THE RĪGA CONFERENCE

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POLICY BRIEF

ARE THE RUSSIAN SPEAKERS IN BALTIC STATES PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE TO RUSSIA'S DISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS?

Viljar Veebel

THE RĪGA CONFERENCE

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The Rīga Conference Policy Briefs
Introductory Remarks

Dear the Rīga Conference Participants, Dear Readers,

In 2021, international relations have still been sailing in troubled waters, and further answers have been sought to issues related to the long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on global development.

This year, on the one hand, existing triggers have augmented: rapid developments and power shift in Afghanistan with potentially global consequences; Russia's escalation of tension and sabre-rattling at the Ukrainian border; increasing confrontation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority; and an irresponsible behaviour by the Belarusian regime. On the other hand, also the issues long in the focus of international agenda have retained their urgency: competition among global and regional powers; increasing risks to international rule of law and democratic values; climate change; the diverse faces of the migration challenge; the ever-increasing role of new technologies in tackling foreign policy matters; and the fight against disinformation.

It still calls for a responsible and broad-based approach on the part of the international community to achieve results conducive to global development and security. The further implementation of the European Green Deal policy and the NATO reflection process 2030 have been significant contribution to this end.

International processes are growing increasingly sophisticated and intricate, when alongside a classical approach to diplomacy foreign policy makers and implementers are expected to come up with swift, unconventional and creative, while at the same time sustainable and effective solutions. They demonstrate the need for a more inclusive approach that results

in even more governmental and non-governmental actors being engaged in foreign policy.

I wish the readers of the Rīga Conference Policy Briefs to continue enriching their insights and knowledge of regional and global foreign policy processes and be active in generating new ideas on their path towards that goal.

Edgars Rinkēvičs

Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia

Rīga Conference Policy Briefs
Introductory Remarks

"Peace" is defined as "a period in which there is no war"[1] or "freedom from disturbance; tranquility[2]". Like before, this year, globally, there were neither. While there have been breakthroughs in combating the COVID pandemic with vaccination roll-out and major economic stimuli from governments, the virus is continuing to disturb our daily lives. The war in Eastern Ukraine is still ongoing as Ukraine battles for its' territorial integrity, while in Georgia the same fight has become a frozen conflict. The hybrid warfare is maturing and becoming more complex as demonstrated by Lukashenko's regime in hijacking the Ryanair flight, as well as in orchestrating the recent breaches of Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish borders by brutally using innocent, misled people as hybrid warfare tools. There is little tranquility in our societies. Disinformation continued to be a troublesome weapon throughout the year and it has fueled further divisions among people with anti-vaccination campaigns being the most prominent theme. The attack on the U.S. Capitol in the beginning of the year, the rise of conspiracy theories and populism are clear symptoms of confused, scared and/or angry people.

Existing security challenges, such as Russia's opportunism and constant military build-up, uncertainty of terrorism threats boosted by the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, unpredictable climate cataclysms, together with emerging challenges related to advancements in technology and supply chain vulnerabilities will only add to this unrest, this state in-between peace and war.

As a result, demand for security will continue to increase. And Western democracies must be able to deliver. Winston Churchill once famously said:

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[1] Oxford Languages
[2] *Ibid.*

"Never let a good crisis go to waste". Thus, we must learn the lessons and act decisively to ensure security – to ensure that our democracies are prepared and capable to overcome whatever might come our way. To ensure that our societies feel safe and become more resilient in the face of ever evolving challenges. In this endeavor Western democracies need to do more and together to achieve true peace.

Open discussion, exchange of knowledge and ideas can certainly help to seek answers on how to do it better and I believe this year's Riga Conference will be a valuable opportunity to do so.

Artis Pabriks

Minister of Defence of the Republic of Latvia

ARE THE RUSSIAN SPEAKERS IN BALTIC STATES PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE TO RUSSIA'S DISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS?

Viljar Veebel

ABSTRACT

The article discusses the vulnerability of certain target groups to Russia's disinformation and fake news campaigns as well as assesses the possibility to counteract Russia's actions. The article focuses on five thematic categories, such as West-related narratives, NATO-related narratives, Russia-related narratives, governance-related narratives, and nationalism-related narratives. The study reveals that in all these categories, Russian speakers in Estonia and Latvia often seem to feel sympathy for Russia and some mistrust as far as Western countries, the NATO alliance, and the local government are concerned. This makes some topics particularly "promising" for Russia to attack in their strategic narratives and disinformation campaigns, referring mostly to the role of NATO and its presence in Baltic states, the protection of the human rights of ethnic Russian minorities living abroad, language-based discrimination, and weakness of the local state institutions. To make the Baltic societies more resilient to Russia's propaganda, according to our study, counteractions should be more targeted towards actively explaining the importance of the NATO alliance and focus more on issues related to protection of human rights and language-based discrimination.

INTRODUCTION

The international community has already witnessed Russia's extensive actions with an aim to manipulate information since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. From then on, the country has stretched the truth and spread confusing information and narratives whenever possible. Moreover, while initially

Russia's propaganda mainly targeted the former Soviet Union republics, for example, Russia's constant allegations that national minorities of Russian origin living in Estonia and Latvia are discriminated,

> **lately Russia has been paying more attention to Western countries by attacking their democratic values and eroding Western societies.**

For example, several sources describe Russia's recent attempts to discredit Western societies during the COVID-19 crisis, such as the studies by RAND Corporation[1], the US Department of State Global Engagement Center[2], the International Centre for Defence and Security IDCS[3], and others. All these studies confirm that Russia uses a well-functioning disinformation[4] and propaganda system to discredit the Western world and to promote its own authority as "a strong leader" in the international arena. The studies also reveal that today **the main idea behind the disinformation campaign is not to convince people about the truth but to cause confusion and doubt, to make truth absolutely "irrelevant", and to set people against each other**. In this light, it is essential to identify and tackle disinformation and fake news to ensure stability and sustainability in Western society.

Particularly in recent years, Western countries have launched many initiatives and programs to encounter disinformation and tackle fake news. To

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[1] Matthews, M.; Migacheva, K.; Brown, R.A. (2021). Superspreaders of malign and subversive information on COVID-19. RAND Corporation, 2021, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA100/RRA112-11/RAND_RRA112-11.pdf.

[2] US Department of State (2020). GEC Special Report: Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem, August 2020, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf

[3] Weitz, R. (2020). Assessing the Russian Disinformation Campaign During COVID-19, ICDS Commentary, published on 13 November 2020, https://icds.ee/en/assessing-the-russian-disinformation-campaign-during-covid-19/.

[4] Hereby, disinformation is defined as the creation, presentation, and dissemination of verifiably false information for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public (European Commission 2021; https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/online-disinformation).

highlight a few of these initiatives, the European Union presented an action plan (including priority areas and specific actions) to tackle disinformation in 2018, and several NATO countries established a NATO-accredited international military organization called the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE) in 2014 with an aim to analyze, among other tasks, counter-narrative strategies and narrative development as well as to jointly work on disinformation attack simulations.

However, tackling fake news and revealing disinformation is just one side of the coin. Another equally important aspect is associated with the target groups of these campaigns and narratives. As long as there exist some target groups who are willing to believe whatever is told to them irrespective of what facts have to say, the Western societies remain vulnerable to Russia's disinformation attacks. To put it another way, the

> **opponent's hostile narratives present risks to the society only if the society itself is weak and vulnerable.**

Thus, in addition to identifying Russia's disinformation and propaganda, it is equally important to investigate how easy it is for Russia to gain and maintain control over the most vulnerable audience groups in the society and to identify what country-specific topics could be used by Russia to attract those groups.

These two topics, referring to the main features of Russia's disinformation campaigns and the vulnerability of Western societies, are combined in this article. It aims to discuss the vulnerability of certain target groups for Russia's disinformation and fake news campaigns and to assess the possibility to counteract Russia's actions in this regard. It is widely believed that Russia's efforts to manipulate information are by large focused on exploiting societal polarization in Western countries. One potential source of polarization is related to ethnicity, i.e., ethnic Russian communities in other countries. Thus, this current study discusses the attitudes of Russian national minorities living in Western countries and their sympathy towards Russia's aggressive and misleading narratives, based on the case of Estonia, which is in many aspects

also very similar to Latvia. Both countries are basically two-language societies, with a relatively large ethnic Russian community[5] living next to ethnic Estonians or Latvians, however, not always sharing the same media landscape.

WHAT ARE STRATEGIC NARRATIVES AND HOW TO IDENTIFY THEM?

In recent decades, the concept of narratives has evolved from a fairly simple idea of "a story being a description of a series of events" (according to the definition of the Cambridge dictionary) to a comprehensive and important tool of soft power in the international political arena. To sum up numerous definitions, a narrative is something that structures reality, creates identity, and shapes the way of how we define and understand other people, institutions, and cultures around us.

To go into detail, various terms and concepts that seem to be the same at first glance are used in narrative studies and debates, such as master narratives (or metanarratives), strategic narratives, hostile narratives, historic narratives, and so on. In this regard, the variety of terms actually helps to explain why narratives are important in society. *Master narratives* provide a pattern for cultural life and social structure as well as create a framework for communication about what people are expected to do in certain situations.[6] *Strategic narratives* are defined as "tools that political actors employ to promote their interests, values, and aspirations for international order by managing expectations and altering the discursive environment".[7] *Hostile narratives* are narratives that are constructed in a way to target the emotions of specific vulnerable groups and that consist of both true and false information, whereby the narration of facts counts more than the facts themselves.

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[5] In 2021, the total population of Estonia is about 1.3 million people. There are about 320,000 Russians living in Estonia (about 24-25% of the total population), as indicated by Statistics Estonia (Statistics Estonia (2021)). Population, https://www.stat.ee/en/find-statistics/statistics-theme/population).

[6] Halverson, J. R.; Goodall Jr, H. L.; Corman, S.R. (2011). Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

[7] Miskimmon, A.; O'Loughlin, B.; Roselle, L. (eds.) (2017). Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. Preface.

Master narratives are the base where all other stories branch out from, including strategic narratives. Some master narratives (as well as strategic narratives) are affected by the interpretation of historical events, by *historical narratives*. Similar to the master narratives, historical narratives are deeply related to both the roots and the overall identity of a particular country, meaning that historical narratives can be radically different across countries. Conflicting historical narratives can often be major stumbling blocks in the international arena when establishing productive dialogues between adversaries. Different narratives can also be explained by the fact that even when talking about the very same subject or event, different countries focus on different aspects. Last but not least, though hostile narratives evolve on the basis of strategic narratives, most of the content used to build hostile narratives is not always objectively false.[8]

> **Today, narratives have a key role to play in determining either the success or failure of disinformation campaigns and fake news.**

The result largely depends on the extent of how meaningfully the narrator communicates its version of "reality". The plausibility of disinformation, referring to false information that is deliberately spread, is ensured by an artificially created context. In this respect, the aim of spreading disinformation and fake news is clearly not to tell the "theoretical truth" but for the audience to accept the message and change its behavior accordingly, as the two consecutive goals of propaganda are to make people first think in the desired way and then to act in a desired way.[9]

In other words, a narrative combines individual "messages" of disinformation and adds some kind of overarching meaning to them. Telling a lie, in this context, requires that a certain meaning is attached to that lie that is more

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[8] Vihmand, L. (2021). On Russian hostile narratives: from defining to hunting them down. Mimeo.

[9] *Ibid.*

important to the target audience than the fact itself.[10] In a similar context, **the term *weaponized narrative* is more and more often used and refers to a narrative deployed by states as an attack to undermine an opponent's civilization and identity and to generate confusion and political and social schisms** (e.g., see Weaponized Narrative Initiative website, https://weaponizednarrative.asu.edu/). Today's superfast information space (first and foremost, the Internet) constitutes an ideal place for deploying narratives. Since a large amount of information is produced and processed with high speed, the target groups of the narratives have only a very limited time to analyze and evaluate the information. This makes it particularly easy to emotionally manipulate people.

MAIN FEATURES OF RUSSIA'S DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA SYSTEM

The nuances of how Russia launches disinformation and fake news campaigns are discussed in many studies. For example, the US Department of State Global Engagement Center published a report *"Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem"* in 2020. The report identifies five pillars of Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem: official government communications, state-funded global messaging, cultivation of proxy sources, weaponization of social media, and cyber-enabled disinformation. The report also highlights detailed examples of who operates in this landscape from Russia's side.[11]

Another interesting study is the publication by the RAND Corporation (*"Russian Social Media Influence"*) published in 2018 that sheds light on the ways how Russia distributes disinformation and fake news in social media.

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[10] Interview with Dr. Ajit Maan (2018). Narrative Strategies, available at http://www.etterretningen.no/2018/03/17/insight-interview-with-drajit-maan-narrative-strategies/

[11] US Department of State (2020). GEC Special Report: Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem, August 2020, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf

The publication argues that Russia has established a complex production and dissemination apparatus that consists of actors at varying levels of attribution. To quote the study, *"actors at the first and second levels of attribution produce or circulate exploitable content. The first level involves overtly attributed or "white" outlets, including official Russian government agencies, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a constellation of Russian state-controlled, state-affiliated, and state-censored media and think tanks, such as RT, Sputnik News, the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, Channel One, and the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies. The second level of content producers and circulators is composed of outlets with uncertain attribution, also called "gray." This category covers conspiracy websites, far-right or far-left websites, news aggregators, and data dump websites./…/Players at the level of covert attribution, referred to as "black" in the gray-scale of deniability, produce content on user-generated media, such as YouTube, but also add fear-mongering commentary to and amplify content produced by others and supply exploitable content to data dump websites. These activities are conducted by a network of trolls, bots, honeypots, and hackers. Trolls, bots, and honeypots all refer to fake social media accounts used for various purposes, but trolls and honeypot accounts are operated by humans, while bot accounts are automated. While both trolls and bots are typically used to push particular narratives, honeypots instead tend to be used to solicit information and compromise accounts via malicious links or sexual exchanges. Meanwhile, hackers deface websites, execute denial of service attacks, and extract secrets to feed content production".*[12] The study also stresses that **the impact of Russian disinformation and fake news campaigns seems to be partially associated with the extent to which the so-called compatriots identify themselves as Russians and with Russia in general**.

[12] Helmus, T.C.; Bodine-Baron, E.; Radin, A.; Magnuson, M.; Mendelsohn, J.; Marcellino, W.; Bega, A.; Winkelman, Z. (2018). Russian social media influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe. RAND Corporation, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2200/RR2237/RAND_RR2237.pdf.

Next to that, an analysis published by the ICDS, *"Assessing the Russian Disinformation Campaign During COVID-19"*, states that more recently Russia prefers to *"push multiple storylines to make nothing certain or true. The latter messaging can muddy the objective reality of what has occurred through a barrage of falsehoods, conspiracy theories and deceptive information".*[13] The analysis also argues that other media techniques in Russia include methods like taking a small truth and stretching it, crafting messages to elicit an emotional response, and pushing inflammatory content to exploit fissures among and within societies.

Next to the topic of how Russia launches disinformation and fake news campaigns, an even more intriguing question is the content of those campaigns, i.e., Russia's strategic narratives.

Some strategic narratives seem to be more popular in Russia than others. First and foremost, for many years, Russia has invested in creating and disseminating strategic narratives that are classified as hostile from the Western point of view. A few good examples of this are the narratives that "the West is against Russia" and "Russia is a victim". The former roots back to the Cold War period, mainly in the former Soviet Union, when both domestic and international propaganda narratives portrayed capitalism as the enemy and the Soviet system as the champion of humanity.[14] The latter, victim's narrative refers to the idea that Russia is framed as a victim of Western aggression.[15] Both concepts are closely related to the concept of Russophobia. In more detail, even if Russia's narratives do not say out loud that Western countries are bad or that Russia is unfairly accused, the narratives are tailored in a way that casts doubt on what the West says, thus undermining the credibility of the Western world. Russophobia is described as a form of intolerance towards ethnic Russians, Russian-speaking ethnic groups, and the Russian state in general, and the struggle

[13] Weitz, R. (2020). Assessing the Russian Disinformation Campaign During COVID-19, ICDS Commentary, published on 13 November 2020, https://icds.ee/en/assessing-the-russian-disinformation-campaign-during-covid-19/.

[14] Oates, S.; Steiner, S. (2018). Projecting power: Understanding Russian strategic narrative. Russian Analytical Digest 229 (2018).

[15] EUvsDisinfo (2018); https://euvsdisinfo.eu/russia-as-a-victim-of-western-aggression/.

against Russophobia is an instrument that can be universally applied.[16] For example, the Russian administration has justified the annexation of Crimea as having prevented Russophobes from carrying out ethnic cleansing.[17]

Another important strategic narrative of Russia is linked to nostalgia for the Soviet period. The overall aim of praising the Soviet period is to increase Russia's influence in the international arenas and to promote a select view of the Soviet past. McGlynn (2021) argues that Russia has developed numerous commemorative symbols, activities, and core historical narratives to use in the international arena. *"The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, embassies, cultural centers, and government-organized groups working on memory, such as the Russian Military Historical Society, organize and energetically export these activities around the world. Prior to 2015, Russian memory diplomacy efforts largely focused on the Russian diaspora and the former Soviet Union, but partly in an effort to develop Russian soft power, attention has since been shifted to foreign citizens without common historical or cultural links to Russia"*.[18] McGlynnn also gives an example of how Russia uses a tailor-made approach in this respect: *"If in France, the Russian Foreign Ministry promotes its historical truth by emphasizing the Normandie-Niémen fighter pilots, then in the United Kingdom, it celebrates the Arctic Convoy veterans who brought supplies to blockaded Murmansk, Soviet Union"*.[19]

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[16] Darczewska, J.; Zochowski. P. (2015). Russophobia in the Kremlin's Strategy: A Weapon of Mass Destruction. Point of View, 56 (October). Warsaw, Poland: Centre for Eastern Studies.

[17] Иванов, С. (2014). Комсомольской правде»: «Никакие гайки Кремль не закручивает. Мы оппозиционеров в мусорные баки не бросаем» (kp.ru) , published on 15 October 2014.

[18] McGlynn, J. (2021). Moscow is using memory diplomacy to export its narrative to the world. Foreign Policy, published on 25 June 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/25/russia-puting-ww2-soviet-ussr-memory-diplomacy-history-narrative/ .

[19] *Ibid.*

HOW RUSSIA MANIPULATES LOCAL RUSSIAN SPEAKERS: LESSONS FROM ESTONIA

The following analysis covers the results of the survey *"Leveraging Data to Resist Disinformation"* that was conducted by Faktum-Ariko in 2019–2021.[20] Methodologically, the survey uses mixed methods to analyze both the effects of disinformation and Russia's role in spreading disinformation and fake news in some Eastern European countries. In total, five survey waves were conducted over the period 2019-2020, and each wave consisted of both computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI survey) and additional focus group interviews. Narratives were summarized in five thematic categories, such as West-related narratives, NATO-related narratives, Russia-related narratives, governance-related narratives, and nationalism-related narratives.

Across all media sources covered in the Estonian sample, the survey identified the following most popular narratives:

- NATO alliance is strong (the most popular narrative among NATO-narratives)
- Western ties are advantageous (the most popular narrative among narratives on the West)
- Russia is powerful (the most popular narrative among Russia-narratives)
- the Baltics are plagued by poor governance (the most popular among narratives on governance)
- the Baltics should be proud of sovereignty and identity (the most popular narrative among narratives on nationalism)

In this regard, these results seem to demonstrate relatively high resilience to Russia's disinformation and propaganda campaigns; people consider NATO to be a strong ally, greatly appreciate partnership and ties with Western countries, and are proud of their sovereignty and national identity. All this should, in principle, diminish both the attractiveness and potential of success of Russia's disinformation and fake news campaigns in the Baltic states.

[20] SAYARA International (2021). Leveraging Data to Resist Disinformation, published on 3 May 2021, https://sayarainternational.com/leveraging-data-resist-disinformation/.

Somewhat alarming in this context are the results that Russia is considered to be a powerful neighbor and that the governance in the Baltics is assessed as poor.

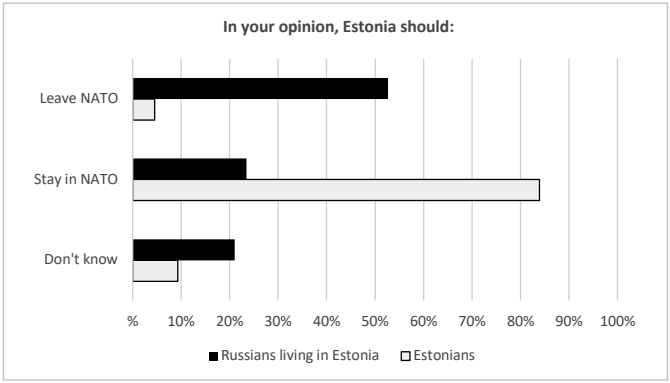
However, the picture changes drastically when a distinction is drawn between the national local majority and Russian speakers. The following analysis summarizes the ethnicity-based survey results to the following questions that reflect particular narratives:

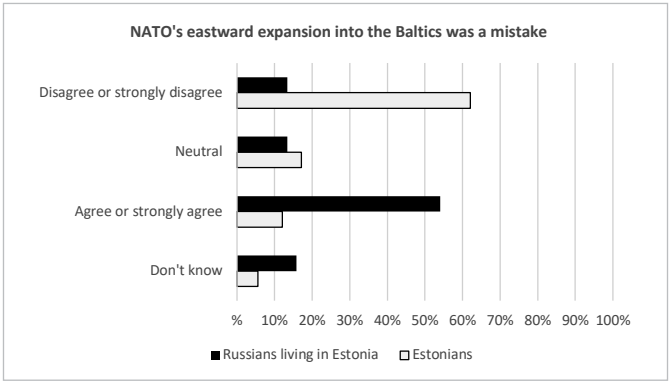
A. NATO-related narratives
   a. In your opinion, our country should: leave NATO.
   b. NATO's eastward expansion into the Baltics was a mistake.
   c. NATO troops currently deployed in Baltic states are beneficial to our security.
B. West-related narratives
   a. The European Union does not care about us.
   b. Western values are compatible with our society and traditions.
C. Russia-related narrative
   a. Agree/disagree: Russia's armed intervention in some areas of Ukraine was justified.
   b. Russia should support the rights of ethnic Russian minorities in Baltic states.
   c. People were better off during the Soviet times compared to today.
D. Nationalism-related narrative
   a. In Estonia there is discrimination against people who do not speak Estonian.

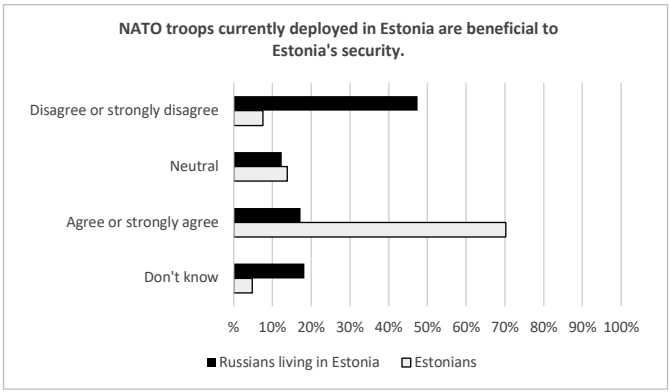
In all these categories, Russians living in Estonia often seem to feel sympathy for Russia and some mistrust as far as Western countries, the NATO alliance, and local government are concerned. The largest polarization is evident in attitudes towards NATO, which is also in accordance with the results of other local studies (referring to the regular study *"Public opinion on national defence"* conducted by the Estonian Ministry of Defence[21]).

[21] Ministry of Defence (2020). Public opinion and national defence. https://kaitseministeerium.ee/en/objectives-activities/national-defence-and-society.

Below are graphs of the responses to NATO-related narratives (October 2020), with differentiation based on ethnicity.

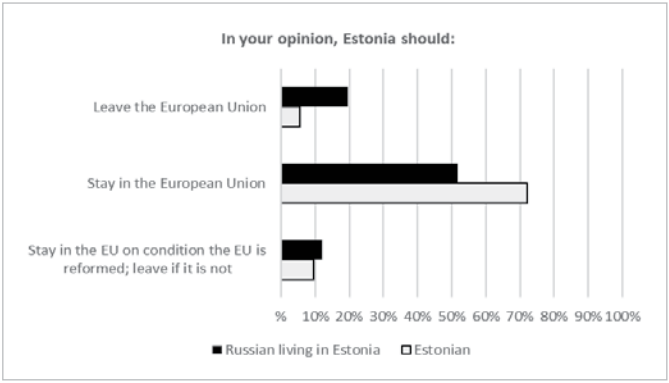


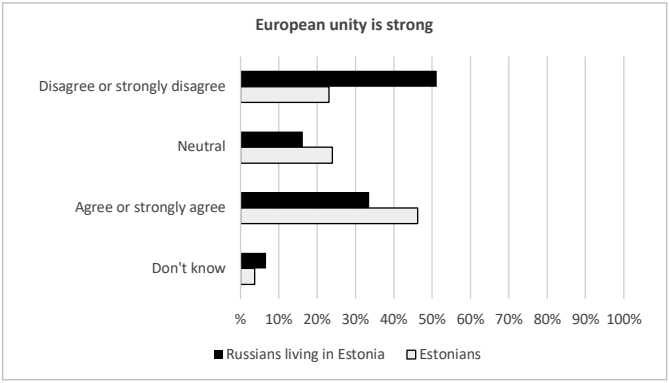


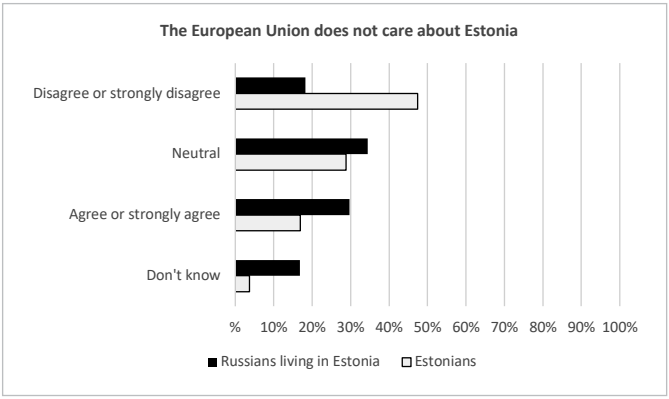


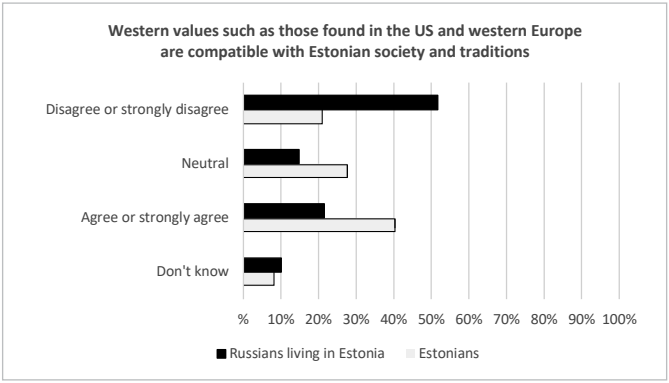
According to the data of our study, it is particularly alarming that slightly more than half of the Russian speaking respondents believe Estonia should leave NATO and that almost half of the Russian respondents disagree or strongly disagree that NATO troops currently deployed in Estonia are beneficial to the country´s security. This means that **Russia's disinformation and fake news campaigns that attack the NATO alliance could resonate more with the Russians living in Estonia, and they could more easily believe it.** The Russian respondents are also more pessimistic than Estonians in their assessment of the European Union and Western values (see Appendix, Figure 1b), but at least the majority of both Estonian and Russian respondents support Estonia's EU membership and believe that Estonia should stay in the EU. In this light, there seems to be no point for Russia to attack the idea of EU membership in general. However, its disinformation campaigns might focus on stressing the disunity of the EU and eroding Western values overall, as there seems to already be relatively wide support for those views among the local Russians living in Estonia. At the same time, support for the statement that the EU does not care about Estonia is relatively low among the Russian respondents, making it relatively meaningless for Russia to rely on this aspect in its disinformation campaigns.

Below are graphs of the responses to West-related narratives (October 2020), with differentiation based on ethnicity.




European unity is strong
Disagree or strongly disagree
Neutral
Agree or strongly agree
Don't know
% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
Russians living in Estonia
Estonians


The European Union does not care about Estonia
Disagree or strongly disagree
Neutral
Agree or strongly agree
Don't know
% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
Russians living in Estonia
Estonians

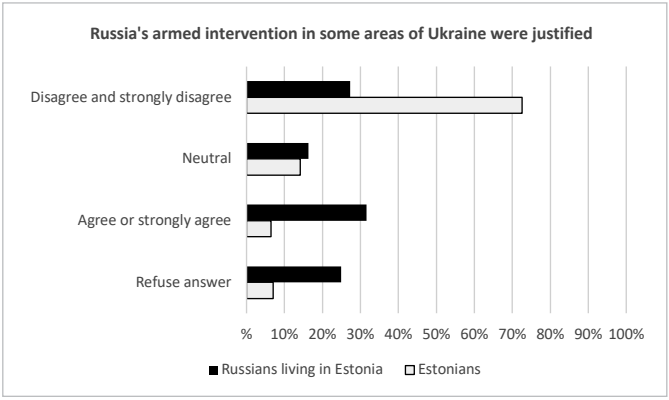

Western values such as those found in the US and western Europe are compatible with Estonian society and traditions
Disagree or strongly disagree
Neutral
Agree or strongly agree
Don't know
% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
Russians living in Estonia
Estonians

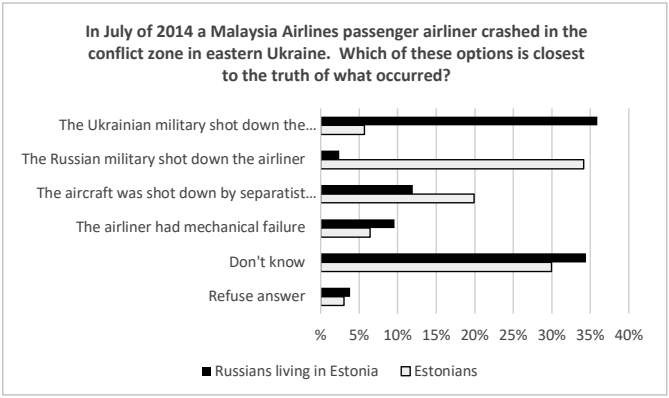
Further analysis of Russia-related narratives clearly reveals that Russia's constant accusations that its neighbors violate the human rights of ethnic Russian minorities living in these countries strongly resonates among the local Russian speakers in Baltic states. Almost 60% of the Russian speaking survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Russia should support the rights of ethnic Russian minorities in Estonia. This means that by stressing the need to protect the human rights of native Russians in the "near abroad" region (even if the real-time situation in respect to human rights in Estonia and other Baltic countries is clearly better than in Russia itself) Russia actually has a "trump card" to play in the eyes of the Russian community living in Estonia. The same applies to Russia's campaigns that stress nostalgia for former Soviet times. Slightly more than 40% of the respondents of the local Russian community in Estonia support the view that people living in Estonia were better off during the Soviet times as compared to today, and almost three-fourths of the Russian respondents did not support the statement that symbols and monuments of the Soviet period should not be allowed in Estonia. The Russian community living in Estonia seems to be relatively nostalgic about the Soviet period, and in this respect, it makes sense for Russia to stress this narrative in their disinformation campaigns.

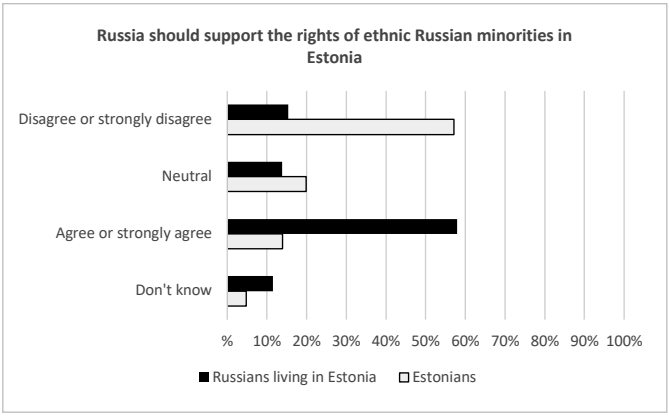
At the same time, only slightly less than one-third of the Russian respondents living in Estonia considered Russia's armed intervention in some areas of Ukraine to be justified. This might refer to a tendency that topics related to Russia's aggressive ambitions (to initiate or intervene in violent conflicts) have no strong resonance among the Russian community in Estonia.

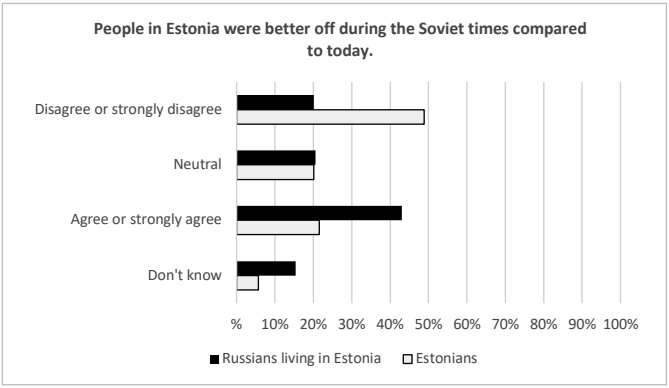
The question about Russia´s role in the crash of the Malaysia Airlines passenger airliner in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 is actually a good example of confusion and doubts in the society, because both the Estonians and Russians living in Estonia share different views about what actually happened during this incident.

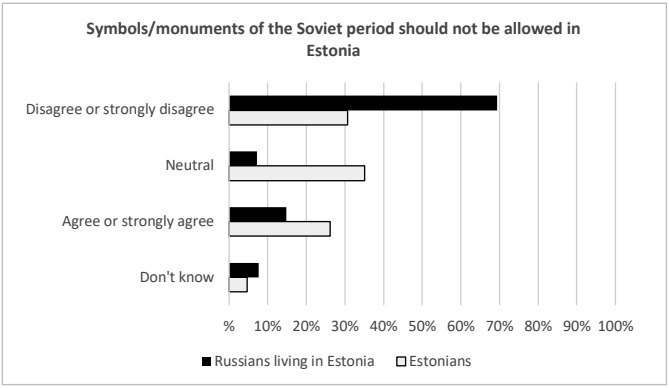
Below are graphs of the responses to Russia-related narratives (October 2020), with differentiation based on ethnicity.


Russia's armed intervention in some areas of Ukraine were justified
Disagree and strongly disagree
Neutral
Agree or strongly agree
Refuse answer
% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
Russians living in Estonia
Estonians


In July of 2014 a Malaysia Airlines passenger airliner crashed in the conflict zone in eastern Ukraine. Which of these options is closest to the truth of what occurred?
The Ukrainian military shot down the...
The Russian military shot down the airliner
The aircraft was shot down by separatist...
The airliner had mechanical failure
Don't know
Refuse answer
% 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30% 35% 40%
Russians living in Estonia
Estonians

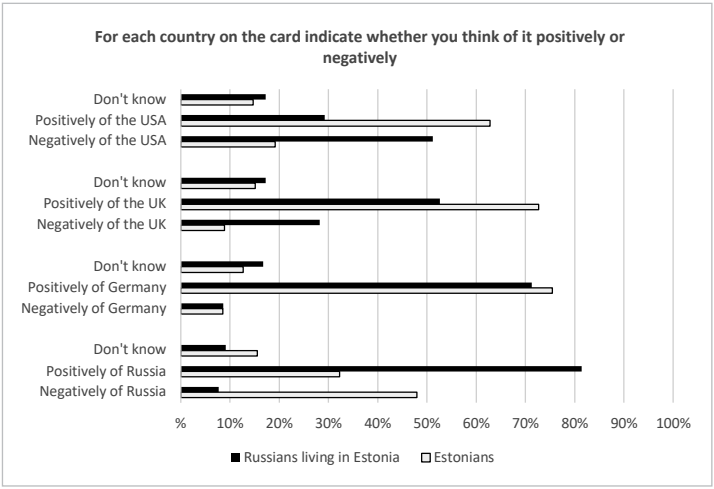

Russia should support the rights of ethnic Russian minorities in Estonia
Disagree or strongly disagree
Neutral
Agree or strongly agree
Don't know
% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
Russians living in Estonia
Estonians





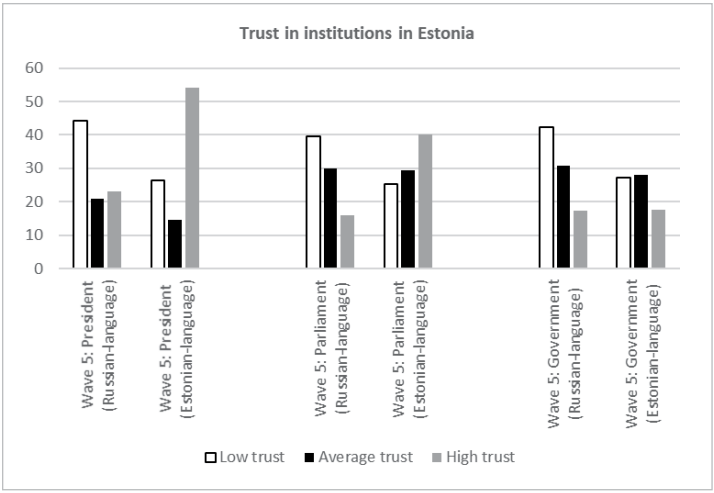
Next, survey respondents in Estonia were asked what they think of various countries and whether they assess them positively or negatively. Based on the previous discussion, it was to be expected that the Russian community in Estonia thinks positively of Russia; in the survey, more than 80% of those respondents stated that they think positively of Russia. However, somewhat unexpected was the result that a large number of Russian respondents also think positively of Germany (slightly more than 70%) and the UK (about 50%). This somewhat conflicts with the "West is against Russia" narrative. Only about 30% of the Russian respondents thought positively about the USA, which is principally in accordance with their negative attitude towards the NATO alliance. In this regard, **information campaigns against the USA are more likely to succeed in the local Russian community in Estonia in comparison to campaigns against Germany and the UK.**

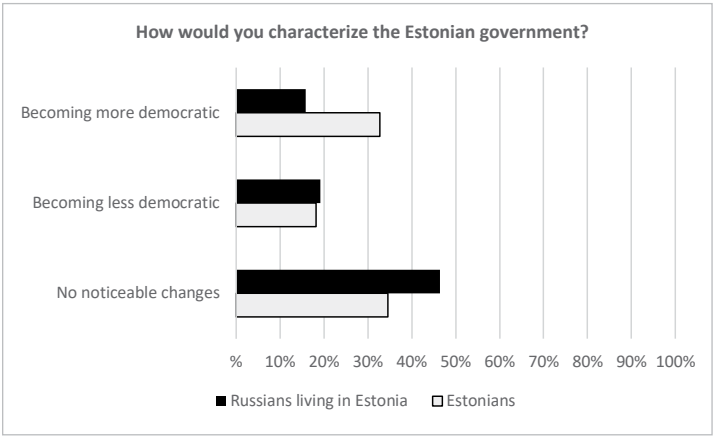
The graph below indicates whether survey respondents in Estonia think positively or negatively of various countries (October 2020), with differentiation based on ethnicity.

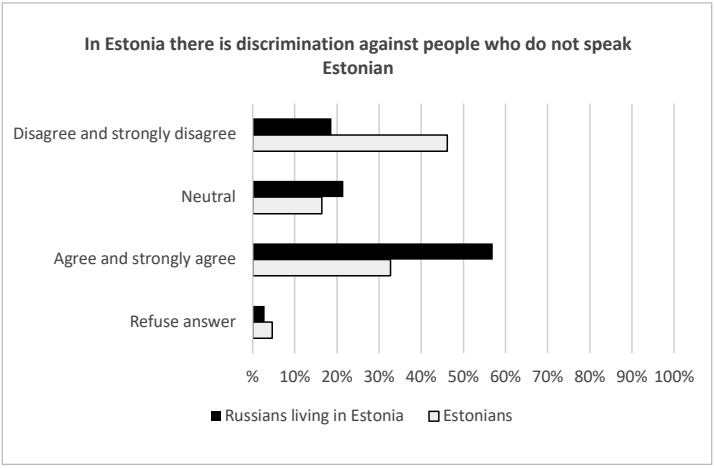


In our survey, the governance-related narratives are covered by the questions on trust in Estonian institutions and the democratic nature of the Estonian government. The CAPI survey results indicate that trust in the Estonian President, the national parliament, and the Estonian government is low among Russian respondents in comparison with Estonians. Based on the survey results, the Russian minority considers the Estonian President to be the most trustworthy figure in the local political landscape. However, their trust even in the President, not to mention the national parliament and the Estonian government, is relatively low. Russians, in comparison with Estonians, also appear to be somewhat more frustrated with the Estonian government in the sense that they believe that the Estonian government is becoming less democratic over time. Thus, any topics related to the trustworthiness of local state institutions in Estonia seem to be highly vulnerable in terms of spreading disinformation and fake news. Considering the overall low level of trust of local Russians in the Estonian national institution, this could actually be the "most fruitful" tailor-made topic for Russia to focus on in its disinformation campaigns against Estonia.

Below are graphs of the responses to governance-related narratives in Estonia (October 2020), with differentiation based on ethnicity.







Finally, analysis of the results to the question on language-based discrimination reveals that Russian-language respondents feel discriminated because they do not speak the local official language. A significant share of Estonian respondents (about 45–55%) felt that there is no discrimination against people who do not speak the Estonian language. However, only 14–20% of the Russian respondents felt the same. Thus, **topics related to discrimination also widely resonate with the local Russian community and should be given particular attention in fighting against Russia's disinformation campaigns and fake news**.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: WHAT ARE THE CHANCES TO TACKLE RUSSIA'S DISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS CAMPAIGNS DIRECTED TOWARDS ETHNIC RUSSIAN MINORITIES LIVING IN ESTONIA?

In practice, most of Russia's strategic narratives either do not survive fact checking or do not prove valid according to Western standards. This also applies to the strategic narratives that Russia distributes in Estonia and about Estonia. The situation with human rights in Estonia is clearly better than in Russia itself, and Estonia is proud of being a sovereign and independent country closely linked to the Western political and economic cooperation framework. However, **it is still easy for Russia to attack Estonia and Latvia with disinformation and fake news campaigns targeting these topics – human rights, discrimination, sovereignty, and international cooperation – since, to a large extent, the local Russian community in Estonia resonates with issues like the role of NATO and its presence in the Baltics, the protection of the human rights of ethnic Russian minorities living abroad, language-based discrimination, and weakness of the local state institutions in the eyes of Russian speakers**. Furthermore, the study revealed that they often seem to feel sympathy for Russia and the former Soviet era as well as some mistrust as far as Western countries, the NATO alliance, and governance in Estonia is concerned.

To make the Baltic societies more resilient to Russia's propaganda, counteractions should be more targeted towards actively explaining the importance of the NATO alliance for Baltic states, as well as focusing more on issues related to protection of human rights and language-based discrimination. In this respect, state institutions in Estonia and NATO representatives in the Baltic states should even more widely and actively explain, for example, the advantages of NATO membership to gain more support among Russian speakers. In this context, creating (from the perspective of local Russians) "meaningful" justification for NATO military exercises that regularly

take place in Estonia should also potentially contribute to a better image of NATO in the eyes of local Russians. Today, the main justification for joint military exercises in the framework of the NATO alliance is "to deter Russia". However, Estonia's local Russians do not feel that Russia poses a security threat to Estonia, and therefore, they cannot be approached using the same argument as for the ethnic Estonians. This also reveals a wider problem in association with tackling Russia's disinformation and fake news campaigns. More precisely, in its campaigns, Russia mostly targets the already pro-Russian audience who easily accepts Russia's narratives, but Western countermeasures are mostly directed towards segments and groups who support Western liberal values. It is purely unreasonable to expect that Kremlin-supporters will, for example, do their fact checking by visiting websites launched by the European Commission to tackle disinformation. Thus, particularly at the EU level, when suggesting another new measure or initiative to tackle Russia's disinformation and fake news, the most important and essential criteria for assessing the effectiveness of this measure should be related to the question of what is the most appropriate channel to reach plvulnerable groups or segments of the society.

Last but not least, **it is equally important to assure local Russian speakers that the state institutions are strong and that all citizens, including the Russian minorities living in Baltic states, have an important role to play in the future of statehood**.

THE LATVIAN TRANSATLANTIC ORGANISATION (LATO) IN ACTION

LATO

LATO is a non-governmental organisation established in 2000. Its aims are to inform the public about NATO and Latvia`s membership in the Alliance, to organise informative public events about Latvian and Euro-Atlantic security issues, to promote partnerships with other countries, to lay the foundations for Latvia`s international role as a member of NATO, and to foster the international community's understanding of Latvia`s foreign and security policy aims. During the past 20 years, LATO has numerous achievements to be proud of. LATO organises the most influential security conference in the Baltic Sea region: The Rīga Conference facilitates discussion about issues affecting the trans-atlantic community and annually gathers international experts in foreign affairs and security/defence matters, policy makers, journalists, and business representatives. LATO promotes policy relevant research on topics such as gender equality, peace and security, resilience in the borderland, and the subjective perception of security. A series of various initiatives intended for increasing the interest of Latvian, Baltic and European youth in security related issues hav been put in motion, including an annual future leader's forum and masterclasses for young political leaders. LATO's most recent project is the Secure Baltics platform, which serves as an information hub for those who are eager to join the debate on international security.

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Twitter: @LATO_L

SECURE BALTICS

LATO has launched a new internet platform SecureBaltics (www.securebaltics.eu). The site gathers different materials – policy briefs, discussions, interviews, studies, educational materials – created in the framework of the Rīga Conference, as well as work from our partners. It is a stable platform that the Rīga Conference community can rely on and use as a credible source of information in the region.

Purpose

The purpose of the platform is to collect the know-how that is generated by the excellent minds gathered at the Rīga Conference on an annual basis. The Rīga Conference gathers regional and international experts in foreign policy and defence, academics, journalists, and business representatives by promoting the discussions on issues affecting the transatlantic community. It has been growing in influence since its inception in 2006.

Every year, for two days the National Library of Latvia is the centre of the most important regional discussions on security issues. However, it is not enough to engage in these discussions only once a year. Therefore, LATO developed SecureBatlics as a practical tool which can encourage the use of any resources and materials that have been produced as part of the Rīga Conference or its follow-up events.

Reach

The platform tries to provide materials in both, English and Latvian, in order to reach multiple audiences. It is intended for the traditional Rīga Conference community of opinion leaders and experts in foreign policy and defence matters as well as any other interested parties that could benefit from the generated materials such as high school teachers looking for study materials.

Vision

LATO hopes that SecureBaltics will become the go-to hub for resource associated with defence and security issues in the Baltics within the next few years.

Materials

The platform SecureBaltics provides resources:

- For all interested parties, including expert community, in the form of interviews, policy briefs, commentaries on topical issues
- For teachers and lecturers in the form of study materials and tests that can be included in academic curriculum
- For students in the form of lectures and study materials, as well as interactive study materials through games.

Partners

The SecureBaltics portal is supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia and the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia.

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Latvia

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LATO LATVIAN TRANSATLANTIC ORGANISATION

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