latvia. For example, according to the Lithuanian National Security Strategy[78], Lithuania seeks to legally prevent the dissemination of information which incites change in the constitutional order of Lithuania by force and encroaches on its sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence, which spreads war propaganda and instigates war or hatred. The Latvian National Security Concept[79] refers to the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive of the European Union that simplifies the procedure of

Centre for Policy Studies Foundation, p. 76. https://www.ibs.ee/wp-content/uploads/EIM2017.pdf (18.06.2022). [**Kaldur *et al***. 2017]

[76] **ERR** 2020b = **Eesti Rahvusringhääling** 2020b. Eriolukorra ajal on uudistesaadete vaadatavus televisioonis tõusnud. April 9. https://menu.err.ee/1074998/eriolukorra-ajal-on-uudistesaadete-vaadatavus-televisioonis-tousnud (18.06.2022).

[77] **Hellman, Wagnsson** 2017.

[78] **National Security Strategy of the Republic of Lithuania** 2017, p. 13.

[79] **On Approval of the National Security Concept** 2019, pp. 19–20.

suspending the retransmission of television channels if based in another EU member state.

The interviewees from Lithuania and Latvia shared the opinion that banning, albeit not a perfect solution, is still a possible measure in the toolkit of democratic countries and all legal measures should be used to counter Russian information influence. According to Romanas Judinas, advisor to the Lithuanian Government Chancellery, "Legal defence is also defence. Maybe not the only way and the best way, but sometimes you should use this." Kristers Pļešakovs, head of the media policy division of the Ministry of Culture of Latvia, agrees that in the event of legal violations (e.g., incitement of hate or war), restriction of access to television channels is justified. All interviewees emphasised, however, that when restricting freedom of access freedom of expression must be borne in mind, which is why there are also strict procedures in place for that.

Estonia, part of the same European Union regulatory environment as Latvia and Lithuania, has not sanctioned any Russian television channels as of 2021 and has adopted a more liberal attitude. The interviewees at the Estonian Ministry of Culture brought forth the argument of freedom of expression. They also said that blocking Russian television channels more actively would create additional tensions in society and is not productive since a lot of the content is also shared on other media such as the Internet. Siim Kumpas, a strategic communications advisor of the Government Office of Estonia, agreed that restricting access to Russian media would make it more difficult to criticise Russia for similar actions. "In a non-free country, the information space is always under control, whether through censorship, threats to journalists or banning some content. If we adopt any of these methods, I start to question what separates the two of us," he said.

5. Discussion

An analysis of strategic documents and expert interviews revealed that the views of the Baltic States on responding to information influence activities are relatively similar. The same applies to the general setup of strategic communication. As already mentioned, strategic communication is not identical in all three states: for example, the emphases of assignments given to the ministries of defence and the armed forces vary. Another difference can be detected in openness. More specifically, compared to colleagues from Estonia and Latvia, the Lithuanian Armed Forces seem to practice a little more transparency in

their work, especially regarding countering information influence. In addition to the fact that part of their strategic communication themes and messages are public (in the possession of the author), the Lithuanian Armed Forces started to publicise parts of their monthly information environment assessment reports that give an overview of Russian narratives and disinformation in the Lithuanian information space or about Lithuania due to the coronavirus pandemic in 2020[80]. The author of this article is not aware of similar public reports compiled by the Ministries of Defence or armed forces in Estonia or Latvia.

The publication of information environment assessments (e.g., the distribution of disinformation or inauthentic activities on the Internet) should be encouraged because it helps to raise public awareness and could also spur academic research on Russian information influence activities. Governments would, however, need to be strict in their methodology on what to classify as disinformation or hostile narratives, as lax standards could backfire and make them vulnerable to criticism of censoring freedom of expression.

According to Pamment *et al*.[81], the main counter influence activities should be precisely directed at the audiences that are most targeted by hostile actors. They write that it is imperative for governments to understand the factors that make these groups susceptible to influence, their motivations, fears and expectations, as well as ways of reaching out to them. It is, thus, advisable for Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian governments to concentrate their efforts on the minorities who gather information from the Russian information space and are, therefore, the most vulnerable. Governments should make sure that

[80] See, for example, **BNS** 2020a. Kariuomenės ekspertai: dezinformacijos srautas socialiniuose tinkluose nemažėja. – Delfi, May 25. https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/kariuomenes-ekspertai-dezinformacijos-srautas-socialiniuose-tinkluose-nemazeja.d?id=84366943 (18.06.2022); **BNS** 2020b. Lietuvoje nuo vasario pradžios užfiksuota 1248 klaidinančios informacijos atvejų apie koronavirusą. – Delfi, May 24. https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/lietuvoje-nuo-vasario-pradzios-uzfiksuota-1248-klaidinancios-informacijos-atveju-apie-koronavirusa.d?id=84357877 (18.06.2022); **BNS** 2020c. KAM: dėl Baltarusijos įvykių rugpjūtį žymiai išaugo dezinformacijos atvejų. – 15 Min, September 12. https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/kam-del-baltarusijos-ivykiu-rugpjuti-zymiai-isaugo-dezinformacijos-atveju-56-1375558 (18.06.2022); **BNS** 2020d. Kariuomenė: melagingos informacijos kampanija siekta diskredituoti JAV pajėgas Europoje. – Delfi, June 1. https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/kariuomene-melagingos-informacijos-kampanija-siekta-diskredituoti-jav-pajegas-europoje.d?id=84425661 (18.06.2022); **Delfi** 2020. Klaidinančios informacijos apie koronavirusą sumažėjo dvigubai, tačiau svarbu išlikti budriems. June 30. https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/klaidinancios-informacijos-apie-koronavirusa-sumazejo-dvigubai-taciau-svarbu-islikti-budriems.d?id=84653309 (18.06.2022).

[81] **Pamment *et al***. 2018, p. 99.

these communities have the necessary media literacy toolkit to be able to critically assess and process the information they receive from the media.

A comparison of school curricula revealed that there is room to integrate even more aspects of the contemporary information environment. For example, Wardle and Derakhshan[82] suggest that the curricula also include forensic social media verification skills, statistical numeracy, artificial intelligence, the workings and implications of algorithms (e.g., filter bubbles), and "techniques for developing emotional scepticism to override our brain's tendency to be less critical of content that provokes an emotional response". These are not included in the compulsory curricula in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania at the moment. Although nations have basic programming courses that include the study of algorithms, these are currently not viewed in the context of social media echo chambers and filter bubbles. On a positive note, since 2019 it has been possible for schools in Estonia to offer the optional course "Human in a contemporary information environment" that provides an overview of media and information influence, and also covers topics such as big data, social media algorithms, trolling, hate speech, propaganda, astroturfing, and fact-checking[83].

Another question to bear in mind regarding the integration of media literacy into the curricula is the extent to which the requirements and provisions outlined in the curricula are actually implemented in classrooms. To ensure that teachers have the necessary mindset and toolkit to teach media literacy and information gathering from a critical point of view, it is essential to include critical media literacy modules into teacher training courses in universities, and encourage teachers' lifelong learning, as recommended by a high-level group on fake news and online disinformation in 2018[84].

After comparing the media policies of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the author of this article started to think that even though the current media policy can be described with the term negative policy proposed by Freedman[85], it is not inevitable. Similarly to Latvia and Lithuania, Estonia could also consider setting up a similar support mechanism for local media to increase awareness of information influence. The need to establish a system

[82] **Wardle, Derakhshan** 2017, p. 70.

[83] **Inimene nüüdisaegses teabekeskkonnas** 2019. Valikkursus gümnaasiumile. Valikkursuse tööversioon 2019. Ugur, K.; Talv, P. (eds.). https://oppekava.ee/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Inimene-kaasaegses-teabekeskkonnas_15_03_2019-1.pdf (18.06.2022).

[84] **European Commission** 2018a.

[85] **Freedman** 2014.

of measures to support the press, in particular local media, together with the need to support the creation of quality content and increase funding for media literacy projects, was already brought up by Estonian media experts in 2019[86]. In order for these measures to reach those who are most vulnerable to Russian information influence, i.e., local Russophones, setting up such a mechanism should also take into account (e.g., by specific measures) the local Russian-language media that must compete daily with well-funded media (mainly television) originating from Russia and projecting Russian strategic narratives, including disinformation.

On a positive note, the Estonian media environment was different from that of its southern neighbours (mostly Latvia) in their attitude towards producing public broadcasts for Russian-language residents. While Latvia is planning to reduce the proportion of Russian-language content on channel LTV7, Estonia has chosen the contrary approach. According to the interviewees from the Estonian Ministry of Culture, Russian-language public television and news should be produced and broadcasted even more. The author of this article agrees; as long as there is a substantial part of society that is not well enough integrated into the Estonian (or Latvian/Lithuanian) information space, there is the need for Russian language public broadcasting to reach this part of the society and ensure that people receive reliable and balanced information, not falling prey to misinformation or information influence activities. This holds especially true during crises where the potential consequences of Russia filling in this "information gap" with its strategic narratives are graver. Among senior citizens, television is still essential. For example, according to an Estonian integration study[87], television remains the most important medium of mass communication for people aged 50–64: Russian television was important to 81% of respondents, whereas 49% appreciated Estonian Russian-language news portals, and only 19% Estonian-language news portals. These contrasts were even bigger for people aged 65 and older[88].

In conclusion, Hellman and Wagnsson[89] were right when they predicted that the four ideal types that they have proposed probably do not exactly reflect the way states engage in information warfare and, instead, states are expected to combine different strategies. After all, ideal types serve only as

[86] **Kõuts-Klemm *et al***. 2019, p. 25.

[87] **Kaldur *et al***. 2017, p. 72.

[88] *Ibid.*

[89] **Hellman, Wagnsson** 2017, pp. 163–164.

heuristic tools to have the right categories to help make sense of what is going on. For example, Latvia and Lithuania focus on developing the media literacy of people while concurrently blocking hostile Russian television channels. According to the four-way categorisation of Hellman and Wagnsson, developing media competency would be strategically categorised as ignoring, while restricting the distribution of Russian television channels would be categorised as blocking. Estonia, as well, is engaged in actively enhancing the media competency of citizens, especially students.

The main conclusion of this empirical study is that the different approaches adopted by the Baltic States in countering information influence activities are mostly derived from their general attitude towards media regulation. This involves the question of to which extent the state should interfere in the media environment, i.e., regulate and shape the media to achieve its goals. Should the state enhance media literacy in private media through media support funds or prevent the spreading of Russian narratives by restricting the distribution of certain television channels? Estonian opinion does not coincide with that of Latvians and Lithuanians.

6. Conclusion

Research into various types of illegitimate information influence techniques such as mis- and disinformation, social hacking (e.g., filter bubbles), trolling and flaming, or the use of botnets, is becoming more and more popular. In part, this is a reaction to the overall Zeitgeist, characterised by populist movements and authoritarian governments seeking to take advantage of the vulnerabilities of the Western information space. In part, it also has to do with technological advances that enable researchers to tap into previously unknown areas such as social media analytics or network analysis. The importance of such research is without doubt, as public communicators must understand information influence in order for their communication efforts to be understood by the public. Yet, all this notwithstanding, research into *managing* or *countering* information influence has largely remained on the sidelines, resulting in a dearth of knowledge when it comes to a comprehensive understanding of how societies could adequately respond to information influence activities.

This academic work aims to provide a remedy. Diving right into the frontline of Russian information influence activities in the Baltic States, the work contributes to the broader understanding of measures democratic countries

have at their disposal to manage this "disorderly information space". Empirical analysis showed that, when looking at the big picture, Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian understandings towards countering information influence activities, as well as their choice of countermeasures, are similar to a large degree. All three Baltic States have stepped up their strategic communication capabilities in recent years with the establishment of dedicated strategic communication teams at their state chancelleries, responsible for coordinating strategic communication amongst institutions and ensuring situational awareness. Even though the Estonian and (since 2020) Latvian security documents, compared to the Lithuanian ones, approach information threats from a broader perspective—talking about psychological defence and the need to achieve societal resilience—the analysis showed, with corroboration from the interviewees, that these terminological differences do not ultimately result in dissimilar worldviews.

All three countries are making progress in integrating media literacy into national curricula. Different aspects of media literacy are best represented in the basic and secondary education curricula of Latvia, currently introduced in schools. Estonian curricula also include the area of media literacy, although unevenly. Compared to native Estonian students, developing media literacy is quite neglected among students in Russian-language schools who comprise about a fifth of all Estonian students. It is important to develop the media competency skills of Russian minorities who largely depend on the Russian information space and are, therefore, the most vulnerable to its false information and information influence activities.

This is why it is advisable for the governments of the Baltic States to focus their efforts on the minorities who gather information from the Russian information space and are, therefore, more vulnerable. Governments should make sure that these communities have the necessary media literacy toolkit to be able to independently and critically process the information they receive from the media.

The main differences in the Baltic approaches result from different regulatory cultures. To be more precise, Estonians have a considerably different understanding of the extent to which the state should regulate and shape the media to achieve its goals. Compared to Latvians and Lithuanians, Estonians approach media regulation from a minimalist point of view; there is no mass media or public information policy and the Security Concept and Defence Development Plan lack references to regulatory or legal measures when it comes to countering information threats. A more liberal attitude towards regulating the media means that Estonia misses out on propping up media

outlets with various support measures. In Latvia and Lithuania, for example, there are media support foundations that allow commercial media to receive state funds to create content of public significance, such as projects to support media literacy or investigative journalism.

Another regulatory measure is restricting the right of retransmission of television channels. From 2013–2021, Latvia and Lithuania have blocked access to Russian television channels on five and ten occasions, respectively, predominantly sanctioning violations related to incitement to hatred or war. The possibility of using this measure is also detailed in these countries' security strategies.

There are multiple ways this research could be developed further. One of the options would be to add more countries with distinct backgrounds into the sample to get a more comprehensive understanding of the various ways in which governments counter information influence. Such research should also involve activities undertaken by the media and civil society, e.g., fact-checking and various awareness-raising projects. This means that the focus of research would move away from responding to Russian and other state-sponsored activities towards managing illegitimate information influences in general. In order to ensure that teachers and other educators have the necessary mindset and toolkit to teach media literacy and information gathering from a critical perspective, it is also worthwhile to analyse how media literacy is included in teacher training courses at universities.

Strategic communication is becoming increasingly effects-based as countries and organisations (e.g., brand analysis and market research) improve their situational awareness capabilities to ensure effective communication. Countermeasures should therefore also be evaluated according to their effect. This could, for example, mean examining the amount of disinformation and inauthentic behaviour on social networks, analysing strategic communication efforts by assessing to what extent governments' strategic narratives resonate within society, or examining the effects of suspending media outlets (like Latvia and Lithuania have done with Russian television channels). Hopefully, the new European Democracy Action Plan adopted by the European Commission in December 2020 will facilitate scientific research on information campaigns. The aim of the Action Plan is to decrease the obstacles for researchers in studying social networks and to make online platforms even more transparent in their operations.

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