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Estonia Reacts: Confronting Russian Manipulation Techniques

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Executive Summary:

Russian influence operations aim to shape Estonia as an undemocratic community and a problematic partner for Estonia's allies. This media offensive is focused both on splitting Estonian society and using media tools to conduct foreign policy. Fake accounts from Russia are designed to interfere with internal Estonian discussions and polarize people's views, distort topics, and escalate public debates. Russia offers covert financial assistance, if necessary, to the Estonian government's opponents; discredits officials by stealing and leaking internal information; and intentionally spreads false information in social media, a specific way to target youth. Estonia's leadership has responded to these challenges, noting that the key to changing the attitude of ethnic groups in Estonia is to bring them into Estonia's information space instead of just Russian information space. This has resulted in the creation of Estonian TV channels that feature presentations in the Russian language. In addition, an increased military presence of NATO nations in Estonia strengthens the nation's resolve and deterrent posture. Estonia's Defense Minister Hannes Hanso stated that a psychological gap between Russia and Estonia is growing and that "if we look at internal Russian politics we see that the legitimacy of the regime is built on confrontation with the West."¹ In his opinion, this anti-Estonian focus diverts the Kremlin population's attention away from its own domestic problems.

¹ Gerard O'Dwyer, interview with Hannes Hanso, *Defense News*, 1 February 2016, p. 19.

Introduction

Estonia, since declaring its freedom from Russia on 6 September 1991, has endured several soft power attacks from Moscow. Most have been in the form of propaganda attacks, but a few have been more belligerent and even destructive. For example, in response to Estonian desires to move the so-called “Bronze Soldier” (for most Estonian’s, a symbol of the Soviet occupation of the country) from its location in central Tallinn to the city’s outskirts,² on 27 April 2007 Russia, which never directly admitted complicity, initiated a massive information technology attack against Estonia. Numerous institutions were targeted (banks, media, police, government institutions) and some Russian news stories denying their involvement continued into November 2017. The information weapons used were botnets that led to denial of services through a barrage of requests on the targeted sites. NATO later established its Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence in Estonia’s capital, Tallinn.

In addition, other areas of perpetual tension continue to exist between Estonia and Russia. This pertains in particular to the large Russian population that elected to stay in Estonia after the latter’s declaration of independence from the Soviet Union (a 2016 census indicated that the vast majority of the Estonian population was either ethnic Estonian [900,000 plus] or Russian [330,000 plus]).³ As a result, the loyalty of some Russian residents to Estonia is sometimes questioned. One town, Narva, is of real concern to Estonian authorities. Narva is a key industrial and natural resource area which precariously juts out into Russia, sharing a border on three sides and thus could easily be cut off and isolated. In Narva, 96 percent of the population are native Russian speakers and 88 percent ethnic Russians. One report noted that 47 percent of the city’s inhabitants are Estonian citizens and 36 percent are Russian Federation citizens.⁴ Such an ethnic mix makes Narva not only attractive as a future asset to Russia, but also provides some justification for aggressive actions if they would so chose to assert them. Russia’s annexation of Crimea further exacerbated this concern when Russia acted with impunity. For one month in 2018, Kersti Kaljulaid, Estonia’s President, even moved her office from Tallinn to Narva as a sign of support to the city.⁵

But it is the drip of propaganda from Russian sources that concerns Estonian officials daily. The Estonian Information Board wrote in 2017 that Russian influence operations aim to shape Estonia as an undemocratic community and a problematic partner for their allies.⁶ Along with attempting to legitimize the occupation of Crimea in the press and on TV, Russia appears to be using media as a foreign policy tool. It is also trying to influence young people, who have little

² Benoit Vitkine, “Estonia, Moscow’s First Cyber Victim,” second installment of five in the series “The Kremlin’s Information Wars,” *LeMonde.fr*, 14 March 2017.

³ See <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/largest-ethnic-groups-in-estonia.html>

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narva>

⁵ Josh Rubin, “NATO Fears That This Town Will Be the Epicenter of Conflict with Russia,” 24 January 2019, downloaded at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/01/narva-scenario-nato-conflict-russia-estonia/581089/>

⁶ No author provided, “EIB: Russia Trying to Introduce Tensions into Relations between Communities in the Baltics,” *Tallinn BNS* (in English), 8 February 2017.

context of what a Soviet-era lifestyle was like. The Russian interpretation of news and the commentary of its guests intermix truth with lies. To help confront this media offensive, Estonia is providing its own Russian-speaking TV channels and other forms of media to counter Russian aggression.

A Few Keys to Estonian Reporting on Russian Propaganda

In the 2018 annual review conducted by Estonia's Internal Security Service, it was stated that the Kremlin attempts to manipulate the young, to create public tension over memorials, and to legitimize the annexation of Crimea. In this sense the government-controlled Russian media is used as a foreign policy tool. Russia appears to seek out anxieties and tensions that could be "escalated into something worse through provocation."⁷ Young people lack the context of the operations that Russia conducted against the nation in the past. Russia's goal is to attract the young to Russia's sphere of influence through the cultivation of the myth of Russia's Red Army as liberators (instead of aggressors) and as partners in the fight against terrorism.⁸ The report of the Internal Security Service mentioned numerous organizations and personnel that, Kremlin backed, seek to characterize Estonia as a Nazi nation or develop other anti-Estonian activities.⁹

One Estonian article discussed the Russian concept of what it means to be a "Russophobe." The Russian portal *Sputnik* defined a Russophobe as follows: If one speaks out against peoples lawfully expressed will, one is against Russians, and that is what is called Russophobia. The article listed some criteria under which *Sputnik* considers an Estonian to be a so-called Russophobe:

- Calling for Estonia's Russian-speaking population to be denied an education in their native language;
- Habitually referring to Russians as "tibra" (offensive term for Russians or Soviets);
- Aiding the Ukrainian nationalist party Right Sector;
- Blaming Russia for all mortal sins and personal problems;
- Criticizing Russian authorities and calling for their overthrow;
- Making offensive comments about the lawfully elected Russian head of state, Vladimir Putin;
- Protesting against the Russian regime, which is supported by the majority of Russians;
- And expressing doubt regarding whether the Russian population really supports its current legal president and his policies.¹⁰

⁷ No author provided, "Estonia's ISS: Biggest Threat Arises from Russia's Foreign Policy Goals," *Tallinn BNS* (in English), 12 April 2018.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ No author provided, "Russia-Related Networks in Estonia Part Four," *Tallinn Propastop*, 5 July 2018.

¹⁰ Oleg Samorodni, "Russian Media Journal List of Russophobes Could be Warning: Estonian Businessmen Will Be Next on List," *Tallinn Eesti Päevaleht Online*, 19 June 2018.

It was also noted that this is a warning signal for people who have not been so addressed up to now but might be Russophobes. Politicians, journalists, and businessmen are all among those who need to accept a “word to the wise.”¹¹

Estonian Foreign Minister Sven Mikser stated in 2018 that Russia’s media is directly or indirectly under Kremlin control and imparts its national message as part of its fight for information space with the Western world. As a result, Estonia has allocated resources that can serve as an alternative for the Russian-speaking population in Estonia.¹² That is, Estonia is providing its own Russian-speaking channels for this element of its population. Efforts in this area extend back to 2015, when Germany and Estonia decided to cooperate in the media sphere to counterbalance Russian propaganda. Specific steps then included supporting *Estonian Public Broadcasting* and online services in Russian, sharing TV and web programs produced in Russian by *Deutsche Welle*, and supporting training for journalists and journalism students via the German Academic Exchange Service. The idea was to offer Russian-speaking residents of Estonia a form of neutral information instead of just responding to Russian propaganda.¹³

Another 2018 report noted that Russian covert propaganda is hidden in between entertainment shows on the *Perviy Baltisky Kanal (First Baltic Channel or PBK)*, *RTR Planeta (Planet)*, and *NTV Mir (World)* that are all controlled by the Kremlin. The interpretation of news and the commentary of guests proceed from the viewpoint of Russia’s official position, where truth and lies are intermixed. On the one hand, access to these shows helps spread Russian fake news among the population. Russian networks are even available in basic network packages, while European channels (such as Finnish channels) are only available in custom packages. Spreading misinformation or slander must be condemned and measures taken. Messages that incite hatred or undermine Estonia’s constitutional order must be stopped. In the past Lithuania, Latvia, and Ukraine have already fined or banned some channels for a period of time due to the airing of programs with misinformation. On the other hand, since Estonia values democratic freedom of speech and the press as long as they comply with Estonia laws, it has continued to offer Russian networks based on these important national values.¹⁴

Europe’s recent Action Plan, designed to improve cooperation between member states and institutions and to encourage civil society to counter disinformation, was unveiled in early December 2018. Estonia’s representative to the European Union’s Political and Security Committee stated that the Action Plan was important as “it demonstrates that democratic societies share a common desire to take concrete steps against the spread of disinformation.”¹⁵ The plan

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² No author provided, “Estonian Foreign Minister says Cooperating Only with Kremlin-Minded Media Would Mean Surrender,” *Tallinn BNS* (in English), 4 January 2018.

¹³ S. Tambur, “Germany to Help Estonia Counterbalance Russian Disinformation,” *Tallinn ERR News* (in English), 20 April 2015.

¹⁴ No author or title provided, *Tallinn Postimees.ee* (in English), 18 October 2018.

¹⁵ No author or title provided, *Tallinn ERR News* (in English), 6 December 2018.

proposed to more than double the Strategic Communication (StratCom) task force budget, established to address Russia's disinformation campaigns, from 1.9 million to 5 million Euros.¹⁶

A Look at Other Important Developments through the Years

When viewed through the years, it becomes apparent that there has been a consistent pattern of Russian attempts to manipulate public opinion and persuade the Russian-speaking population of Estonia to follow the Russian information space. Luckily for Estonia, polls indicate that Moscow's propaganda effort has not achieved the results the Kremlin-backed offensive had sought. It is hard to know precisely "why" Russian attempts to manipulate public opinion have been thwarted but perhaps it has been because Estonia is more effective at communicating its values than Russia is at communicating its propaganda; or perhaps because Russian Estonians simply prefer their lifestyle in the Baltics under a democracy over what they lifestyle would be in Russia under a kleptocracy.

2014

There were several important developments in 2014 to protect Estonia from Russian influence operations, from training that was designed to counter disinformation to the deterrent effect of NATO deployments. One of the biggest developments was a decision announced by two generals, Estonian Defense Forces Command Major General Riho Terras and NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, General Jean Paul Palomeros, to create a NATO military cyber training center in Tallinn.¹⁷ Later in the year a retired Estonian General noted that the presence of NATO troops on Estonian soil sends a political message to Russia; further, Estonia's Baltic Sea defense must be strengthened along with its air defense missile systems.¹⁸ Additionally, a report out of Tbilisi Georgia noted that Estonia plans to build a fence along its Eastern border with Russia, and to construct around-the-clock technical surveillance for border security. The fence will be 70 miles long and was set to start in 2018.¹⁹

Not all the news was good. On 5 September 2014 Eston Kohver, an Estonian police officer, was abducted by the Russian Security Services. Estonia states he was abducted on Estonian territory while Russia states he was on Russian territory with weapons, money, and special equipment. In August 2015 he was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment, which Estonian Foreign Minister Marina Kaljurand called a provocation. Others can be expected, she noted, as Russia's actions are simply unpredictable.²⁰ Then, at the end of September 2015, Kohver was suddenly released.²¹

2015

In 2015 it was noted that over the past 23 years (1991-2014), the Kremlin's propaganda has not destabilized the Baltic countries.²² Russia has continued its attempts to split NATO and EU partners

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Bruce Jones, "NATO Approves Estonian Cyber Training Centre," *Jane's Defense Weekly*, 25 June 2014, p. 15.

¹⁸ Ants Laaneots, "What Must We Ask from NATO?" *Tallinn Postimees*, 2 December 2014.

¹⁹ No author or title provided, *Tbilisi Georgia Today Online* (in English), 3 September 2015.

²⁰ No author or title provided, *Interfax* (in English), 3 September 2015.

²¹ No author or title provided, *Tallinn ERR News* (in English), 1 October 2015.

²² Toomas Alatalu, "The Times Participating in Hybrid War," *Tallinn Eesti Paevaleht Online*, 3 April 2015.

with a policy of divide and rule, but it has not worked. A poll in 2015 showed that 68 percent of Estonians support the presence of NATO troops and 25 percent are against it. It was noted that the key to changing the attitude of other ethnic groups in Estonia is to bring them into Estonia's information space instead of their current viewing preferences in just Russian information space.²³ Another survey noted that while two-thirds of ethnic Estonians see Russia as the main global threat, only six percent of Russian-speakers living in Estonia feel that way.²⁴

Japan's Vice-Minister of Defense visited Estonia in 2015 and stated that his nation was very interested in cooperating with Estonia in the field of cyber-security. While there, he visited the Information Systems Authority and the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence (CCD COE) in Tallinn.²⁵

In October 2015 the US human rights organization Freedom House released its Internet Freedom Index. As before, Estonia was in second place behind Iceland (the US was sixth). Estonia not only has increased its Internet access over time but has also protected the population's right to privacy. In 2013 close to 97 percent of banking transactions were done with e-banking services, according to Freedom House reports.²⁶

A final 2015 report noted that Moscow's "relentless information campaign" and movement of militias and Special Forces troops near border regions raise questions about military readiness and the intelligence capabilities of Estonian forces. Lieutenant General Riho Terras, the country's senior military officer in 2015, noted that "We need to make sure that we believe in Article Five [the principle of collective defense in NATO's founding treaty], but even more importantly, we need to make sure that Mr. Putin believes in Article Five. And I think we should put a lot of emphasis on that."²⁷ Terras added that maintaining defense spending is crucial, and he warned against moves to scrap Britain's aging nuclear arsenal. The article states that the UK is NATO's only European nuclear power, since France has a special opt-out that allows its nuclear forces to operate independently of the alliance.²⁸

2016

In 2016 it was noted that the EU Department of External Relations launched an EU website (in Russian) to produce more information for examination in Russian information space. Further, the department launched a weekly "review of disinformation" has been initiated that aims at unveiling Russian fake news. It was also noted that NATO's leadership was thing about "creating a new communications directorate to counteract the Russian 'information weapon.'"²⁹

²³ No author provided, "Two-thirds of Estonian Residents Support the Presence of NATO Troops. There is a Marked Difference in Attitudes of Estonians and Other Ethnic Groups," Tallinn *ERR News*, 30 April 2015.

²⁴ No author provided, "Estonians See Russia's Activity as the Main Global Threat," Tallinn *Baltic News Service*, (in English), 7 May 2015.

²⁵ No author or title provided, Tallinn *ERR News* (in English), 7 May 2015.

²⁶ No author or title provided, Tallinn *ERR News* (in English), 28 October 2015.

²⁷ No author or title provided, London *FT.com* (in English), 13 May 2015.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ No author or title provided, Tallinn *Postimees Website*, 10 February 2016.

The Estonian Information Board (EIB, the nation's foreign security and intelligence agency) states that Russian military planning in the Baltic region contains a temporal advantage if it ever decides to conduct a limited military operation. The main goal of such operations would be to impose "control over some towns or areas close to the border."³⁰ Narva appears a likely first target for such an operation due not only to its geographical location but also due to the predominance of the huge number of Russians that populate the city. The Russian operation may include the threat of tactical nuclear weapons as a deterrent,³¹ one source stated.

A potential Russian goal appears to be to restore its sphere of influence through expanding its media capabilities in the region. For example, Russia launched its *Sputnik* news portals in Estonia in both Estonian and Russian languages in February 2016.³² *Sputnik* is led by Dmitry Kiselyov, a person who is on the EU sanctions list for being a "central figure of the government propaganda supporting the deployment of Russian forces in Ukraine."³³ The article noted that another media outlet, *Rossiia Segodnya (Russia Today)*, is the main propaganda tool of Moscow that is aimed toward the West.³⁴

Estonia's Defense Minister Hannes Hanso stated in February 2016 that a psychological gap between Russia and Estonia is growing and that "if we look at internal Russian politics we see that the legitimacy of the regime is built on confrontation with the West."³⁵ This is the new normal. It diverts the Russian population's attention away from its own domestic problems. Also, of special interest was that Hanso believes Belarus is not a friend of Russia, as it and others have been "bullied into this position or they are given no other option."³⁶

2017

In 2017 an Estonian historical expert on the Soviet era, David Vseviiov, stated that there was talk about fear of Russia being "part of the Estonian's DNA ever since 1939," and it was revived with the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass. That year President Vladimir Putin stated that there was little way to criticize the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement (where a secret protocol between Stalin and Hitler allowed for Moscow to invade Estonia along with other nations),³⁷ indicating his support for such a tactic.

In a February 2017 interview with Mikk Marran, Director General of EIB, it was noted that Russia's advantage occurs since the "entire influencing process is centrally managed...they observe the guidelines issued from the Kremlin." Russia's influence toolbox allows them to create confusion and then exploit it. Moscow also continuously maps the strength of Estonia's information systems. Marran added the following about contemporary intelligence gathering:

³⁰ No author provided, "Biggest Military Conflict Danger in Baltics Arises from Russia's Misconceptions," Tallinn *Baltic News Service* (in English), 9 March 2016.

³¹ Ibid.

³² No author or title provided, Tallinn *ERR Website*, 13 March 2016.

³³ No author or title provided, Tallinn *ERR News* (in English), 25 February 2016.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Gerard O'Dwyer, interview with Hannes Hanso, *Defense News*, 1 February 2016, p. 19.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Benoit Vitkine, "Estonia Trains to Confront the Russian Threat," *LeMonde.fr*, 10 January 2017.

21st century intelligence is a combination of the classics and technology. Human intelligence will certainly remain an important part of intelligence because, as always, the information gathered from a person by a person is the most important. ...However, the role of technology and software is growing, which means that intelligence is becoming increasingly more expensive. All the systems which are built up, need to be kept operational. They need maintenance and they need to be upgraded every three to five years. These are huge expenses. But if we do not spend that money, we will soon lag behind.³⁸

There were also several warnings in 2017 about Russian provocations aimed at unsuspecting NATO soldiers. British troops, sent to participate in war games in Estonia, were warned that Russia sets honey traps, stages pub brawls, and uses other subversive efforts to blackmail soldiers on social media accounts. Russian efforts create a false impression of Western aggression through the use of such stories.³⁹ Danish soldiers scheduled to arrive in Estonia later in 2017 were also warned to expect Russian provocations aimed at compromising them.⁴⁰

In April 2017 Estonia's parliamentary committee published a new version of Estonia's security policy principles, which included cyber space as a new security environmental dimension. According to the bill:

Estonia's main security risks are the deepening of global security problems, the declining impact of the Euro-Atlantic region, and of a value space that is based on democracy, the market economy, and a law-governed state, as well as the weakening of integration based on the European Union principles and Russia's provocatively aggressive behavior, including by using force near its borders as well as elsewhere in the world.⁴¹

It is envisioned that a new element, the so-called hybrid method, is being used against Estonia where both military and nonmilitary issues function in symbiosis.⁴²

Later in the year Estonia's Internal Security Service's Annual Review was published, which focuses on counter-intelligence activities and how to defend against various destabilizing forces. Its main focus was the Russian Special Services, a reference to intelligence organizations. The latter's influence and subversive operations were highlighted, especially the people and organizations working for them. A main objective of Russia's activities appears to be to destabilize the political systems of Estonia and others in the West. Russia recently organized and incited incidents in Serbia and Montenegro and generated scandals and controversies in the West to

³⁸ Kart Anvelt interviews Mikk Marran, "Information Board Head: Our Aim Would Naturally Be Direct Connection into Putin's Head," Tallinn *Eesti Päevaleht*, 9 February 2017.

³⁹ No author provided, "Estonia's Intelligence Chief Warns of Provocations Targeting NATO Soldiers," Tallinn *BNS* (in English), 21 February 2017.

⁴⁰ No author or title provided, *Postimees website*, 21 April 2017.

⁴¹ No author provided, "Estonia's Security Policy Principles to Include Cyber Space," Tallinn *Baltic News Service* (in English), 17 April 2017.

⁴² *Ibid.*

demonstrate that Western politicians are no less corrupt than those politicians the Western press accuses in Russia.⁴³ Finally, in November 2017 there was an important report published by the Estonian National Defense College's (ENDC) Center for Applied Studies. Titled "Russian Information Warfare against the Ukrainian State and Defense Forces: April-December 2014," the report is available in English at the website of ENDC.⁴⁴ It contains some examples of Russian efforts to control information space in Ukraine.

2018

In January 2018 the Estonian Police and Border Guard Board showcased its nine ELIX-XL drones which will survey the eastern border and monitor rescue operations and border incidents. They have a flight time of one hour and a range of five kilometers.⁴⁵ As Colonel Eero Rebo, Commander of the 2nd Infantry Brigade, noted:

It is strategically important that the border is clearly marked and well-noticeable on the terrain, so that we know what is going on at all times. A good border is vital to a small country with such a neighbor [as Russia]. No less important is the daily prevention of criminal activity; the more so since we have heard from the media and read in the annual report of the Internal Security Service about the connections between smugglers and our eastern neighbors' special services.⁴⁶

Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid stated at the Munich Security Conference in February that NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) in the Baltics and Poland has been successful in countering Russia's policy, but deterrence still requires a realistic reinforcement strategy. Only in this way can it convince an adversary that its defense is credible.⁴⁷ A sizeable deterrent near its border area is one way to strengthen its strategy.

Border security is important to Estonia for both geopolitical and security reasons, but it is only one of several factors supporting national security. For example, one report stated that decoupling Estonia from Russia's power grid and integrating Estonia with the Continental European power system prevents Russia from blackmailing Tallinn into acquiescing to the Kremlin's demands.⁴⁸ This issue and other national security concerns must remain at the top of the Estonian leadership's considerations when addressing Russian geopolitical motivations.

⁴³ Editorial, "Security Police and the Russian Threat," Tallinn *Postimees.ee*, 12 April 2017.

⁴⁴ No author provided, "Estonia Publishes Report on Information War against Ukraine," Tallinn *St. Ohtuleht Online*, 15 November 2017. See <http://www.ksk.edu.ee/teadus-ja-arendustegevus/publikatsioonid/endc-occasional-papers-7/>

⁴⁵ No author provided, "Estonia's Police Authority to Showcase Drones Purchased for Guarding the Eastern Border," Tallinn *Baltic News Service* (in English), 12 January 2018.

⁴⁶ Eero Rebo, "Ukraine and Georgia Are Warning of What Will Happen if Border is Not Completed," Tallinn *Eesti Paevaleht Online*, 12 February 2018.

⁴⁷ No author provided, "Estonian President: NATO's Russia-Policy Has Been Successful," Tallinn *Baltic News Service* (in English), 16 February 2018.

⁴⁸ No author provided, "Desynchronization of Baltic Grid Crucial Due to Geopolitical Aspects—Study," Tallinn *Baltic News Service* (in English), 13 April 2018.

Cyber security is one of those vitally important issues for Estonia. In May 2018, exercise “Locked Shields 2018” was kicked off at NATO’s CCD COE in Tallinn. It embraced a technical and strategic game whose aim was to “rehearse protecting vital services and military systems in the event of a large-scale cyber-attack.”⁴⁹ Teams had to report incidents, make strategic decisions, and solve challenges involving external communications and issues in the legal and media fields. Teams will be “protecting the computer systems and information systems of an imaginary country that has come under attack.”⁵⁰

In a June 2018 interview with *Defense News*, Jonatan Vseviiov, Permanent Secretary of the Estonian Ministry of Defense, stated that Estonia is setting up a cyber command within the armed forces. With regard to policy, he noted it is important to maintain a strong degree of constructive ambiguity. Estonia can’t let adversaries know what events would trigger Article 5 because, if it did, then opponents would conduct attacks that would fall below that threshold. The cyber domain requires a whole-of-society approach to security.⁵¹ It has been noted that cyber defense, military mobility, and a preparedness to respond to hybrid threats are for Estonia the most significant areas of EU-NATO cooperation.⁵²

In late summer 2018, Estonia appointed Tiirmaa-Klaar as its first ambassador at large for cybersecurity. She noted that Estonia is well prepared to fend off cyber-attacks, with the State Information System’s Authority (RIA) and private sector specialists working in cooperation with one another. But technical capacity alone is not enough, as strategic thinking is required as well to compose the bigger picture that is confronting Estonia. For example, if attacked, a response must be proportional and in accordance with international law. Sanctions in other domains may hurt the attacking nation more than a cyber counterattack. That is, strategic thinking is needed to determine the exact deterrent response against the assailant (such as finding ways to make them lose face, etc.). In December, RIA was in Ukraine to teach that nation’s central electoral committee how to adopt basic cyber security measures.⁵³

With regard to propaganda, the Tallinn website *Propastop* covered anti-Estonian manipulation, lies, and propaganda. Members of the Estonian Defense League, a voluntary military organization, run the site. They cover Russian-related networks that actively participate in media and communication propaganda efforts in Estonia. *Propastop* has singled out Vladimir Putin’s *Russkiy Mir* (*Russian World*) organization that allegedly supports Russian language instruction but is more commonly viewed as a front for influence operations. Apparent non-governmental organizations doing the same are the Pushkin Institute, the Baltic Youth Alliance, and the Reval Media Agency.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ No author or title provided, *Caversham BBC Monitoring* (in English), 1 May 2018.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Aaron Mehta, interview with Jonatan Vseviiov, “6 Questions with Estonia’s No. 2 Defense Official,” *Defense News*, 16 July 2018, pp. 18-19.

⁵² No author or title provided, Tallinn *Baltic News Service* (in English), 11 October 2018.

⁵³ No author or title provided, Tallinn *Postimees.ee* (in English), 10 December 2018.

⁵⁴ No author provided, “Russia-Related Networks in Estonia Part Five,” Tallinn *Propastop*, 23 July 2018.

It was noted that a growing Russian community, demonstrating pro-Kremlin and pro-Russia and anti-Western sentiment, is observable in Baltic social media.⁵⁵

One area that Russia has exploited in Estonia is the latter's value of a democracy's policies of freedom of speech and the press. If a nation complies with Estonia's laws, then they should be allowed on TV channels according to a center-right Pro Patria Party member. Contrasting this view was that of IKRE Parliamentary Group Chairman Mart Helme who believes that propaganda channels should be restricted.⁵⁶ It was noted that Russian TV channels are often included in basic packages offered by Estonian TV. This means that Estonia pays licensing fees to these Russian channels, which include *Pervyi Baltiiski Kanal*, *NTV-Mir*, *RTR-Planeta*, and *Ren TV*. Thus, while Estonia is trying to stop Russian propaganda, at the same time its people are paying Russia for its state news and comments. The latter are directed at destroying cooperation within Europe. Meanwhile European channels are "optional channels" which can be ordered but only for an additional fee.⁵⁷

2019

Two reports in 2019 from the *Baltic News Service* indicated NATO's continued interest in uncovering Russian propaganda aimed against Estonia and other Baltic members. First, Estonia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sven Mikser noted that the private sector, media, and state institutions are working together to fight disinformation. New developments, such as the European Union's action plan to fight disinformation, are important ways to confront Russian propaganda. Facebook reportedly closed 13 pages related specifically to Estonia (with 19,000 followers) since the pages were linked to employees of the Russian channel *Sputnik*.⁵⁸ Other fake accounts appeared designed to interfere with internal Estonian internal discussions, polarize people, distort topics, and escalate public debates.⁵⁹ Second, in July 2016, NATO established an EFP in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. This resulted in a battalion-sized battle group deployed in each country to serve as a deterrent to Russia. In January 2019 the International Center for Defense and Security (ICDS) reported that Russia is the main risk to the EFP of NATO battle groups in the Baltics. Disinformation and incident exploitation involving EFP personnel are its main threats.⁶⁰

In its March 2019 annual report, the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (FIS) warned that the Russian threat is not only asymmetrical but also covert and based on political subversion. There is also a potential Russian military threat to Belarus if a so-called color revolution developed there,

⁵⁵ No author or title provided, "Tallinn *Postimees.ee* (in English), 31 December 2018.

⁵⁶ No author or title provided, *BBC Monitoring* (in English), 23 October 2018.

⁵⁷ Urmas Paet, "Propaganda Channels in Estonia: Russian Influencers Only Chuckle, Have Fun with Europeans' Naivety," Tallinn *Eesti Päevaleht Online*, 25 October 2018.

⁵⁸ No author provided, "EU and Foreign Ministers Discuss Plan for Fighting Disinformation," Tallinn *Baltic News Service* (in English), 21 January 2019.

⁵⁹ Holger Roonemaa and Anna Pold, "Sputnik Secret Propaganda Network Involved 13 Estonian Pages," Tallinn *Postimees*, 18 January 2019.

⁶⁰ No author provided, "NATO eFP in Baltics, Poland Sends Strategic Message—Report," Tallinn *Baltic News Service* (in English), 28 January 2019.

which would initiate swift retaliatory action from Moscow. President Putin appears dissatisfied with Belarus President Lukashenko.⁶¹

The FIS also noted that Russian cyber spies have had some success in accessing information from Estonian government agencies, as they continuously map various Estonian information systems. Such information is often then used against Estonia in phishing campaigns.⁶² Another FIS report noted that Russia is likely to intervene in European Parliamentary elections to gain some seats for pro-Russian or Eurosceptical political forces. In this way EU unity could be diluted. It was further noted that Russia supports its allies through Russian-controlled media; organizes high-level meetings and visits that attract media attention; offers covert financial assistance if necessary; discredits opponents (by stealing and leaking internal information); and intentionally spreads false information in social media.⁶³

Conclusions

It is apparent that Russia continues to attempt to disrupt Estonian society with media and cyber offensives. Some media offensives are designed to split Estonian society while others serve as Russian foreign policy tools. Estonia's leadership has responded to these challenges, noting that the key to changing the attitude of ethnic groups in Estonia is to bring them into Estonia's information space instead of just Russian information space. Estonian TV channels in Russian as well as an increased military presence of NATO nations in Estonia and a higher degree of cooperation with the European Union have been major ways that Estonia has countered Russian efforts.

In spite of all the dangers associated with cyber issues, Estonia continues to press forward with a digital policy that covers the country's enterprises from banks to industry. Recently Estonia developed an e-residency program that allows foreigners to obtain a digital ID and to start an Estonian company online without ever visiting the nation.⁶⁴ So far there has been no word of this effort being abused. Estonia's President, Kersti Kaljulaid, is a huge supporter of such programs. She realizes that other nations cannot emulate Estonia immediately so her advice to other nations wishing to start a similar system are somewhat limited. They should start with smaller services, she notes, say with school applications, to build trust in becoming a digital nation online before trying something more daunting like e-voting. The nation aims to have 10 million e-residents by 2025, with a focus on those living in Britain affected by Brexit. Officials estimate that Estonia lifts its GDP by 2 percent annually and saves paperwork due to the conduct of so many online contacts with the state.⁶⁵

Estonia is also doing what it can at improving its national security through a comprehensive border security initiative, constantly improving its cyber security, and relying less on Russian products and services, in particular energy issues. The nation is further focused on ensuring that

⁶¹ No author or title provided, Tallinn *ERR News Online* (in English), 12 March 2019.

⁶² No author provided, "Foreign Intelligence Service: Russian Cyber Intelligence is Constantly Looking for Information in Estonia," Tallinn *Maaleht*, 20 March 2019.

⁶³ No author or title provided, Tallinn *Baltic News Service*, 12 March 2019.

⁶⁴ No author or title provided, *Delfi website*, 18 April 2017.

⁶⁵ No author provided, "Charlemagne: The Church of Data," *The Economist*, 8 July 2017, p. 48.

the minds of its citizenry do not fall victim to Russian propaganda and influence methods. As the title to this work noted, Estonia is always confronting Russia's media and its attempts to manipulate public opinion. With historical animosity present on both sides, there are clearly problems that will not go away soon. Manipulation techniques will continue into the future as far as one can see, or at least during the reign of President Putin.

Recommendations:

Estonia is a leading practitioner in the cyber field and its training and coding insights should be studied along with its digital pilot programs. Estonia's advanced cyber expertise has resulted in their being ranked 2nd in the world, has led to countries such as Japan and Ukraine seeking their assistance, and indicates there is a lot to learn from them. The digital pilot programs they are running with e-residency that allows foreigners to start an Estonian company online without ever visiting the nation is important for many reasons. The consequences could be disastrous if the system is not properly managed and system access is not properly vetted (that is, firms gain access to systems they could corrupt, recon, or disorganize). Studying their pilot implementations and resulting lessons learned will provide valuable insight for similar US and NATO efforts.

It is important to study Russian methods designed to fracture democratic unity and to destabilize societies, since these methods may be used against the US's younger generation on social media. Russia's institutions that organize propaganda and information streams aim to both denounce democracy and reduce feelings of security among Estonia's younger generation. To achieve its goals in Estonia, Russia has interfered with internal Estonian discussions and polarized people's views, distorted topics, and escalated public debates. Russia offers covert financial assistance if necessary to the Estonian government's opponents; discredits officials by stealing and leaking internal information; and intentionally spreads false information in social media. One Russian technique only noted in Estonia was the accusation that many Estonians were Russophobes, but this type of slander could be applied against any Western nation. Each of these vectors needs to be monitored and counters developed. Watching how Estonia approaches each issue should be educational for Estonia's Western allies.

The US should study Estonia's geopolitical experience and responses to Russia to measure what works and what doesn't. Estonia's experiences with Russian geopolitical acts of aggression (2007 cyber-attack, use of propaganda against the Russian-speaking majority in Narva, provocations against NATO troops stationed in Estonia, etc.) cover many areas (some quite sensitive) and indicate that Russia sees more opportunities to exploit situations in Estonia than in other Baltic nations. Perhaps Russia uses the Estonian situation to reinforce its domestic population's view that NATO is surrounding Russia. If the legitimacy of the regime is based on confrontation with the West, as one Estonian official noted, then maintaining tension with Estonia must be continued to reinforce Russian policy.