EU DISINFO LAB

Disinformation landscape in ESTONIA

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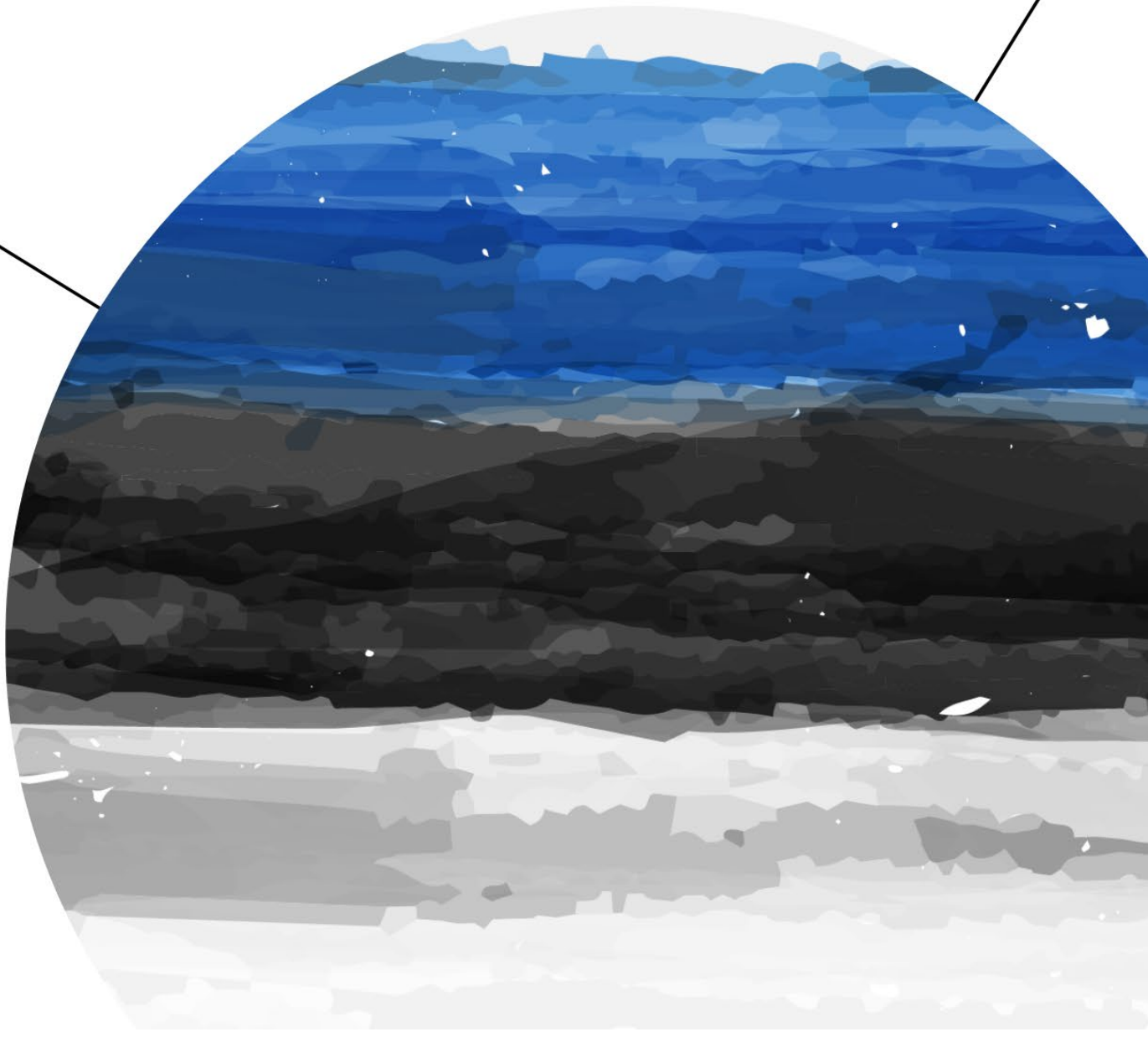

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INTRODUCTION

- Estonia, like Latvia, Lithuania, and other regions once occupied by the Soviet Union, is increasingly targeted by Russian propaganda, which seeks to leverage disinformation to sow confusion and erode public trust.
- The most significant case of the Kremlin's use of disinformation as a tool for hybrid warfare is the 2007 DDoS attack on Estonia, combined with "green men" radicalising and organising riots on social media. This became foundational in the national self-branding of Estonia as an information-resilient country.
- The local disinformation landscape expanded significantly in both producers and consumers during 2020, when the pandemic and lockdown led to a surge in disinformation that far exceeded what Estonian society had previously encountered. This situation prompted discussions about imposing penalties on the original spreaders of disinformation, drawing insights from the case study of neighbouring Latvia.
- Estonia is considered quite advanced in media literacy. A 35-hour module on media and its ecosystem is included in the national curriculum and taught in Year 11 of high school as a mandatory part of the Estonian linguistics class. Despite this progress, Estonia still struggles to translate theoretical knowledge of media and information literacy into daily practices, which is essential for enhancing the country's resilience to disinformation.

EMBLEMATIC CASES

WIDESPREAD DISINFORMATION AT THE PANDEMIC'S ONSET

- When the COVID-19 pandemic started, there was a lot of panic and disinformation. As is known from previous crises, widespread panic and lack of quick information from official sources lead to information disorders online. Such was the case in Estonia in March 2020. On the morning of the 16th of March 2020, a panicked message began to spread across Estonia through social networks: an alleged press release was due to arrive at 4 p.m., saying that the entire Harju County would be curfewed.
- Around noon, the story had acquired its share of variations: some people claimed that all of Estonia would be isolated, others suggested only Tallinn, the capital, would be affected, while some mentioned that Keila, a town near Tallinn, would be cut off.
- Spreaders named the Defense Police as the source, the presidential offices, or the Ministry of Internal Affairs. When the government confirmed that it was false information, the "news" had reached tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of Estonians.
- Even though this was significantly widespread, KAPO (Estonian Internal Security Service) did not find it coordinated – it just seemed to illustrate how well people believe any information in times of confusion. The full investigation about how the lie spread, can be found here.
- The very same day the disinformation about isolating areas within the country spread, there was another claim going around claiming that the Government would ban all alcohol sales within the country. This was also widely spread and believed. Leading government officials held a press conference where they debunked the claims. As KAPO stated in the yearbook for 2021: "/---/ The pandemic has not significantly changed national security, but it can give opportunists the hope of fishing more easily in muddied water."

NATO SOLDIERS SEXUALLY ASSAULT LOCALS

- After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Estonia started investing more in its defence mechanisms. One of these investments was the expansion of the practice fields where NATO soldiers exercise. That raised a lot of protest amongst the locals of Nursipalu (Võru) where people argued that the Estonian government was "bringing the war into their backyard".
- This was soon taken advantage of by anti-government and anti-Ukraine forces from other regions of Estonia – the loud minority in the region quickly found support from across the country for online activities as well as offline protests, led by individuals who are also active on social media as conspiracy theorists on the coronavirus. Within that conflict, other rumours and disinformation narratives began spreading. One is that the NATO soldiers who reside in the area sexually assault local girls. Since this was a severe allegation made by a woman who was involved in local politics, the woman was contacted by the police to determine the sources and evidence of these claims.
- In turn, Kalle Grünthal, a member of the Estonian Parliament, added fuel to the fire on Facebook, where he made a post in capital letters: "PLEASE HELP WITH INFORMATION." In it, Grünthal wanted to get information on whether the alleged information spread

is true -that soldiers of the allied forces have committed sexual crimes against locals-. At the end of the post, Grünthal says that he is grateful for even the smallest piece of information regarding this case.

- The post in question started to spread a few days ago, and yesterday the knowledge about it also reached the police. This post has not spread on an immense scale; rather, it is shared and distributed by a narrow group of people," said Janar Koemets, an online police officer of the South-East precinct, in April this year. T
- The post had been shared 182 times as of July 2024. He noted that posts about alleged rapes began to circulate already last year and also made it into the KAPO yearbook as an example of spreading false information. At the beginning of July 2024, the Southern District Prosecutor's Office closed the criminal proceedings, during which it was established that the story of the Võru city councilor, who spoke loudly both on social media and at public gatherings about the alleged sexual violence of allied soldiers, is not true. This, together with other misinformation disseminated about Nursipalu and NATO, has been a long and successful process of undermining NATO authority and causing fear among Estonians.

BOMB THREATS TARGETING ESTONIAN SCHOOLS

- On the night of October 12, 2023, a series of bomb threats in the Russian language landed in the mailboxes of dozens of Estonian schools and kindergartens. The same thing happened the next day. Schools reacted differently - some sent the children home, others continued with their studies. Pictures and videos of alleged explosions in Viljandi and Tartu spread on social media. Fake articles reported alleged injuries and deaths.
- The disinformation was mostly spread on platforms like Snapchat and TikTok. These bomb threats were also made in the other Baltic countries and they are considered to be Russian hybrid attacks against its neighbours.
- In December of 2023, the head of the Ida-Harju police station, Roger Kumm, said that according to the police, it is an extensive wave of mass mailings and that the real threat level has not increased. "The purpose of these letters is to disrupt the work of the institutions, to cause fear and panic," said Kumm.
- This was the first of its kind where fact-checkers and researchers saw how the panic and confusion was going on in a specific social media sphere that did not reach usual platforms – like Facebook or Instagram which are far more popular among Estonians. This could indicate that if someone was deliberately spreading this misinformation, their goal might have been to instil fear in students by targeting platforms primarily frequented by young people.

NARRATIVES

ESTONIANS LIVED A GOOD AND PROSPEROUS LIFE UNDER THE SOVIET RULE

- One of the narratives pushed by the Kremlin is that Estonians had a good life during the Soviet rule. One of the examples of this is how Kaja Kallas (prime minister of Estonia from 2021 to 2024) is painted by the Russian propaganda channels and disseminated through social media.
- At the end of June 2024, it was revealed that the European Council nominated Kaja Kallas as the candidate for the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. After that, the Kremlin started a larger disinformation campaign against Kallas on social media. The most popular false claim that started circulating after that, is related to a photo of teenage Kaja Kallas. Kallas has repeatedly talked about how her grandparents and mother were deported to Siberia by the Soviet authorities, referring to the horrors that Estonians had to go through at that time. The photo of Kallas sitting next to her parents as a "well-off" teenager is used to "prove" that life was beautiful at that time, that Kallas was lying and there was no repression.
- Even though this is case-specific, it goes beyond Kallas – during the Soviet occupation, about 7,550 families, or 20,600 to 20,700 people, were deported from Estonia to Siberia by the Soviet forces. Even though Estonians remember it well and therefore are not easily convinced by the lies spread by the Kremlin, this does undermine and falsely paint the painful history of Estonia under the Soviet occupation. This therefore makes it harder to prove to Western societies that the narrative pushed by the Kremlin is false.

RIGGED ELECTIONS AND E-VOTING SCEPTICISM

- Estonia is known for being e-driven and one of the only countries in the world where you can cast your vote during any election over the internet. This has its benefits – convenience has attracted a larger voter turnout, for example. Yet there is a downside. Every election year the public is faced with scepticism and therefore a lot of disinformation spreads about the legitimacy of the Internet voting process.
- After the last Parliamentary elections, a conservative party MP posted a photo of different computer parts in a trash can. The politician claimed that these were parts that contained sensitive voting data and said it was supposed to "prove" how our elections are a fraud. It was an instalment from an art exposition that had ended – therefore it was in the trash.
- Other claims are going around, starting from how the number of voters is artificial since it has changed over the years (when in reality people have become of voting age) to general voter fraud.

FEAR AND PANIC CAUSED BY DISINFORMATION ABOUT WARTIME

- Similarly to other previously occupied countries bordering Russia, Estonia does have an increased sense of anxiety towards the intentions of Russia. Nevertheless, right now there is no reason to believe imminent threat from said neighbour. But that's exactly

what the Kremlin narrative wants Estonians to believe – any negative attitude towards Russia is our contribution to escalating potential conflict.

- This has led to increased amounts of disinformation about the "involvement" of Estonian (and other European countries) troops. For example, the Foreign Ministry of Russia is constantly spreading a lie that countries send foreign mercenaries to Ukraine.
- A factcheck conducted by Delfi Estonia showed that this is not true – any foreign soldiers in Ukraine are there of their own free will and fighting on both the Russian and Ukrainian sides of the war. These claims even made their way to the parliament where an MP claimed that the answers given by the prime minister of Estonia are not "enough" to prove otherwise. Now the former head of Estonian defence forces gave a thorough and clear interview where he explained how and if Estonian forces would ever be in Ukraine, easing the chaos surrounding the subject.

COMMUNITY

- The only signatory of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) and a Meta Third-Party Fact-Checker in Estonia is Delfi. They have been doing fact-checking since 2018, have been a part of the IFCN since 2021, and are also a part of other media literacy projects. Including the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) and the Baltic Engagement Centre for Combating Information Disorders (BECID). Delfi Estonia does not only conduct fact-checks but also organises workshops and guest lectures to spread their knowledge on disinformation and propaganda.
- The BECID project is active in all three Baltic states and from Estonia, it has partners from the University of Tartu and the University of Tallinn, in addition to Delfi Estonia. It is promoted by the European Commission and linked to EDMO. Coordinated by the University of Tartu, it comprises 4 universities, 4 fact-checking organisations and fact-checking units within media organisations, and a non-profit organisation Baltic Centre for Media Excellence. As one of fourteen hubs in the EDMO network, this is the biggest regional and cross-border consortium in the region, with 67 individuals involved in different capacities.
- The Defence League of Estonia, a voluntary national defence organisation, initiated a non-profit blog called Propastop in 2014. Propastop blog is aimed at contributing to Estonia's information security. It is run by volunteers, many of whom still belong to the Estonian Defence League, an Estonian voluntary national defence organisation. They mediate information related to the blog topics from state agencies, current media, and literature, but mostly rely on the real-time Russian news media monitor Propamon, which scans the Russian information scape for mentions of Estonia and is open for use to all. Propastop explains backgrounds and analyses what our neighbours are up to in propaganda war.
- The Estonian Debating Society is a group of people, who among other things, conduct political fact-checks. Unlike Delfi Estonia, they analyse politicians, their speeches, promises, etc to further hold them accountable for what they have said. The Estonian Debate Society collects materials and conducts training on media literacy and critical thinking.
- There is an active MIL network in Estonia with 28 organisations regularly meeting. Media Literacy Week, organised by the Education and Science Ministry of Estonia, aims to shed light on the problem of disinformation and propaganda, and is organised in cooperation with all or most of the organisations in the network, highlighting and amplifying everyone's work, and setting common goals for the future.

POLICY AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

- Estonia does not have a set of laws covering disinformation. People who spread disinformation are subjected to the same general laws that apply to other cases. For example, if the disinformation is somehow hurting a person or an organisation, they can be held accountable in a civil defamation case. But there are a few exceptions.
- Back in 2020, during the disinformation spread in regards to the pandemic (as explained at the beginning of this fact sheet), journalists asked around the prime minister's office, from where cited the legal department of the State Chancellery: "In the combination of the Penal Code (KarS § 262 subsection 1) and the law enforcement act (KorS § 55 subsection 1 p. 2) the distribution of knowingly false information can be punished with either a fine or arrest. The Penal Code prohibits violating public order. Among other things, intimidation and threats are treated as a violation of public order, which the deliberate dissemination of false information undoubtedly is." In this case, it has to be established that the disinformation being spread is done so in a malicious manner, harmful to the general public.
- As for governance, the coordination of media and information literacies and the combat against disinformation in Estonia is divided between different national authorities.
- Amendments to the Media Services Act (incorporating the DSA Directive on a local level) went into force on 9 March 2022, including the addition of a chapter on promoting media literacy. According to § 53^2 of the Act, media literacy means the skills, knowledge and understanding that enable the effective and safe use of media. According to § 53^3, the Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for promoting media literacy in the framework of the planning of the state education policy and the organisation of related areas.
- Additionally, the Government Office of Estonia's Strategic Communications department coordinates work on the topic across different authorities and coordinates the psychological defence of Estonia(ns).
- As for informing the society of narratives and manipulation tactics, Estonia relies on a Broad Security Concept, according to which our security forces - along with the Government Office - need to make sure the population is informed on the latest trends; to that end, both the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service as well as the Internal Security Service give out yearbooks detailing the foreign and local influence, which have developed into the most comprehensive overviews of disinformation actors, platforms, narratives, goals and activities within Estonia.
- The goal of building resilience within the Estonian society against disinformation also reflects in the National Defence Development Plan 2031 (by the Ministry of Defence), the Digital Agenda 2030 (by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications), the Internal Security Development Plan 2030 (by the Ministry of Internal Affairs), and the Cohesive Estonia Development Plan 2030 (by the Ministry of Culture). Not all of them use the words "media and information literacy" or even "disinformation" but hold all of the components of building societal resilience against disinformation. To establish a cohesive national strategy, the next step would be to adopt a common terminology for the interdisciplinary and cross-border challenge of disinformation. Following this, developing a strategy and allocating a budget for counter-disinformation activities would be essential.

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