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
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 States. 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 spheres1 – 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 governments2. Kremlin-orchestrated and/or motivated disinformation has reportedly engendered negative effects on the attitudes of vulnerable groups in Estonia3. 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 nostalgia4. 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 communities5 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 propaganda6). 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 sources7.

According to one GLOBSEC survey, 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)8. 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 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/infl uenced 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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3 https://euvsdisinfo.eu/deadly-deceptive-disinformation
7 https://www.propastop.org/2021/10/18/kes-puuavad-venekeelsetest-fb-gruppides-tahelepanu
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 plans of the respondents were representative of the country’s profile, age, education, place of residence, ethnicity and use of internet. 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 took much longer than usual, which resulted in some respondents becoming dissatisfied or quitting parts of the interview. It should also be noted that the data collected in the framework of a project co-funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is not the general population sample. Some respondents were also asked if they believed in the official number of coronavirus cases was lower than Estonia’s public authorities reported. The findings 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/influenced 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
broader anti-democratic macro-narratives. The information vulnerability of this

group should be meticulously analysed.

https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100006206509210

https://www.facebook.com/groups/889272741211578/user/100001413112618,

https://www.facebook.com/groups/516332315524392/user/100001791608454,

https://www.facebook.com/groups/516332315524392/user/100031264365766,

https://www.facebook.com/groups/516332315524392/user/100033071059987,

https://www.facebook.com/groups/624198561104841/user/1814777948,

https://www.facebook.com/groups/624198561104841/user/100007593936283,

https://www.facebook.com/groups/624198561104841/user/100070974763473,

https://www.facebook.com/groups/516332315524392/user/100000054311655,

https://www.facebook.com/groups/762365760953570/user/100062114666779,

https://www.facebook.com/groups/624198561104841/user/100006282360725,

https://www.facebook.com/groups/291260307626160/user/100000720732958

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

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


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-

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


reinforcing the apparent 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.