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The Kremlin's Information Influence Campaigns in Estonia and Estonian Response in the Context of Russian-Western Relations[1]

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Abstract: The Russian Federation has developed a large number of instruments to put pressure on the West using non-conventional means such as cyber attacks, economic tools and information warfare. Using modern IT technologies in its hybrid activities, Russia, much like China or other authoritarian powers, is trying to challenge the current world order. These instruments are particularly evident in the Baltic States. This article uses Estonia as a case study to inquire into the political goals and strategic

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conduct of Russia. Specifically, the focus is on the political context, instruments of information war, and available countermeasures. As argued in the current study, the shift from European to Eurasian power, Russia's careful management and success in avoiding crossing the "red lines" of its adversaries, as well as in exploiting the socioeconomic weaknesses and openness of the West, all play a relevant role in understanding the political context. As for instruments, Russia has developed strategic narratives and conspiracy theories, plus several channels next to media channels, and policy tools such as *Pax Russica* and the compatriot policy. These are deployed in its neighborhood and aimed at unintegrated segments of the Russophone populations.

Keywords: *conspiracy theories, countermeasures, COVID-19, Estonia, information influence campaigns, Kremlin, response, Russophone population, strategic narratives*

1. Introduction

The relationship between Russia and the West[2] is ambivalent and has been getting increasingly tense since 2013–2014, when Russia conducted large hostile activities against Ukraine. Russian military activity on the Ukrainian border and tensions with the West have escalated confrontation between Russia and the West. The main conflicts that Russia has a stake in, such as the one in Donbas (Sazonov *et al.*, 2016; Westerlund & Norberg, 2016; Mölder & Sazonov, 2018), are either confined close to Russia's border or remain relatively uncontested as in Syria, Libya, etc. At the same time, the Russian Federation uses a number of instruments to exert pressure on the West using non-conventional means. These include cyber attacks, economic tools and information warfare. The Kremlin uses several manipulation tactics, information pressures, for implementing its influence activities and carries them out by applying modern ICT technologies. These instruments are put to use throughout the West, but they are particularly evident in the three Baltic States. Along these lines, this article intends to focus on Estonia as a case study to inquire into the political goals and strategic conduct of the Russian Federation. What political context does such low-profile hybrid

[2] Here 'the West' stands for EU and NATO members and includes former Soviet republics that have shown interest and taken steps to move towards closer integration with these organizations.

warfare reveal? How are instruments of information warfare combined? In terms of effective policy, what could be the short-term, and especially long-term response countermeasures that a targeted country like Estonia could undertake?

The article seeks to answer the first question on the ideological level, where a noticeable shift has occurred. It will be argued that the actions that the Russian Federation conducts in Estonia should be interpreted against its moving away from the goal of achieving and pursuing European values. This is most concisely, if not also symbolically, captured in the substitution of the concept of European power by that of Eurasian power.

This also explains the visible asymmetry in Russia's activity and the passivity of the West in using unconventional measures. As the Kremlin has no intention of pursuing democratic governance, there exist but few impediments against it taking the advantage in this conflict. Russia has also shown a quick learning curve specifically in the knowledge of how not to cross the possible "red lines" for the West. But what makes these measures relatively effective, especially ones adopted in information warfare, are the internal socioeconomic and ideological splits within the Western nations which Russia uses as soft targets. As will be argued, the Kremlin paints the West as Russophobic to rationalize its conduct and sees concepts like 'normative power Europe' as a threat.

In response to the alleged activity and hidden pressure from the West, the Russian Federation has developed strategic narratives and conspiracy theories. In order to bring these to bear on public awareness it has established and developed several channels that include alternative media channels, e.g., some policy tools like the concept of *Pax Russica* and the accompanying compatriot policy. These channels and content are harnessed primarily in its neighborhood where there are still substantial Russophone populations who have not successfully integrated in the local societies in the post-Soviet space, among them the Baltic States. Here the example of Estonia proves useful as a target since it has a significant population segment that speaks Russian and is still imperfectly integrated. However, as a member of Western institutions, Estonia, along with the other Baltic countries, proves a worthy target to show the inherent corruption and ineffectiveness of the West.

This article will be structured along the main argument: the following chapter will address the wider context necessary for understanding Russia's political goals; the third shows the major tools of Russia's information

warfare such as strategic narratives[3] and conspiracy theories; and, finally, the fourth chapter focuses on the specific channels that Russia uses in Estonia to implement its information warfare, followed by outlining some long-term policy guidelines in terms of countering Russia's actions.

As for the methodology, first for collecting empirical data, twelve semi-structured expert interviews were conducted from 2019 until early 2021 with internal security analysts, researchers, experts in political science, law, information warfare and media communication in a qualitative fashion (Flick, 2006). Several interviewed experts wanted to remain anonymous and for that reason are referred to as Expert A, B, C, etc.

As a second layer of input data, more than thirty articles from different Russian media sources (*Baltnews.ee*, *Ekspert Online*, *Inosmi.ru*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Regnum*, *REX Information Agency*, *Realtribune*, *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, *RuBaltic.ru*, *RF Segodnia*, *Sputniknews*, *Vesti.ru*, *Versia.ru*, *Vzgliad* and some others) were analysed, covering the period from early 2014 until December 2021, including the first and subsequent waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. The criterion for selecting these articles was that their target audience be Russophone people in Estonia. Qualitative content analysis is applied to analyse the collected empirical data (both interviews and articles) using a hidden pilot sample (Kuckartz, 2014).

2. The main components and centre of gravity of the Kremlin's influence activity in the West

First, the importance of the ideological dimension should be outlined. Here, a considerable change becomes noteworthy. The Kremlin has clearly and decisively moved away from the goal of achieving and pursuing European values. The actions that the Russian Federation is carrying out in Estonia, in other Baltic States, and in the wider West should be read against this backdrop. This is exemplified in ramifications as diverse as the return of the Cold War rhetoric in the Kremlin's vocabulary and in its focus on closer association with the BRICS[4] countries instead of the post-Soviet move towards the West. Yet it is captured most concisely and also symbolically in the substitution of the concept of European power by that of Eurasian power

[3] Strategic narratives are used by many countries in their information activity (Roselle *et al.*, 2014).

[4] Brazil, Russia, India, China, and the Republic of South Africa.

(Karaganov, 2015; Mölder & Sazonov, 2020b, p. 41), including promotion of the *Russkii Mir* (*Pax Russica*) concept.

It is significant that Russia has shown itself to be adaptive and a quick learner in how not to trespass the possible "red lines" for the West. In the end, what makes those measures relatively effective, especially the ones adopted in information warfare, are the internal socioeconomic and ideological splits within the Western nations which Russia uses as soft targets. Additionally, the overall openness, inclusion and pluralism of Western societies helps the Kremlin to achieve its hybrid warfare goals. To make its conduct rational, the Kremlin paints the West as being Russophobic (Feklyunina, 2013).

The Kremlin is waging a hybrid war against the West on different strategic levels and dimensions through the application of a broad range of tactics and tools.[5] As well as informational pressure and media manipulations, Moscow also uses cyber attacks and economic pressure in an attempt to influence political and other crucial levels. The Kremlin attempts to account for the characteristics of each country in the Western world and, even more broadly, is striving to damage the Western liberal system as a whole, targeting European values (Karlsen, 2019) with different types of disinformation by trying to influence (intimidate and bribe) politicians—including far-right forces (Weiss, 2020), leftist forces (Paier & Sazonov, 2019), and pro-Kremlin media (GEC, 2020).

The Kremlin uses hybrid threats and asymmetric tactics against the West to create political complications, to harm democratic and liberal values and systems, and to damage and weaken pan-European security architecture and cooperation in the EU (Karlsen, 2019, pp. 1, 2, 5; Pernik & Sazonov, 2019). One fundamental pillar of this hybrid warfare is Russia's information activity (Galeotti, 2016; Darczewska, 2015; Darczewska & Żochowski, 2017, pp. 2–5; Helmus, *et al.*, 2018). Its arsenal of (dis)information activity is quite wide and represents several threats and vulnerabilities to the democratic liberal Western system, including the manipulation of elections (Pernik & Sazonov, 2019). By taking more internal resources under its control, the Kremlin has developed its propaganda machine, information and cyber capabilities, military industry, and army—the latter contributing in particular to the development of the concept of hybrid warfare (Renz, 2016; Chekinov & Bogdanov, 2013; Rácz, 2015).

Russia's information warfare is very active, and during the COVID-19

[5] Further on this topic see Mölder *et al.*, 2021.

pandemic, Russia's influence operations have shown no signs of subsiding (Mölder & Sazonov, 2020a). Saara Jantunen (2018) accentuates the significant difference between Western and Russian influence activities in the informational environment, showing the latter to be quite flexible. In the West, legislation imposes restrictions on the use of influence in communication by state and military organizations on target groups. However, Kremlin and pro-Russian forces do not recognize this same type of restriction (Jantunen, 2018, pp. 158–159). For that reason, Moscow considers the characteristics of each state and nation being targeted with information warfare (Mölder & Sazonov, 2018). More generally, the main aim of the Kremlin's information campaigns in Estonia and the West is to spread fear and mistrust and to create instability and political, economic, and ideological tension. The Kremlin's aim is to divide and split Europe (Karlsen, 2019), and in particular it tries to *destabilize the Baltic States* using these same methods and tools (Winnerstig, 2014), including propaganda (Spriņģe, 2018).

Narratives from Russia are quite popular among a significant part of the Russophone population of Estonia, and local discourses are mostly transmitted through the Russian-language media. The Russophone audience of Estonia constantly receives messages and narratives from Russia's channels, e.g., about the "immorality" of the West or about the "misdeeds" and "aggression" of NATO (Eslas, 2017), stoking fears of migrants and refugees and spreading other harmful narratives about the foundations of the architecture of European security, values, and the identity of the EU. Russia constantly blames Estonia for fascism, xenophobia, and Russophobia (*Postimees*, 2018; Baranov & Afonina, 2016; *Baltnews*, 2020a).

3. Russian channels and tools of influence to spread strategic narratives and conspiracy theories

3.1 Russian tools and channels of influence

We should also be mindful of the Kremlin's information activities, sources, fakes, and trolling. According to the Estonian media executive and expert Ilmar Raag (2019), there are at least five different actors or levels that are often interlaced in Russia's interference in Estonia, and those actors are: 1) Official Russian sources; 2) Hidden Russian centrally-controlled sources; 3) Independent patriotic actors on the internet; 4) Local conflict stakeholders whose interests may coincide with Russian goals; 5) Western alt-right actors who have an alliance of opportunity with Russians.

Concerning Russian federal TV channels, Raag emphasizes that Russophones in Estonia mostly watch Russian federal TV networks that are under the control of the Kremlin administration. According to Raag, *RT* does not occupy the same position in Estonia that it occupies in other Western countries (the United States and Western Europe) because Estonian Russophones have free access to the many Russian federal networks, newspapers and TV channels on offer. Raag remarks that Russian TV news does not cover the Baltic countries extensively. In his view, the proportion of news about Estonia on Russian TV news coverage is on average about 100 times smaller than the proportion of news about popular topics like Ukraine, Crimea, the United States, the civil war in Syria, and other global issues. Ilmar Raag suggests that Estonia is not a top priority for the Kremlin, but the role Russian TV channels play in Estonia is still remarkable. (Raag, 2019)

Raag states that, on the internet, the picture is more confusing, highlighting that official Russian sources like *Sputnik* in Estonian language[6] do not have much of an impact. Ranked by the number of users, *Sputnik* was not even among the first top ten sites or online portals in Estonia. The other channel in this respect is *Baltnews.ee*, whose agenda is more hidden but which has proven ties with Russia's centrally organized control (Raag, 2019).

According to Raag (2019), we can still see signs of the old paradigm when the old hostile narratives used by the Kremlin—such as discrimination against Russophone people in Estonia, Estonia as a failed state, and the glorification of Nazism and fascism—are still actively used and promoted on Russian TV and in other Russian media, while on the social media, pro-Kremlin forces have attempted to initiate a false flag anti-European movement (Raag, 2019). We should also list here the channels and tools that Russia uses for disseminating strategic narratives and strategic conspiracy theories which might present challenges or produce threats in the informational environment. The most influential of these are TV news and social media platforms. For the spread of disinformation, the Kremlin uses *several tools, channels and measures*, such as:

a) *Pax Russica / Russkii Mir* ('Russian World') and the compatriot policy;
b) Russian media (TV channels, newspapers, online media sources);
c) Social media (Facebook, Twitter, Telegram and Russian social media networks such as Odnoklassniki and VKontakte);
d) Pro-Russian activists and pro-Russian NGOs and clubs such as Impressum;

[6] *Sputnik* has not operated in Estonia since 2019 (*Err.ee*, 2019).

e) Business connections between Estonia and Russia;
f) Political environment;
g) Cyber-attacks and (robo)trolling;
h) Targeting democratic systems (e.g., elections) (see Mölder & Sazonov, 2021).

Another expert, Igor Kopõtin (2020), points out a certain pattern of asymmetric threats. In the beginning, there is an escalation of a certain situation in a political area, which may be related to a change of government or, for example, elections. According to Kopõtin, the Russian Federation has been quite successful in this work.

According to the Estonian security expert Priit Heinsoo, the hallmark of a hybrid threat may be "the division of society along ethnic lines, and this, in turn, is related to the dissemination of false information and being in information fields" (Heinsoo, 2019). Heinsoo also highlighted the following important issues: what information fields people are in, what information is operated on, and what images are created for them. All this divides a society, and this social division can create tensions that, in turn, cause mass disturbances, the same type of mass disturbances as the ones that can be created along ethnic lines (using as an example the Russian Federation) (Heinsoo, 2019; Sazonov *et al.*, 2020, p. 19).

Some experts also highlighted the role of the media in shaping societal perceptions and public debate. Here, the centre of gravity is at polarization; radicalization; loss of confidence in open dialogue; loss of trust in the media as the media loses its status as the fourth power; media fragmentation, as there is no common platform for the country, i.e., it is difficult to reach the target audience; disinformation; loss of confidence in the democratic system (direct threat to a democratic society); loss of confidence in state structures; and distrust of power structures (Expert A, 2019; Expert B, 2019; Expert C, 2019; see also Sazonov *et al.*, 2020, p. 18).

There is a large Russian-speaking population in Estonia; however, there are also several different ethnic minorities (MFA, 2014; *Riigiportaal*, 2021). The Russophone population constitutes 26–27% of Estonia's population of 1,300,000; however, in addition to Russians in Estonia there are Ukrainians, Belarusians, Tatars, and other ethnic groups. One the most fundamental tenets of Putin's state philosophy is the concept of *Pax Russica* ('Russian World') that he and his ideologues officially introduced in 2006–2007 (*Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 2007). The idea of *Pax Russica* (Sycheva, 2007; Itchenko,

2014) is closely connected to the compatriot policy of the Russian Federation. Russia declared that its duty is to protect Russian-speaking people not only in Russia but also abroad, including in Estonia. *Pax Russica* or the 'Russian World' is represented in Estonia virtually as well (Teperik *et al.*, 2018, p. 6).

The presence of the whole range of Russian media in Estonia is another cause for concern. Russian TV channels such as *NTV* or *RTR*, newspapers like *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, and some Baltic Russian-language media (*Baltnews.ee*, *RuBaltic.ru*) give information in line with the Kremlin's policies (negative views on NATO and the EU) (*Baltnews*, 2017b; Expert F, 2021; Expert G, 2020). The Russian media channel *Sputnik*'s actions in Estonia were terminated in 2019 after sanctions were brought against the Kremlin propaganda channel *Rossiia Segodnia* (*Russia Today*) which owns the agency (*Err.ee*, 2019). However, elsewhere in the Baltic States, *Sputnik*'s representative office continues to operate in Latvia. The Estonian opinion leader Igor Kopõtin pointed out that the Russian-speaking diaspora in Estonia is a myth (Kopõtin, 2018). According to him, this entails various opinions covering a large variety of different perspectives. Nevertheless, many Russian speakers in Estonia have problems with integrating into Estonian society, often remaining nostalgic about Soviet times, and Moscow uses that to further its own interests, especially in propaganda (Kopõtin, 2018; 2020; see also Mölder & Sazonov 2021).

In addition, threats could come also from social media. Social media outlets such as VKontakte and Odnoklassniki that are very popular among the Russian-speaking residents of Estonia are also an important instrument of influence (Nissen, 2015), but Facebook, Twitter, and others play an important role as well (Biteniece *et al.*, 2019; Fredheim, 2018). Robotrolling was used prior to elections (e.g., European Parliamentary elections in May 2019) (Biteniece *et al.*, 2019, p. 6).

Several pro-Russian organizations that currently operate in Estonia are also worth paying attention to because of their anti-governmental actions. The so-called media club Impressum[7] conducts anti-Estonian actions and activities associated with the Kremlin (Makarychev, 2020). In addition, there are also several societies of military history (*Postimees*, 2011) and NGOs related to *Russkii Mir* (*Pax Russica*).[8] Some politicians or members of the Estonian

[7] The club's website is available at http://www.impressum-club.eu/

[8] In June 2007, Putin founded the Russkiy Mir Foundation (http://russkiymir.ru/fund/); Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of the Establishment of the Russkiy Mir Foundation (http://russkiymir.ru/en/fund/decree.php), see Sazonov, 2017, pp. 17–28; Ishenko, 2014.

Centre Party partially show their sympathies with pro-Kremlin discourse. There are also some other politicians and Russian-speaking opinion leaders in Estonia who promote the Kremlin's discourses (Klenskiy, 2016; 2017; Grigoryan, 2014). The Kremlin can also use nationalists and ultra-right forces, and Priit Heinsoo has referred to the Soldiers of Odin as an example of the use of extremist groups (Heinsoo, 2019).

3.2 Russia's strategic narratives

Strategic narratives (Miskimmon *et al.*, 2013; Roselle *et al.*, 2014, pp. 70–84) consider stories that exist in the collective memory of people and those factors which frame interpretation, among them political agendas, and ideological views (see Ventsel *et al.*, 2021).

Miskimmon and others highlighted that strategic narratives are stories "by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors" (Miskimmon *et al.*, 2018).

As Andreas Antoniades, Ben O'Loughlin and Alister Miskimmon argue:

> Strategic narratives are representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political elites attempt to give determined meaning to past, present and future in order to achieve political objectives. Examples include the justification of policy objectives or policy responses to economic or security crises, the formation of international alliances, or the rallying of domestic public opinion. (Antoniades *et al.*, 2010, p. 5)

Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Rosselle state that strategic narratives can affect:

1) The international system, expressing how a political actor shapes perceptions of the organization of international relations;
2) Politics, such as the desire of political actors to influence international arms control negotiations or to interfere in disputes between the parties in the management of armed conflicts;
3) Identity—i.e., how political actors want to project their identity in international relations. (Roselle *et al.*, 2013)

How do narratives propagate? In this study, we interpret the propagation of narratives as a function of the internalization of these narratives affecting

attitudes on domestic and foreign political issues. In more detail, we refer to these manifestations as domestic (in this case, Estonian) and foreign narratives (here, Russian). By internalizing these foreign (in some cases also hostile) narratives to the point where they crystallize into opinions about public policy, members of the population legitimize and ultimately spread these foreign narratives themselves.

In the framework of the current study, Russian strategic narratives were analysed with the Exovera Narratives platform (https://exovera.com/platforms/narratives/) in 2020 and with the ZignalLabs (https://zignallabs.com/) analytical toolkit in 2021. The Exovera Narratives platform was used to aggregate and track various narratives relating to Kremlin-aligned disinformation topics in online text-based media outlets located in Estonia. Different narratives regarding the West (EU/U.S.), governance, nationalism, NATO, and the Russian Federation were tracked in Estonia from June 2019 to December 2020. The main added value for the research contributed by Exovera and ZignalLab was related to their massive quantitative screening and mapping capability and ability to suggest narratives based on an analysis that was then allocated into distinctive categories. (Veebel, 2020)

In connection with Russia, 17 narratives altogether were found and categorized by Exovera in Estonia. The five most relevant ones were:

1. NATO is a hostile relic and fragile: most unpopular.
2. The West is corrupt, imperialistic, discriminatory and in decline.
3. Russia is powerful, but also a victim.
4. The Baltics are plagued by poor governance.
5. Russophobia and fascism are present in the Baltics. (Veebel, 2020)

During our regular observations with the Zignal narrative tracker platform, the four most popular pro-Kremlin narratives in Estonia in 2021 were:

1. The West is weak and divided, the West is no better than Russia.
2. Liberal values are not succeeding.
3. Migration pressure will disintegrate the Western societies.
4. Russia is the main protector of traditional values in the world. (Veebel, 2020)

Most of the observed Russian strategic narratives cannot survive factual checking or validation according to scientific standards. However, this is probably of no concern to the Kremlin, as strategic narratives are aimed at vulnerable groups or groups expecting a certain world view, neither

needing persuasion. Accordingly, debunking on pro-Western websites has a rather low impact as the main audience neither visits nor believes these sites. As revealed during interviews in 2020 among vulnerable Russian-speaking groups in Estonia, actual socio-economic support would have a much stronger effect on these groups than counter-propaganda. For groups open to a mixture of the Kremlin world view and Soviet nostalgia, the main argument was the opportunity to live once more through the sweet memories of the status and power experienced during the Soviet times, something that members of these groups had in the 1980s. (Veebel, 2020)

In this respect, the Russian side mostly aims at an already supportive audience showing a high readiness for their narratives. At the same time, Western countermeasures mostly reach groups which are like-minded or supportive of Western liberal values anyway. Still, it is not too easy to answer the question whether the governments of NATO and EU Member States should try to change the minds of committed Kremlin supporters or focus mostly on groups that are ambivalent. (Veebel, 2020)

In analysing support to Russia's hostile narratives in Estonia, language is definitely the most relevant variable, followed by geographical location, educational level, and age. To illustrate this, according to a GEC study in 2020, NATO is seen as aggressive and dangerous by 80% of Russian speakers, while the percentage for Estonia speakers is less than 20%. A similar effect appears in terms of how Russia is seen. Around 70% of Russian speakers see Russia as a normal, trade-oriented and peaceful partner, while less than 30% of Estonian speakers share this opinion. (Veebel, 2020)

Additionally, many statements and narratives only have a convincing or emotional meaning in the Russian language (for example, "*Krim nash!*"), and for native speakers there appears to be no point or willingness to communicate to non-Russian or pro-Western groups with such words (Veebel, 2020).

3.3 Russian strategic narratives disseminated during COVID-19 (2020–2021) for the Estonian audience

In a recent study on pro-Russian media outlets during the exacerbation of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Holger Mölder and Vladimir Sazonov (2020a) showed that strategic narratives created and disseminated by the Russian Federation in early 2020 for target audiences in the Baltic States try to emphasize three things. Firstly, they evoke political and economic

motives related to government policies in the Baltic States. Secondly, they use status-related motives to disrupt the international system and Western-led political institutions throughout the Baltic States. Thirdly, conflictual motives are highlighted, indicating opposing identities between the Russian and Baltic nations, identities that have often emphasized a perceived Russophobic context in Baltic identity-building. The aim of these strategic narratives is to create ideological and political tensions within the European Union and NATO and to destroy Western unity. The Baltic States have become an important target due to their geopolitical location and strategic importance.

3.3.1 Anti-EU strategic narratives

During the first and subsequent waves of COVID-19 in 2020, and again in 2021, pro-Kremlin channels actively transmitted anti-European feelings and fears related to the coronavirus and its impact. Several topics were circulated, e.g., that the European Union would not help the Baltic States and that COVID-19 had destroyed the unity of the European Union (Piatrinis, 2020; Armazanova, 2020; Nosovich, 2021a; 2021b), or that the economy will soon collapse (Kruglei, 2020).

One of the main narratives was a story about how the COVID-19 pandemic would kill the EU and its economy (*Inosmi*, 2020). Division within the EU on key issues of common policy is emphasized. "While even in countries that are critically dependent on European integration, such as Germany or Estonia, leaving the European Union again offers the most radical solution to problems, European public opinion is quite close to boiling." (Nosovich, 2021a).

Among others, ideas were promoted that Europe was in economic decline and people in the EU were becoming poor (Karaieva, 2021), people in the Baltic States were losing their jobs (Ilyashevich, 2020), and the Baltic States were facing a terrible economic crisis (Nosovich, 2020). Also, poor and ineffectual measures adopted by the Estonian government had apparently caused many COVID-19 cases and many Estonians were already admitted to medical clinics (*Sputnik*, 2021).

3.3.2 Identity-based strategic narratives: Russophobia

One component and common topic in Russian influence activity is Russophobia (Feklyunina, 2013). Russophobia has been promoted by Russia for decades "for both domestic and foreign policy purposes, and historically the Kremlin's

elite has concentrated much of the negative flow of information on Russia under the narrative of Russophobia" (Ventsel *et al.*, 2018, p. 118; see also Mölder & Sazonov 2020a, pp. 87, 92, 93). This popular narrative of the oppression of the Russophone community in Estonia and in the Baltic States more generally presents local Russian-speaking people "as a hated minority deprived of many fundamental rights because of their national identity" (Mölder & Sazonov, 2020a, p. 87; see also Lucas & Pomerantsev, 2016). The topic of Russophobia is still very actively used by the pro-Kremlin media and by pro-Kremlin opinion leaders and authors (e.g., Baranov & Afonina, 2016; see also *Baltnews*, 2017a). It was also popular in 2020, including the idea that Russian journalists are oppressed in the Baltic States (*Baltnews*, 2020b) or Russophobia is flourishing in Estonia and the other Baltic States (Nikolaiev, 2020; Baburin, 2020; Vinnikov, 2020). Nikolai Nikolaiev's article 'Brain coronavirus: Estonian Russophobes insulted with Moscow's help' attempts to provoke hostility between Estonian and Russian-speaking communities in Estonia, accusing Estonians of Russophobia. The author of the article concludes that the main goal of Estonian patriots is to look for a mythical Russian threat everywhere (Nikolaiev, 2020).

The narrative of Russophobia in Estonia was still being actively promoted by pro-Kremlin media sources in 2021, including disseminating stories that the Russian language is officially called "a language of occupants" in Estonia (Boikov, 2021).

In one of the articles recently published at *Baltnews.ee*, the author Semen Boikov argues that

> [Estonian] nationalists are really haunted by the originality of the Russian-speaking diaspora and its proximity to Russia. Perhaps it was from this that the bestial fear of the "Russian threat" grew. The methods of dealing with the Russian language and promoting Estonian language were extremely tough. First, a significant part of the population was deprived of citizenship, and knowledge of the state language was made a condition for obtaining it. Secondly, all school and preschool education is intended to be fully translated into Estonian by 2035. (Boikov, 2021)

The same article also accentuates that the Estonian language is one of the least spoken in the world having only 1.1 million speakers, in only one country. Next to Finnish and Hungarian, it is one of the most difficult languages with its 14 cases, two types of infinitives, and root alternations.

In the ranking of the most difficult languages to learn, it is ranked fifth after Japanese, Chinese, Korean and Arabic languages.

Russia is interested in the possibility that the Baltic States could become a "window to Europe", allowing the Kremlin to put pressure on the EU and NATO (Mölder & Sazonov, 2020a, p. 89). This is probably the reason why the Kremlin is interested in fostering instability in this region through the use of visible and strongly Eurosceptic ideas. The main goal of Russia's information activities is to widen the political gap between the United States of America and the EU. Another aim is to shape public opinion and mobilize the populist movements in the West that are opposing the liberal democratic principles. These populist movements are quite skeptical about the constitutional guarantees of minorities and also the protection of individual rights on behalf of Moscow's strategic interests (Mölder & Sazonov, 2020a, p. 84). The Kremlin's disseminated strategic narratives that describe the West and its democratic institutions as something corrupt and in need of reform are the reason why Moscow supports and promotes alternative formats of international cooperation excluding the West and its representatives—such as the BRICS. (Hinck e*t al*., 2018, p. 27)

3.3.3 Strategic narratives about Zapad 2021

According to the Russian strategic narrative (Gerasimov, 2013), Russia sees itself as a long-term target of the Western collective's hybrid activities[9]. Hostile activities previously aimed mostly against Russian allies have in recent years been seen to be initiated against Russia itself. This is symbolic of Russia's understanding of its relationship with the West. Russia sees itself as a victim, especially concerning its own "near abroad". Thus, any activities in this area are seen as demonstrative of the West's aggressive intentions which need immediate and decisive counter action. Accordingly, for Russia, the fears and ambitions are probably bigger than the West imagines. For example, not only are there the colour revolutions but also continuous support for "anti-constitutional actors" (e.g., the most well-known Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny), growing military exercises next to Russian borders (Defender 2020), financing the propagation of LGBT+ values, and revealing corruption in the Kremlin.

In terms of the active engagement activities of the West, the Russian narrative does not allow for the nation to remain passive, even when it

[9] Related narratives include: "Russia as the only or main protector of the rule-based international order." "Russia as the only alternative to the global dominance and imperialism of the US".

assesses the threat as low. Either Russia will be engaged in such a game or it loses face. This leaves Putin and the Kremlin with no good options. It must also be kept in mind that in Russia there are different competing strategic "schools", some of which are willing to cooperate with the West, whereas there is a section of strategists who would like to see a quick escalation of the conflict instead of losing face as during the Yeltsin presidency.

Thus, a doubling of troops in the Baltic States can only be seen by Russia as an escalation. Although Russia's own hybrid and other activities have been in slight decline recently, the fact that NATO has organized such an exercise may push Russia to demonstrate its will.

Military exercises on both sides are one of the most important parts of this narrative competition between NATO and Russia.[10] Regular military exercises in Estonia (or the wider Baltic operational area) raise the question of who is escalating and who is responding? Russian Zapad[11] exercises are a regular occurrence and have been taking place since the Soviet times in 1981, but they have received more attention in the past decade, as the most recent one took place in 2021. At the same time, Defender 2020 is part of NATO's new initiative in recent years to organize more sizeable exercises close to the Russian border (in Poland and Norway). In a way, NATO can be seen to be both aggressively escalating (the Russian narrative) and meaningfully responding after many years of Russian escalation (the NATO and Baltic narrative; see US Army Europe, n.d.). In relation to Zapad 2017 it was claimed that the West does not tell the truth about either Russia or Zapad 2017 (Sazonov & Goncharenko, 2018, pp. 200–233). It is also said that the West and the NATO countries have speculated that Russia wants to conquer the Baltics and invade Europe. Such claims reawaken the narrative of the Cold War. Articles often emphasize that Western information campaigns represent Zapad 2017 as an example of Russian aggression, but this position

[10] Of course, there are also other issues and topics that were used in pro-Russian discourse with the purpose of influencing the local target audience; for example, military exercises such as Zapad 2017 (*Baltnews*, 2017a; 2017b) or Vostok 2018. As Ventsel *et al.* have pointed out about Zapad 2017, "Russia and Belarus tried out the scenario of a potential war with NATO…" (Ventsel *et al.*, 2021, pp. 21–39). During the Zapad 2017 exercises, several Russian publications played up the topic of a possible Russian invasion of the Baltic countries and Poland in diverse ways, also emphasizing the vulnerability of the Suwałki corridor and the various fears of NATO countries about this (*Baltnews*, 2017d; *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 2018). In the context of the Zapad-2017 exercises, pro-Kremlin sources tried to focus on the Estonian border town of Narva with a predominantly Russian-speaking population (*Baltnews*, 2017e).

[11] E.g., the military exercise Zapad 2017 reflects the Kremlin's foreign policy aims in relation to the Western world and should be seen as playing a significant role in its overall attempt to destabilize NATO (Winnerstig, 2014; Ventsel *et al.*, 2019, p. 2).

has proved to be fraudulent and wrong (*Baltnews*, 2017c). Sometimes historical parallels with the Cold War are drawn with an attempt to show that NATO and the West are trying to recreate the Cold War paradigm from scratch (Sazonov & Goncharenko, 2018, p. 215).

During the military exercises Zapad 2017 and Vostok 2018, the narrative of the very strong power of the Russian armed forces was forcefully promoted by several pro-Kremlin publications (Podkovenko, 2018). Russophone audiences were bombarded with reporting on how militarily powerful Russia was, and that the whole world feared Russia's military might. For foreign audiences (among them Estonia's Russian-speaking population), all this was done for the purpose of intimidation—to create fear, and, of course, to disorient the target audience. Zapad 2021 was also used as an instrument of informational pressure against the Baltic States and Poland, and more broadly the West. We can see that pro-Russian channels were mostly using the same discourse of fear and even the same narratives as in the previous exercise, Zapad 2017 (Ventsel *et al.*, 2021), but a new trend put all these narratives (e.g., the Baltic States' fear of Russian military power, Russia's threat to close the Suwałki corridor, Russia not being dangerous at all, etc.) in the context of a new hybrid threat which was caused by Minsk sending illegal migrants from the Middle East to the Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish borders. One narrative which is promoted by the pro-Kremlin media is that the Baltic States are creating fake news about non-existent hybrid threats at their borders with Belarus (*Baltnews*, 2021a).

In an article published in early September 2021, the author argues that

> Lithuania's rhetoric about hybrid aggression from the part of Belarus was supported in Estonia—President of Estonia Kersti Kaljulaid, Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, and many heads of relevant ministries spoke using the same phrases. The Estonian military tried, in turn, to stretch a link between the idea of a hybrid threat and the beginning of the joint strategic Russian-Belarusian military exercise Zapad 2021. (*Baltnews*, 2021b)

Also, as in 2017, Russian and Belarusian state officials and high military leaders stress that Zapad 2021 is not dangerous for other countries and has only one purpose, that is, defensive (*Baltnews*, 2021b).

At the same time, as in 2017, Russia was playing with figures, showing that the number of military personnel and tanks and other military units is quite significant. Another article published in September 2017 in *Baltnews*

mentioned that in the Western Military District of Russia about 200,000 soldiers, over 80 aircraft and helicopters, up to 760 units of military equipment, including over 290 tanks, over 240 guns and multiple launch rocket systems would take part in the West 2021 exercises. Directly on the territory of Belarus, from the presented list, there were 12,800 troops (including up to 2,500 Russian military personnel), and more than 30 aircraft and helicopters, up to 350 units of military equipment (about 140 tanks, up to 110 guns, multiple launch rocket systems and mortars) to be involved (*Baltnews*, 2021c).

In general, the Baltic States are shown by Russian strategic narratives as a poor and unsuccessful periphery of the European Union, being abandoned by their new Western patrons and therefore facing serious issues and problems with their economies, social systems, and demography. These political strategic narratives emphasize the role of the Russian Federation as defender of the traditional conservative ideas and values that will save the world from the malign influence of the Western liberal ideology that pervades the declining West (Laruelle & Radvanyi, 2018, p. 126). As we can see, the strategic narratives disseminated by the Kremlin are an integral and important part of the Russian information war that Moscow is waging against the West.

3.4 Conspiracy theories in the Kremlin's strategy of information pressure

Since the days of the Russian Empire, conspiratorial thinking has been a widely-used political tool to keep society in a single constructed information space. During the Soviet epoch (1917–1991), it was believed that Western countries (the United States and Western Europe) dreamed of destroying and humiliating the Soviet Union and its values, its ideology. This was a widespread idea in the Soviet society and such conspiratorial thinking has been transferred to Putin's Russia of today (Yablokov, 2018). Thus, such information activities have also been transferred to the post-Soviet space, e.g., accusing Western countries (the United States, Europe) of anti-Russian conspiracies (Mölder & Sazonov, 2019, pp. 100–101).

One important issue that should be covered is conspiracy theories (Madisson & Ventsel, 2020) that Russia disseminates through the Kremlin's strategic narratives, which quite often support various theories about Western civilization conspiring against Russia (Mölder & Sazonov, 2019; see also Yablokov, 2015, pp. 301–315; 2018).

Kremlin and pro-Kremlin forces skillfully used conspiracies during the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic as a tool of pressure in the information space. For example, the Russian media created and promoted the conspiracy that the COVID-19 virus was created by the United States (Nadtochev, 2020), and engineered in a military laboratory (Antashkevich, 2020). Evgeni Antashkevich presented himself as a person affiliated to KGB-FSB. He uses a typical conspiratological approach and tries to convince the target audience that the United States is possibly guilty of spreading or even creating COVID-19 (Antashkevich, 2020). Antashevich puts forward his argument as follows:

> I am not a virologist or a biologist, so the first version cannot be taken into account. I'm not a bioclimatologist, so the second version cannot be taken into account either. I am a KGB-FSB operative, so for me, the third version would be a valid one. Let's look at the events in their sequence, imagine that it is a play and start with the most important thing—the libretto: the first scene—something happens on stage, but it is difficult to understand what; the second view—logic appears and intentions are highlighted; the third act—a pandemic. A pandemic (we use that terrible word) that probably [...] started in China in the second half of December 2019. (Antashkevich, 2020)

Pro-Kremlin channels also spread the already long-known BigPharma conspiracy theory which argues that the COVID-19 crisis is a fabrication or was organized in the interests of large Western pharmaceutical companies, and that pharmaceutical companies, government officials, politicians, and others secretly cooperate against the public interest (Blaskiewicz, 2013). These kinds of conspiracy theories and strategic conspiracy narratives (e.g., that COVID-19 was created in the United States) were produced in Russia and later disseminated through the media and social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, VKontakte, blogs, etc.) with the aim of influencing target audiences, among them also Estonian audiences.

4. Estonia's responses and countermeasures: current measures and policy suggestions

In recent years, Europe and the West (including the Baltic States) have started to invest resources in and pay more attention to countering and debunking Russian information warfare (Lucas & Pomerantsev, 2016;

Hellman & Wagnsson, 2017, pp. 153–170; Radin, 2017). Estonia has been one of the pioneers in that respect. According to Holger Mölder (2019), it is necessary to create greater social cohesion as well as a comprehensive security concept where the state's defence capability not only depends on the number of tanks and armoured vehicles but also on people being able to proactively detect and eliminate various hybrid threats at the earliest possible stage of hybrid warfare.

Erkki Koort (2019) emphasizes the important idea that the military does not tackle the hybrid situation first. In the context of a hybrid conflict, image creation is crucial. The main issue here is to bring our messages to the world and to do so through both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the media. It is necessary to think about what would help Estonia during a hybrid conflict and what would help create an image.

In addition, since 2007 and especially after 2014, Estonia has been paying more attention to this issue and has already taken several steps and measures at the state level to protect the country and society from manipulative, harmful, and hostile information activities which risk influencing society, its democratic system, and the political environment.

First, the Estonian state founded the Russian-speaking Estonian TV channel ETV+ (created as an alternative to Russian TV channels broadcasting pro-Russian propaganda).

Second, there are several volunteer organizations that deal with countering Russian fake news such as *propastop.org* or the National Centre of Defence and Security Awareness (NCDSA) (*Sinu Riigi Kaitse*)[12], an independent Estonian civic platform that aims to raise awareness about security and defence issues in Estonia.

Third, several governmental institutions are participating and working on improving resilience to Russian (dis)information and fake news.

Fourth, the Estonian state has a working monitoring system where different state and non-state actors monitor online media, TV, and general traffic on the internet. According Ilmar Raag (2019) this work is done both on a qualitative level, but also by collecting big data to see the trends. The results of the monitoring are quite regularly published in order to provide public situation awareness.

[12] Available at https://www.kaitsen.ee/ncdsa-eng/

Fifth, several agencies in Estonia are working on "relationships in order to track down fake accounts or obvious hate speech that is in any way against social media platform standards" against manipulations and fakes on Facebook and Twitter (Raag, 2019). Russia and pro-Russian activists have often launched several groups that target local people with (dis)information, fakes, and manipulative information. The Estonian side is trying to counter this kind of harmful activity.

Expert C (interviewed during the current study in 2019) listed several measures that were implemented to respond to harmful influences and to protect the electoral system. Expert C highlighted the forming of a media task force (meeting group) whose aim was to meet each week. The work group included representatives from the Information System Authority, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Government Office, and the State Electoral Office. Additionally, before the parliamentary elections, the European Commission and The Bureau of the European Parliament in Estonia also organized several working meetings. The task of this working group was to share specific information related to organizing elections and to actively discuss media monitoring results. This could be one measure against disinformation (Expert C, 2019). According to Expert C, daily media monitoring took place and input for this process came from the Governmental Office, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Estonian National Library (Expert C, 2019).

In 2020, during the spread of COVID-19, the Estonian government paid attention to communication with Estonians and Russophones in their own languages (Terviseamet, 2020).

5. Conclusion and policy suggestions

This article has focused on the main examples of the Kremlin's advantages, channels, and tools deployed in Estonia and especially among the Russophone community. However, Moscow's arsenal of information activity in Estonia and the West is much wider, including attempts to destabilize societies, cyber attacks, misinformation, political and economic blackmail, intimidation, deception, and bribery. One should also consider that the Russophone population in Estonia is not homogenous but is fragmented with several Russian-speaking minorities composed of diverse communities holding different views. However, large sections of this group remain

subject to Russian state media discourse as they are the target audience of Russian information activity and could potentially be influenced by the Kremlin in the promotion of *Pax Russica*. It is important to realize that Russian propaganda is dangerous and directed at different target groups. It is also important to address the "demand" for the deceptive content of (dis)information.

Based on the above discussion, the authors outline a couple of suggestions that could be used as long-term guidelines for fighting Russia's disinformation campaign. It is important to distinguish between the strategic plane and fighting a specific event. The latter is well implemented, as can be seen from the above account. In regard to strategic action, however, the authors suggest it appears to be useful to:

(i) Create trustworthy local content and thereby build up the reputation of media channels, especially Russian-language ones. This provides perhaps the greatest antidote to disinformation, inasmuch as the trustworthiness of the local channels will be amplified by their contrast with disinformation promoted by Russia. This, in turn, means that there will be no great pressure to prohibit the disinformation sources and channels. They will rather start working as tools for building accurate democratic media-knowledge for citizens.

(ii) The need to address socio-economic problems seriously, mostly aggravated by the global crisis of 2008, characterizing especially the peripheral regions in Estonia. This would allow a closer governance contact with the Russian-speaking minority.

(iii) Particularly in the Estonian context, it is vital to create opportunities for deeper integration for the Russophone population, and this may gather a strong impetus if the Estonian-speaking population comes to accept the Russophone population in a more profound way, with all its present traits. This will, of course, presuppose an active role coming from the Estonian political and other elites. Here it is important to be able to distinguish between different groups and identities within the Russophone population.

Estonia has done a lot in recent years to protect the country and society from manipulative (dis)information activity and fakes that could influence society, harm the democratic system, and change the political environment. Although the government and different governmental organizations continue to cooperate in this area, media companies, civil society groups,

and NGOs are also investing in long-term resilience to different kinds of fakes and disinformation. However, raising social awareness about such disinformation should be a priority. The importance of digital literacy education among the population should not be underestimated.

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Interviewed experts

Heinsoo, P., interview conducted on 21.05.2019 (Tallinn)

Koort, E. (head of the Institute of Internal Security, Estonian Academy of Security Sciences), interview conducted on 27.05.2019 (Tallinn)

Kopõtin, I., interviews conducted on 28.02.2018 and 15.05.2020 (Tartu)

Mölder, H. (associate professor, TalTech), interview conducted on 27.05.2019 (Tallinn)

Raag, I., interview conducted on 17.06.2019 (via e-mail)

Expert A, interview conducted on 08.05.2019 (Tallinn)

Expert B, interview conducted on 13.05.2019 (Tallinn)

Expert C, interview conducted on 26.06.2019 (via e-mail)

Expert D, interview conducted on 19.05.2019 (Tallinn)

Expert E, interview conducted on 22.05.2020 (via Skype)

Expert F, interview conducted in March 2021 (via Zoom)

Expert G, interview conducted on 22.09.2020 (via Zoom)

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