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Russian information warfare in Estonia, and Estonian countermeasures[1]

The Russian federation uses several tools to allow it to place pressure on the western world in an asymmetric manner, among them being cyber-attacks, economic tools, and information-influence campaigns. These instruments are especially strongly felt in Estonia. This article uses Estonia's example in order to delve into Russia's political goals and strategic conduct. Specifically, analysis is provided in regard to the political context, instruments which form part of the 'information war', and any effective counter-measures, with all of this being carried out within the theoretical framework of constructivism. As will be argued, the shift from European to Eurasian power and Russia's carefully crafted management process of not exceeding red lines, as well as its process of exploiting the socio-economic weaknesses of the west all play a relevant role in understanding the political context. As for instruments, Russia has developed tools which can be analysed in terms of strategic conspiracy narratives, while it has likewise used several channels which lie next to the usual media tools, along with policy tools such as *Pax Russica* and the compatriot policy.

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Introduction

The relationship between Russia with the west can, at least, be said to be ambivalent.[2] In a conventional sense, at least for a few years, relations are once again relatively stable. The main conflicts in which Russia has a stake - such as in the Donbas region of Ukraine - all began in 2014 (Mölder & Sazonov, 2018; Sazonov et al., 2016; Westerlund & Norberg, 2016). All of them are either confined close to Russia's border or remain relatively uncontested such as in Syria. At the same time, Russia uses a number of instruments to allow it to place pressure on the western world in an asymmetric manner. These include economic tools (such as, for example, the energy sector) and political tools, along with espionage, soft power, cyber-attacks, and elements of information warfare. When it comes to influence activity, the Kremlin uses several manipulation tactics which include disinformation campaigns, elements of fake news, and disseminating several narratives towards target audiences in the west. These instruments are used widely throughout the west, but they are especially strongly felt in Estonia as a neighbouring state which falls within the category of 'near abroad'. Along these lines, this article intends to use the example of Estonia in order to delve deeper into the political goals and strategic conduct being utilised by the Russian federation. Which political context serves to explain such a low-profile form of war? Which theoretical logic explains how the information war instruments are brought together? In terms of effective policy, what could be the short and, especially, long-term counter-measures which could be undertaken by a country which has been targeted in this way - such as Estonia?

The current article seeks the answer to the first question on an ideological level, an area in which there has been a notable shift. It will be argued that the actions which have been conducted by the Kremlin and pro-Kremlin forces within Estonia, and on a wider basis across the western world, should be read against its move away from a goal of achieving and pursuing traditional European democratic and liberal values. This is most concisely, if not also symbolically, captured in the substitution of the concept of 'the European power' by that of 'the Eurasian power' (Karaganov, 2015). Curiously, Russia apparently knows how not to exceed the possible red lines for the west. And it exploits internal divisions within the western nations.

As will be argued, the Kremlin sees concepts such as 'normative power Europe' as being dangerous to it (Veebel, 2019). It has developed its own tools

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[2] 'The west' as used here denotes the EU and Nato members, and includes former Soviet republics which have shown interest in and have taken steps towards moving for closer integration with these organisations.

in response to the supposed activity and hidden pressure from the west, be it in the former communist bloc or in other places around the world, such as in the Arab world (Ploom et al., 2019; Dannreuther, 2019).

This article applies the constructivist theory in order to understand the motivation behind Russia's information campaign. The constructivist perspective on international relations makes it possible for one to analyse the information war in terms of it being a conflict over ideas and identities. However, with Russia's campaign in its 'near abroad' the goals can be perceived as being even more aggressive. According to Filipec (2019), hybrid warfare within its information dimension goes beyond the construction or reconstruction of identities inasmuch as it aims to indoctrinate a target population and even guide it.

The Russian federation has developed its own information instrument, and this article intends to analyse them in terms of strategic conspiracy narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Ventsel et al., 2021; Madisson & Ventsel, 2020). In order to bring these instruments to bear, the authors have uncovered and developed several channels which include those which lie next to media channels, such as policy tools along the lines of the concept of *Pax Russica* and the accompanying compatriot policy. These channels and their content are harnessed primarily within Russia's neighbourhood where there are still substantial Russophone populations which have not yet been successfully integrated into local societies in the post-Soviet space, among them Estonia. Here, using Estonia as an example proves useful as a target since it has a significant population segment which speaks Russian and is still imperfectly integrated. With this population segment being part of western institutions, Estonia proves a worthy target when it comes to being able to show the inherent corruption and ineffectiveness of the west as a whole.

This article will be structured along its main argument. The first chapter will address the theoretical context in terms of understanding Russia's political goals and motivation, while the second shows the major tools being used in Russia's information warfare policy, such as strategic conspiracy narratives (Veebel & Vihmand, 2020; Veebel et al., 2020), the third chapter focuses on pro-Kremlin narratives which have been used during the COVID-19 pandemic, the fourth on specific channels which Russia uses in Estonia in order to implement its information warfare policy, the fifth on examples of Kremlin information activities, and the sixth discusses Kremlin's narratives and tools, as well as outlining some of the long-term policy guidelines in terms of which Russia's actions can potentially be countered.

As for the methodology, in terms of collecting empirical data, fourteen semi-structured expert interviews were conducted in 2019 and early 2021

with internal security analysts, researchers, and experts in political science, law, information warfare, and media communications, and in a qualitative fashion (Flick, 2006).

In addition, a total of twenty-six articles were analysed from various Russian media sources *(Baltnews.ee, RuBaltic.ru, REX Information Agency, Sput-niknews, Regnum, Komsomolskaya Pravda, Baltija.eu,* and others), covering the period between 2014 (from the annexation of Crimea by the Russian federation) until October 2021 (which covers the first and subsequent waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in Estonia). The criterion for selecting these articles was that their target audience was comprised of Russophone people who were located in Estonia.

A qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the collected empirical data (both via interviews and articles) by using a hidden pilot sample (Kuckartz, 2014).

Additionally, we study the nature and effects on Estonian audiences of the provision of disinformation, focusing on three general research questions: 1) what are the narratives being used here?; 2) how do these narratives originate?; and 3) how do the narratives propagate?[3]

Mixed methods were used in order to analyse these questions. The 'Wave 1' survey was conducted in Estonia in autumn 2019, and the 'Wave 5' survey took place in autumn 2020. Each survey was based on a technique known as computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI), with the sample size consisting of about N=1,000 respondents.[4] The topics which were covered in the CAPI surveys included the following: respondent habits in terms of their media consumption; their assessment of the current political system in Estonia, along with the political parties, and the economic environment; views on Estonia's membership in international organisations and the influence of other countries in Estonia; and respondent feelings and perceptions regarding certain topical issues in Estonia, COVID-related matters, or the transition to the Estonian-language-only educational system. Surveys involving computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) were conducted by Kantar, a local partner in Estonia (Veebel, 2020). Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) took

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[3] These narratives were identified by using as a basis experts on theoretical deduction by regional subject matter who used their knowledge of the region's information environment. A total of seventeen narratives were identified and tracked using the Exovera media monitoring tool. Ten of the seventeen are deemed to be 'hostile' narratives. Our methodology seeks to match the dissemination (or supply) of these hostile disinformation-based narratives with their resonance (or demand) at the audience level. The resonance of narratives is influenced by many more factors than simply the contemporary media environment. For example, deep-seated social identities and structural factors affect public perceptions and, ultimately, narrative internalisation too.
[4] A total of 1,004 respondents in Wave 1, and 1,002 respondents in Wave 5.

place in Tallinn in autumn 2019 and summer 2020,[5] along with similar surveys in Narva,[6] and also Tartu.[7] The FGDs covered various topics, including an exploration of identity-based narratives about Estonia, and of Estonians and Russians living in Estonia; the media exposure experienced by survey respondents and the media values of those respondents; identity narratives, domestic narratives, and foreign player narratives; and topical issues in Estonian society which are relevant at the time at which the FGDs were being undertaken (Veebel, 2020).

1. The theoretical context for understanding the Kremlin's influence activity in the west

This chapter outlines the theoretical constructs which are used by this study to interpret Russia's information activity in Estonia. Firstly, the concept of 'the Eurasian power' is dealt with, making it possible to reveal the dramatic shift in Russia's values which have moved it away from European values. This shift makes it possible to understand Russia's motivation in terms of it pursuing its information campaign and its widest grounds for the legitimisation of its actions and claims. Secondly, the constructivist paradigm is examined as it is applicable in terms of analysing the goals behind Russia's information activities. Finally, the concept of a strategic conspiracy narrative is focused upon, this being the specific tool which is being employed within this article in order to interpret the content of Russia's hybrid campaign.

In order to be able to grasp Russia's motivational background while it conducts its hybrid activities - most prominently among these is its information campaign - the fundamental ideological level should be addressed. At this level a considerable change has occurred. Russia has clearly moved away from the goal of achieving and pursuing European values (Veebel & Markus, 2018). The claim by this article, regarding the actions which the Russian federation is conducting in Estonia, and across the wider context of the west as a whole, should be read against this backdrop. This is exemplified in such forms as the return of Cold War rhetoric to the Kremlin's vocabulary, and in its focus on closer association with the BRICS countries instead of the

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[5] The capital city of Estonia; a mixed community which includes both an Estonian-language population and a Russian-language one.
[6] A city which is located along the Estonian-Russian border, and which mainly comprises a Russian-language community.
[7] A city with an academic background in the southern part of Estonia, with a majority Estonian-language community.

post-Soviet move towards the west. And yet, despite this, it is captured most concisely and also symbolically in the replacement of the concept of 'the European power' by that of 'the Eurasian power' (Karaganov, 2015).

What is significant is the fact that Russia has demonstrated itself to be a quick learner in terms of gaining knowledge about how not to exceed possible red lines for the west. Eventually, what makes the measures it uses relatively effective, especially those which have been adopted into the sphere of information warfare, are the internal socio-economic and ideological divisions within the western nations which Russia uses as soft spot targets. To make its conduct rational, the Kremlin paints the west as being Russophobic, and sees the west as a threat to it (Veebel, 2019a).

The Kremlin also sees concepts such as 'normative power Europe' as being inherently dangerous to it. This also serves to explain the remarkable asymmetry in Russia's activity, and western passiveness when it uses unconventional measures. As no direct intention exists for the Kremlin in pursuing a western-style democratic form of governance, there exist but few impediments against it taking advantage in this conflict. However, in Russia's terms, it has developed its own tools in response to the supposed activity and hidden pressure from the west (Veebel, 2021). As the Kremlin sees it, the west has long been applying its soft and semi-soft measures to change regimes in the former communist bloc (Dannreuther, 2019). This has mainly been the case in what have become known as the 'Colour Revolutions', the wave of which has swept over the ex-Soviet countries. Russia's most clear and prominent account of this supposedly western activity and an answer to it has been elaborated by Valery Gerasimov (Gerasimov, 2016).

The second theoretical aspect which needs to be dealt with is the constructivist paradigm. This is relevant when it comes to being able to interpret the goals behind the Russian campaign and the specific way in which the information war tools are being used. Here we rely on Filipec, who has adopted constructivist logic when discussing Russia's hybrid warfare, particularly in regard to its information activities in central and Eastern European countries.

Constructivism considers hybrid warfare to be the act of engaging in warfare over the use of ideas, discourses, and identities (Filipec, 2019). As Filipec argues, disinformation and propaganda offer several ways of being able to create a positive perception for the attacker whilst simultaneously imprinting negative aspects onto the target's perceptions. What is most important, though, is the fact that in terms of hybrid warfare this goes beyond the construction of identities. In this regard, Filipec (2019) claims that 'aims which form part of hybrid warfare are more aggressive as they may indoctrinate a target population and may guide it through the use of various areas of ma-

nipulation (such as reflexive control and cognitive dissonance), often without the target population even being aware that they are being targeted, so that it begins to pull against the main pillars of the state, including within the areas of prosperity, freedom, and democracy'.

Specifically, Russia's disinformation campaigns have their usual targets in the 'near abroad', involving key historical events which form part of related national identities. This makes it possible to attack civic consensus within the target societies. As Filipec argues (2019), 'attacking factual and objective interpretations of national history together with attempts to redraw the historical memory of the target population, including the imprinting of interpretations which are now favourable to the interests of the attacker, may be contrary to the interests of a target country and could result in the creation of schisms and an identity crisis'.

At the same time, disinformation can be used to mobilise the domestic population and to enhance its cohesion. According to Filipec (2019), all of these measures amount to the establishment of a form of Russian 'information sovereignty', starting with their own media outlets and their own social networks - such as *VKontakte* - all the way up to creating their own version of a 'Russian' Wikipedia.

Along these lines, this article attempts to determine which of the above outlined constructivist take on the goals behind Russian disinformation patterns could be detected in the Estonian case, as well as which particular meaning could be attributed to it.

Finally, strategic narrative as a concrete tool needs to be introduced in brief in such a way that makes it possible to view it as it has been applied by Russia, but also in the way in which it has simultaneously been used as an analytical tool, in order to understand its activities in terms of disinformation. According to Miskimmon et al. (2013), strategic narratives can be seen as instruments which consider stories which exist within the collective memory of a group of people, while also including other factors which frame interpretation, among these being political agendas and ideological views (Ventsel et al., 2021). As has been argued by Ventsel et al by means of the example of Russia's military exercises, narratives which can be seen as working towards strategic aims could be issued in terms of the creation of their meaning in different forms, such as in applying the logic of antithesis, or through affirmation via negation and in using the rhetoric of moral victimhood (Ventsel et al., 2021).

As can be seen, it is the dimension of meaning creation which ties together the wider constructivist paradigm and the tool for strategic narrative. In conceptualising the relevance of communication, Castells has prominently

defined power in terms of 'the relational capacity which enables a social player to asymmetrically influence the decisions of other social player(s) in ways which favour the empowered player's will, interests, and values' (Castells, 2009, p. 10).

With strategic narratives it is possible to distinguish analytically between their three stages: formation, concerning how narratives are formed; projection, regarding how narratives are spread and contested; and reception, covering how narratives are received (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p. 9). This study mainly attends to the last two stages: projection and reception.

2. Russian federation strategic narratives being used against Estonia

Within the framework of the current study, Russian strategic narratives have been analysed by using the Exovera narrative platform in 2020, and with the ZignalLabs analytical toolkit in 2021. The Exovera narratives platform was used to aggregate and track various narratives which related to Kremlin-aligned disinformation topics in online text-based media outlets which were located in Estonia. Different narratives regarding the west (the EU and/or the US), governance, nationalism, Nato, and the Russian federation were all tracked within Estonia between June 2019 and December 2020. The main added value for the research which was contributed by Exovera and ZignalLab was related to the massive quantitative screening and mapping capability, and ability to suggest narratives which were based on an analysis which allocated then to distinctive categories (Veebel, 2020).

In connection with Russia, a grand total of seventeen narratives within Estonia were found and categorised by Exovera. The five most relevant of these are as follows:

1. Nato is a hostile relic and one which is fragile: a most unpopular organisation.

2. The west is corrupt, imperialistic, discriminatory, and in decline.

3. Russia is powerful, but is also a victim.

4. Estonia is plagued by poor governance.

5. Russophobia and fascism are present in Estonia (Veebel, 2020).

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

1. The west is weak and divided; the west is not better than Russia.

2. Liberal values are not succeeding.

3. Migration pressure will disintegrate western societies.

4. Russia is the world's main protector of traditional values (Veebel, 2020).

As can be seen, the instruments which the constructivist theory has made it possible to distinguish do indeed make their appearance. The picture of the west which these narratives leave is clearly negative (with Nato as being fragile, the west being corrupt but in decline, liberal values not succeeding, and migration pressure disintegrating the west). At the same time, the image of Russia is logically connected to these negative perceptions (with it being under threat from the west), but it still remains with an overall positive meaning (Russia is powerful, while also being the main protector of traditional values).

Most of the observed Russian narratives cannot survive a factual check or validation according to western standards. However, this is probably no concern to the Kremlin as these strategic narratives are being aimed at vulnerable groups or groups which expect a certain world view, both of them not needing any particular persuasion. Accordingly, debunking in pro-western websites has rather low levels of impact as the main audience does not visit such sites or believe what they say. As has been revealed during the interviews in 2020 which involved vulnerable Russian-speaking groups in Estonia, actual socio-economic support would have a much stronger effect on these groups than would counter-propaganda. For groups which are open to mixture of the Kremlin's world view and Soviet nostalgia, the main argument was the opportunity to live once more in a life full of the sweet memories of Soviet period status and power, something which members of these groups had in the 1980s (Veebel, 2020). This last aspect plays with historical memories, trying to strengthen the audience's connection to (today's) Russia by way of nostalgic inroads into past experience.

In this aspect, the Russian side is for the most part aiming at an already-supportive audience which shows high levels of readiness for their narratives. At the same time, western countermeasures are mainly reaching likeminded groups which are supportive of western liberal values anyway. Still, providing a constructive answer in regard to the question of whether the governments of countries which are part of Nato or the European Union should try to change committed Kremlin supporters or mainly focus instead on groups which are somewhat confused about current affairs (Veebel, 2020).

In analysing support for hostile Russian narratives in Estonia, language

is definitely the most relevant variable, followed by geographical location, and then educational level and age. To illustrate this point, according to the GEC study in 2020, Russian speakers see Nato as being aggressive and dangerous - to the level of 80% of all respondents - while Estonia speakers see Nato in these terms in virtually the opposite way, with less than 20% of them supporting such a concept. A similar effect appears in terms of how the Russian federation is seen, with around 70% of Russian speakers seeing Russia as a normal, trade-orientated peaceful partner, while less than 30% of Estonian speakers share this opinion (Veebel, 2020).

Additionally, many statements and narratives have a convincing or emotional meaning alone when they are expressed in the Russian language and for the native speakers (for example: 'Krym nash!'). There appears to be no or little willingness to communicate with non-Russian speaking or pro-western groups in regard to these narratives (Veebel et al., 2021).

3. Pro-Kremlin narratives during COVID-19

In a recent study on pro-Russian media outlets during the escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Holger Mölder and Vladimir Sazonov have been able to show that strategic narratives which were created and disseminated by the Russian federation in early 2020 for target audiences in Estonia attempted to emphasise three things. Firstly, they evoked political and economic motives which were related to government policies in Estonia. Secondly, they use status-related motives to disrupt the international system and western-led political institutions throughout Estonia and the other Baltic states. Thirdly, conflict-driving motives were highlighted, indicating opposing identities between the Russian and Estonian nations, identities which have often emphasised a perceived Russophobic context in Estonian identity-building (Mölder & Sazonov, 2020a; Mölder & Sazonov, 2020).

This aim of the strategic narratives is the creation of ideological and political tensions within the European Union and Nato, and to destroy western unity (Veebel, 2018). Estonia and the other Baltic states have become an important target due to their geopolitical location and strategic importance (Mölder & Sazonov, 2020a).

Following on from this, we will present some examples of topics and narratives from pro-Kremlin media sources during the period which saw the spread of COVID-19 and which we have analysed.

The COVID-19 pandemic which has been experienced around the

world over the last two years is the most recent way of being able to prove how dangerous hybrid threats may become from a security perspective, and how they can be used for various hybrid operations, including economic pressure, information, and influence operations. As an opportunist force, Russia is using all of its available opportunities, trying to affect several target audiences, amongst them those which are located in Estonia. For that reason, COVID-19 was used as a propaganda tool by Russia, with it disseminating the narrative that COVID-19 is splitting the EU (Армазанова, 2020).

3.1. COVID-19 destroys EU unity and the Estonian economy

During the first wave of COVID-19 in 2020, pro-Kremlin channels actively transmitted anti-European feelings and fears which were related to coronavirus and its impact, along with several conspiracies about the origin of COVID-19 (Надточев, 2020; Подковенко 2018; Анташкевич, 2020). Several topics were circulated, such as one which stated that the European Union would not help Estonia and the other Baltic states, and that COVID-19 had destroyed the unity of the European Union (Пятринис, 2020; Армазанова, 2020), or that the EU's economy and, particularly that of Estonia and the other Baltic states, would soon collapse (Круглей, 2020). One motive which was disseminated in 2020 by pro-Kremlin players was a motive which described the economic issues and decreases in gross domestic product (GDP), along with rising unemployment levels (Иванов, 2020).

From those articles which have been analysed it can be seen that pro-Kremlin-orientated media, when disseminating its narratives for an Estonian target audience during the spread of SARS-CoV-2, used several narratives and messages which sought to undermine the integrity of the European Union, and to cast doubt on Estonia's ability to deal with this serious crisis. They tried to convince their audience that Estonia is a Russophobic state and that its government hates Russia and Russian language and culture. Additionally, in order to achieve its goal, an attempt was made to convince the target audience that Estonia (and also the other Baltic states) were economically very weak and dependent upon the EU's help, that Estonia's economy was poor and was declining rapidly during the crisis which was being caused by COVID-19. At the same time emphasis was also placed on the claim that the European Union was weak and was no longer interested in or even able to help Estonia (Mölder & Sazonov, 2020a).

3.2. Russophobia in Estonia during COVID-19

These stories were disseminated in Estonia alongside the Russophobia narrative, as well as throughout the wider Baltics (Николаев, 2020; Бабурин, 2020; Винников, 2020). This Russophobia narrative in Estonia was also actively being promoted by pro-Russian media outlets in late 2021, with them disseminating stories about the Russian language officially being labelled within Estonia as 'a language of occupation' (Бойков, 2021).

In one of these articles, which was recently published in 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. Methods of dealing with the Russian language and promoting the Estonian language have been extremely tough. Firstly, a significant proportion of the population was deprived of citizenship, and a comprehensive 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'* (Бойков, 2021).

In same article, Boikov also accentuates the opinion that *'the Estonian language is one of the least-widely spoken in the world: only 1.1 million people speak it, and only in one country. Along with Finnish and Hungarian, it is one of the most difficult to master, with fourteen cases, two types of infinitives, and root alternations. In the ranking of the most difficult languages to learn, it comes fifth after Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Arabic'* (Бойков, 2021).

As we can see, the topic of Russophobia is still very actively being used by the pro-Kremlin media and by pro-Kremlin opinion leaders and authors (Баранов, & Афонина, 2016),[8] all of which includes the promotion of the idea that, in Estonia and the other Baltic states, Russian journalists are being oppressed (Baltnews, 2020).

3.3. Sputnik-V as an effective vaccine

Pro-Kremlin channels also accentuated the opinion that the vaccine, Sputnik-V, which was formulated in Russia, has a good many positive aspects, and that the vaccine has been the subject of much discussion world-

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[8] For example, Баранов, A & Афонина, E (2016): 'Прибалтийская русофобия и её истоки', *Комсомольская Правда. Северная Европа*, 08/04/2016: https://www.kp.ru/radio/26511/3531281; see also *Baltnews* (2017a): 'Депутат ЕП Яна Тоом о боязни "Запада 2017": "Кто сильнее испугается, тому больше дадут" (+видео)', *Baltnews.ee*, 11/09/2017: http://baltnews.ee/mir/20170911/1016281635.html.

wide. Among other factors, it was argued that the popularity of Sputnik-V in the Baltic states is high (Ильяшевич, 2021). The story goes that Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian political elites are against Sputnik-V and are trying to explain to their people that the Russian vaccine is not a good one, while everyone else is full of praise for it. In early 2021 the narrative was spread by pro-Kremlin channels that Sputnik-V would successfully help in the fight against COVID-19 in a good many countries (some Russian sources mentioned as many as thirty-nine countries), and that Hungary, Slovakia, and some other countries in Europe were already switching to Sputnik-V, while the United States does not want to help and is not sharing its vaccines with other countries in the west (Baltnews, 2021).

3.4. A discussion of pro-Kremlin narratives

Russia is interested in the possibility that the Baltic states may perhaps become a 'window into Europe', allowing the Kremlin to put pressure on the EU and Nato (Mölder & Sazonov, 2020). This is probably the reason for the Kremlin being interested in fostering instability in this region through the use of visible and strongly Eurosceptic ideas (Mölder & Sazonov, 2020). 'The main goal of Russia's information activities and influence operations is to widen the political gap between Europe and the United States. The second purpose is to shape public opinion and to mobilise populist movements in western societies which oppose its liberal democratic principles and are sceptical about the constitutional guarantees of minorities and the protection of individual rights on behalf of the Kremlin's strategic interests' (Mölder & Sazonov, 2020). The Kremlin's disseminated strategic narratives which describe the west and its democratic institutions as elements which are corrupt and are in need of reform are the reason for Moscow supporting and promoting alternative formats of international cooperation which exclude the west and its representatives, such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) (Hinck et al., 2018; Mölder & Sazonov, 2020).

In general, Estonia was shown by Russian strategic narratives as being a poor and unsuccessful periphery of the European Union, one which had been abandoned by its new western patrons and therefore faced serious issues, and problems with its economy, social systems, and demography (Hinck et al., 2018; Mölder & Sazonov, 2020). These political, strategic narratives emphasise the role of the Russian federation as the defender of traditional conservative ideas and values, one which will be able to rescue the world from the malign influence of western liberal ideology which pervades

the declining west (Laruelle & Radvanyi, 2018, p. 126). As can be seen, the strategic narratives which have been disseminated by the Kremlin are an integral and important part of the Russian information war which Moscow is waging against the west.

One common topic in Russian influence activity is Russophobia (Feklyunina, 2013, p. 91-109). Russophobia has been promoted by Russia for several decades, 'both for domestic and foreign policy purposes and, historically, the Kremlin's elite has concentrated much of the negative flow of information in regards to Russia under the narrative of Russophobia' (Ventsel et al., 2018, p. 118; Mölder & Sazonov, 2020). This popular narrative which involves the oppression of the Russophone community in Estonia presents local Russian-speaking people 'as a hated minority who have been deprived of many of their fundamental rights because of their national identity'.

4. Pro-Kremlin threats and channels of influence in Estonia

In addition to the channels listed above, plus the various tools, narratives, and topics which the Kremlin, pro-Russian media outlets, and social media posts disseminate across Estonia, it is also important to list those channels and tools which may throw up 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:

- *Pax Russica* ('Russian World') and the compatriot policy
- Russian media (TV channels, newspapers, and online media sources)
- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and Russian social media networks such as Odnoklassniki and VKontakte)
- Pro-Russian activists and pro-Russian NGOs and clubs such as Impressum
- Business connections between Estonia and Russia
- The prevailing political environment
- Cyber-attacks and (robo)trolling
- Targeting democratic systems (such as during elections) (Mölder & Sazonov, 2021).

In an interview, 'Expert B' *listed the hybrid threats in Estonia, such as* activities by the Russian special service, along with Russian information activi-

ties and economic threats, such as Russia's influence activities in the economic sphere (Interview with Expert B, 2019). Another expert, Igor Kopytin, points out a certain pattern which can be seen in terms of asymmetric threats. In the beginning there occurs an escalation of a certain situation in a political area which may be related to a change of government or, for example, elections. In Kopytin's opinion, this work by the Russian federation tends to be quite successful (Interview with Kopytin, 2020.).

According to security expert Priit Heinsoo, the hallmark of a hybrid threat may be 'the division of society along ethnic lines with this, in turn, being related to the dissemination of false information and being in information fields' (Interview with Heinsoo, 2019). Heinsoo also highlighted the following important issues: information fields which people occupy, in which information is operated upon, and for which images are created for the people who visit them. All of this serves to divide society, and this social division can create tensions which can in turn cause mass disturbances, the same type of mass disturbances as can be created along ethnic lines (taking the Russian federation as an example) (Interview with Heinsoo, 2019).

'Expert A' highlighted the role of the media in shaping societal perceptions and public debate. He highlighted hybrid threats which also need to be addressed: polarisation; radicalisation; a loss of confidence in open dialogue, a loss of trust in the media as the media loses its status as a fourth power, and media fragmentation in that there is no common platform for countrywide output, meaning that there are difficulties in reaching target audiences, along with the presence of disinformation, a loss of confidence in the democratic system (posing a direct threat to a democratic society), a loss of confidence in state structures, and a distrust of power structures (Interview with Expert A, 2019).

Estonia contains a large Russophone community; however, there are several differing national minorities in the country (Välisministeerium, 2014; Riigiportaal, 2021). The Russophone community makes up about 26-27% of Estonia's population of 1,300,000 people but, in addition to Russians in Estonia, there are also numbers of Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Tatars, and other ethnic groups. One the most fundamental tenets of Putin's state philosophy is the concept of *Pax Russica* ('Russian World') which he and his ideologists officially introduced in 2006-2007 (*Российская газета, 2007)*. The idea of *Pax Russica* (Сычева, 2007), its very concept, is closely connected to the compatriot policy which is used by the Russian federation. Russia declared that its duty was to protect Russian-speaking people not only in Russia but also abroad, including in Estonia. *Pax Russica* or the 'Russian World' is also represented in Estonia on a virtual basis (Teperik et al., 2018).

The presence of the entire range of Russian media outlets in Estonia is one more cause for concern. Russian TV channels such as *NTV or RTR*, newspapers such as *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, and some Baltic Russian-language media outlets (*Baltnews.ee* and *RuBaltic.ru*) pour out information which is in line with the Kremlin's policies (involving negative views on Nato and the EU) (Baltnews, 2017). The actions of the Russian media channel, *Sputnik*, in Estonia were terminated in 2019 after sanctions were brought against the Kremlin propaganda channel, *Rossija Segodnya* ('Russia Today'), which owns the agency (Err.ee, 2019). However, elsewhere in the Baltic states - specifically Latvia - Sputnik's representative office continues to operate. Estonian opinion leader, Igor Kopytin, pointed out the realisation that the Russian-speaking diaspora in Estonia is a myth (Interview with Kopytin, 2018). According to him, there are a good many opinions which cover a large variety of differing points of view. Nevertheless, many Russian-speakers in Estonia have problems with integration into Estonian society, often remaining nostalgic about the Soviet era, something which Moscow uses to further its own interests, especially in terms of propaganda (Interviews with Kopytin (2018) and Kopytin 2020; Mölder & Sazonov, 2021).

In addition, threats can also come from social media sources. Social media outlets such as *VKontakte* and *Odnoklassniki*, both of which are very popular amongst 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 (Nato Strategic Communications Centre for Excellence, 2019). Robotrolling was used prior to various elections (such as the European Parliamentary elections in May 2019) (Nato Strategic Communications Centre for Excellence, 2019, p. 6).

There are also pro-Kremlin organisations which are currently acting in Estonia. These are also worthy of attention due to their anti-governmental actions. The so-called media club, *Impressum*, conducts anti-Estonian actions and activities which are associated with the Kremlin (Makarychev, 2021). In addition, there also exist several military-historical societies (Postimees, 2011), and NGOs which are related to 'Russkiy Mir' (*Pax Russica*). Some politicians or members of the Centre Party partially show their sympathies with the pro-Kremlin discourse. There are also some other politicians and Russian-speaking opinion leaders in Estonia who promote Kremlin discourses (Кленский, 2017; Кленский, 2016; Григорян 2014). The Kremlin also can use nationalists and ultra-right forces, and Priit Heinsoo used the 'Soldiers of Odin' as an example of the use of extremist groups (Interview with Heinsoo, 2019). Finally, one of the targets of Russian information and cyber-attacks is democratic systems and elections (Past, 2019).

5. Examples of information activities and Kremlin sources in Estonia

Finally, we should also pay attention to examples of the Kremlin's information campaign (among these being pro-Kremlin channels, fake news sources, and (robo)trolling). The Kremlin's information warfare activities, which are orientated against Estonian target audiences, include the dissemination of fake news, among it what is known as 'deepfakes', several forms of general disinformation and, of course, trolling (Interview with Expert I, 2020).

We can see at least five different players or levels which are often interlaced within Russia's interference in Estonia, and those players include the following:

1) Official Russian sources
2) Hidden, centrally-controlled Russian sources
3) Independent patriotic players on the internet
4) Local conflict stakeholders whose interests may coincide with Russian goals
5) Western alt-right instigators who have an alliance of opportunity with Russians (Interview with Raag, 2019).

As far as Russian federal TV channels go, Ilmar Raag accentuates the theory that Russophones in Estonia for the most part watch Russian federal TV networks which 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 (such as the United States and Western Europe) because Estonian Russophones have free access to the many Russian federal networks, newspapers, and TV channels (Interview with Raag, 2019). Pro-Kremlin channels manage to influence local target audiences in Estonia (among these especially being Russophone people), and also try to influence mainstream media outlets with specific information which is sometimes uncritically amplified by one or another media sources in Estonia (Interview with Expert H, 2021).

Therefore Raag is able to remark that Russian TV news does not extensively cover Estonia. In his view, the proportion of news which covers Estonia itself and which is shown on Russian TV news coverage amounts on average to about a hundred times less content than the proportion of news which covers popular topics such as Ukraine, Crimea, the United States, the civil war in Syria, and other global issues. Raag suggests that Estonia is not a top priority for the Kremlin, but that the role of Russian TV channels in Estonia is still

somewhat remarkable (Interview with Expert H, 2021).

Raag stated that when it comes to the internet the picture is more confusing, highlighting the fact that official Russian sources such as *Sputnik* use the Estonian language for their news,[9] but that they do not actually have much impact. When it is ranked by the number of its users, *Sputnik* did not even reach the list of 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-organised control systems (Interview with Raag, 2019).

However, pro-Russian activists and trolls do not only challenge the democratic system and influence elections. Parliamentary elections and pre-election campaigns in Estonia and in the west could be used more broadly by Russia with nefarious aims in mind.

6. A discussion of the Kremlin's activities, and Estonia's responses and countermeasures: present measures and policy suggestions

As this article has demonstrated, in terms of its disinformation activities the Putin regime is attempting 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. It is thereby targeting European values (Karlsen, 2019, p. 1-14), using varying forms of disinformation by trying to influence politicians (through intimidation and bribery), among them far-right forces (Wess, 2020), leftist forces (Paier & Sazonov, 2019), and pro-Kremlin-minded media sources. The Kremlin uses hybrid threats and asymmetric tactics against the west; to create political chaos, to harm democratic and liberal values and systems, and to damage and weaken pan-European security architecture and cooperation within the EU (Karlsen, 2019, p. 1, 2, 5).

The overview of Russia's disinformation activities which has been outlined above shows that one fundamental pillar of this hybrid form of warfare is Russia's information activities (Galeotti, 2016; Darczewska, 2015, p. 2-5; Helmus, 2018). Its arsenal of (dis)information activity is quite a wide one. It represents several threats and vulnerabilities to the democratic liberal western system, including in terms of elections (Pernik & Sazonov, 2019, p. 5). By taking more internal resources under its control, the Kremlin has developed

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[9]   No longer operates in Estonia, since 2019: https://www.err.ee/1019225/sputnik-peatas-eestis-tegevuse.

its propaganda machine, its information and cyber capabilities, its military industry, and its army, with the latter contributing in particular to the development of the concept of hybrid warfare (Renz, 2016).

As this article has demonstrated through its use of Estonia as an example, Russia's information warfare operations are highly active. During the COVID-19 pandemic Russia's influence operations have shown no signs of subsiding (Mölder & Sazonov, 2020). Saara Jantunen 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 upon the use of influence on target groups in communications by state and military organisations but, however, Kremlin and pro-Russian forces do not recognise this same type of restriction (Jantunen, 2018). For that very reason, Moscow considers the individual characteristics of each state and nation which is being targeted by 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. Russia's aim is to divide and split Europe (Karlsen, 2019). In particular, the Kremlin tries to *destabilise the Baltic states* using these same methods and tools (Winnerstig, 2014), including propaganda (Spriņģe, 2018; Mölder & Sazonov, 2020).

Narratives from Russia are quite popular amongst a significant proportion of the Russophone population of Estonia, and local discourses are transmitted for the most part through Russian-language media outlets. The Russophone audience in Estonia constantly receives messages and narratives from Russia's channels, covering varying topics such as the 'immorality' of the west or the 'misdeeds' and 'aggression' of Nato (Eslas, 2017), thereby stoking fears in regard to 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 accuses Estonia of fascism, xenophobia, and Russophobia (Postimees, 2018; Baltnews, 2020a).

At this juncture we turn finally to Estonia's response over the last few years to Russian information activity. As a preface, we should note that, in recent years, Europe and the west (including the Baltic states) have started to invest resources into and to pay more attention to countering Russian information warfare operations (Lucas & Pomerantsev, 2016; Radin, 2017).

According to Holger Mölder, it is necessary to create greater levels of social cohesion, as well as a comprehensive security concept, one in which the state's defence capability not only depends upon the number of tanks and armoured vehicles it may possess but also on one in which people can proac-

tively detect and eliminate various hybrid threats at the earliest possible stage of any hybrid warfare operation (Interview with Mölder, 2019).

One important idea which is emphasised by Erkki Koort is that the military does not deal firstly with a hybrid situation. Within the context of a hybrid conflict, the process of image creation is crucial. The main issue here is to deliver our own messages to the world and to do so both through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the media. It is necessary to think about what can help Estonia during a hybrid conflict and what can help to create an image (Interview with Koort, 2019).

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

The Estonian state has developed and improved its strategic communications system. Several issues are valid when it comes to Estonia's internal operations, including over-regulation, slow decision-making, and a duplication of work. Additionally, the country's bureaucratic system is not especially flexible, so difficulties could exists when it comes to developing the state's counter-information capability and to improving it quickly (Interview with Expert I, 2020; Interview with Expert H, 2021).

1. The Estonian state founded the Russian-speaking Estonian TV channel, ETV+. This TV channel was founded as alternative to Russian channels which operates within Estonia.

2. There are several governmental institutions which are participating in and working on improving resilience to Russian (dis)information and fake news operations (Interview with Expert I, 2020).

3. The Estonian state has a working monitoring system in which different state and non-state participants monitor online media, TV, and general traffic on the internet. According to Ilmar Raag, 'This work is done both at a qualitative level, and also by collecting big data to investigate any trends which may become apparent. The results of the monitoring are regularly published in order to provide public situation awareness' (Interview with Raag, 2019).

4. There are several volunteer organisations which deal with the work of countering fake news, such as *Propstop.org*, or the 'National Centre of Defence and Security Awareness' (NCDSA) (*Sinu Riigi Kaitse*), which is an independent Estonian civic platform which aims to raise awareness about security and defence issues within Estonia.

5. Russian and pro-Russian activists have often launched multiple groups which target local people with (dis)information, various fakes, and manipulative information. The Estonian side is trying to counter this kind of harmful activity (Interview with Expert D, 2019).

6. Expert C listed several measures which were implemented in order to provide a response to harmful influences, and to protect the electoral system. Expert C highlighted the fact that a media task force (in the form of a meeting group) was formed with the aim of convening each week. This work group consists of representatives from the 'Information System Authority', the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Government Office, and the State Electoral Office. Additionally, before the parliamentary elections took place, the European Commission and the 'Bureau of the European Parliament' in Estonia also organised several working meetings. The task of this working group was to share specific information which was related to the organisation of elections and to actively discuss media monitoring results. This could be one measure which could further be used to counter disinformation (Interview with Expert C, 2019).

7. According to Expert C, daily media monitoring took place, and inputs for this process came from the Governmental Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Estonian National Library (Interview with Expert C, 2019).

8. Within the legislative sphere, in 2008 the Estonian parliament adopted the '*Advertising Act*' (2014) which was later updated in the same year. Expert C pointed out that, according to the law, active agitation during elections is counted as being valid from the last day in which the various candidates are required to register.

9. In 2020, during the spread of COVID-19, the Estonian government paid considerable attention to communications with Estonians and Russophones by using their own languages (Terviseamet, 2020).

The list of measures which have been taken in Estonia when it comes to responding to those areas of Russian influence activity which have been provided here is not an exhaustive one, but they were chosen as indicative examples.

Conclusions and policy suggestions

This article has mentioned only some examples of the Kremlin's advantages, channels, and tools when it comes to deploying disinformation tools in Estonia and, especially, amongst the Russophone community. In fact, Moscow's arsenal of information activity in Estonia and the west is much wider, including attempts to destabilise societies, undertaking cyber-attacks, providing misinformation, and carrying out political and economic blackmail, intimidation, deception, and bribery.

The Kremlin is waging a hybrid war against the west at different strategic levels and in various dimensions through the application of a broad range of tactics and tools. As well as informational pressure, Moscow also uses cyber-attacks and economic pressure in an attempt to influence political and other crucial levels.

One should also consider the fact that the Russophone community of Estonia is not homogenous. Instead it is fragmented, with several Russian-speaking minorities which are made up of different people with different views. However, large sections of this group belong within the field of Russian media discourse, as they form the target audience of Russian information activity and could potentially be influenced by the Kremlin when it comes to the promotion of *Pax Russica*. It is important to realise that Russian propaganda is dangerous, and is being directed at different target groups. It is also important to address the 'demand side' of (dis)information's deceptive content.

Based on this discussion, the authors outline a couple of suggestions which could be used as long-term guidelines in fighting against Russia's disinformation campaign. It is important to distinguish the strategic plane from the act of fighting a specific event. The latter is well implemented, as has been shown in the account above. In regards to strategic action, however, it would appear to be useful to provide one or two suggestions which could be enacted: i) the first of these would be to create trustworthy local content and thereby build up the reputation of media channels, especially the Russian language ones. This would perhaps provide the greatest antidote to disinformation inasmuch as the trustworthiness of the local channels would be amplified by the contrast to Russia's promoted disinformation.

This means that there would be no great pressure to prohibit disinformation sources and channels. Instead they would rather start working as tools for building accurate democratic media-knowledge for citizens. As the second of the suggestions, this article stresses: ii) the need to address seriously the existing socio-economic problems, which for the main part have been aggravated by the global crisis of 2008, something which especially hard-hit

the peripheral regions in Estonia. This would allow closer contact between governing bodies and the Russian-speaking minority. As the final recommendation, the authors would like to suggest that iii) particularly within the Estonian context it is vital to create options for deeper integration when it comes to the Russophone population, something which may result in a strong impetus if the Estonian speaking population could be brought to accept in a more profound way the Russophone segment of the population, with all the traits which it presents. This will, of course, presume an active role 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 its society from manipulative (dis)information activity and fakes which could influence society, harm the democratic system, and change the political environment. Although the government and the various governmental organisations continue to cooperate in this area, media companies, civil-society groups, and NGOs are also investing in long-term resilience to different forms of fakes and the provision of disinformation. However, raising social awareness about such disinformation should be a priority. The importance of digital literacy education amongst the population is a matter which should not be underestimated.

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