

The Concept of Pax Russica, Russian Strategic Narratives and their Possible Impact on Populist Movements and the Russophone Community in Estonia¹⁵

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1. INTRODUCTION

1. 1. The aim of article

This review article focuses on studying the informational influence of Russia through strategic narratives that were disseminated to target audiences in Estonia, including several populist movements and the Russophone community. I will examine which Russian strategic narratives were disseminated before and during COVID-19 with the purpose of impacting political movements and society, especially the Russophone population of Estonia.

1. 2. Data sample and methodology

This research is primarily based on the qualitative media analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) of several pro-Kremlin media outlets in the Russian language through 12 semi-structured expert interviews (Lepik et al., 2014) with opinion leaders, political figures, security experts (law, media and communication, political science, defence studies) and several representatives of the Russophone community in Estonia as well (Flick, 2006). These expert interviews revealed several issues and threats to Estonian society in the informational environment.

Seventeen articles from various Russian media sources (*Baltnews.ee*, *Sputniknews*, *REX Information Agen-*

cy, *Regnum*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Inosmi.ru* and others) were analysed, covering the period 2014 until 2021. The criterion for selecting these articles was that their target audience should be Russophone people in Estonia. Qualitative content analysis (Flick, 2006) was used in current study to analyse the empirical data (interviews and articles published in mainstream media) by using a hidden pilot sample (Kuckartz, 2014)³.

1. 3. Some notes on Russian information warfare and strategic narratives

Putin's authoritarian regime is trying to account for the characteristics of each country in the Western world and, even more broadly, is striving to damage the democratic and liberal system as a whole (Karlsen, 2019) with several different types of manipulative and harmful disinformation by trying to influence political, cultural and economic circles in the West, among them far-right forces (Weiss, 2020), leftist forces (Paier & Sazonov, 2019; Weyland, 2013) and even some liberal circles in the Western world. For that reason, Putin's authoritarian regime considers the characteristics of each state and nation being targeted with information warfare (see more Mölder & Sazonov, 2018; Lucas, & Pomerantsev, 2016; Darczewska & Żochowski, 2017). The main aim of the Kremlin's information war against the Western world and its liberal and democratic system and values is to create fear, mistrust and instability. Russia's goal is to divide Europe and, in particular,

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³ Four articles from four different publications and different media outlets from which primary coding was performed.

the Kremlin tries to destabilize using these same manipulative methods, messages and tools of destabilization (Winnerstig, 2014), including hostile propaganda (Sprinĝe, 2018; Mölder & Sazonov, 2020), cyber-attacks and many other hybrid means and tools.

For a better understanding of the nature of Russian information warfare, we should accentuate that the Kremlin is waging a hybrid war against the Western world on all levels through the use of disinformation campaigns, cyber-attacks, organized crime, political blackmail, money-laundering, espionage, energy dependence, facilitated migration, etc.⁴ Moscow also uses economic and political pressure in an attempt to influence the Western political and economic environments. Over the last decade, or even longer, Russia has increased its aggressive rhetoric and imperialist ambitions. One of Russia's hybrid warfare dimensions is Russian information activity which could be designated as Russian Global Knowledge Warfare. As Eric Shiraev and Holger Mölder correctly pointed out, Global Knowledge Warfare (GKW) *"is the purposeful use and the management of knowledge in pursuit of a competitive advantage over foreign opponents. Knowledge is information that has a purpose or use and requires the awareness or a form of understanding of the subject. Knowledge warfare is about what people know, how they interpret this knowledge, and how they use it in their actions"* (Shiraev & Mölder, 2020, p. 2).

Strategic narratives which are most crucial and existential tools in the GKW are, according to Mölder and Shiraev, built on effectively visualized images and strategic narratives which can influence wide target audiences; they can influence the decision-making process of political or economic elites or shape public opinion (Mölder & Shiraev 2021, p. 16).

What are strategic narratives? Why they are so powerful tools of influence? The concept of strategic narratives has been actively adopted in international relations and also used in political communication (Roselle et al., 2013). Strategic narratives consider stories that exist in the collective memory of people and also other factors which frame interpretation, including political agendas and ideological views (Ventsel, et al. 2021, p. 6; also Mölder & Sazonov, 2020, p. 85). As Roselle et al. (2021) rightly argue, our era's soft power is a strategic narrative. The strategic narrative began with a starting point similar to Nye's idea, based on an understanding of fundamental change in the international system and the question of how to influence international relations.

Already Antoniadis et al. (2010, p. 5) argues that strategic narratives are representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative means by which the political elite seeks to give a meaningful significance to the past, present, and future in order to achieve political goals. Roselle et al. (2013) argue that strategic narratives can affect the following areas:

- an international system that expresses how political actors shape perceptions of the organization of international relations
- identity, meaning how political actors want to project their identity in international relations
- policies, for example the desire of political actors to influence international negotiations

Thus, if political actors are able to align narratives of the international system, politics and identity with their own strategic orientations and goals, the greater the opportunity becomes for them to increase their influence in the international arena (Miskimmon et al., 2018, p. 3). Strategic narratives created by Russia are aimed at various target groups. Creating narratives exploits several populist political movements as well as politicians. To this end, various strategic narratives were created that amplify or shape perceptions of the world in line with the goals of Russia (Sazonov, 2022).

At the end of this subchapter I will mention that populism, according to Ernesto Laclau (2007), is a never-ending discursive struggle for hegemony through infusing meanings in key concepts which are inherently open to interpretation (see also Makarychev & Sazonov, 2021).

2. PAX RUSSICA AS A TOOL OF INFLUENCE IN ESTONIA

In 2007 Russian authoritarian leader Vladimir Putin founded the Russkiy Mir Foundation led by Viacheslav Nikonov (Member of the State Duma).⁵ On April 2007 Russian dictator Putin declared the following about *Pax Russica*:

The Russian language not only preserves an entire layer of truly global achievements but is also the living space for many millions of people in the Russian-speaking world, a community that goes far beyond Russia itself. As the common heritage of many peoples, the Russian language will never become the language of hatred or enmity, xenophobia, or isolationism. In my view, we need to support the initiative put forward by Russian linguists to create a National Russian Language

⁴ See more Radin, 2017; Mölder, et al., 2021; Mölder & Sazonov, 2022.

⁵ The grandson of Viacheslav Molotov was a famous Soviet politician from Stalin's epoch.

*Foundation, the main aim of which will be to develop the Russian language at home, support Russian language study programmes abroad and generally promote Russian language and literature around the world.*⁶

Pax Russica ('Russian World') (Itshenko, 2014) is the fundamental idea of the ideological basis of Putin's Russia. This idea or concept has been actively developed and disseminated by various PR companies and information campaigns in the mainstream media and social media for a Russian audience, and also for Russophone communities around the world (Expert I, 2021; Expert J, 2020).

The concept of *Pax Russica* has been used by Russian political elites as a powerful ideological tool of pressure and influence with the aim of uniting all Russian-speaking people in the world. The wish is to create a global Russian-speaking ideological, cultural, historical, political, economic and informational space which will be controlled and governed by the Kremlin. It is important to note here that *Pax Russica* is very closely related to the Putin regime's compatriot policy in which the Kremlin has declared that its duty is protect Russophone people not only in Russia but also abroad, particularly in Estonia (Sazonov & Mölder, 2022). As Holger Mölder and I write in our article:

"The fundamental ideas of Pax Russica have been vigorously used by Moscow for expansionist purposes, lately regarding aggression against Ukraine, later widely disseminated for justifying the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of the Donbas area in Ukraine. The concept was promoted by abundant information campaigns in mass media, social media, etc. The Kremlin blamed the Ukrainians for fascism and for discrimination against Russians. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, imperialist ambitions became an effective tool of the Russian political elites to unite the irredentist movements of Russian-speaking people in neighboring countries and to create a powerful Russian-influenced cultural, ideological, social, political, and informational area on the territory of post-Soviet space. It was also used to develop its own compatriot policy" (Sazonov & Mölder, 2022).

What does *Pax Russica* mean for Estonia? Over the last two decades, or even earlier, the Kremlin has been influencing the Baltic states, including Estonia. Their arsenal of asymmetric activities includes infor-

mation and psychological influence (Arold, 2015, pp. 9–14), cyber-attacks, exploitation of crime to influence societies, radicalization, incitement of riots, and the involvement and the exploitation of activists to destabilize Estonia's internal security and important state functions (Expert A, 2019).

In Estonia the concept *Pax Russica* was exploited through compatriot policy and the Kremlin's strategic narratives used to undermine and discredit the Estonian government, Estonian state and society. The Kremlin does this through promoting pro-Kremlin propaganda narratives like Russophobia (see e.g., Baburin, 2020), discrimination against the Russian-speaking population, and flourishing Nazism in Estonia, to name but a few. According to Expert C's (2019) opinion, we can still see signs of the old paradigm when the old hostile narratives used by the Kremlin—such as discrimination against Russophone people in Estonia, Estonia as a failed state, and the glorification of Nazism and Fascism—are still actively used and promoted on Russian TV and in other Russian media, while on social media, "We also had a significant attempt to start a Russian-initiated false flag anti-European movement" (Expert C, 2019).

Concerning Russian federal TV channels which were presented on Estonia (until 2022), Expert C accentuates that Russophones in Estonia mostly watch Russian federal TV networks that are under the control of the Kremlin administration. According to Expert C, RT does not occupy the same position in Estonia that RT occupies in other Western countries (United States and Western Europe) because Estonian Russophones have free access to the many Russian federal networks and TV channels (Expert C, 2019; Expert B, 2019). Expert C claims:

"It means that the Estonian Russian population is directly influenced by the same media space as people in Russia. The Estonian language audience considers RT a foreign channel because of the language" (Expert C, 2019).

Several propaganda narratives from Russia, or created by pro-Russian actors, are quite popular among a significant part of the Russophone population of Estonia.⁷ Local discourses were often or sometimes mostly transmitted through Russian-language main-

⁶ See Russkiy Mir Foundation; see also Sycheva 2007.

⁷ The Russian-speaking population makes up 26–27% of the Estonian population of 1,300,000, approximately 80% of them living in two counties: Harjumaa (including the capital Tallinn) and Ida-Virumaa (northeast of Estonia). It has been a valuable target for information and influence operations coming from Russia. See also Wlodarska-Frykowska, 2016.

stream media (Russian media channels, but also some local Baltic and Estonian Russian-language media channels as well). The Russophone audience of Estonia constantly receives messages and narratives from Russia's channels—e.g., about the “immorality” of the West or about the “misdeeds” and “aggression” of NATO (Eslas, 2017) - stoking the fears of migrants and refugees and spreading other harmful narratives about the foundations of the architecture of European security, values, and the identity of the EU. Russia constantly accuses Estonia, its government and people of encouraging fascism, xenophobia, discrimination of minorities and Russophobia (Baranov & Afonina, 2016; Baltnews, 2020a).

Russia's governmental TV channels like *RTR*, *NTV*, *PBK* (*Russian First Channel*), several Russian newspapers, and even some Baltic Russian-language channels transmit information in line with the compatriot policies of Russia, promoting the idea of *Pax Russica* and often producing disinformation and fake news (Expert H, 2020). The presence of the whole range of the Russian media in Estonia until February 2022 was one more cause for concern. Russian TV channels like *NTV* or *RTR*, newspapers like *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, and some Baltic Russian-language media (*Baltnews.ee*, *RuBaltic.ru*) give information in line with the Kremlin's policies (negative views on NATO and the EU) (see e.g., Baltnews, 2017).

In February 2016 the Russian propaganda channel *Sputnik* opened a branch in Estonia and started publishing fake news and propaganda messages, reproducing Russophobic narratives (Rooda, 2017). *Sputnik's* actions 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 *Sputnik's* representative office continues to operate in Latvia. The server for the Lithuanian audience *Sputnik Lietuva* is located in the Russian Federation (Springe, 2018; Mölder & Sazonov, 2020).

Estonian opinion leader Expert D (2020) pointed out that the Russophone diaspora in Estonia is a myth. According to him, there are many opinions covering a large variety of different points of view. Nevertheless, many Russian-speakers in Estonia have problems with integration into Estonian society, often remaining nostalgic about Soviet times, and Moscow uses that to further its own interests, especially in propaganda. Several Russians living in Estonia are not politically educated, do not believe in democracy and do not consider that participation in elections can change

anything. Many of them are disappointed in the Centre Party (Keskerakond) and do not participate in elections. The Centre Party, however, uses the resources of Tallinn media channels such as the newspapers *Pealinn.ee*, *Stolitsa.ee*, *Vceherka.ee*, sometimes in addition to the Russian TV channel PBK, to promote their views (Expert D, 2018; Expert D, 2020; Expert E, 2019; Expert F, 2019; Expert G, 2021). Luckily, Russian TV and many Russian online media portals were banned in early 2022 when Russia attacked Ukraine.⁸ Several pro-Russian organizations long active in Estonia are also worthy of attention because of their anti-governmental actions. The so-called media club *Impressum* (Impressum, 2021) is also worth special attention because of its clearly anti-Estonian actions and activities associated with the Kremlin (Makarychev, 2020).

In addition to *Impressum*, there are also several military-historical societies (Postimees 2011) and NGOs related to ‘Russkiy Mir’ (*Pax Russica*). The *Impressum* Media Club has invited Valery Tishkov, the famous pro-Kremlin Russian historian and academic Director of the Russian Ethnology and Anthropology Institute, to Estonia. Professor Tishkov is one of the most prominent people in Russia ‘fighting’ against the falsification of Russian and Soviet history by Western scholars. The Estonian authorities banned Tishkov from entering Estonia in November 2014, which was shown in Russian propaganda in a negative light (Tass, 2014).

In addition, threats could come also from social media. Social media (Nissen, 2015) such as VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, very popular among the Russian-speaking residents of Estonia, are also an important instrument of influence, but Facebook, Twitter and others play an important role as well (Robotrolling, 3/2018; Robotrolling, 2/2019). Robotrolling was used prior to elections (e.g., European Parliamentary elections in May 2019) (Robotrolling, 2/2019, p. 6).

3. RUSSIAN STRATEGIC NARRATIVES IN THE CONTEXT OF *PAX RUSSICA*

One characteristic feature of Russian strategic narratives that they are destructive. Their aim is to destroy their potential adversary and, besides the Russophone community, the Kremlin very often targets various populist movements and groups in Europe (also in Estonia as well) from left to right, etc. Interestingly,

⁸ The Estonian government stopped broadcasting several Russian TV channels in Estonia, among them *Rossiya 1*, *Rossiya 24*, *NTV*, *REN TV* and some others. Several harmful pro-Kremlin online portals and web sites were also banned, including *RuBaltic.ru*, *ntv.ru*, *ren.tv*, *5-tv.ru*, *78.ru*, *1tv.com*, *lenta.ru* and *tass.ru* (Err.ee, 2022).

Russia claims to protect and promote worship against liberalism and tries to promote idea that Russia is protecting conservative and family values (Sazonov & Mölder 2022).

Thus, in this subchapter I will briefly look at the Russian strategic narratives that the Kremlin create and uses as tools for influencing target audiences in the West, and particularly Estonia before and during the first waves of COVID-19. One tactic they use is the dissemination of strategic narratives as a soft power tool (Roselle et al., 2014) which the Kremlin deploys with a Western audience in mind, including the Baltic states and particularly Estonia (Ventsel et al., 2019).

In a recent study, Holger Mölder and I (2020) examined pro-Russian media outlets during the escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020. In our article we showed that strategic narratives created and disseminated by the Russian Federation in early 2020 for target audiences in the Baltic states (Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania) tried to emphasize three things. Firstly, they evoked political and economic motives related to government policies in all three Baltic states. Secondly, they used status-related motives to disrupt the international system and Western-led political institutions (e.g., NATO, EU etc) throughout the Baltic states. Thirdly, conflictual motives were highlighted, indicating opposing identities between the Russian and Baltic nations, identities that have often emphasized a perceived Russophobic context in Baltic identity building. These strategic narratives were created and spread by the Kremlin and they are part of Kremlin's strategic aim to destroy unity of Western world. Its goals are the creation of ideological and also political tensions within the European Union and NATO, within EU and United States. The Baltic states have become an important target of information operations conducted by the Russian Federation due to their geopolitical location (close to Russian border) and last but not least strategic importance (Mölder & Sazonov, 2020).

During the first wave of COVID-19 in 2020 pro-Kremlin channels actively transmitted anti-European hysteria and fears related to coronavirus and its impact. Several topics were circulated, e.g., that the European Union would not help the Baltic states and that COVID-19 had destroyed the unity of the European Union (Piatrinis, 2020; Armazanova, 2020) or that the economy would soon collapse (see, e.g., Krugley, 2020; Nosovich, 2020). These were promoted alongside the old topic of Russophobia in Estonia and the other Baltic states (Nikolayev, 2020; Baburin, 2020; Vinnikov, 2020). In our recent article, Holger Mölder and I showed that Russia's official strategic narratives no longer speak about Estonia and the whole Baltic region as a part of

the Russian state, but they are certainly still interested in their connection with the sphere of influence of the Russian Federation in which the Baltic states would possibly become a "window to Europe", allowing the Kremlin to put pressure on the EU and NATO (Mölder & Sazonov, 2020, p. 89). This is probably the reason why the Kremlin is interested in fostering instability and chaos in this region using quite visible and strong Eurosceptic and anti-NATO ideas (Mölder & Sazonov, 2020). As Holger Mölder and I argue, "the main goal of Russia's information activities and influence operations is to widen the political gap between Europe and the United States and to reduce the US contribution to NATO and European security. The second purpose is to shape public opinion and to mobilize populist movements in the Western societies that oppose the liberal democratic principles and are sceptical about the constitutional guarantees of minorities and the protection of individual rights on behalf of the Kremlin strategic interests" (Mölder & Sazonov, 2020, p. 84).

The Kremlin's disseminated strategic narratives, that describe the West and its democratic institutions as something very corrupt and in need of reform, are the reason why Moscow supports and promotes alternative formats of international cooperation excluding the West and its representatives—such formats as BRICS⁹ (Hinck et al., 2018, p. 27; see more Mölder & Sazonov, 2020, p. 87). The Baltic states are, in general, portrayed by Russian strategic narratives as a failed states, a poor and unsuccessful periphery of the European Union, abandoned by their new Western hosts. According to these Russian strategic narratives, the Baltic states are currently facing very serious issues and deep problems in the economy, in social system, demography etc that appeared and became more and more serious after leaving the Soviet Union. The political strategic narratives which were constructed and disseminated by Moscow emphasize the role of the Russian Federation as holder of traditional conservative (family) ideas, values, rescuing the world from the bad influence of Western liberal ideology and democracy which exists in the declining West (Mölder & Sazonov, 2020, p. 87; Laruelle & Radvanyi, 2018, p. 126).

As we can see, the strategic narratives disseminated by the Kremlin are an integral and important part of the Russian information war which Russia is conducting against the West.

In the next subchapter I will briefly focus on Russophobia which the Kremlin actively uses in its information warfare.

⁹ Brazil, Russia, India, China, Republic of South Africa.

4. RUSSOPHOBIA AS A TOOL FOR PRESSURE

One common topic in Russian influence activity is Russophobia (Darczewska & Żochowski, 2015). Russophobia has been promoted by Russia for decades “for both domestic and foreign policy purposes, and historically the Kremlin’s elite has concentrated much of the negative flow of information on Russia under the narrative of Russophobia” (Ventsel et al., 2018, p. 118; Mölder & Sazonov, 2020, p. 87, 92, 93). This quite popular narrative of the oppression of the Russian-speaking community in Estonia and in the Baltic states generally presents local Russian-speaking people “as a hated minority deprived of many fundamental rights because of their national identity” (Mölder & Sazonov, 2020, p. 87; Lucas & Pomerantsev, 2016). The topic of Russophobia is still very actively used by the pro-Kremlin media and by pro-Kremlin opinion leaders and authors (e.g., Baranov & Afonina, 2016; Baltnews, 2020a), including promoting the idea that journalists are oppressed in the Baltic states Russian (Baltnews, 2020b). I now present one illustrative example of how pro-Russian oriented opinion leaders try to use and promote the topic of Russophobia in the context of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In October 2020 Dmitri Klensky, an Estonian Russian-speaking opinion leader, ex-politician and journalist (during the Soviet period he worked in “Pravda”) published an article entitled “Coronavirus exposed the Russophobia of the Estonian media or the technology of manifestation of mild xenophobia” in which he highlighted how some Russian-speaking Estonian opinion leaders use Russophobic ideas for their own benefit. Klensky accentuates:

Let us compare two news headlines about the same event: “Popov does not rule out that COVID-19 is spreading more in the Russian-speaking community” and “Popov: there is a tendency for an increase in the incidence of COVID-19 in Tallinn and Harju County.” Feel the difference! It turns out that something is wrong with the Russians, they are dangerous for Estonia. The first news was published by the portal rus.postimees.ee, the second by rus.err.ee. The first was published by a private media outlet, the second by public and legal, practically state-owned. Both appeared immediately after the broadcast of the Russian-language ETV+ “Who will win?” on the topic “Is there a negative attitude towards certain nationalities in the Russian media in Estonia?” (Klensky, 2020)

Klensky uses the issue of Russophobia in the context of COVID-19 to paint the editor-in-chief of the portal Rus.postimees.ee O. Lagashina in a negative light, accentuating that she “almost swore on air” that the Russian editorial office she headed was the ideal place for covering issues involving an ethnic motive. Nevertheless, this belies the headline of the news in question. The headline already provocatively states that the “Russian community” of Estonia is objectively more prone to the infection than the rest of Estonia. At the same time, such an assessment is attributed to Arkadiy Popov, head of the ambulance service of Tallinn North Estonian Regional Hospital and the medical headquarters for combating coronavirus created under the Health Department. He said this on the morning program *Terevisioon* of the Estonian-language channel ETV (Klensky, 2020).

As we can see, the Russophobic topics promoted and disseminated by the Kremlin and pro-Kremlin opinion leaders were created to show that there are serious issues with discrimination against the Russian-speaking community in Estonia. Thus, the Kremlin tries to create a negative image of the Estonian state and its people for Western and Russian-speaking audiences alike. The next issue which should be discussed is conspiracy theories which Russia uses as a tool of disinformation for their influencing target audience (Expert K, 2020; Expert L, 2020).

5. SOME RIGHT, LEFT AND CENTRIST POLITICIANS AND PRO-KREMLIN DISCOURSE: ARE THERE SOME SIMILARITIES?

It is often very difficult to make clear and thus claim that some populist politicians share the views or narratives of the Kremlin, while it is known that such politicians exist. Cases where populist ideas (right or left) (Wodak, 2015; Weyland, 2015; Paier & Sazonov, 2019) coincide in some places with the Kremlin’s narratives, or are somewhat similar to Kremlin discourse, are likely to be more frequent. Nevertheless, I pick out some examples where we can find some similarities with the Kremlin strategic narratives which Russia disseminates.

Expert D points out a certain pattern of asymmetric threats in Estonia. In the beginning, there is an escalation of a certain situation in a political area that may be related to a change of government or, for example, elections. According to Expert D, Estonia has never had as close relations with Russia as Ukraine or Georgia, but the Russian Federation is nevertheless trying to influence the political situation in Estonia and try-

ing harm it (Expert D, 2020). In Expert D's opinion, this work of the Russian Federation is quite successful:

"In the beginning, Russia tried to create ethnic (Russian) parties that received some funding from Russia. At one point, it was realized in Russia that it was not working. There were more serious attempts to use existing political force to influence the situation in the country" (Expert D, 2019; Expert D, 2020).

Some politicians or members of the Centre Party partially show their sympathies with pro-Kremlin discourse. There are also some other politicians and Russian-speaking opinion leaders in Estonia who promote Kremlin discourses (see, e.g., Klensky, 2016; Klensky, 2017; Grigoryan, 2014).

Among left-winged parties I will mention here the Estonian United Left Party which known for its pro-Kremlin orientation (Makarychev & Sazonov, 2019). It should be noted here that Estonian left-wing politician from the Centre Party Oudekki Loone is famous for her Soviet nostalgia and some positive attitude to the Soviet Union and Russia: *"Estonia would provide Ukraine with missiles and artillery, which are rationally expected to victimize the people of Donbass"* (Loone's Facebook post, end of 2021). She was later quoted in pro-Kremlin media. Loone also accentuates that it *"is clear to everyone that these weapons will be used to kill the Russians"*. Loone explained that sending Javelin ammunition to Ukraine would emphasize the need for a military solution to the conflict, which is not in line with the Minsk agreements. She considers that the Russian army have been on the Ukrainian border for quite some time and does not see any significant increase in the threat. Loone also stated: *"When Ukraine stopped supplying water to Crimea, I was seriously worried that stronger steps could be expected from Russia"*. According to Loone, Putin has been looking for an agreement with the West all the time, and he has not succeeded: *"Rather, we could support win-win situations such as a more general gas agreement with the launch of Nord Stream 2"* (Paris, 2022). Loone was also among some other Centre Party members in the Estonian parliament who on 22 February 2022 did not join with supporting Ukraine in face of the upcoming Russian invasion (Saarniit, 2022).

Right-wing politician Mart Helme from EKRE¹⁰ and Member of the Estonian Parliament said in the Estonian parliament in early April 2022 that war refugees from Ukraine bring infectious diseases to Estonia and may start engaging in prostitution: *"I have one son, a doctor, I communicate with doctors. The doctors say*

that this picture of health is terrible. HIV is coming back. Infectious diseases are being brought in from Ukraine, which we have thought will never be available in Estonia again. No, they're coming back to us because tens of thousands of people are coming and bringing us here." (Delfi, 2022)

But in this case we should note that Russian propaganda disseminated similar narratives for years, claiming that Ukrainian women are prostitutes, etc (EuroMaidan Press 2014). Makarychev and I write that populism of the EKRE is oriented against liberalism of the West with the EU. The EKRE also is targeting the political establishment of Estonia that bases its "policy on the principle of European solidarity, and on Russia as the main protector of its 'compatriots' residing in Estonia" (Makarychev & Sazonov, 2019).

Additionally the Kremlin can also use nationalists and ultra-right forces, and Expert F used the Soldiers of Odin as one example of the use of extremist groups. Expert F admits that radical nationalism is a threat (Expert F, 2019).

Expert C added one interesting example about the narrative "Estonia exit EU" (#ESTexitEU) (Propastop, 2019) used on social media which was promoted with anti-EU purposes:

"Can we say that #ESTexitEU was a centrally-planned and executed operation? I do not know. In this new paradigm, the telling indicator is the use of big numbers. Many desired effects become possible if the operation achieves a critical mass of messages. A targeted person may then perceive that everybody around him thinks a certain way and those messages are massively repeated. For the analyst, it means that if you can record growth in numbers of posts or accounts that carry certain narratives then we can really talk about serious interference" (Expert C, 2019).

CONCLUSION:

In this article I have mentioned only some examples of the Kremlin's channels, and tools of influence used in Estonia and especially among Russophone community. The Kremlin's propaganda uses all opportunities and possibilities and COVID-19 well illustrates this issue how it works.

Russia's influence operations disseminated strategic narratives for promoting narratives of "Pax Russica" among Russophone community in Estonia for years trying influence whole Estonian society, to split it, but also to influence political environment. Therefore we should also consider that the Russophone community of Estonia is not homogenous, as is sometimes

¹⁰ The Conservative People's Party of Estonia

presented in some researches or in media outlets; it is visibly fragmented, with several Russian-speaking minorities made up of different people with different views. However, large sections of this group belong in the field of Russian media discourse, as they are the target audience of Russian information activity and could be potentially influenced by the Kremlin in the promotion of *Pax Russica*. Russian strategic narratives shaped perceptions of the world and political preferences in line with the Kremlin's foreign policy goals during COVID-19 (Sazonov et al., 2022).

Last but not least it should be notice here that the Kremlin's strategic narratives are aimed at potential target audiences, among them populist movements, radical (but also non-radical) political figures and forces, several international target groups, alternative or anti-establishment groups, anti-US, anti-NATO movements, anti-EU, etc. (Mölder & Sazonov, 2020; Sazonov, 2022).

Interviews

- Interview with Expert A, Tallinn, 08.05.2019.
- Interview with Expert B, Tallinn, 13.05.2019.
- Interview with Expert C, via e-mail, 26.06.2019.
- Interview with Expert D, Tartu, 28.02.2019 and 15.05.2020.
- Interview with Expert E, via e-mail, 17.06.2019
- Interview with Expert F, Tallinn, 21.05.2019.
- Interview with Expert G, 18.08.2021
- Interview with Expert H, via Skype, 22.05.2020.
- Interview with Expert I, 15.3.2021
- Interview with Expert J, 13.10.2020
- Interview with Expert K, 22.09.2020.
- Interview with Expert L, Tallinn, 17.08.2020.

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