



**Disinformation
networks of pro-
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in Estonia
and their fostering
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Disinformation networks of pro-Kremlin proxies in Estonia and their fostering of anti-government sentiment among the Russian speaking community: the case of anti-vaccination narratives in the online space

Autocratic regimes like Russia and China have deployed multiple strategies in their bids to exploit the pandemic against democratic societies including the Baltic States¹. Numerous malicious narratives, for example, have been disseminated and weaponised by Kremlin-controlled channels and ideological proxies. The aim – projecting influence on citizen attitudes and behaviour in different countries and spheres². One of the largest clusters of activity involves disinformation campaigns opposing pandemic crisis management in Western democracies. These actions seek to heighten resistance to government restrictions and undercut other crisis regulations. The anti-establishment narratives, notably, are backed by a toxic brew of conspiracy theories, domestic populism and falsehoods concerning an alleged violation of rights by governments³.

Kremlin-orchestrated and/or motivated disinformation has reportedly engendered negative effects on the attitudes of vulnerable groups in Estonia⁴. The country hosts a fragmented society, with some marginalised communities of Russian speakers buying into propagandistic and malevolent information. This disinformation is targeted towards fostering distrust in the current government, promoting an anti-vaccination agenda, advocating for close and friendly relations with Russia and occasionally cultivating

Soviet nostalgia⁵.

Public information networks of pro-Kremlin ideological proxies in Estonia include several websites, pages on social media platforms (Facebook, VK, OK) and open and closed groups on Facebook and other online communities⁶ that attempt to mimic legitimate deliberative social and political forums in Estonia. The activities of these disinformation assets are coordinated by interlinked groups (some participants have been previously mentioned in the annual reports of the Estonian Internal Security Service and/or spotted distributing pro-Kremlin anti-Western propaganda)⁷. The members of these groups and followers of these pages are locked in echo chambers that see their beliefs reinforced by a narrow range of messages and narratives from an “alternative reality”.

The anti-vaccination campaigns of 2021 provide compelling evidence of coordination aimed at achieving greater reach and stronger engagement of target audiences across various platforms and channels in Estonia. The emotional resonance of the topic of vaccination renders the issue all too easy to exploit through psychological manipulation and the mobilization of Russian-speaking people in Estonia who harbour some scepticism and whose media consumption is shaped in one way or another by pro-Kremlin sources⁸.

According to one GLOBSEC survey⁹, general support for vaccination against COVID-19 was lowest among respondents who live in Ida-Viru County (a region in Estonia comprised mostly of Russian speakers). Sputnik, the Russian vaccine, was also far more popular among the people of Ida-Viru than any other region. Significant regional differences were also measured regarding societal perceptions about COVID-19 associated topics. The share of those believing that the official number of coronavirus cases was lower than Estonia’s public authorities reported was highest in Ida-Viru (33.3%). The findings were no different when it came to societal distrust of COVID-19 vaccines “because the pharmaceutical companies are only driven by profit (42.4%)”. A total of 39.7% of people in Ida-Viru, meanwhile, subscribed to the belief that measures taken during the pandemic will leave a long-term detrimental impact on their rights and freedoms (the region again ranked at the extreme end of the spectrum). And 26.2% of the region’s populace believed that the pandemic was a planned operation by hidden forces/elites aimed at controlling the population. These numbers provide some clue as to the generalised portrait and common attitudes prevalent among some Russian speakers in Estonia. These individuals, importantly, are often the target of misleading information and/or disinformation campaigns that underpin

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This analysis is part of a series of analyses called “Narratives travelling the information space” within a project led by GLOBSEC and funded by the National Endowment for Democracy. National Endowment for Democracy and GLOBSEC assume no responsibility for the facts and opinions expressed in this report or their subsequent use.

1 <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/deadly-deceptive-disinformation>
<https://www.debunkeu.org/covid-19-is-a-tool-for-control-and-other-disinformation-narratives-escalate-distrust-in-vaccines>
<https://www.propastop.org/eng/2019/02/26/is-the-kremlin-inciting-anti-vaccination-behaviour-in-estonia>
<https://www.err.ee/1608456092/vladimir-sazonov-venemaa-laane-vastased-narratiivid-koroona-ajal>

2 <https://estonianworld.com/security/estonian-foreign-intelligence-the-coronavirus-crisis-offered-new-opportunities-for-authoritarian-regimes>
<https://www.investigativejournalismforeu.net/projects/whos-financing-fake-news-in-the-baltics>

3 <https://medium.com/dfrlab/populists-across-the-baltic-states-boost-covid-19-disinformation-for-political-gain-9b19ca94ad55>

4 <https://epi.delfi.ee/artikkel/92369777/vene-propaganda-karvane-kasi-takistab-eestis-koroonaviruse-taastumist>
<https://www.postimees.ee/7182190/vene-propaganda-kaivitas-laane-vaktsiiniide-vastase-kampaania>

5 <https://www.propastop.org/eng/2020/04/21/the-fb-webpage-attacking-estonians-methods-to-fight-the-coronavirus-is-associated-with-the-kremlins-networks-of-influence/>

6 The following online resources provide some illustrative examples:
<https://sputnik-meedia.ee/>, <https://dokole.eu>, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/889272741211578>, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1434087526804344>,
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/318810591846699>, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/russkaja.estonia>, <https://www.facebook.com/tvn.Estonia>,
<https://www.facebook.com/RuskaaSkolaEstonii>, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/906192049864963>, <https://ok.ru/rusest>, <https://vk.com/russkayapribaltika>

7 <https://www.propastop.org/2021/10/18/kes-puuavad-venekeelsetest-fb-gruppides-tahelepanu>

8 <https://news.postimees.ee/7376088/russian-propaganda-pouring-into-the-brains-of-estonian-viewers>

9 The poll was conducted in March 2021 on a sample of 1,000 respondents in Estonia using stratified multistage random sampling in the form of computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. The profiles of the respondents were representative of the country by gender, age, education, place of residence, nationality and size of settlement. Respondents were also asked about their political preferences by specifying the party they would vote for if elections were held the upcoming weekend. Collection of data in each country (Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia) was coordinated by FOCUS, s.r.o. Conducted in the framework of a project organised by GLOBSEC and supported by the National Endowment for Democracy, the survey formed the basis of a report published in June 2021 - GLOBSEC Trends: Central & Eastern Europe one year into the pandemic https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GLOBSEC-Trends-2021_final.pdf

broader anti-democratic macro-narratives. The information vulnerability of this group should be meticulously analysed. Stigmatization, meanwhile, should be avoided at all costs recognizing that other groups (not ethnicity or language specific) in Estonian society are equally susceptible to misconceptions and believing social myths¹⁰.

Several common tropes can be discerned in scrutinizing the anti-vaccination narrative diffused by online propaganda channels and actors¹¹ during the period of Summer-Autumn 2021: (1) restrictions imposed by the Estonian government are an exhaustive overreaction; (2) vaccine mandates are illegal; (3) the rights of local Russian speakers are being violated; (4) stringent pandemic restrictions are dictated to Estonia by Brussels or other external forces¹².

OSINT-based analysis of several highly opinionated and manipulative articles¹³ that include at least two of the above-described elements reveal the apparent interconnectedness of anti-vaccination narrative dissemination among Russian speakers in Estonia. The total reach and user engagement of shared articles was evaluated in the inter-linked Facebook pages, open groups and online communities where the analysed content was cross-shared and commented on. The estimated reach was about 845,000 hits and approximately 6,000 public interactions on Facebook during a five-month period in 2021¹⁴. These are quite significant numbers for the Russian-language online community in Estonia. One of the common denominators connecting these pages, groups and communities are a group of people, profiles and accounts involved in their administration and generation and sharing of content¹⁵. Their activities also create opportunities for “useful idiots” to

amplify malign rhetoric to emotionally trigger other social media users outside the usual circle.

The content is sometimes even published first on fringe media sites and other untrustworthy sources. The commentaries and articles are intended to manipulate public opinion on socially and politically important topics. They, therefore, can contain messages that need to be whitewashed and legitimised as normal discourse through popular dissemination and discussion in various forms on social media. Through psychological influence techniques, rhetoric is used in this way to sow doubt and distrust within the target audiences. The strategies, consequently, feed general buy-in towards malicious narratives whose ultimate goals – using existing or emerging schisms within society – are to deepen polarisation and spur the radicalisation of certain vulnerable groups on various issues. As ill-intentioned actors have evidently learned to employ information malpractice, democratic societies should develop pragmatic responses that promote cohesiveness and resilience building over the long term.

Malicious influence in the information space, notably, can be magnified during crises by both domestic and foreign actors whose activities are either interconnected by digital nodes (and other relevant infrastructure) or mutually reinforcing owing to similar (ideological and/or material) goals and objectives with respect to target audiences. Estonia’s social cohesion has been challenged by both traditional dividing lines (e.g. native language, citizenship) and by attitudes and behavioural patterns shaped by a complex combination of factors (media consumption habits, conspiracy theories, living environment, socio-economic background, future perspectives). It is important that

government authorities ensure that they constantly seek to understand these processes and accordingly incorporate any lessons into crisis communication guidelines. With respect to Estonian society more broadly, meanwhile, it is paramount that the next generation of opinion leaders be cultivated and supported. These individuals should be able to reach out to a diverse range of communities and groups through messages that resonate and unite and express core values that align with the constitutional order, democratic principles and human rights.

¹⁰ <https://icds.ee/en/democracy-alternative-reality-and-estonias-resilience/>

¹¹ The case study was based on the 30 most illustrative topical articles, published by online resources with pro-Kremlin orientations, questionable reputations and/or anti-democratic anti-liberal agendas, i.e. <https://sputnik-meedia.ee/covid>, <https://rus.objektiv.ee>, <https://www.zemijaki.eu>, <https://dokole.eu>, <https://baltnews.ee>, <https://tribuna.ee>, <https://baltija.eu/>

¹² This is a short content analysis based on the keywords and key messages from the selected articles listed in the annex.

¹³ The case study was based on the 30 most illustrative topical articles, published by online resources with pro-Kremlin orientations, questionable reputations and/or anti-democratic anti-liberal agendas, i.e. <https://sputnik-meedia.ee/covid>, <https://rus.objektiv.ee>, <https://www.zemijaki.eu>, <https://dokole.eu>, <https://baltnews.ee>, <https://tribuna.ee>, <https://baltija.eu/>

¹⁴ The CrowdTangle Chrome Extension was used to quantify the reach and interactions of the posts.

¹⁵ The following accounts and profiles are engaged in inter-related information activities across several online resources, described in the case study:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/516332315524392/user/100032833010538>,
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/291260307626160/user/100000720732958>,
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/624198561104841/user/100006282360725>,
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/762365760953570/user/100062114666779>,
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/516332315524392/user/100000054311655>,
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/624198561104841/user/100070974763473>,
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/624198561104841/user/100000143505554>,
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/624198561104841/user/100007593936283>,
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/624198561104841/user/1814777948>,
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/516332315524392/user/100033071059987>,
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/516332315524392/user/100031264365766>,
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/516332315524392/user/100001791608454>,
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/889272741211578/user/100001413112618>,
<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100006206509210>

