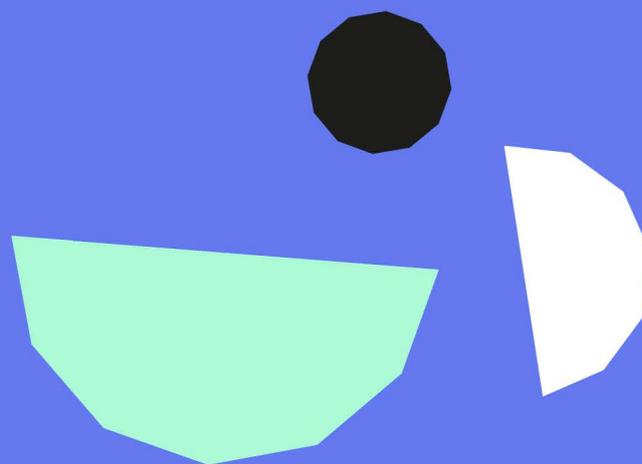


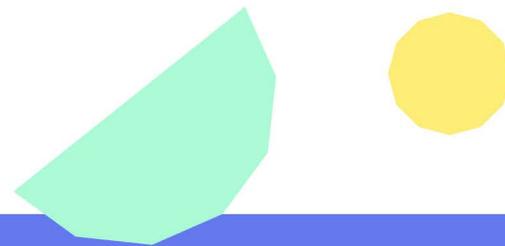
DIGIRES: Multisectoral and Multistakeholder Foresights Towards Resilient Digital Citizenship in Lithuania

State-of-the-art: A report on current issues,
methodologies, and needs in
anti-disinformation actions in a small state



A Report by the Baltic Research Foundation for Digital Resilience
(DIGIRES, EU funded project LC-01682259)

December 2022



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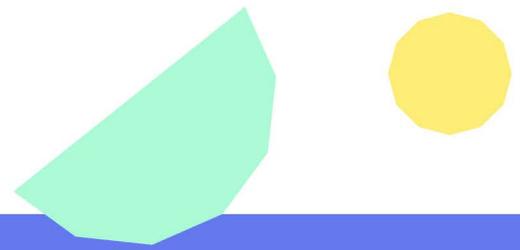
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Acknowledgements

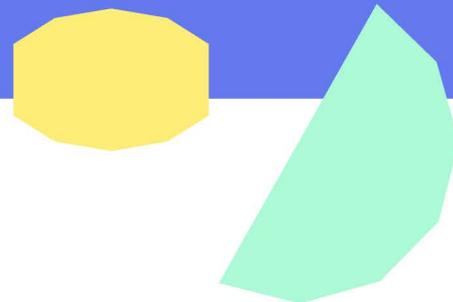
We are grateful to all the people who participated and are actively engaged in the continuing growth of the DIGIRES initiative: journalists from regional news media who joined our trainings and panel sessions; Public Communications' bachelor program students at Vytautas Magnus University, who have taken the specially designed module on fact-checking and source verification strategies designed by DIGIRES trainers, and engaged in applying the learned techniques in lessons with high school students; teachers and high-school students who participated in media awareness and digital media literacy trainings; librarians who opened to us even broader networks for collaboration; medical professionals who joined focused discussions; programs' specialists and experts in disinformation whom we interviewed; representatives of ministries and institutions who believed in us and supported our ideas by joining panel sessions and discussions; our international partners: researchers, media professionals and co-creation idea supporters from the NORDIS (Nordic Observatory for Digital Media and Information Disorder) network, partners from the BECID (Baltic Excellence Center for Combatting Information Disorders) consortium, and EDMO (European Digital Media Observatory).

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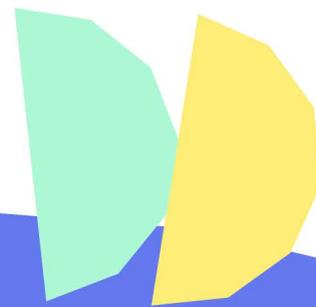


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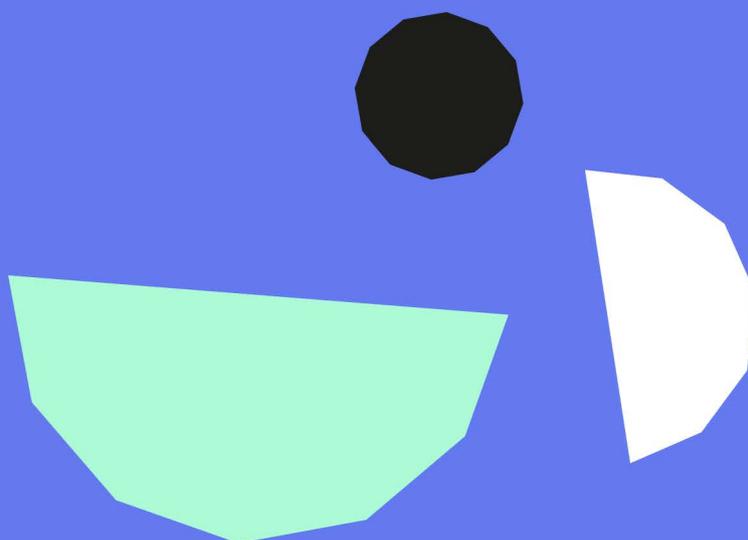
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Executive Summary



Executive Summary

Mere access to information is no luxury these days. Quite the opposite – with accelerating digitalization and information abundance, the extent of false, misleading, and often hostile content, popularly defined as disruptive communication, has grown exponentially. Thus, knowing what quality news is and being able to access such content should be appreciated as a true privilege in times of information excess.

Disinformation seeks to deceive by attaining some pre-planned targets, which might be political gains or remodeling of public perceptions towards some predefined thinking. No matter how it is framed, disinformation and other forms of manipulation of information pose huge challenges to democratic sustainability. Such manipulation disrupts the process of forming opinions. Also, manipulation breeds doubt and *dissatisfaction*.

In such circumstances, the biggest challenge for information consumers is and will continue to be to learn to live with and make knowledgeable choices in an environment surrounded by disinformation and information manipulation. Hence, a forward-looking concept – defined as *resilience to digital information disruptions* – is advocated in this Report by the DIGIRES (the Baltic Research Foundation for Digital Resilience) association to help build society's ability to resist and counter information manipulations.

Resilience, which in different disciplinary traditions is popularly described as a mental reservoir, hence, a personality trait, has a progressive meaning. It is a dynamic process of capacity building and individual response formation that define the ability to resist detrimental (external) influences.

If we apply such a measure in the field of media and communication practices, this capacity does not rest only on individual agency qualities, such as degree and quality of engagement with information. A broader social-structural context, namely the regulatory environment and plurality and viability of digital media, which *symbiotically* create the relevant informational context for such agency features to be manifested, also plays an integral role.

Thus, we argue that society's digital resilience develops and fluctuates based on individual cognitive and psychological (attitudinal) features, the scope of which are furthermore defined by systemic infrastructural (state and organizations levels) conditions existing in an environment.

To better understand the specificities of the context framing social resilience characteristics, we employ a macro-mezzo-micro level focused analytical approach.

1

On the macro (national) level, the emphasis is on the state's public policy decisions (degree and forms of strategic interinstitutional cooperation, programs developed against disinformation, and regulatory steps).

2

The mezzo (group) level is determined by organizational routines of different groups, for example, media and journalists expanding fact-checking and analytical activities and acting as providers of a "safety net" that disallows radical statements being injected into the public agenda.

3

Lastly, the micro (individual) layer is defined by the degree of individual self-confidence, perceptions of trust and information choices.

From the tripartite model of symbiotic influences between the actors in the three layers described above, it becomes clear that digital technologies and their logic of datafication and algorithmization alone should not be blamed for the influx of disinformation and related flaws, such as instigations to conflict, group radicalization, populist polarization, and so forth. Conversely, disinformation is a multi-faceted and complex phenomenon, which demands that it be viewed both as a socio-technological and highly instrumentalized process, and a phenomenon whose negative effects require a *socio-cultural* perspective to understand it.

We already know that the capacities to cope with information disruptions are country-specific and highly dependent on the political, economic, and media environments. Disinformation works particularly quickly where the mutual trust is not high. Hence, increasing socio-economic inequalities, political polarization of society, and rising populism, as well as low confidence in news media and fragmented audiences are among the key factors limiting citizens' resilience to disinformation and information manipulations.



International assessments often conclude that the three Baltic countries are characterized by being reasonably resilient to Russian propaganda. Also often claimed is that their historical experience is one of the decisive factors that explains this resilience.

Undeniably, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia have for decades been targets of Soviet propaganda. With the end of the Cold War, however, the Kremlin's propagandistic system did not take the Baltic countries off its informational radar. Obviously, since then, disinformation has become more substantial and more complex, reflecting narratives that are consistent with the current issues and aims, such as COVID-19 related fears and manipulations, hybrid attacks, environmental disasters, food emergencies, economic and energy crisis, etc. In short, with digitalization, disinformation has become more systematic, ubiquitous, contextually adaptable, and combining the latest technologies to augment the planned effect.

In this report, we argue that the phenomenon of disinformation must be explored through social lenses as a process that requires a rigorous contextual analysis of stakeholders, their actions and attained knowledge, and the development of adequate policy responses.

There are strong organizations in Lithuania that are active in the fight against disinformation. Professional media and journalists do a very important job. NGOs are involved in many different media literacy projects. Researchers, too, are actively solving the problems of online disinformation detection.

In general, we know what kind of fake narratives are circulating and who (what persons, institutions, and foreign agents) are behind these propagandistic and disinformation networks. In Lithuania, a macro-level institutional awareness exists on several issues of heightened concern, for example, that social resilience is related not only to the quality of information, and that it is a matter of national security. Therefore, an active plan is being developed by the Government, which focuses on a coordinated fight against disinformation through inter-institutional cooperation.

Nevertheless, despite such an awareness on a national level, there is little analysis of the impact of the implementation of different media literacy trainings and programs have, for example. In other words, there is a lack of effectiveness in the ways different aspects of the general anti-disinformation policy is implemented and coordinated.

To assure that citizens are competent and well-prepared to deal with digital encounters, a comprehensive policy approach that focuses on informed and educated citizenship is required. What is missing, is a strategically focused national policy framework that outlines how to

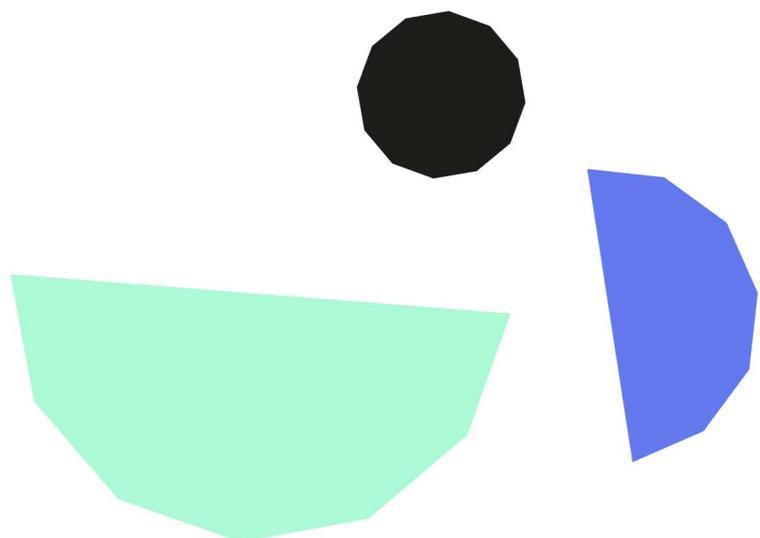


strengthen and sustain professional media and journalism, improve media education programs in schools, or for example, use library networks to reach different groups of people with quality content.

Lastly, political will is needed to propose strategies that are aimed at *inclusion of all*, instead of on recommendatory engagement of only some vulnerable groups. In other words, it is necessary to turn digital resilience and media literacy competencies, specifically the ones focused on information source verification acts, into competences of “hard power”, so that information and digital media use becomes a sustainable, democratic resilience-oriented, and mutually empowering force that provides a decisive response to manipulations and attacks on human rights and democracy.

In addressing the question of resistance to harmful effects of digitalization, in the long term, DIGIRES – the Baltic Research Foundation for Digital Resilience – progresses on the idea of social resilience building as a dynamic process of stakeholderism.

Viewed from such a perspective, in this Report, resilience is explored as a co-production process with new forms of collaborations actions among potential stakeholders, namely state institutions, media and culture organizations, and citizens.



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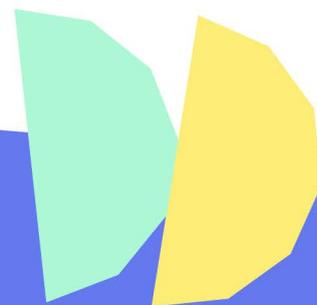


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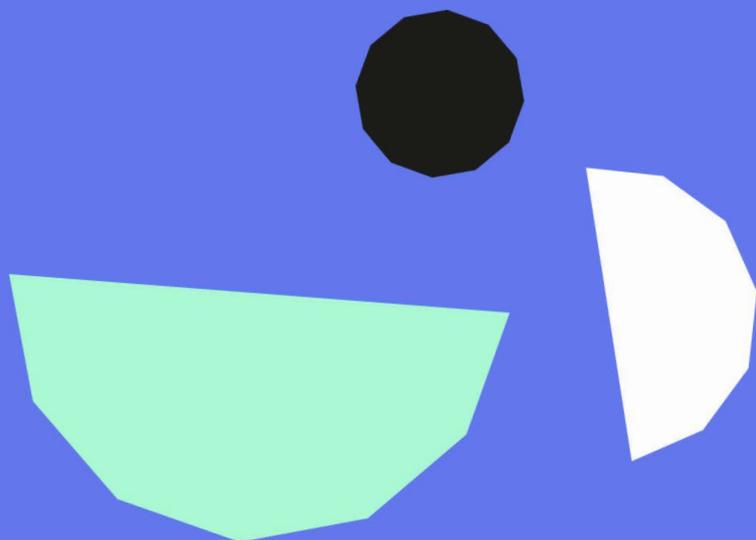
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Preface





Preface

This report provides an overview of state-of-the-art of anti-disinformation actions (expertise and aims of different stakeholders) in Lithuania aimed at fostering of *digital resilience*.

The discussion is framed in line with the aims of the DIGIRES initiative, a pilot project that aspires to advance and test new forms of collaborative partnerships between different stakeholder groups -scholars, educators, journalists, librarians, cultural industries, IT specialists, civics, government officials, policymakers - engaged in manifold actions to counter information disruptions, i.e., predominantly disinformation.

Although DIGIRES is planned as an EU-funded small scale pilot project (2021-2022) , it is designed to practically operate as a public organization – the Baltic Research Foundation for Digital Resilience (<http://digires.lt>).

DIGIRES has these objectives:

1

To advocate experiments with critical thinking and *fact-checking* for digital source verification and facticity assurance by practically engaging groups of people (high school/university students, regional journalists, media educators, also other groups: teachers, librarians, health specialists, youth workers, civil servants).

2

To employ machine learning (ML) and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies for the Lithuanian language to develop novel analysis methodology for the selection of specific marks and *identifications* of false information.

3

To assess the level of digital *civics*, i.e., of democratic engagement and digital media literacy, among the public and propose a scheme for enhancing digital media awareness and civic preparedness by developing guidelines for different groups to learn to think critically about the broader context of digital information sources.

4

Lastly, to begin building experience and *knowledge resources* for a comprehensive and whole-of-society approach in developing collaborative partnerships and testing expertise-sharing in Lithuania/Baltic countries and establishes connections with the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) and other regional EDMO Hubs to jointly campaign for digital media awareness competencies to discern false information and digital manipulations.

¹ DIGIRES (Supporting Collaborative Partnerships for Digital Resilience and Capacity Building in the Times of Disinfodemic/COVID-19) for is an EU Funded project, Contract No. LC-01682259, <http://digires.lt>.

² DIGIRES organizes structured trainings in fact-checking for regional journalists, communications students, civil servants, and health professionals.

³ As knowledge co-production and co-sharing initiative, DIGIRES organizes and takes part in public actions involving partnering with state and public organizations, such as the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania, the Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO (for example, by participating in joint events: <https://www.delfi.lt/video/transliacijos/anonsai/diskusija-kas-atsakingas-uz-musu-skaitmenini-atsparuma.d?id=91266249>, public speaking and advocacy, partnering in Global MIL Week 2022 national events in Lithuania: <https://www.unesco.lt/archives/5363>).

⁴ <https://edmo.eu>.

⁵ Among these are NORDIS (<https://datalab.au.dk/nordis>), CEDMO (<https://cedmohub.eu>), IBERIFIER, and pan-Baltic BECID (Baltic Excellence Center for Information Disorders), which from November 2022 operates in the Baltic States by learning also from DIGIRES experience.

In 2022, along with other countries in the Baltic Sea region, Lithuania has gained a well-deserved international visibility for its anti-disinformation actions .

Countries in the Baltic Sea region have a long and consistent experience of fighting against Russian propaganda. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia continues to keep the Baltic countries on its information radar (see Figure 1).

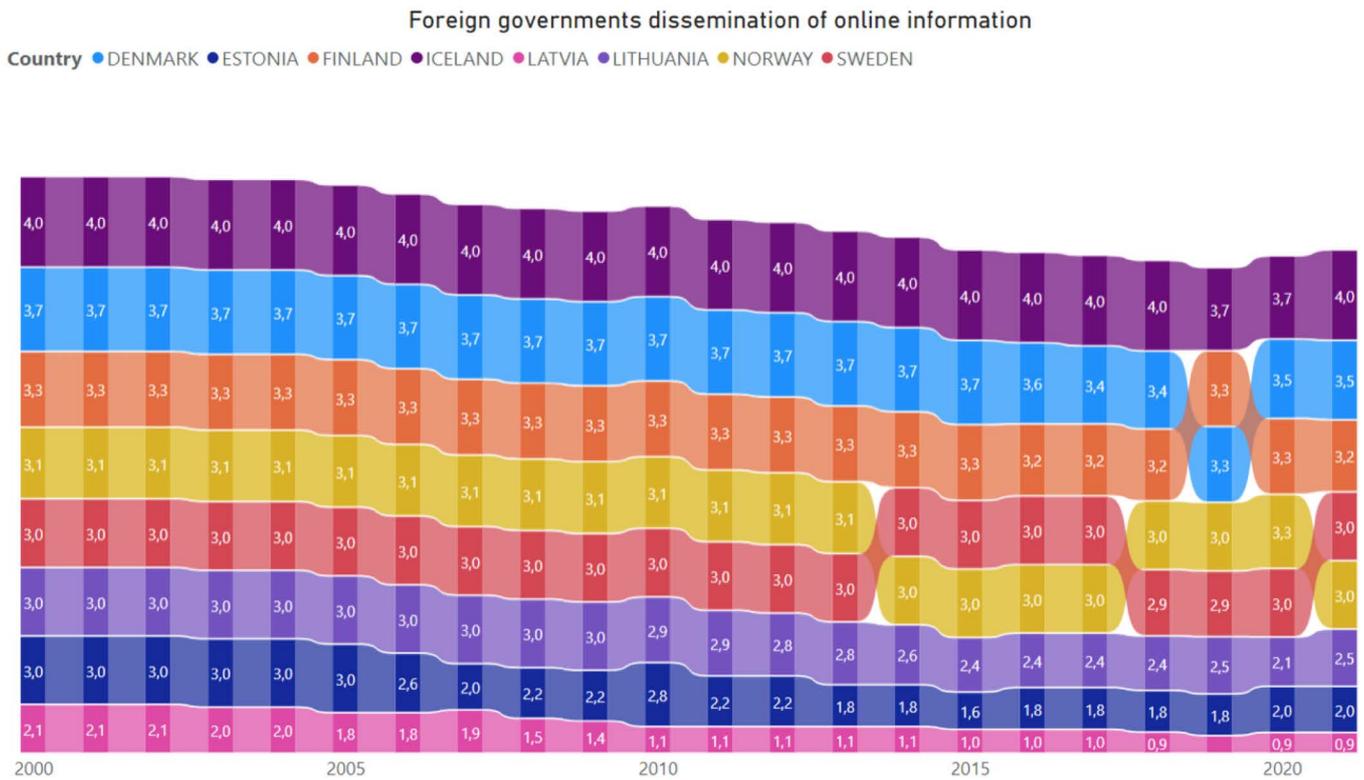


Figure 1. Based on assessments of the Digital Society Project : Foreign governments dissemination of online disinformation (Question: How routinely do foreign governments and their agents use social media to disseminate misleading viewpoints or false information to influence domestic politics in this country?).

The diagram above does not record the intensity of external threats or the number of attacks (DSP project bases its assessments on *qualitative*, i.e., expert evaluations), but the trends also show that in the three Baltic countries, outbreaks of manipulations of information are constant and address many political issues. The situation in the Nordic countries’ region has started to change recently, in 2022, when Russian disinformation intensified as response to Finland and Sweden joining NATO.

⁶ TIME Magazine (March 2022): Meet the Lithuanian ‘Elves’ Fighting Russian Disinformation, <https://time.com/6155060/lithuania-russia-fighting-disinformation-ukraine/>.

⁷ <http://www.digitalsocietyproject.org>. Mechkova, V., Pemstein, D., Seim, B., and Wilson, S. (2022). DSP Dataset v4, Digital Society Project (DSP).

⁸ 0: Extremely often – on all key political issues; 1: Often - on many key political issues; 2: About half the time - on some key political issues, but not others; 3: Rarely – on only a few key political issues; 4: Never, or almost never.

If some decades ago propaganda and disinformation was spread on television, today it is disseminated in digital formats by conventional news media, Internet media, social networks.

In the very near future, discerning fabrications from facts will be an even more difficult and complex process, and it will affect everyone, from individual consumers to corporations/businesses⁹.

To develop a *digital and resilient citizenry*, DIGIRES begins by consolidating the efforts of the three important pillars of a strong society:

1

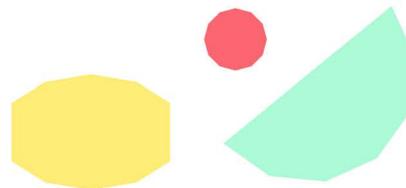
Consolidating and strengthening professional media, journalism, and *fact-checking*.

2

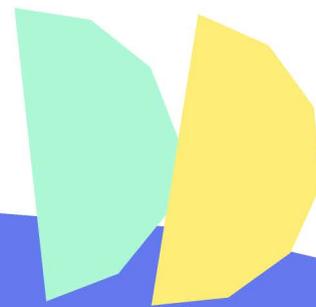
Bringing media awareness actions for all involved in information use (not only among the ones selected as sensitive groups), and putting forward *research and technology innovations* in universities, research institutes, and engaging industries.

3

Engaging cultural industries/institutions, such as libraries, schools, and museums, also youth workers and organizations, as digital media *literacy and resilience* advocacy networks reaching out to different regions of Lithuania, and groups of people.

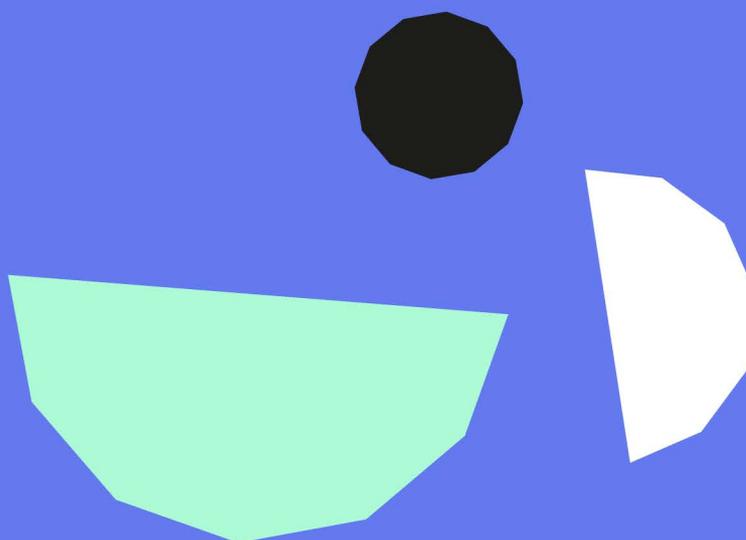


⁹ Already 5 years ago there predictions were made that it will become more difficult to recognize an online lie; and not only because the techniques of lying will become more sophisticated, but that the amount of manipulative digital content will increase several times. As listed in 2017 by Gartner communications (<https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2017-10-03-gartner-reveals-top-predictions-for-it-organizations-and-users-in-2018-and-beyond>), “by 2022, most people in mature economies will consume more false information than true information. ‘Fake news’ has become a major worldwide political and media theme for 2017. While fake news is currently in the public consciousness, it is important to realize the extent of digitally created content that is not a factual or authentic representation of information goes well beyond the news aspect. For enterprises, this acceleration of content in a social media-dominated discourse presents a real problem. Enterprises need to not only monitor closely what is being said about their brands directly, but also in what contexts, to ensure they are not associated with content that is detrimental to their brand value”.



1.

DIGIRES principles for resilient digital citizenship



1. DIGIRES principles for resilient digital citizenship

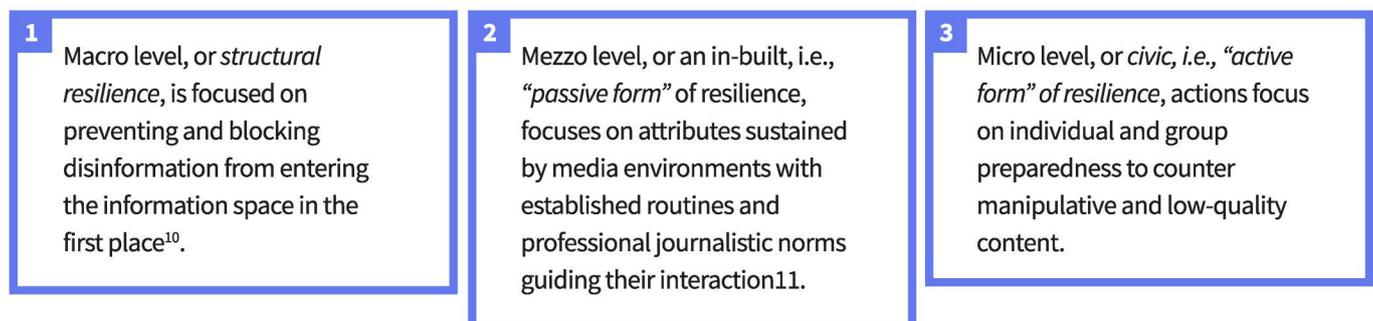
DIGIRES research activities begin by identifying some of the most obvious areas of systemic gaps (inconsistencies in government policies and programs, lack of coordinated actions and impact assessments) and missing individual and group competencies in daily practices with digital media and content.

If these systemic/cultural weaknesses are not properly assessed and addressed, they may become liabilities that increase the fragility and cracks in the *social fabrics*, affecting societal relations in the country. The consequences are obvious: a society made up of divided groups polarized by their individual interests. In a world of digital communication, group polarization may be even more rapid and radical than in an “offline” information environment, due to several characteristics of the former’s milieu, such as the intense and spontaneous flow of communication, lack of required accountability, permeability of communication boundaries, echo chambers, etc.

This report follows the above-suggested path, focusing on a contextual analysis, naming the actors/stakeholders of the fight against propaganda and disinformation, their activities and the content created.

In its early phase, DIGIRES follows dual function. It is a pilot research project and functioning as stakeholders (fact-checkers, freelancers, media educators and researchers) engaging initiative. In this context, DIGIRES foresees several selected interventions - meetings organized for active listening, open discussions, lectures, trainings, public campaigns, policy improvement - based on multistakeholder expertise to correct the identified inconsistencies in anti-disinformation actions. Additionally, DIGIRES aims to invest in promoting long-term practical, results-focused actions geared at sustainable *democratic resilience*.

DIGIRES argues that *resilience to information disruptions*, generally, needs to be viewed as a three-tier system of macro-mezzo-micro structural levels with distinctive safeguards to shield from detrimental actions:



¹⁰ Additionally, strategies on macro level are aimed at “disrupting the network of disinformation nodes, working with social media companies to remove malicious content in real-time, and using pro-active cyber operations”: Bjola, C. & Papadakis, K. (2020) Digital propaganda, counter publics and the disruption of the public sphere: the Finnish approach to building digital resilience, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 33:5, 638-666, DOI: 10.1080/09557571.2019.1704221.

¹¹ Humprecht, E., Esser, F., & Van Aelst, P. (2020). Resilience to Online Disinformation: A Framework for Cross-National Comparative Research. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 25(3), 493–516. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161219900126>.

Briefly, by advocating long standing public values and ideals of openness, accountability, and fairness, and developing and testing new forms of coordination of the expertise listed above (in research, fact-checking, and media literacy instruction), DIGIRES sets guidelines for the improvement of the digital communications arena in Lithuania.

Lithuania: a small state on the forefront of disinformation

Lithuania represents a small news market and a linguistically restricted information space¹². However, its media scene is rich, varied, and dynamic. Its media professionals and media and communications analysts have knowledge and hands-on expertise in revealing false information and cyberattacks. Public organizations and citizens, too, are engaged in countering disinformation with media literacy initiatives and vigorous digital activism¹³.

All in all, Lithuania's decisive expertise in detecting and combating disinformation should be further explored with the aim of revealing additional capacities for innovative knowledge-based solutions to confront digital information disruptions.

Despite a significant number of structured policies and programs countering information disruptions¹⁴, obvious gaps in knowledge on what needs to be done to advance adequate responses to changing information environments and to tame such a multi-faceted and *fluid* phenomenon as disinformation and other manipulation of information remains to be explored.

Small state's big challenges – a question of language

The DIGIRES pilot project considers several important issues related to its themes.

One is technological advancement. As the Internet community and the pace of information dissemination are rapidly growing, automated fake news detection in digital contents has gained interest in the AI research community.

¹² Lithuania (territory of 65 286 km²; population 2.80 million people) is situated on the South-Eastern coast of the Baltic Sea. The official language of the country is Lithuanian. Lithuania is an ethnically homogeneous country, with Polish and Russian-speaking populations being the biggest minorities (6,6% and 5,8% respectively of the total population). There are 154 nationalities living in Lithuania (Statistics Lithuania, 2022).

¹³ TIME Magazine (March 2022): Meet the Lithuanian 'Elves' Fighting Russian Disinformation, <https://time.com/6155060/lithuania-russia-fighting-disinformation-ukraine/>.

¹⁴ MPM2022 (<https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/74712/MPM2022-EN-N.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>) report selects Lithuania as an interesting case of multi-stakeholder action (rather than legal regulation) against disinformation. The legal approach to fighting against disinformation is considered unsuitable, as it tends to trigger a risk to freedom of expression. As stated in MPM2022, Lithuania was among the first EU member states to launch measures against disinformation at the national level. The Amendment of the Law on Public Information, which was adopted by the national parliament in 2019, allows, by a court decision, for the suspension of the broadcasting of TV channels because of the incitement of hatred or the dissemination of disinformation. Also, there is a significant number of varied initiatives (on a self-regulation basis, but also policies/strategies at the ministerial level, indicating strategic steps/goals in the fight against disinformation) to counter disinformation.



Small countries face unique challenges, some especially pertinent to artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) innovations.

The goal of automatic fake news detection, using AI, ML and Natural Language Processing (NLP) technologies, is to reduce time and effort spent detecting fake news and help humans stop its proliferation. Low-resourced languages, which have not yet had rich corpuses of labelled data and false information texts, are facing the biggest challenges. Such languages lack AI tools and insufficient labelled data for supervised machine learning.

In recent years, tremendous progress was achieved in developing AI systems that can learn from massive amounts of carefully labelled data. Unfortunately, there is a limit to how far the field of AI can go with supervised learning alone. There are some tasks and languages (especially low-resourced languages such as the Lithuanian language) for which there is simply not enough labelled data. On the other hand, it is impossible to label everything in the world and to do it rapidly enough to keep pace with the daily emergence of new topics of disinformation.

A more nuanced understanding of reality, beyond what is specified in the training data can bring AI closer to human-level intelligence in effectively combating fake news. In general, humans rely on their previously acquired background knowledge of how the world works. Common sense and critical thinking help people learn new skills and recognize disinformation without requiring massive amounts of teaching. Unfortunately, common sense is still the dark matter of artificial intelligence¹⁵.

As DIGIRES research reveals, the labelled data resources for Lithuanian are very limited. In special fields, such as disinformation detection, the lack of data makes the task of developing automatic detection tools exceedingly difficult. Such technical problems are less relevant for well-resourced languages (such as the English language)¹⁶.

Small languages require specific solutions to be developed and adapted for AI purposes. This can be achieved by investigating whether the hand-crafted features and classical ML can be combined with neural network models (AI). There is much evidence that hand-crafted features seem to capture something that is more useful and cannot be learned by AI models on small data set. That is, there are still no studies that answer the question whether the hand-crafted rhetorical features can or cannot be combined with neural network¹⁷ models. The same can be said about psycho-linguistic and content-based features. But the

¹⁵ LeCun Y. and Misra I. (2021) Self-supervised learning: The dark matter of intelligence <https://ai.facebook.com/blog/self-supervised-learning-the-dark-matter-of-intelligence/>

¹⁶ E.g., FEVER dataset <https://fever.ai/resources.html>, LIAR dataset <https://metatext.io/datasets/liar-dataset>, others.

¹⁷ Oshikawa R. et al. (2020) A Survey on Natural Language Processing for Fake News Detection. Proceedings of the 12th Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation (LREC 2020), pages 6086–6093, Marseille, 11–16 May 2020.

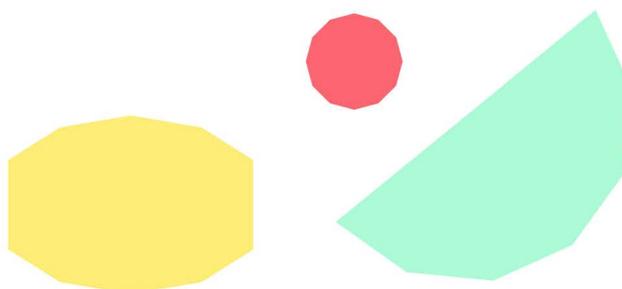
process of creating hand-crafted rules is very expensive and time-consuming. In cases of low-resourced languages, DIGIRES research suggests that AI alone will not be successful unless we educate the masses to be vigilant of disinformation and be media literate.

Aside to language, the cultural context of disinformation is equally as important. Communication is a deeply cultural act. Human interactions retain cultural characteristics which are manifested both in content topics and forms of communication.

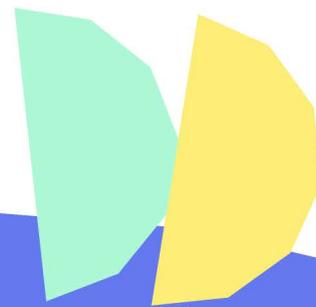
Therefore, when analyzing the exposures to such a globally influential phenomenon as disinformation in different countries, we must also consider the contextual and cultural features (historical frames, customs of linguistic expressions, values, beliefs and attitudes, tradition of party-political polarization, and socio-economic inequalities¹⁸).

No matter how common and universal the current problems caused or intensified by disinformation may be – polarization of society, the decline of institutional and interpersonal trust, and rising threats to democratically organized opinion formation and decision-making – it is unlikely that universal solutions will be found to be applicable in all societies.

This makes DIGIRES' employment of macro and mezzo approaches in analyzing societal structures and organizational forms (policies, programs) relevant, and its micro-level analyses, considering how digital transformations affect the daily life of individuals and groups and their political and civic choices, that much more important.

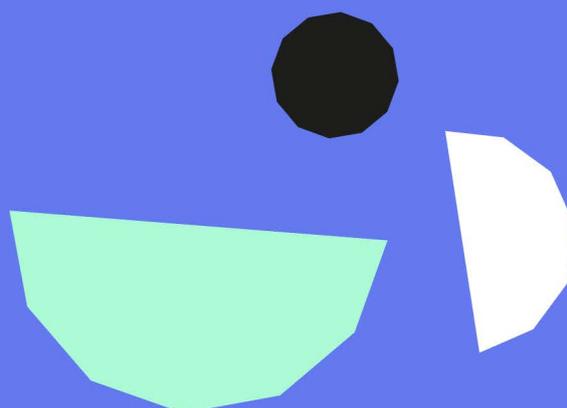


¹⁸ Balčytienė, A. (2012). Culture as a guide in theoretical explorations of Baltic media. In Hallin, D. & Mancini P. (eds.). Comparing media systems beyond the Western World. Cambridge University Press; Balčytienė, A. (2015). Acceleration of History, Political Instabilities and Media Change. In Zielonka J. (ed.). Media and Politics in New Democracies: Europe in a Comparative Perspective, 181–197. Oxford University Press.



2.

Why is digitization
and resilience
important when it
comes to information
disruptions?





2. Why is digitization and resilience important when it comes to information disruptions?

As widely acknowledged, digitization enables a wide spectrum of applications and services designed to meet a myriad of public requests and information disseminators' goals. However, intensive digitization processes are also accompanied by social consequences, among which are an abundance of information and changed audience relationship with facticity and source validation customs, an influx of manipulative and false content, instigations to conflict, and the speeding up of populist claims and instigations.

Communication turned into data-rich information flows appears as a dominant force defining the logics behind the services of digital platforms. Very often, digitization succeeded by platformization (algorithmization, datafication) is viewed as a general trend responsible for the many problems and flaws in the digital space and, consequently, the democratic decay in general.

But technologies alone should not be blamed for societal flaws, such as populist expansions or affective and ideological polarization¹⁹.

Though the algorithmic system employed in digital technologies and instilled in platform logics remains highly opaque, this should not be a major argument that technology is responsible for democratic backsliding. Technological impact must be seen as an indirect effect of digital information management and the creation and rapid dissemination of certain types of content, which is centered around social conflicts and designed to structure human activities towards some predefined and expected (commercial or propagandist) outcomes. Following these ideas²⁰, information disruptions, and specifically disinformation are treated as symptoms, i.e., a digitalized manifestation of long-standing social and political divisions prevailing in a concrete social setting.

There is no doubt that digital information will continue to grow. This is determined by the infrastructural system of the Internet, which is highly de-centralized and in which information content is meant to circulate²¹ by engaging users in sharing and multiplying it. Additionally, digital innovations, predominantly artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, must be regarded as another factor that leads to the proliferation of massive digital content multiplication and flows. Accordingly, DIGIRES stresses that the supremacy and dominance of digital communications and, hence, the profusion of false information must be taken as a factor of social change and a key problem that is affecting modern democracies.

Therefore, the review of information disruptions and actors/stakeholders engaged in digital resilience in

¹⁹ Kreiss, D. (2021). Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, prospects for Reform. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 26(2), p. 505–512.

²⁰ Jungher, A. and Schroeder, R. (2021). Disinformation and the Structural Transformations of the Public Arena: Addressing the Actual Challenges to Democracy. *Social media + society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/205630512198892>.

²¹ Siapera, E. (2022). Platform governance and the “infodemic”. *Javnost/The Public*. Vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 197-214.

Lithuania is produced by a certain shift in the lens that is employed. Though it does not offer direct answers to the problem of disinformation, by drawing attention to awareness of linguistic, content related (i.e., history and identity aspects in circulating fake narratives), political-economic context of media operations, and socio-cultural factors behind media use and digital information expansions in Lithuania, the review seeks to place anti-disinformation actions in the context of the country's contemporary reality.

Core challenges: Information disruptions and lack of clarity in communication

To be empowered as citizens of a digital democracy, people need to know how to navigate the streams in the ocean of digital information. In other words, responsible engagement with information requires *agency*, i.e., commitment and ability to discern false information.

To assure that citizens are competent and well-prepared to deal with digital encounters, clarity is required also in the structural forms (the macro level, i.e., the system of government policies and programs) and consistency in mezzo/organizational practices and at the micro level of individual routines, i.e., the actions and attitudes of individuals.

There are many groups that pursue their goals and actively care for sustainability and social resilience (see Figure 2). However, the coordination of all stakeholders' activities raises several questions. For example, addressing "media literacy", different ministries²² oversee public policy only in such aspects of "literacy" that they perceive appropriate, and mainly focus on the problems of disinformation that are relevant to them. Another problem is that the public policy documents do not delve deep into nuanced changes in concepts, such as shifts in "media literacy"²³ or "resilience" understandings, etc. This is also an additional reason that hinders a clear strategic direction to work towards large-scale systemic change.

The awareness of and coordination of stakeholder actions within each of the macro-mezzo-micro layers and among them is of exceptional importance for sustainable resilience. As can be seen from visualization of the main stakeholder groups in the three layers (Figure 2), the mezzo level is particularly rich in diverse actions and public engagements. What is missing from these actions, however, is a deeper understanding of its *impact*: funding and other resources invested, and results obtained from these diverse and often also overlapping and competing activities²⁴.

²² Media literacy policy is being developed by the Ministry of Culture (which forms information policy), Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (responsible for media literacy competencies in education, including general education and life-long learning), and the Ministry of National Defence (responsible for social resilience and civic resistance competencies).

²³ T. Philip Nichols & Robert Jean LeBlanc (2021) Media education and the limits of "literacy": Ecological orientations to performative platforms, *Curriculum Inquiry*, 51:4, 389-412, DOI: [10.1080/03626784.2020.1865104](https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2020.1865104).

²⁴ The Ministry of Culture has Strategic Guidelines of Lithuania's Public Information Policy 2019-2022, where the fifth guideline "Information threats resilience and an information literate society" is aimed at "developing media and information literacy as a strategic, inter-disciplinary coordinated priority, fostering critical thinking, empowering the public's own ability to assess public information and to cope with unwanted information threats, and stimulating civic activism, participation, and creativity (expression)" (<https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/95c4cf60344211e99595d005d42b863e>). The document mandates state institutions to run a regular assessment of the media literacy competencies of the public. This is an important step towards sustainability and consistency of actions. However, there is a lack of information about what further steps have been taken regarding these results.

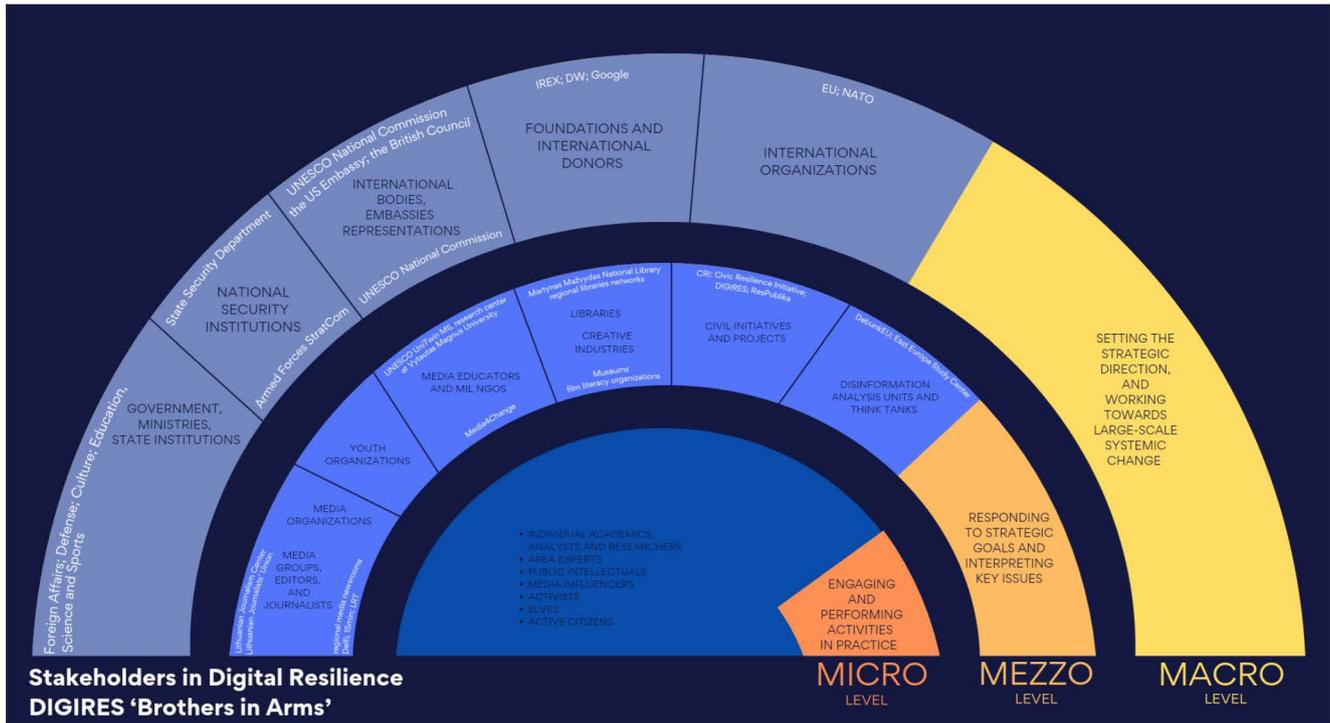


Figure 2. Macro-mezzo-micro level stakeholders in digital resilience in Lithuania.

As a response to this situation, by looking at a wide array of initiatives and stakeholder groups (especially at the different players in the mezzo level arena, such as journalists, scientists and media educators who engage with groups of citizens, elves, etc.)²⁵, DIGIRES tests new forms of intersectoral and multisectoral *collaborations*²⁶. It appears that in areas of sustainable digital resilience building, the model of *collaborative governance* has been understudied. By working collaboratively DIGIRES will employ available expertise in resisting disinformation to assist, first, fact-checkers (but also the public) in everyday digital endeavors. Based on knowledge it obtains, DIGIRES will regularly provide policy recommendations.

It is too naïve to expect that pilot ideas alone will change the landscape of digital information, and all the toxic effects of disinformation will be disclosed and directed to disappear. False digital information already outpaces factual or authentic content. Hence, the biggest challenge for contemporary information consumers is to learn to live with and make informed and knowledgeable choices in an environment which is flooded with manipulative information.

DIGIRES contends that a daily digital practice of information verification and bottom-up knowledge viewed with scholarly insights are fundamental in giving policy guidelines and recommendations on

²⁵ Apart from DIGIRES, we will not find very many organizations working directly with social and digital resilience. But the concept of “resilience” itself is multifaceted, combining the competences of media literacy, civic activism, public engagement and checking the reliability of information. All these actions lead to the development of interpersonal and social trust, and thus to social resilience.

²⁶ Commonly, public organizations apply models of *collaborative governance*. DIGIRES association is one of such examples; it was established by three founding partners: academic (Vytautas Magnus University), news media (UAB Delfi), and Nacionalinis socialinės integracijos institutas/Media4Change (media education NGO).

how the daily digital information exchanges can be improved, through regulation, information exchanges, standardization of practice, and other moves. DIGIRES anticipates that these insights should help to advance digital media awareness. For example, this can be achieved by implementing comprehensive and all-inclusive approaches to information verification and digital media literacy trainings involving specialists, civil servants, public authorities, teachers, and high school students, but also socio-economically restricted groups (elders, women, minority groups).

Core concepts: What is false information and how to spot it?

Disinformation is a multi-faceted and complex phenomenon which is viewed as socio-technological and highly instrumentalized process. Combatting disinformation with modern technologies is essential; nonetheless, to be sufficient, the technological infrastructural arrangements need to be supported by the analysis of *social and cultural specificities* of the context (such as media engagement and use, public perceptions, and attitudes, as well as dominant inequalities and the basis for conflict/radical clashes) and of the perceptions of those communicating.

From a content-focused perspective, disinformation is defined as a strategic aim to attain some pre-planned outcomes, which might be political and economic gains, or remodeling of public perceptions towards some predefined positions and attitudes. Regardless of what it focuses on, disinformation aims to harm. Misinformation, quite similarly, is observed as more of an unintended form of information dissemination with potentially similar outcomes as disinformation.

Fact-checking and debunking, as well as pre-bunking, are strategies often promoted as critically needed resources to raise public awareness about (dis)misinformation. These are adequate and justified responses by media and journalists, and especially fact-checkers, whose professional working routines have been distorted by an influx of disinformation and/or misinformation.

Focusing solely on what seems visible - disinformation narratives as disclosed by media professionals and disinformation analysts - tackles only some of the critically significant aspects of the overall problem.

We might know with some exactness how many false claims in relative quantitative calculations are circulating, what types of disinformation and false narratives are registered, how these narratives change and evolve to address new political or other aspirations of the sender. However, we might be unaware about the scale and harms they cause to daily democratic life in a country.

²⁵ Apart from DIGIRES, we will not find very many organizations working directly with social and digital resilience. But the concept of “resilience” itself is multifaceted, combining the competences of media literacy, civic activism, public engagement and checking the reliability of information. All these actions lead to the development of interpersonal and social trust, and thus to social resilience.

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The relevance of disinformation topics to Lithuania over the past decade is determined by at least two crucial factors: first, Russia's aggressive expansion, whose geopolitical and military expression is ideologically underpinned by various propaganda images; and second, the cultural and political transformations in the Western democracies.

The DIGIRES project strives to learn:

1

How the anti-disinformation system works in Lithuania. What actions and on what levels should be taken to ensure the system's greater effectiveness and, hence, the publics' digital resilience to information disruptions.

2

How disinformation is perceived by the public, and where do the greatest obstacles against democratic dialogue reside?

To reiterate, DIGIRES suggests that a *contextually* focused analysis of environment is required here: (dis)misinformation needs and will be explored through multidimensional lenses of examination, considering *systemic/organizational* and *individual* characteristics of resilience development pertinent to the digital social change.

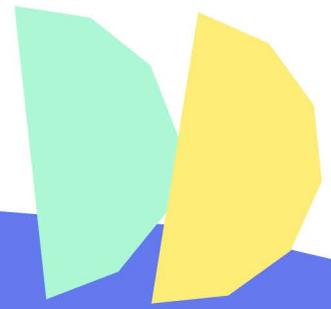
Distinctive insights: Expert assessments

Media monitoring and the gathering of statistical data on changing digital communications and perceived transformations in media environments present illustrative trends. DIGIRES contends that aside from data and knowledge about the changing structural communications environment, the in-depth analysis of insights about the challenges by those (experts, specialists) who operate in this system is of paramount importance.

The interviews, excerpts of which are provided in the concluding sections (section 8) of this report to illustrate some of the key developments and gaps in knowledge, were conducted with political scientists and disinformation analysts, media literacy educators, and journalists²⁷.

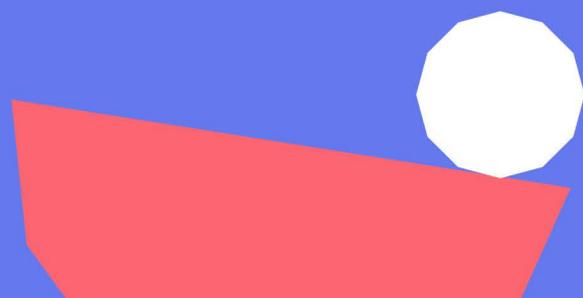
The selected mezzo level stakeholders provide their views on changing information environment, persistent problems in communications in Lithuania, and existing and potential solutions to information disruptions.

²⁷ Thirteen interviews were performed with different (mainly mezzo-level) stakeholders in the period of June-November, 2022.



3.

Baltic media environments transformed – a scene where (dis)information happens



3. Baltic media environments transformed – a scene where (dis)information happens

The Baltic countries are characterized as elite-oriented democracies with relatively narrow citizen engagement in public and political processes²⁸. A dominant characteristic feature of elite-oriented, i.e., restrictive, and chiefly “procedural” democracy²⁹, is the superficial interest in politics in a society. Citizens become politically engaged and active during election periods, and in the intervals between elections, the institution of media takes a leading role that controls, follows, and recalls political mistakes and makes these public. Too many active citizens are hindered from deeper political engagement by too little knowledge of the political process and insufficient attention to more acute social problems. In Lithuania, democracy is often referred to in relation to economic prosperity and socio-economic stability, and the engagement of people in the issues that do not concern them directly, in many cases, is not considered as important³⁰.

Media and journalism in Lithuania: Risks to media viability and pluralism

Accelerated digitization has brought severe disruptions to Baltic media markets: information abundance, decreasing trust, collapse of traditional media business model, emergence of new media uses, and, ultimately, uncertainty that leads to changes in the relationship between the media and the world³¹.

In international comparative studies of politics and media, the three Baltic countries are often presented as successful examples of CEE democratization. These countries are characterized as small and highly competitive media markets. Nevertheless, despite many successes, there are obvious risks in relation to the media’s functioning and to media plurality, which do not yet allow for a more determined implementation of a universalist principle that would ensure equal accessibility and availability of quality content for all groups in society³².

²⁸ Duvold, K., Berglund, S., and Ekman, J. (2020). *Political Culture in the Baltic States: Between National and European Integration*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

²⁹ Strömbäck, J. (2005). In Search of a Standard: Four Models of Democracy and Their Normative Implications for Journalism. *Journalism Studies* 6 (3): 331–345.

³⁰ Duvold, K., Berglund, S., and Ekman, J. (2020). *Political Culture in the Baltic States: Between National and European Integration*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

³¹ Ragne Kõuts-Klemm, Anda Rožukalne & Deimantas Jastramskis (2022) Resilience of national media systems: Baltic media in the global network environment, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 53:4, 543-564, DOI: 10.1080/01629778.2022.2103162; Balčytienė, A, Juraitė, K. (2022). Baltic Democracies: Re-configuring Media Environments and Civic Agency, *Journal of Baltic Studies*. Doi: 10.1080/01629778.2022.2117833.

³² Balčytienė, A. (2021). Crisis of Agency in Central and Eastern Europe: From the Consolidation of Media Freedom to the Institutionalisation of Free Choice?, *Javnost - The Public*, 28:1, p. 75-89. doi: 10.1080/13183222.2021.1861404.

³³ Ragne Kõuts-Klemm, Anda Rožukalne & Deimantas Jastramskis (2022) Resilience of national media systems: Baltic media in the global network environment, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 53:4, 543-564, DOI: 10.1080/01629778.2022.2103162.



One obvious tendency that is clearly visible in each of the three Baltic countries is formulated as a risk linked to limitations in media market diversity³³. Such an assessment is determined by objective conditions - limitations of size of the national market and of broader applicability of national languages - and an overtly liberal character of ownership regulation, which disregards cross-media concentration and competition enforcement, commercial and owner influence over editorial content, as well as the lack of transparency of media ownership³⁴. These enduring risks for media market plurality have been increasing slightly in all the Baltic countries³⁴, and most clearly it will remain the key danger in the future. It is also obvious that the effects of the digital revolution, such as the impact of global platforms on local content, etc., are another factor exacerbating the risks.

Thus, from a plurality perspective, considering both structural and representational aspects of news media functioning, the discursive arena in Lithuania, in fact in all three Baltic countries, is mostly constrained by economic challenges. Rapid digitization and datafication with all their consequences do not eliminate but augment the risks.

Lithuania's media operate in conditions of severe competition and, therefore, under conditions of ongoing media ownership concentration, which determines editorial decisions that reinforce commercialization tendencies. Nonetheless, it is important to mention the editorial policy decisions that are obviously far-sighted and professionally motivated, such as the establishment of fact-checking newsrooms - Melo detektorius/Lie Detector at Delfi.lt and Patikrinta 15min/Verified by 15min at 15min.lt - provision for news content in minority languages like Russian and Polish, and engagement in media and news literacy education activities.

Briefly, the news media and journalistic ideals remain among the top significant players, if not the most important ones, in the fight against digital information disruptions. DIGIRES research also verifies that the Lithuanian Internet media is faithful to its professional mission in selecting news and observing the public space, thus defending, and "shielding" it from excessively radical, conflict-generating and opposing opinions.

As can be seen from the DSP data, the Internet media in Lithuania tend to present the major political issues in very similarly ways (Figure 3), thus, "fractionalization" of the digital information space is low.

³⁴ Jastramskis, D., Rožukalnė, A. & Jõesaar, A. (2017). Media Concentration in the Baltic States (2000–2014). *Informacijos mokslai*, 77: 26–48.

³⁵ Juraitė, K. & Balčytienė, A. (2022). Accelerating Information Consumption and Challenges to MIL Amidst COVID-19 in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. *The Routledge Handbook of Media Education Futures Post-Pandemic*. London and New York: Routledge.

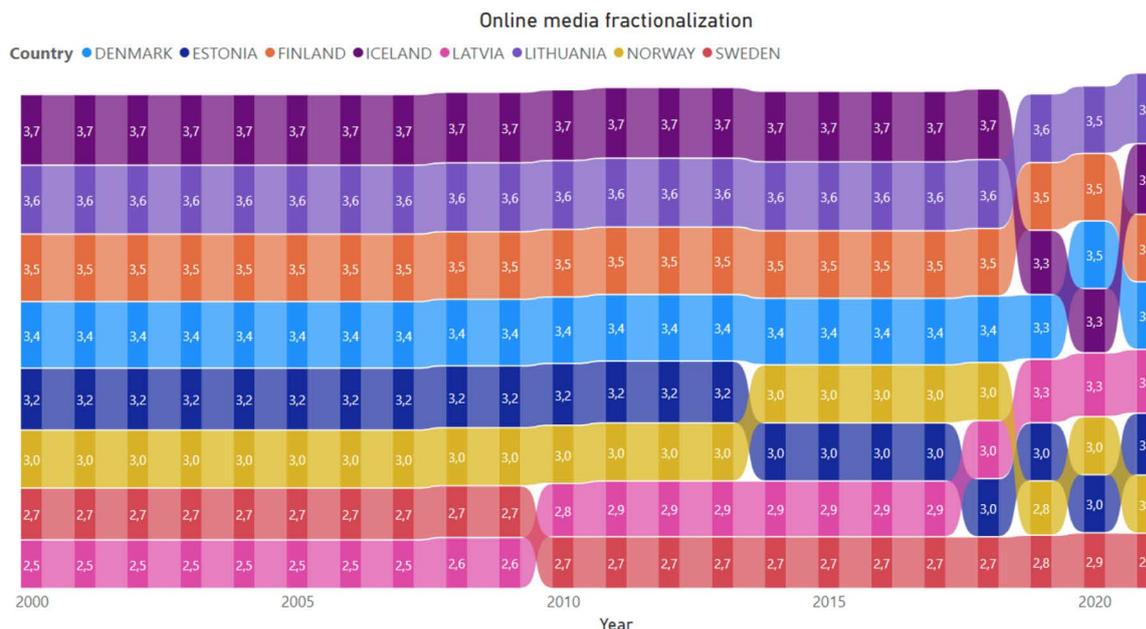


Figure 3. Online media fractionalization (based on assessments of the Digital Society Project³⁶: *Question: Do the major domestic online media outlets give a similar presentation of major (political) news?*³⁷).

To conclude, though the media structures are rapidly changing, and re-structuring given the impact of digitization (platformization), their key function to serve the informed citizenship remains intact. Thus, it becomes necessary to look to state media policy that can assist the media in carrying out their function and resist global economic or regulatory risks.

Changing media repertoires and selective audiences

Although for the majority of audiences the conventional news media channels, such as print or broadcast media, do not appear as primary choices for information, conventional news media remains an important player³⁸ in the digitally mediated communications arena.

As already discussed, resilience and capacity to cope with information disruptions are country-specific and highly dependent on the political, economic, and media environments³⁹. Increasing polarization of society and rising populism, as well as low confidence in news media, a weak public service broadcaster, and more fragmented audiences, are among the key factors limiting citizens' resilience to disinformation.

The dynamics of media transformations and public opinions do illustrate fundamental changes in the Baltic media ecosystems.

³⁶ <http://www.digitalsocietyproject.org>. Mechkova, V., Pemstein, D., Seim, B., and Wilson, S. (2022). DSP Dataset v4, Digital Society Project (DSP).

³⁷ DSP responses: 0: No. The major domestic online media outlets give opposing presentation of major events; 1: Not really. The major domestic online media outlets differ greatly in the presentation of major events; 2: Sometimes. The major domestic online media outlets give a similar presentation of major events about half the time; 3: Mostly. The major domestic online media outlets mostly give a similar presentation of major events; 4: Yes. Although there are small differences in representation, the major domestic online media outlets give a similar presentation of major events.

³⁸ In August 2021, Lithuania had the lowest confidence in the media since 1998: 24.8% respondents trusted the media and 33.4% did not, whereas in October 2022, the change is minimal, as 26.6% of population reported their confidence in Lithuanian media, and 33.1% did not demonstrate any trust. See Vilmarus survey results at: <http://www.vilmarus.lt/index.php?mact=News,cntnt01,detail,0&cntnt01articleid=2&cntnt01returnid=20>.

³⁹ Humprecht, E. et al. (2021). The sharing of disinformation in cross-national comparison: analyzing patterns of resilience. Information, Communication & Society, Doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2021.2006744.

Despite the acknowledged respect and high trust expressed for the public service media’s reliability and significant sources of news in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, social media platforms proliferate in the Baltic countries, becoming important wellsprings of daily information (see Figures 4-6)⁴⁰. Even though there is a growing concern about online disinformation and manipulations in the region, people’s perceptions about their own abilities to spot and verify online sources provide some worrisome results. One of the recent Eurostat surveys shows that only 1 out of 10 Lithuanians opted to check suspicious online information⁴¹.

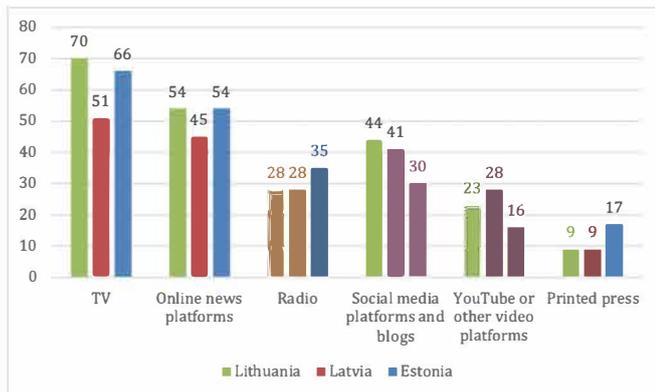


Figure 4. Media use in the Baltic countries, % (Eurobarometer, 2022).

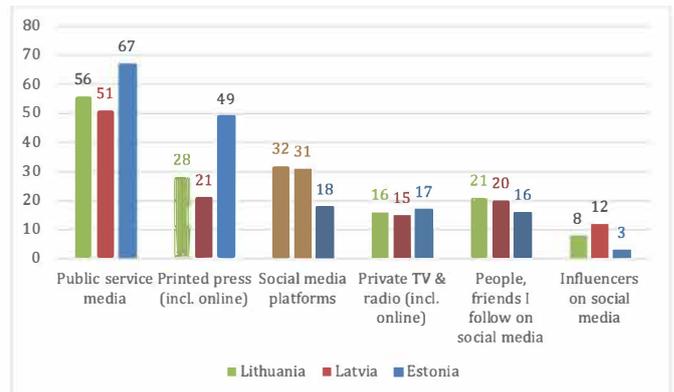


Figure 5. Trust in media in the Baltic countries, % (Eurobarometer, 2022).

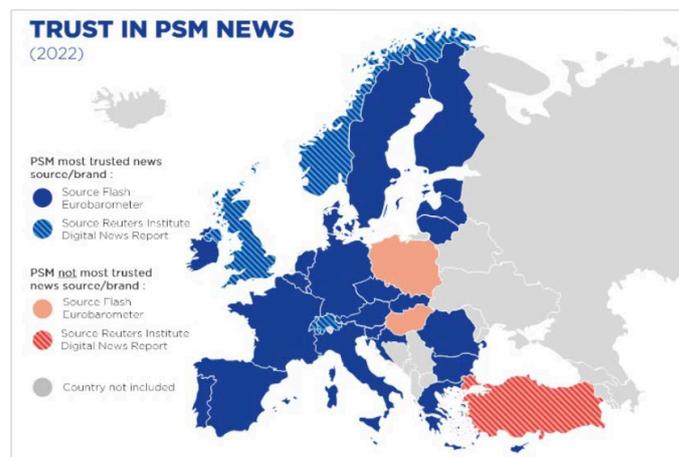


Figure 6. European map of trust in public service media (EBU, 2022).

Additionally, Eurobarometer surveys suggest that people in the Baltics are more often confronted with disinformation than in their Nordic region counterparts and close to 60% of respondents boldly acknowledge that they are confident in their ability to recognize disinformation (see Figures 7-8)⁴². Conversely, many of them have shared misleading online content; additionally, as the DIGIRES pilot survey reveals, often they did so not only out of ignorance, but also for fun.

⁴⁰ EBU Media Intelligence Service (2022). Trust in Media 2022: Public Version. European Broadcasting Union.

https://www.ebu.ch/publications/research/login_only/report/trust-in-media.

EBU Media Intelligence Service (2022). Trust in Public Service Media 2022: Public Version. European Broadcasting Union.

<https://www.ebu.ch/research/membersonly/report/trust-in-public-service-media>.

⁴¹ Eurostat (2021). How many people verified online information in 2021? <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20211216-3>.

⁴² Flash Eurobarometer (2022). News & Media Survey 2022. European Parliament. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2832>.

In the framework of the DIGIRES project, a pilot survey was conducted in April-May 2022. Using a quota sampling technique, a sample of 339 respondents was collected and analyzed. The survey included questions on media use, perceptions of journalism, and awareness of risks and challenges related to disinformation. Even though respondents demonstrated their concern about disinformation being an important national problem (78%), as well as high confidence in their ability to distinguish between the truth and lies (65%), 40% of them admitted that, for different reasons, they had shared fake news online.

This could be regarded as a lack of responsibility and awareness of the risks related to online media and information use.

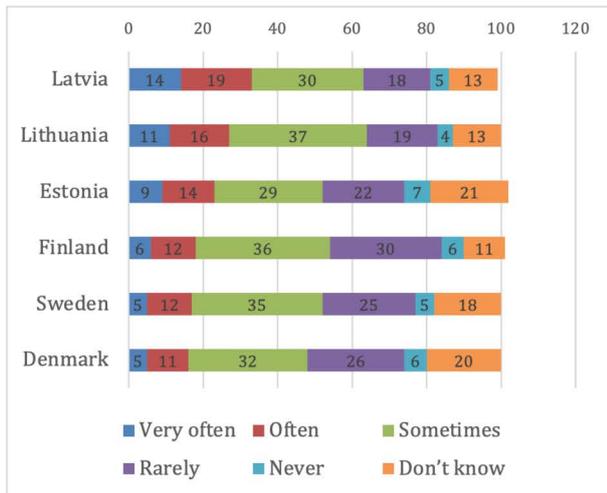


Figure 7. Exposure to disinformation in Baltic and Nordic countries (Eurobarometer, 2022).

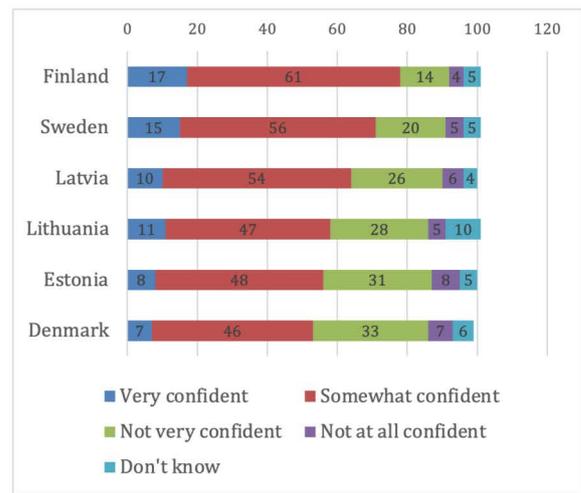


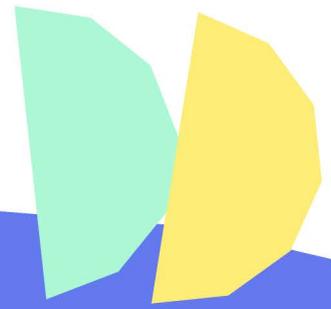
Figure 8. Confidence in recognizing disinformation in Baltic and Nordic countries (Eurobarometer, 2022).

On the other hand, we detect a growing demand for quality information during times of deep uncertainties and crises. Most of the respondents (around 80%) appreciate quality journalism, because of its key role in sustaining democracy and its importance as a source of reliable news during times of crises.

The most significant differences among them are seen in relationship to age, education, and social status. Younger and more educated audiences tend to be more active users of online news channels with more diversity general media repertoires, including TV and radio, social networks, news portals, official information sites, international news sources and audiovisual media platforms. As digital natives, they are also more critical about the power of information manipulations and the scope of disinformation in the online media environment. However, even if they demonstrate higher confidence in their abilities to discern truth and identify lies, their resilience to information disruptions is limited and their capacities, e.g., debunking skills, are inadequate to prevent spread of malicious content.

Therefore, the urgency of media and information literacy training becomes a strategic guideline for all communication agents, not just for media/education sectors, and remains a matter of high concern in Lithuania, and in other Baltic countries. This is precisely what DIGIRES focuses on in its public activities. In specifically designed information source reliability verification training, the DIGIRES team - fact checkers, trained freelancers, media educators, scientists, information operations specialists - adapts the most important source recognition techniques to the needs demographically divers groups .

⁴³ in 2022 alone, DIGIRES trainings in fact-checking (debunking, also in lateral reading strategies) were organized for regional journalists (more than 70 participants), communications students (90 participants) and high school students (more than 550 participants), health sector workers (30 participants). Additionally, fact-checking as a skill and its practical techniques were discussed at dozens of public events (more information: <http://digires.lt>).



4.

The scope of
information disruptions
in the Baltic countries:
What do we know about
disinformation?



4. The scope of information disruptions in the Baltic countries: What do we know about disinformation?

Lithuania has faced decades of Soviet propaganda for decades. Since the end of the USSR, Russian disinformation has become more complex, systematic⁴⁴, resourced, operative, and digitally appealing constructing narratives that are consistent with current issues and Kremlin goals. The memory of Soviet propaganda serves as the educational and resilience-building backdrop for Lithuanians. Today's Russian propaganda and disinformation has been and remains a tool used to approach and address socio-economically and culturally susceptible groups of society⁴⁵. Obviously, Kremlin-based propaganda is not the only source of disinformation in Lithuania.

Types of disinformation: A few selected insights from Lithuania

The annual report by the Strategic Communication Department of the Lithuanian Armed Forces, which is responsible for the main monitoring of the information space in Lithuania, states that the intensity of international information activity increased by 32% in 2021. Five thousand and thirty cases of disinformation activity were detected in the Lithuanian information space⁴⁶. They originated in Russia, Belarus, and China. The three persistent narratives were security, foreign policy, and foundations of the Lithuanian Constitution. The migrant crisis was the most prevalent disinformation narrative in Lithuania's information space during 2021. It was topic included in the hybrid attack carried out by Belarus' Alexander Lukashenko regime and comprised references to the organized transit of illegal migrants to the Lithuanian border, targeted directly at discrediting NATO, undermining Lithuanian public trust in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty and membership in the Alliance, defaming Lithuania's defense policy, and demeaning the image of the Lithuanian army and its capability to defend itself. Another targeted issue concerned the opening of the embassy of Taiwan in Lithuania, which prompted the Chinese response with specific false information messages regarding Lithuania's foreign policy.

In 2020, Lithuania faced the turbulent, energy consuming COVID-19 pandemic, providing one more opportunity for spreading disinformation. The Vilnius Institute of Policy Analysis conducted a qualitative survey in four Lithuanian cities in October 2020, using the in-depth individual interview method. Respondents were asked about their views on domestic and international politics, historical memory, and

⁴⁴ Peter Gross (opinion, 2021 March). Veridica.ro joins fight to reveal matryoshka of liars (<https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/30/veridica-ro-joins-fight-to-reveal-matryoshka-of-liars/>); Hibridinio karo ginklai: apie dezinformaciją ir jos strategijas – diskutuoja Nerijus Maliukevičius ir Viktoras Denisenko (<https://www.bernardinai.lt/hibridinio-karo-ginklai-apie-dezinformacija-ir-jos-strategijas/>); Maliukevičius, N., Andriukaitis, L. (2022). Aktyvių priemonių evoliucija: „Ghostwriter“ atvejis. Bielinis, L. (ed.). Politikos ir komunikacijos sankirtoje: tendencijos, diskursai, efektai. VDU leidykla.

⁴⁵ LRT (interview with dr. Ainė Ramonaitė, 2022 November). Why are people in Lithuania affected by Soviet nostalgia? Deterring disinformation? (<https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1819448/why-are-people-in-lithuania-affected-by-soviet-nostalgia/>); Lessons from Lithuania's counter measures since 2014 Vytautas Keršanskas Hybrid CoE Paper 6 (https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/20210427_Hybrid-CoE-Paper-6_Deterring_disinformation_WEB.pdf).

⁴⁶ Dezinformacijos aktyvumas 2021 m. buvo išskirtinai aukštas (<https://www.kariuomene.lt/kas-mes-esame/naujienos/dezinformacijos-aktyvumas-2021-m.-buvo-isskirtinai-aukstas/24698>).



information consumption patterns. The goal of the interview was to discover common disinformation narratives that exploited prominent problematic areas of domestic and international policy, as well as historical memory. The findings identified the most often repeated narratives to be the COVID-19 devastation of the Lithuanian health system, the supposed exploitation of COVID-19 to impose control over the population, Lithuania's lack of an autonomous foreign policy, the absence of anything positive gained from the demise of the Soviet Union, and NATO's use of member state funds that could be better spent on social security⁴⁷.

A report by the DebunkEU.org, a disinformation analysis center, found 197 false statements in 12 videos released by foreign agents between January and April in 2020. The messages conveyed in these videos these messages, according to DebunkEU.org included, "the coronavirus is artificially created in the laboratory; the COVID-19 pandemic is a pre-planned and artificially motivated process by powerful political and economic forces which seek to disrupt the current world order; the coronavirus is not so dangerous, and the COVID-19 pandemic does not really exist – it is just a media conspiracy"⁴⁸.

Vytautas Keršanskas, focusing on Lithuania's experience, materials, and strategies used in the fight against disinformation in the context of Russia's aggression in Ukraine since 2014, discusses the key narratives in the fight against disinformation and emphasizes the Lithuanian information environment⁴⁹. Post-2014, Russian disinformation was recognized as a national security threat in Lithuania, leading to the mobilization of not only the government, but also of civic society and the public sector to counter this problem. After discussing the main objectives of Russian disinformation in Lithuania, as well as the key governmental and non-governmental actions in response to it since 2014, Keršanskas concludes that one of the key challenges in countering disinformation is the measurement of its impact, which is mainly quantitative and related to the audience's responses through shares, likes, or retweets in social media. Keršanskas emphasizes that such analytics do not tell the whole story and that in-depth analyses are needed to identify the overall effect of over-lasting disinformation efforts and how effective counteractions are.

Russia's invasion in Ukraine in February 2022 activated specific propagandistic and disinformation narratives. Lithuanian National Broadcaster's (LRT) Investigation Team, together with DebunkEU.org, examined 194 Facebook groups and pages that are active in Lithuania. The most disseminated disinformation messages include justifications for Russia's aggression and invasion of Ukraine, as well as ignoring and diverting attention from the attacks on different Ukrainian regions. There were also messages that encouraged of prejudice and intolerance towards Ukrainian refugees in Lithuania⁵⁰. These were also

⁴⁷ Lietuvos visuomenės paveikumas dezinformacijai. Naratyvų analizė Vilniaus politikos analizės institutas, Donatas Puslys, Gintaras Šumskas, 2021.

https://vilniusinstitute.lt/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Lietuvos-visuomenes-paveikumas-dezinformacijai_puslys_sumskas_VPAI.pdf

⁴⁸ Debunk EU research: conspiracy theories in Lithuania spread nearly 200 false statements – from scary delusions to dangerous disinformation <https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/110832/documents/HHRG-116-IF17-20200624-SD014.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Keršanskas, V. "Deterring disinformation? Lessons from Lithuania's countermeasures since 2014".

https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/20210427_Hybrid-CoE-Paper-6_Deterring_disinformation_WEB.pdf.

⁵⁰ Lithuania's pro-Kremlin disinformation network exposed – LRT Investigation

<https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1701641/lithuania-s-pro-kremlin-disinformation-network-exposed-lrt-investigation>.

linked to the narrative of particularly adverse consequences of the war and economic sanctions. According to Aistė Meidutė, a journalist and fact-checker at Delfi.lt, Belarus disseminates false and propagandistic messages in their media regarding Lithuanians who are “buying goods in bulk from Belarus and about Lithuania’s desperate need to import goods from Belarus”⁵¹. Although none of these claims were true, they remain in the information space. The latest report by the Strategic Communication Department of the Lithuanian Armed Forces, issued on June 13, 2022, indicates that disinformation targeted at Lithuania’s defense capabilities, NATO, and national and international exercises accounted for 41.61%. The main disinformation narratives revolved around NATO’s Defender Europe 2022 exercise in Europe, which was labelled by Russian disinformation as a new stage in the escalation of tensions with Russia. According to the confrontational narratives, more NATO troops and military equipment are being deployed in Eastern Europe under the guise of military exercises. Thus, emphasizing that Eastern Europe is being militarized at a level not seen since the Cold War, bringing the continent closer to a global nuclear war⁵².

Altogether, these reports identified the main objectives of Russian propaganda and disinformation in Lithuania heavily relied on creating skepticism among the population about EU and NATO membership, neutralizing critical thinking, creating a negative perception of the work of the country’s institutions, as well as creating confusion between citizens and the public authorities. It was also noted that during the pandemic period disinformation was directed against NATO and its troops in Lithuania, the EU, the Ministry of Health, and 5G communication technologies. Various propaganda and disinformation techniques were used by propagandists to achieve and influence these objectives. It is evident that Russian propaganda is a threat to Lithuania’s national security.

The reports cited also commonly discuss a combination of countermeasures based on Lithuanian experience in dealing with Russian disinformation since 2014, including a proposition of enhancing legal regulation of the information space; broadening the understanding of what constitutes a disinformation threat; supporting and fostering private, civil, and non-governmental initiatives related to this issue; and enhancing collaborations – strengthening operational coordination and awareness between authorities, civic society, and private sector.

Baltic region as a target: A brief note on disinformation in Estonia and Latvia

Lithuania’s Baltic neighbors are also engaged in combating disinformation. Estonia and Latvia’s Russian-speaking population constitutes up to a quarter of inhabitants, respectively, in sharp contrast to Lithuania’s 5%. The Russian minorities also remain vulnerable to disinformation, is a common feature in the region. Targeting the critical thinking and enhancing the Euro-Atlantic skepticism remain notable directions of the Russian activities in those countries as well.

⁵¹ Disinformation in Russian language spreading through the EU
<https://edmo.eu/2022/05/24/disinformation-in-russian-language-spreading-through-the-eu/>.

⁵² „Bayraktar“ akcija, Suomijos ir Švedijos stojimas į NATO – agresyvio Rusijos propagandos taikiniai
<https://www.kariuomene.lt/naujienos/bayraktar-akcija-suomijos-ir-svedijos-stojimas-i-nato-agresyvio-rusijos-propagandos-taikiniai/24740>.

The Mission Report of the NATO Committee on Democracy and Security (2021)⁵³ states that the information warfare between Estonia and Russia largely began in 2007 when a World War II monument to Soviet troops was relocated from Tallinn's city center to the military cemetery and was exacerbated during the 2008 Russia-Georgian war, and even more so since 2014 with the beginning of the Russian war against Ukrainian. The Kremlin has been engaged in corrupting the information environment, attempting to shape positive opinions about Russia, and, in general, to cause societal polarization and mistrust vis-a-vis the Baltic national authorities. Since 2014, Estonia has made much progress in its information policy designed to combat Russian disinformation.

Foreign Policy Council's Ukrainian Prism review of the disinformation resilience in Estonia⁵⁴ notes that Estonian society is remarkably resilient, because of vivid historic memories and close interactions between the government and civil society. Financial support for these interactions, interagency cooperation, including those between government, business, and NGOs, and accelerating the role of opinion leaders might be some of the components ensuring the efficiency of resiliency in general.

Estonian authorities have worked to ensure complementary policies of raising public awareness about disinformation to sustain psychological defenses, and consistently communicating with the public in their strategic communication approach. The Estonian Government is reported to cooperate with the NGOs and business and having a list of experts to be involved during the crises; making public information about all concerns relevant to citizens, including the cybersecurity ones initiated by the Russian attacks in 2007-2008⁵⁵.

Also in focus are the notable difference in the political views of the Russian-speaking and Estonian-speaking citizens. For instance, as the study notes, 89% of ethnic Estonians but only 27% of local Russian-speakers approve of NATO's military presence in Estonia. In addition, only 6% of Russian-speakers, compared to 78% of ethnic Estonians, viewed Russia as being responsible for the war with Ukraine. The Russian-speakers are divided into several groups – four clusters in terms of their perception of the information. In figures, that attitude is about assimilation (23%), separation (34%), integration (22%), or ignorance (19%), and one of the Russian goals is to obstruct social cohesion, making use of some of those clusters⁵⁶. Some countermeasures in that field should be mentioned: for instance, in 2015, the Estonian Public Broadcasting launched ETV+, Estonia's first public Russian-language free-to-air television channel, to target its Russian-speaking population, countering Russian television⁵⁷.

⁵³ NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Committee on Democracy and Security. Mission report Estonia - 22 April 2021
https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2021-06/098%20CDS%2021%20E%20-%20REPORT%20VIRTUAL%20VISIT%20TO%20ESTONIA_0.pdf.

⁵⁴ Estonia: Disinformation Resilience Index <http://prismua.org/en/english-estonia-disinformation-resilience-index/>.

⁵⁵ NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Committee on Democracy and Security. Mission report Estonia - 22 April 2021
https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2021-06/098%20CDS%2021%20E%20-%20REPORT%20VIRTUAL%20VISIT%20TO%20ESTONIA_0.pdf.

⁵⁶ Estonia: Disinformation Resilience Index <http://prismua.org/en/english-estonia-disinformation-resilience-index/>.

⁵⁷ NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Committee on Democracy and Security. Mission report Estonia - 22 April 2021
https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2021-06/098%20CDS%2021%20E%20-%20REPORT%20VIRTUAL%20VISIT%20TO%20ESTONIA_0.pdf.

The Estonian Governance Agreement 2021-2023 promises, “We will be leaders in the European Union in the fight against disinformation and the manipulation of the public information space”⁵⁸.

The counter-disinformation landscape in Latvia is less institutionalized. A Ukrainian Prism review about disinformation in Latvia⁵⁹, states that among the challenges which Latvian media sector faces in combating disinformation are language divisions among the population, polarized media market, relatively weak institutions, and outdated legislation. There is a disproportionately large presence of Russian-language media in the country, which has certain funding linkages to Russia. This reality maintains divisions in the political environment between social groups and facilitates the dissemination of Russian disinformation. The regulatory framework is based on outdated normative acts, for instance, television channels available in Latvia but formally established beyond its frontiers are not subject to Latvian regulators; there is no specific information security doctrine, despite an articulated cybersecurity strategy⁶⁰; and no regulation of Internet media. Finally, while there are initiatives for debunking fake news and propaganda – instituted by the Baltic Media Centre of Excellence⁶¹, Information Technology Security Incident Response Institution (CERT)⁶², and some blogs⁶³ and NGOs⁶⁴ – there is no sustainable state-led capacity-building in information security or media literacy. The reasons include the lack of funding and understanding of the importance of the role of such institutions in democratic development.

In general, one more factor demonstrating the importance of the region to Russian digital-driven propaganda and disinformation practices is outlined by NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in 2017. Its report mentions that 84% of Russian messages on Twitter about NATO in the Baltic region and Poland were created by the bots. Among the four countries studied, Estonia was targeted disproportionately more frequently, and Lithuania and Poland less so⁶⁵.

To conclude, Estonia and Latvia are facing the same issues as Lithuania. They differ in their approach, and it might be reasonable to consider *a coherent and coordinated regional approach* to curbing disinformation, studying each other’s experiences and those of other states like Poland and Ukraine. Some steps have been taken to do so. For instance, in March 2022, the ministers of culture of the Baltic States called for the protection of the European information space from the retransmission of Russian and Belarusian television

⁵⁸ Republic of Estonia Government. Governance agreement for 2021–2023 <https://www.valitsus.ee/en/governance-agreement-2021-2023>.

⁵⁹ Latvia: Disinformation resilience Index <http://prismua.org/en/english-latvia-disinformation-resilience-index/>.

⁶⁰ Cybersecurity Strategy of Latvia 2019–2022 https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/Cybersecurity%20Strategy%20of%20Latvia%202019_2022.pdf.

⁶¹ Baltic Centre for Media Excellence <https://bcme.eu/en/home-page>.

⁶² Information Technology Security Incident Response Institution of the Republic of Latvia <https://cert.lv/en/about-us>.

⁶³ Jānis Polis personal blog <https://ardomu.lv/>.

⁶⁴ Re:Baltica <https://en.rebaltica.lv/>.

⁶⁵ NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga Report. Robotrolling 2020/4 <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/robotrolling-20171/203>.



disseminating disinformation⁶⁶. The officials noted that the Russian military operations are substantially supported by the Russian media channels, thus such disinformation poses a great threat to democracy and peace all over Europe.

Russian disinformation campaigns in the Baltic States

There is consensus that Russia's information policy is an instrument of its aggressive foreign policy. The Russian information policy is in such a form when it is difficult to determine where the propaganda ends and the information warfare, or hybrid warfare, begins. Whatever its classification, it is a deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve the desired effect. Russia's aim is to insert and legitimize their world views - largely embodied in the concept of "Russian World" – thus, seeking the accomplishments of its foreign policy goals. While the "Russian World" began as a traditional conservative narrative – family-centered, solving demographic problems, criticizing LGBT – and offers of ideational aid to the West's right-wing movements, it rapidly escalated when the annexation of Crimea was justified as the protection of the Russian-speakers worldwide⁶⁷.

Russia tailors its approach in harmony with its understanding of the varying vulnerabilities and contexts of the populations it targets populations, and the intended end results. The efficiency of its information warfare and approaches might be different in various regions and among various groups⁶⁸. According to US intelligence data, Russia has been involved in the referendum in the Netherlands to sabotage the Free Trade Agreement with Ukraine, attacked certain politicians in the US and Europe, and set up false accounts to instigate the migration crisis, such as a case of a teenage girl "Lisa" raped by Muslims in Berlin⁶⁹.

Describing Russian disinformation in general, Lukas Andriukaitis writes that it is repetitive - sending similar messages in different countries - multi-channeled, irregularly based on facts, opportunistic, and innovative. When narratives are established to be efficient, they continue referring to them regardless of context or countries, because there is no need in having facts to support the narrative. Russian disinformation is not always based on fabricated facts, in fact, factual truth is exploited, sometimes rearranged, twisted or out of context, and in some instances simply hushed up. It is also highly opportunistic, trying to capitalize on every event, and using any historical fact, to its advantage⁷⁰.

Russian disinformation attacks aimed at undermining the three Baltic states' governments and citizens institutions, instigating social and ethnic tensions, and eroding confidence in the Global West and NATO were neither a sudden development nor unexpected. Addressing the military component of facing the threats,

⁶⁶ Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania
<https://lrkm.lrv.lt/en/news/the-ministers-of-culture-of-the-baltic-states-call-for-the-protection-of-the-european-information-space>.

⁶⁷ Kasčiūnas, L., Vaišnys, A., et al. (2017). Rusijos propaganda: analizė, įvertinimas, rekomendacijos. *Vilnius: Rytų Europos studijų centras*.

⁶⁸ Tashev, B., Purcell, M., & McLaughlin, B. (2019). *Russias Information Warfare: Exploring the Cognitive Dimension*. Marine Corps Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning Quantico United States.

⁶⁹ Bennett, W. L., & Livingston, S. (2018). The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. *European journal of communication*, 33(2), 122-139.

⁷⁰ Andriukaitis L. (2020) Russian propaganda narratives in the Baltics and the wider region
https://vilniusinstitute.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/VIPA_Andriukaitis_2020_lv4-1%D0%B5.pdf.

Flanagan et al.⁷¹ note that all three countries are expanding their special operations forces. In addition, Estonia has a highly trained territorial defense resilience and resistance plans; Latvians, though beforehand focused on the professional army, recently began building a whole-of-society resilience efforts; and the Lithuanian government took steps to train the national guard and volunteers, as well as to invest much in the education of the citizens.

While a Donbas or the Crimea scenario in the Baltic states is unlikely, largely due to the Russophone minorities being far from a cohesive “fifth column”, and thanks to NATO membership, a Russia-orchestrated incident, or a perceived provocation against the Russian-speaking population, as a pretext for the military intervention or territorial seizure under ambiguous circumstances cannot be discounted. However, it is still worth noting that even if Russia does not ultimately decide to resort to open warfare - especially unlikely now in 2022, as a large part of Russia’s conventional military machine was destroyed by Ukraine - it will not stop trying to influence neighboring states by using propaganda and disinformation and other forms of indirect aggression. The Russian-speaking minority in Estonia and Latvia are particularly available targets as many Russian-speaking people, as they “rely on Russian origin media for information and entertainment”, according to Flanagan et.al.

Groups as ripe targets

Russia does not solely spread its propaganda and disinformation in the Russian language. For instance, Russian Sputnik-News, an agency that takes both explicit and implicit actions to spread disinformation, emerged in the Baltic languages in 2016, and there are networks with Internet trolls operating in the Baltic languages⁷².

Kasčiūnas, Vaišnys et al. argue that the aim of Russian information warfare in the Baltic region is to maintain the image that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are each a “temporary entity”, labelled as “fake West” or “fake Europe”, which should be a neutral space, despite their membership in Euro-Atlantic organizations. Rarely are major narratives targeting the whole society since certain narratives should resonate with the groups’ perception⁷³. In general, the long-term concern in the region is the Russian discourse of the protection of “compatriots abroad” (sootchestvenniki), which became one of the explanations for the Russian war against Ukraine⁷⁴.

In 2018, the results of the analysis of the Russian-speaking social media users (in Facebook, Vkontakte, and Odnoklassniki) in the Baltic region for the period of 2013-2017 focused on the demographic, public posts, and behavior patterns of the Russian-speaking users. It concentrated on 11 macro topics, namely the USSR, World War II, Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church, the West, Anti-Baltic, the Allies, Ukraine, non-citizens,

⁷¹ Flanagan, S. J., Osburg, J., & Kepe, M. (2019). *Deterring Russian aggression in the Baltic States through resilience and resistance*. RAND Corporation.

⁷² Baltics battle Russia in online disinformation war
<https://learn.german.dw.com/en/baltics-battle-russia-in-online-disinformation-war/a-40828834>.

⁷³ Kasčiūnas, L., Vaišnys, A., et al. (2017). Rusijos propaganda: analizė, įvertinimas, rekomendacijos. *Vilnius: Rytų Europos studijų centras*.

⁷⁴ Kols, R. (2022) Hybrid Threats: The Baltic Perspective
https://www.csce.gov/sites/helsinkicommission.house.gov/files/RKols_Hybrid%20threats%20Baltic%20Perspective-2022.pdf.

Defense Forces, and hostile influences. The study revealed that there is a relatively small but significant proportion of active ideological users in every network in each of three states who create, support, and disseminate pro-Russian rhetoric. It also noted that offline events are used as pretexts to promote certain topics, “making use of dramatic language”, and giving special attention to issues related to the Second World War, the USSR, present-day Russia, and anti-Western sentiments⁷⁵.

The data on the relative popularity of the macro topics show few major differences among the Baltic states. For instance, the topic of non-citizens is (quite obviously) less relevant for Lithuania, but the topics “USSR” and “Ukraine” are discussed more often than in Latvia and Estonia. In Latvia, active Facebook users pay increased attention to ideological issues; in Lithuania, the level of attention to ideological issues has increased with new topics of historical memory; in Estonia, ideological activity is recurring and is largely associated with periodically resonant macro topics, such as its non-citizens, World War II, Defense Forces, and NATO. The popularity of the “pro-Russian” macro topics on Facebook is the strongest in Latvia, followed by Lithuania, while in Estonia they are presented the least.

The information environment in the Baltic region is, thus, not entirely homogeneous as demonstrated by the above-mentioned differences in proportions of the Russian-speaking minorities and differences in political backgrounds, i.e., non-citizenship institution in two countries. Additionally, there is a difference in the age groups targeted by Russian propaganda and disinformation, with more senior citizens being subject to disinformation influence; they usually are feeling more nostalgia for the Soviet past and having a more modest level of critical assessment of the information on the Internet).

In his recent study on the effectiveness of Russian disinformation in the Baltic region, Morkūnas writes that it has two aims: first, to discredit the state as much as possible, increasing dissatisfaction with domestic governments and democracy, and second, to portray Russia positively⁷⁶. He notes that disinformation affects not only the social landscape, but also economic development. It echoes in the decrease of incentives for domestic investment activities, vaccination rates consequently higher health care spendings, causes mistrust in the justice system and reluctance to seek assistance from public institutions⁷⁷. Therefore, disinformation activities may cause long-term and deep problems that are not limited to influence in the political sphere.

Estonia was one of the first targets of disinformation, when, during the above-mentioned transfer of the monument for Soviet troops, Russian propaganda engaged in the weaponization of Soviet-era narratives and exploitation of its World War II discourse⁷⁸.

The main aims of disinformation in Lithuania, as summarized by Kasčiūnas et al., are to capitalize on social

⁷⁵ Teperik, D., Senkiv, G., et al. (2020) Virtual Russian World in the Baltics
<https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/ncdsa-natostratcomcoe-study-3b-rus-socmedia-web-final-1.pdf>

⁷⁶ Morkūnas, M. (2022). Russian Disinformation in the Baltics: Does it Really Work? *Public Integrity*, 1-15.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Veebel, V. (2015). Russian Propaganda, Disinformation, and Estonia's Experience. *Foreign Policy Research Institute*,
<https://www.fpri.org/article/2015/10/russian-propaganda-disinformation-and-estonias-experience>.

and economic issues, exploiting historical memory - mostly, the above-mentioned World War II discourse - sowing mistrust in the Global West, instigating ethnical issues, and fueling the differences between the relatively conservative Lithuanian society and the liberal EU⁷⁹.

Unpacking disinformation narratives: manipulations of history

Deeply rooted in Russian mentality, the Kremlin's World War II narrative is widely exploited in Lithuania as well. The Lithuanian Freedom Fighters, "the Forest Brothers" who are an important part of history, are one of the topics used. Russian propaganda and disinformation is distorting historical facts to portray them as Nazi collaborators or terrorists, with the added false accusation that they participated in the Holocaust⁸⁰.

For Russians, the monuments to their WWII soldiers, or generally their "Victory Day" discourse, are a focal point of their national identity, providing support for their memory of the heroic role of the Russian/Soviet people. Russian propaganda and disinformation narrow the legacy of World War II through the lens of the official Soviet/Russian discourse, which disregards the problematic and complex outcomes for the Baltic States, ignoring that what represented glory for Russia, sometimes was humiliation for the Baltics, and leading to contradicting narratives. The attempts to monopolize the victory in the war, to focus on the huge costs which the Soviets paid, and to maintain the Russian political elites' narrative of the Baltics "voluntarily joining the USSR" are aimed at demanding full political rights for Russians living in the region and, in general, driving a wedge ethnic Russians and the majority populations in the Baltics⁸¹.

However, speakers of national vernaculars are also be targeted by Russia's historical discourse, and, in this regard, the Holocaust is an important topic. For instance, the perspective of the "double genocide", which was popular in 1990s, argued that Lithuanian Jews participated in the repression of Lithuanians, and Lithuanians collaborated with Germans and participated in the Holocaust as an act of revenge. In fact, the repressions were organized by the Soviets⁸². For the Jewish community, the issue of the Nazi collaborationism, which still took place in certain forms, is likely to remain important.

In 2022, the LRT Investigation Team and DebunkEU.org released a study about the disinformation network disseminating pro-Russian narratives in Lithuania about the war in Ukraine⁸³. The network appears to be coordinated by just a few people but involves hundreds of Facebook groups and pages linked to opinion

⁷⁹ Kasčiūnas, L., Vaišnyš, A., et al. (2017). Rusijos propaganda: analizė, įvertinimas, rekomendacijos. *Vilnius: Rytų Europos studijų centras*.

⁸⁰ Andriukaitis L. (2020) Russian propaganda narratives in the Baltics and the wider region https://vilniusinstitute.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/VIPA_Andriukaitis_2020_lv4-1%D0%B5.pdf.

⁸¹ Kuczyńska-Zonik, A. (2016). Russian propaganda: methods of influence in the Baltic States. *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, 14(2), 43-59.

⁸² Budryte, D. (2013). Travelling trauma: Lithuanian transnational memory after World War II. *In Memory and Trauma in International Relations* (pp. 184-197). Routledge.

⁸³ Lithuania's pro-Kremlin disinformation network exposed – LRT Investigation (2022) https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1701641/lithuania-s-pro-kremlin-disinformation-network-exposed-lrt-investigation?fbclid=IwAR3qP2U4sUc_c2M2f9o2xB4uegwiRXaqroP9ZAouSe2uzd3xVancRhwOkuA.

leaders. One hundred and ninety-four FB groups were analyzed, 105 of which fall into 4 blocks differing in the intensity of their pro-Russian rhetoric.

- Block 1 (41): praising pro-Soviet and pro-Russian ideas, denigrating Lithuania, EU, and NATO.
- Block 2 (28): same as block 1, plus ads, sales, or book groups.
- Block 3 (19): opposing LGBTQ rights and COVID restrictions, spreading conspiracies that blame the US for the war, criticizing Ukraine.
- Block 4 (11): pursuing lowering requirements for calling a referendum; linked to the Lithuanian People's Party.

Narratives identified by the study revolve around pro-Russian propaganda; disinformation about the war in Ukraine, such as “the US Armed Forces are killing civilians”; the “family values” discourse; distracting attention from Russian war crimes - for instance, what was done in Mariupol - anti-refugee manipulations; speculations of “apolitical discourse”, such as “the war is only about money”, etc.

Damaging effects of manifold crises – from COVID-19 to energy security

It bears remembering that Moscow also exploited the emergence and spread of COVID-19 and used “COVID diplomacy” to reassure domestic audiences, to win favor with selected foreign audiences⁸⁴, and to undermine the legitimacy of Western democracies, especially in the countries of the former Warsaw Pact and the USSR.

COVID-19's altogether real effects were and presented as conspiracy theories, thus, the lockdowns purposefully caused negative economic effects, and funneled into the diminution of “civil rights” narrative, problems with access to health care, and, in general, fueling the antivaccination debate, which also undermines public health⁸⁵. The ethnic minorities vulnerable to Russian propaganda and disinformation once again became target audiences, with the expectation that mistrust of the authorities and Western vaccines would be fueled among them⁸⁶.

To answer the question “What makes disinformation texts so convincing that they trap some readers?”, DIGIRES research on the topic of COVID-19 focused on the analysis of legitimation strategies⁸⁷. Discourse analysis was applied to analyse the rhetoric used in disinformation texts as compared to that of mainstream media texts. As prior research has shown, the conventions of news reporting are adhered to in both factual news articles and fake news articles, and the distinction between the two lies

⁸⁴ Foster, N. (2021). Propaganda gone viral: A theory of Chinese and Russian “COVID Diplomacy” in the age of social media. In *The Russian Federation in Global Knowledge Warfare* (pp. 123-145). Springer, Cham.

⁸⁵ Moy, W. R., & Gradon, K. (2020). COVID-19 Effects and Russian Disinformation Campaigns.

⁸⁶ Roževič A. (2021) COVID-19 social media narratives in Lithuania
https://www.eesc.lt/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/v03_Covid-19_social-media-narratives-in_LT_A4.pdf.

⁸⁷ Legitimation is a strategy that aims to provide answers to the question why their texts and information are framed in a certain way and why a specific version of some practice is provided.



in some subtleties of the way some conventional features are used⁸⁸. Disinformation texts are, thus, texts in disguise based on simulation/imitation of “serious” genres and blended with more popular genres⁸⁹.

All in all, DIGIRES analyses reveals that, at the surface level, the rhetoric of COVID-19-related disinformation texts clearly mimic the informative style of bona fide journalistic genres and tends to take a pseudo-scientific stance. Concurrently, disinformation employs features of an argumentative style⁹⁰ that is more characteristic of debates and not news articles. However, important differences emerged at the level of macro-analysis in terms of the types of agents (different scholars, participating in successful and unsuccessful initiatives, doctors, politicians, etc.), referred to in the texts, larger narrative structures, and the way the overall goal is framed. The agents in mainstream media are very diverse, whereas in disinformation texts the agents represent the dichotomy of “us” and “them”: “us”/the good (those resisting the government, the rich, scientists, mainstream journalists) vs. “them” (sinister agents/the evil). Regarding the larger narrative structures in disinformation, the narratives are centred around “the Enemy,” stemming from the bipolar opposition between “us” and “them” and, thus, recycle and disseminate strongly polarising discourses. Disinformation texts formulate their goals as missions to fight “the enemy”, while mainstream media focus on the goal of fighting the virus. Hence, disinformation discourses are *enemy-oriented*, as opposed to the mainstream media’s *solution-oriented* discourses. Importantly, polarisation and the focus on an enemy are a predominant feature of hostile discourses in general, e.g., hate speech⁹¹, aggressive language, discriminatory communication, and negative stereotyping.

Another narrative recently surfaced in the region, revolving around energy security. 2022 promo videos of the Russian Gazprom and in the official communication of its head, Alexei Miller, suggest that if relations with Russia do not improve, Europe will “freeze” this winter. These kinds of statements are a form of gas blackmail and are not a new topic⁹². And while the alternative sources of gas would potentially allow the

⁸⁸ Mahyoob, M., Algaraady, J., & Alrahaili, M. (2021, March 6). Linguistic-Based Detection of Fake News in Social Media. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v11n1p99>.

⁸⁹ Horbyk, R., Löfgren, I., Prymachenko, Y., Soriano, C. (2021). Fake news as meta-mimesis: imitative genres and storytelling in the Philippines, Brazil, Russia and Ukraine. *Popular Inquiry*, 1: 30-54. https://aalto.doc.aalto.fi/bitstream/handle/123456789/111278/J_horbyk_roman_2021.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

⁹⁰ To summarise, argumentative style in disinformation clearly imitates informative style of factual genres through such strategies as: (1) legitimisation by reference to different types of authority, (2) reference to value systems, and (3) (theoretical) rationalisation imitating scientific conventions realised as definitions, explanations, and predictions of activities. Thus, at the surface level, no major differences emerged.

⁹¹ Ruzaitė, Jūratė (forthcoming). Impoliteness categories in hateful comments targeting migrants in Lithuania. In Victoria Guilén-Nieto, Antonio Doval, Dieter Stein (eds.), *From fear to hate: Legal-linguistic perspectives on migration*. Berlin/Boston: deGruyter; Ruzaitė, Jūratė. (2021) How do haters hate? Verbal aggression in Lithuanian online comments. In I. Chiluwā (ed.), *Discourse and Conflict: Analysing Text and Talk of Conflict, Hate and Peace-Building*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76485-2_5; Ruzaitė, J. 2018. In search of hatespeech. *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics* 14(1): 93–116 Special issue on Narrating hostility, challenging hostile narratives. Mouton de Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/lpp-2018-0005>.

⁹² Baltic states no strangers to gas blackmail from Russia or Belarus – opinion <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1546568/baltic-states-no-strangers-to-gas-blackmail-from-russia-or-belarus-opinion>.

region to solve its energy problem⁹³, the growth of heating and utilities prices, in general, will of course be an addition to Russian propaganda arguments.

Hopefully this will not have a significant affect in the Baltic countries, which demonstrate significant levels of support for Ukraine and the Free World's proxy war with Russia. However, it should not be forgotten that the emotional support of a partner country may sooner or later fade, especially if socio-economic problems worsen. Russia knows this and will certainly want to use it to their advantage. Therefore, we should expect an increase in the use of propaganda narratives on issues related to the economic negatives of the war in Ukraine.

Russia's full-fledged war against Ukraine created some shifts in public opinion among the citizens of the Baltic states regarding the aggressor, not to mention political decisions like the visa ban or closing the borders for Russians.

A shift of values in Estonia's Russian-speaking minority and those among them who support Ukraine, demonstrating a preference for democracy and freedom, is clearly discernable⁹⁴. The Latvians' dim view of Russia increased from 37% in 2021 to 66% after the Ukraine invasion in February 2022; only 20% retained positive attitudes regarding the aggressor⁹⁵. The antipathy toward Russia's actions was also reflected in the 2022 parliamentary elections, with pro-Russian parties garnering fewer. Political expert Marcis Krastins concludes, "in such times people tend to rally around the flag"⁹⁶. According to an SKDS research centre survey, only 40% of the Russian-speaking minority condemn the Kremlin's invasion⁹⁷, accentuating the role the ethnic and language factor plays in the values and perceptions applied to Russia's actions. The Russian-speaking residents who were more likely to condemn the invasion were aged 18 to 34, had higher education, were citizens of Latvia, and had medium to high incomes, according to the SKDS survey. These data suggest that Russian disinformation, as anticipated, tends to expect a more positive echo among the older generation and people who are in the worst socio-economic situation.

In Lithuania, support for economic sanctions against Russia, the humanitarian aid to Ukraine, and the arms delivery is high - 79%, 93%, and 83%, respectively⁹⁸.

⁹³ Russia's energy blackmail no longer a headache for Lithuania?

<https://www.lytas.lt/english/business-tribune/2022/09/06/news/russia-s-energy-blackmail-no-longer-a-headache-for-lithuania-24477809>.

⁹⁴ Amid war in Ukraine, are Estonia's Russian speakers ready to embrace the West?

<https://www.dw.com/en/amid-war-in-ukraine-are-estonias-russian-speakers-ready-to-embrace-the-west/a-61078050>.

⁹⁵ Survey: Latvian public sees Russia in more negative light than in 2021

<https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/survey-latvian-public-sees-russia-in-more-negative-light-than-in-2021.a474416/>.

⁹⁶ Latvia election: Karins wins reelection amid Russia-Ukraine war

<https://www.dw.com/en/latvia-election-karins-wins-reelection-amid-russia-ukraine-war/a-63305784>.

⁹⁷ Less than half of Russians in Latvia condemn Russia's war in Ukraine: survey

<https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/less-than-half-of-russians-in-latvia-condemn-russias-war-in-ukraine-survey.a464423/>.

⁹⁸ Fewer Lithuanians satisfied with response to Russia's war in Ukraine – survey

<https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1777622/fewer-lithuanians-satisfied-with-response-to-russia-s-war-in-ukraine-survey>.

5.

The processual and socio-cultural turn in disinformation analysis: Resilience as a co-production process

5. The processual and socio-cultural turn in disinformation analysis: Resilience as a co-production process

In the communication and political science literature, resilience to digital information threats and disruptions is often explicated as the ability of society – its institutions, organizations, and publics – to resist and counter digital information attacks and manipulations⁹⁹. Specifically, social, and over-all resilience relies on faculties that help society to *withstand* external threats¹⁰⁰.

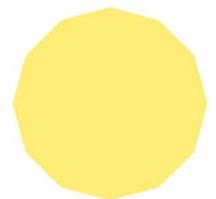
This expectation is not without problems.

Clearly, in the face of informational threats, this type of thinking about “resilience” preserves a *nostalgic aspiration* of “returning to” and “bringing back” the state of the previously attained system of social organization. When society faces a myriad of disruptions, such a perspective, predominantly expresses an implicit longing for getting back to the state where a desirable goal is socially perceived and held as routine and known, i.e., something that is popularly understood as encompassing the imaginary idea of “the normal”.

DIGIRES advocates altering some of the current concepts underlining policy and research linked to creating resilience during times of manifold *inforuptions* – such as political populism and manipulations; interventions in political processes; the spread of disinformation and fake news; instigations to conflicts; climate change denialism; the rise of ethno-nationalism; the dominance of hate speech, conspiracies, attacks, leaks, and scandals.

We know that the bulk of content with and instigations of these themes reaches the public through digital forms. Thus, it is tempting to associate the profound distrust associated with these themes with the digital platforms and intermediaries that deliver them.

Indeed, digital platforms driven by algorithms underpin contemporary societal structures and shape the performances of users and are extremely important¹⁰¹. Platforms have created numerous benefits for people and companies, but they also created serious problems, the acceleration and amplifications of disinformation being just one of them.



⁹⁹ Humprecht, E. et al. (2021). The sharing of disinformation in cross-national comparison: analyzing patterns of resilience. *Information, Communication & Society*, Doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2021.2006744

¹⁰⁰ Hall, P. & Lamont, M. (2013). *Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Obrist, B. et al. (2010). Multi-layered social resilience: a new approach in mitigation research. *Progress in Development Studies*, 10, 4, pp. 283–93. Doi: 10.1177/146499340901000402.

¹⁰¹ van Dijck, J. (2021). Governing trust in European platform societies: Introduction to the special issue. *European Journal of Communication*, 36(4), 323–333. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231211028378>.

European institutions and researchers are looking for answers that would allow not only to restrict, ban the circulation of “bad”¹⁰² digital content, but also to buttress people’s rights to receive quality content¹⁰³.

DIGIRES embraces the idea that all concepts pertaining to complex processes of digital information circulation and manipulations, such as disinformation, susceptibility, and resilience to it should be, viewed and treated as symptoms of some deeper societal processes and transformations, in cases of disinformation and manipulations, social conflicts and chasms.

DIGIRES advocates developing resilience capacities and competencies as a required goal to be attained through political decision making, namely public policy strategies and programs (referring to *structural resilience*), functioning media system (an *in-built resilience*), but also with initiatives and responses from citizens (aiming at *active civic resilience*).

To that end, DIGIRES not only explores and assesses an influx of disinformation as a technologically managed phenomenon and a so-called *representational phenomenon*, but as phenomena that demand to be “cautiously observed” and “registered”, i.e., named, described, and measured in quantitative terms. For example, how much and what kind of disinformation is there, how it spreads and through which channels.

DIGIRES maintains that disinformation must also be explored through social lenses as a *process* that requires rigorous contextually cultural analysis of the environment and stakeholders, their actions and knowledge attained, and development of adequate policy responses. DIGIRES pursues such an ambitious goal with several approaches that are combined into two groups: scientific projects and practical media education trainings focused on fact-checking and lateral reading strategies for information verification.

The scientific perspective is used to reveal the state of transformation of the news media in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia¹⁰⁴, and the change in public opinion¹⁰⁵ in relation to the influx of information disruptions. This kind of analysis allows for a critical evaluation of public thinking and gaps in awareness among various groups of people about actual and potential information disruptions. To effectively reach these groups and motivate them to become responsible users of information, DIGIRES not only addresses “media literacy”, a complex and multidimensional concept¹⁰⁶. In designing instructional materials and teaching interventions, DIGIRES’

¹⁰² Siaperas, E. (2022). Platform governance and the “infodemic”. *Javnost/The Public*. Vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 197-214.

¹⁰³ Cammaerts, B., and Mansell, R. (2021). Digital Platform policy and regulation: Toward a radical democratic turn. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/11182>.

¹⁰⁴ Balčytienė, A, Juraitė, K. (2022). Baltic Democracies: Re-configuring Media Environments and Civic Agency, *Journal of Baltic Studies*. Doi: [10.1080/01629778.2022.2117833](https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2022.2117833).

¹⁰⁵ Analysis prepared for *UNESCO MILID Book 2022: Informed citizenship in the times of manyfold inforuptions: The Baltic-Nordic evidence for media and information literacy, civic resilience, and public good*.

¹⁰⁶ Tessa Jolls (report, 2022 September). Building resiliency: Media literacy as a strategic defense strategy for Transatlantic (<https://www.medialit.org/sites/default/files/announcements/JollsBuilding%20Resiliency-Media%20Literacy%20as%20a%20Strategic%20Defense%20Strategy%20for%20the%20Transatlantic%20%2810-10-2022%29%20copy.pdf>).

strategies also focus on the functioning logic of digitally mediated interfaces, how information is presented, and on infrastructures, i.e., data and algorithms¹⁰⁷.

As previously stated, the *representational* side - the scope and narratives of disinformation in Lithuania and neighboring countries - is broadly discussed and publicized in media. That is, we are sufficiently well informed about the most popular types and sources of disinformation. However, it is still not well known how and why users respond, whether by with engagement or ignorance to fake narratives, and how they *stay unaffected* by them.

DIGIRES aims to reverse the currently dominant thinking in Lithuania which mostly accentuates how much and what kind of fake narratives circulate around towards an approach, which looks at social resilience development as a *symbiotic process of development* involving structural, representational, and individual (i.e., macro-mezzo-micro) capacities.

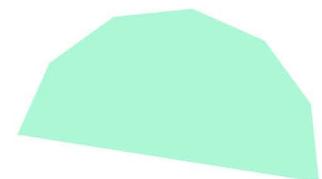
DIGIRES is convinced that a multisectoral and interdisciplinary approach to this complex problem is vital.

Trust, resilience, and empowerment

DIGIRES proposes that the integrated system of resilience be viewed not only as a set of protective mechanisms, such as regulatory safeguards and policies, and predefined qualities and competencies that people might possess. Instead, the evolvement of social and digital resilience must be recognized to be an *ongoing and contextually* informed process.

For that reason, the idea of resilience development must be explored as a *co-production process* with new forms of collaborations and *trust governance*¹⁰⁸ actions among potential stakeholders, namely state institutions, organizations such as media, schools, NGOs, and citizens.

Furthermore, within the democratic sustainability and democracy co-production discourses, resilience requires that it be studied through *agency* notions, namely the notion of *civic resilience*. As an active, ongoing, and *performative* process, civic resilience (see Figure 9) is perceived as the capacities and competencies of stakeholders and community engagement and empowerment groups, which arises based on organizational structures and individual resourcefulness.



¹⁰⁷ DIGIRES trainings team has prepared a ToolKit material for source verification by applying “lateral reading” strategies. It is suggested that “lateral reading” empowers media users with skills to adequately analyze content and encounter digital algorithmic architectures and platform business models, to experience aesthetic features and assess human resources required to create and sustain such type of information circulation.

¹⁰⁸ van Dijck, J. (2021). Governing trust in European platform societies: Introduction to the special issue. *European Journal of Communication*, 36(4), 323–333. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231211028378>.

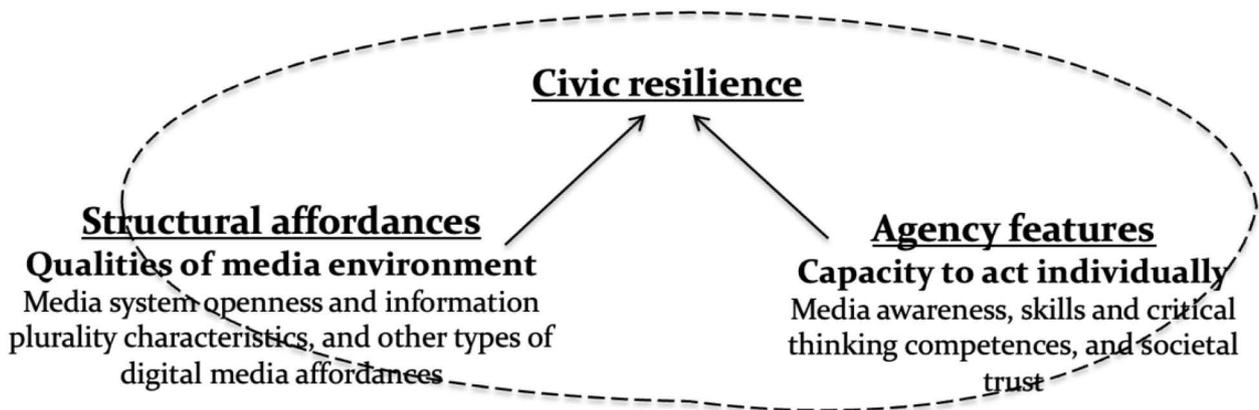


Figure 9. Civic resilience as a performative process.

For that reason, DIGIRES – both as a research/analysis project¹⁰⁹ and an existent association (Baltic Research Foundation for Digital Resilience¹¹⁰) – aims at co-governed and co-produced resilience processes:

1

DIGIRES views resilience development as capacities building process, which is maintained through co-governed expertise exchanges, co-production of knowledge, and “shareability” which evolves via different acts of building trust.

2

With DIGIRES, resilience-building approaches are founded on the principle of common needs, i.e., the idea of commoning and the creation of common good between different participating actors/shareholders with required expertise¹¹¹.

Resilience and sustainability are two concepts that appear interchangeably in modern discourses linked with social change. Broadly speaking, resilience thinking rests on capacities to use shocks to initiate renewal; whereas sustainable development refers to capacities to carry on and continue to exist.

The diagram (see Figure 10) below expands this interchangeable co-existence between the two ideas into a visualized conceptual presentation: as illustrated, both modes of existence complement and qualitatively “extend” each other’s characteristics.

¹⁰⁹ DIGIRES (Supporting Collaborative Partnerships for Digital Resilience and Capacity Building in the Times of Disinfectemic/COVID-19) is 15 month duration (2021-2022) an EU Funded pilot project, Contract No. LC-01682259, <http://digires.lt>.

¹¹⁰ Baltic Research Foundation for Digital Resilience was established in 2022 by the three founding partners – Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, UAB Delfi (news media organization), and the National Institute for Social Integration (which is an NGO).

¹¹¹ In its current form, DIGIRES needs related research and innovations are carried by scholars at Vytautas Magnus University (Intelligent Systems Lab, Department of Public Communications, UNESCO Chair on MIL for Inclusive Knowledge Societies), fact-checking at Delfi.lt and regional media (regional daily *Tauragės kurjeris*), and media literacy actions to engage different groups are managed by Media4Change NGO.

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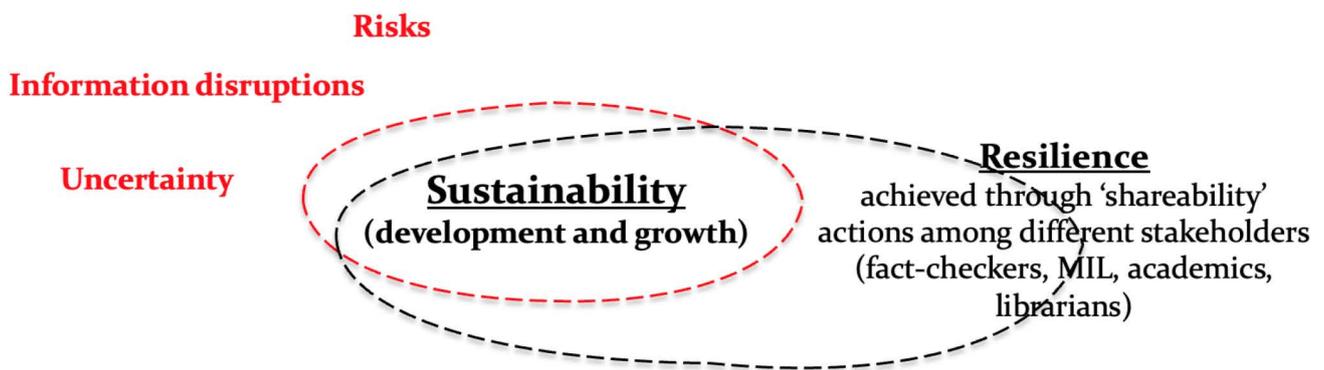


Figure 10. Resilience expands sustainability (a conceptual illustration).

To build up such a scheme and working model of co-governance and knowledge co-production and exchanges, DIGIRES takes into the account socio-cultural specificities of the context and addresses the attributes of resilience on the level of the state (macro), organizations (mezzo level: media, education, creative industries), and individuals (micro).

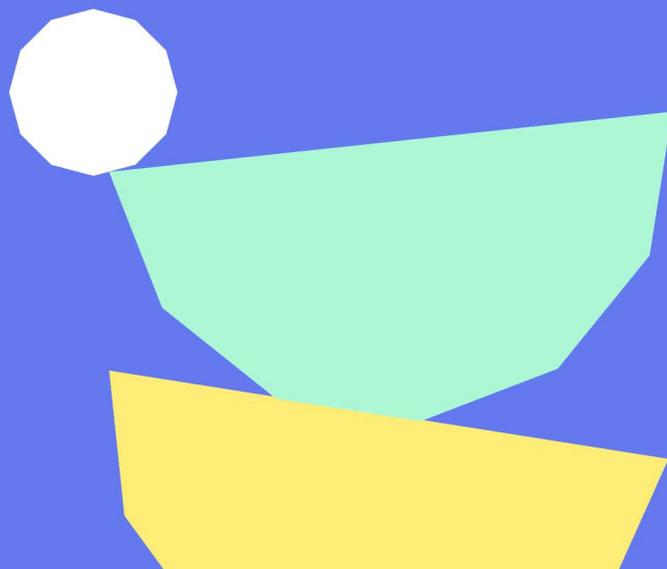
To attain its ambitious goal, DIGIRES tests some pilot ideas:

- 1 In its research, it applies an integrated approach and explores structural arrangements of digital resilience in Lithuania. Among these is processual stakeholder analysis and a focus on representational (media) dimension, also with insights¹¹² into the human/psychological underpinnings of resilience as defined by different professionals.
- 2 Concurrently, DIGIRES sees its activities as very practically oriented and include: (a) authentically designed resilience-focused trainings, which are based on required digital media literacy competencies, and give instructions on source verification strategies; (b) public talking and listening; (c) policy proposals.

¹¹² Interviews with different stakeholder representatives show how the idea of resilience is articulated by different actors; these responses also reveal gaps in the resilience system.



Actions to counter disinformation



6. Actions to counter disinformation

Along with acceleration of information and communications, actions to counter disinformation with media initiated and supported projects - such as fact-checking, debunking, pre-bunking, registering fake claims and narratives - and scientific assessments of society's democratic resilience to harmful information, were initiated by DIGIRES.

Media literacy and media awareness are considered to be highly promising actions¹¹³ in building necessary group and community capacities against the circulating diversity of fake claims and narratives that are strategically designed to manipulate and deceive. Still, no matter how widespread and intense these actions are, many of those call to be regarded as *re-actions* to some negative results.

Fact-checking

Various strategies that media organizations are employing, such as fact-checking, debunking, pre-bunking, and exposing fake narratives, are working conjointly with developing novel journalistic formats to encourage public engagement and mobilization in relation to disinformation. Are these media acts sufficient to confront (dis)misinformation? How can society adhere to the ideals of informed and resilient citizenship in times of accelerating communications, information abundance, information disruptions, and truth decay?

Both in Lithuania and other democratic countries, fact-checking is a common practice among journalists to provide the public with verified information and, in general, to serve the democratic purposes assigned the media. In Lithuania, fact-checking is a journalist's duty, defined by the Law on the Provision of Information to the Public. However, in the context of disinformation, fact-checking is employed not only when journalists produce their own journalism, but also as a measure to counter disinformation already circulating in our information ecosystem. Many journalists feel the responsibility to debunk fake narratives to achieve certain political goals and to cleanse the current communication environment from falsehoods.

Because fact-checking and debunking disinformation - a kind of investigative journalism - require significant financial and human resources, smaller news media channels are not able to engage as much in such activities.

The first fact-checking project in Lithuania, also the first in the other Baltic countries, was launched in 2016 by 15min.lt, a commercial news portal. Titled "Patikrinta 15min" (Verified by 15min), the project aims to gather and analyze the politicians and other prominent public figures' discourses that raise doubts about the veracity of provided facts and numbers. Such discourses do not include opinions, predictions, or abstract statements. The fact-checking process at "Patikrinta 15min" includes questioning the person whose statements are investigated to provide evidence to support his/her claims, as well as obtaining information from primary

¹¹³ Tessa Jolls (report, 2022 September). Building resiliency: Media literacy as a strategic defense strategy for Transatlantic (<https://www.medialit.org/sites/default/files/announcements/JollsBuilding%20Resiliency-Media%20Literacy%20as%20a%20Strategic%20Defense%20Strategy%20for%20the%20Transatlantic%20%2810-10-2022%29%20copy.pdf>).

documents, other publicly available sources, and experts. Based on all available information, statements are assigned evaluations varying from the absolute truth to the absolute lie. One of the latest falsehoods detected by journalists at “Patikrinta 15min” includes Russian propagandists’ claims that a real photograph of Poles kneeling and praying for Ukraine is a photograph of Serbs praying for Russians¹¹⁴.

In 2018, Delfi.lt, one of the three founding partners in DIGIRES, launched a fact-checking project titled “Melo detektorius” (Lie Detector). It provides the reader with fact-based information by carefully analyzing public statements of Lithuanian politicians and experts. Every investigation starts with a careful selection of facts. Journalists use different tools to do so: they search for facts online, attend government meetings, follow experts’ public comments, participate in press conferences, and use Facebook’s special fact-finding tool. After choosing a particular fact from any statement, the journalist begins to search for information on the Internet, databases, academic works, and research to confirm or debunk the chosen fact. Having gathered all the necessary evidence about the fact under investigation, the journalist is ready to publish his/her findings and the final assessment about the fact: whether it includes disinformation, lacks context, or manipulates old footage. When sharing their discoveries with the public, journalists at “Melo detektorius” provide as much textual and visual evidence as possible, including a list of references at the bottom of each of their reports. One of the most recent disinformation narratives exposed at “Melo detektorius” revolves around Ukraine being governed by fascists, who use violence to suppress civilians with different political beliefs, particularly in the Donbas region.

In addition to the fact-checking project “Melo detektorius”, Delfi.lt has also published a series of investigative articles titled “Sekant pinigais” (Following Money), revealing who and how finances disinformation in Lithuania. It analyzes which Russian companies control the Russian media channels available in Lithuania and explains how such channels, especially Kremlin-controlled television, spread disinformation and incite hatred. Moreover, Lithuanian public figures who are known nationwide for disseminating harmful information to the audience are singled out. The series presents the Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis’ examination of disinformation narratives prevalent in Lithuanian society. Such investigative work performed by journalists at Delfi.lt is closely related to the fact-checking initiatives, because they all aim to counter disinformation and to enlighten the public about the current information crisis.

The third fact-checking initiative, carried out by the public Lithuanian Radio and Television), is “LRT Faktai” (LRT Facts), launched in 2019. The aim of this project is to impartially and comprehensibly disclose misleading or false information published in the public sphere. The fact-checkers at “LRT Faktai” analyze false news such as propaganda, clickbait, paid articles, disinformation, manipulation, and fake news. The fact-checking process is very similar to the “Patikrinta 15min” and “Melo detektorius” one. “LRT Faktai” presents the source of the lie and its origin, shares the facts gathered by journalists, and at the end of the report provides the assessment of the analyzed statement. The links to all the sources the journalists relied on are also provided so that the process of fact-checking is transparent and credible. One of the latest false news investigated by “LRT Faktai” involves images of Russia supposedly sending military equipment to the Finnish border as a response to Finland’s expressed desire to join NATO.

¹¹⁴ <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/ciniska-apgaule-malda-uz-ukrainiecius-paverte-malda-uz-rusu-karius-55-1666592>.

The first two Lithuanian fact-checking projects, “Patikrinta 15min” and “Melo detektorius”, are both verified signatories of the Poynter International Fact-Checking Network’s (IFCN) code of principles. This indicates the projects’ commitment to non-partisanship, fairness, transparency of sources, funding, organization, and methodology, and an open and honest corrections policy. As mentioned beforehand, both “Patikrinta 15min” and Delfi.lt, as well as LRT, operate on a national level. Their stable financing allows them to invest more in such fact-checking initiatives aimed to counter disinformation than, for instance, it would be possible for regional news media. However, fact-checking as a journalistic practice can and should be applied at all levels of news media, ranging from regional to mainstream. The journalists, as a collective unit, are responsible for sharing verified information with their audiences, for debunking false narratives spread in public discourse, and, consequently, for regaining the public’s trust in news media as a democratic institution.

Finally, despite there being two fact-checking editorial newsrooms in Lithuania, and fact-checking is an integral part of daily operations in leading news media, DIGIRES’ experience and results from its public polls confirm that fact-checking activities are too poorly known to the public.

Civic engagement and media education

A few types of educational materials on how to recognize and counter disinformation are listed here. The list typically involves education tools and projects put forward by the government, different projects funded by donor organizations (such as IREX¹¹⁵, Swedish Institute¹¹⁶, Nordic Council of Ministers, EU, etc.), NGOs (such as Media4Change, Center for Digital Ethics, Safer Internet Centre Lithuania, etc.) or higher education institutions. One of these includes an educational toolkit, “How to notice and counter disinformation”, initiated by the European Union and developed for high school students and teachers to help identify which information found online is truthful and which is false. This toolkit consists of theoretical material with examples and illustrations on how disinformation was spread during the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on explaining how disinformation works and how one should respond to it. The toolkit also includes tasks for students to work on in groups, as well as various sources of information.

Another educational tool created to help counter disinformation¹¹⁷ is a Lithuanian newsletter called “I think!¹¹⁸” (“Aš manau!”), issued by the Institute of International Relations and Political Science of Vilnius University. This newsletter focuses not only on disinformation but also other topics, such as Europe’s response to Russia’s war in Ukraine, the Istanbul Convention, or the Partnership Law. Every issue focuses on one of these topics and, in addition, includes an item on fake news and Europe’s response to it during the COVID-19 pandemic. This newsletter is mainly designed for high school students and teachers to discuss and analyze the main political, economic, and social issues. It includes expert opinions and theoretical findings on

¹¹⁵ <https://www.irex.org/news/irex-launches-media-literacy-online-course-baltics>.

¹¹⁶ <https://sharingsweden.se/toolkits/introducing-source-criticism-classroom/>

¹¹⁷ “How to notice and counter disinformation”
https://learning-corner.learning.europa.eu/learning-materials/spot-and-fight-disinformation_lt.

¹¹⁸ “I think!”. <https://asmanau.wordpress.com/2021/05/03/nr-49-melagienos-ir-europos-atsakas-i-pandemija/>.

who spreads disinformation, why and how to recognize fake news, and what the EU institutions do to tackle this issue. Finally, questions and tasks for students are included as well.

The other two educational objects analyzed here include government and non-government led projects. The first one, initiated by the Office of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, is called “Strengthen your Immunity¹¹⁹” (“Sustiprink imunitetą”). This information campaign focuses on how to recognize and counter threats online. The project’s website is divided into three main sections. The first provides information for employers and employees, the second gives information on how to safely browse online, and the third, named “Recognize fake news”, teaches how not to get stuck in the flow of fake news. Users are also able to complete a “Strengthen your Immunity” test – it asks to recognize whether a headline of the article is fake or not. Lastly, the website includes sources on how to verify news articles and, in general, information found online.

The project, “Challenges of the Contemporary Disinformation¹²⁰”, launched by Civic Resilience Initiative, is more of a project-training for journalists from various regions of Lithuania. The project aspires to raise the importance of critical thinking and digital resilience in our society.

Media4Change is one of the most active NGOs in the media and information literacy network in Lithuania. Its “Media Literacy for All” program includes a variety of learning opportunities, engaging educational tools, and awareness raising campaigns.¹²¹ Media4Change is engaged in capacity building action while strengthening the MIL competences of civil society, especially focusing on young media users and journalists, and media-makers providing them with trainings, educational resources, and promotion campaigns.

In 2022, online media literacy courses were launched in Lithuania. One of them ‘Very Verified: An Online Course on Media Literacy’ was developed by Media Literacy in the Baltics, a program of the U.S. Department of State, administered by global development and education organization IREX, using a Learn to Discern (L2D) approach to building citizen resilience against disinformation and manipulation.¹²² This course equips people with basic media literacy and information verification skills needed in their daily life and the ability to spot propaganda and other information disruptions. It also provides educators with easy-to-use blended learning lesson materials that correspond with the course.

Another online course is provided by the Centre for Media Literacy and its ‘Global On-ramp to Media Literacy’ project.¹²³ This is 90-minute, self-guided course addressing the need for critical thinking skills. The interactive course uses texts, videos, quizzes, and infographics to cover topics that range from CML’s long-proven Five Key Questions and Core Concepts and Empowerment Spiral, to information about CML’s MediaLit Kit, a collection

¹¹⁹ “Strengthen your Immunity”. <https://sustiprinkimuniteta.lt/>.

¹²⁰ “Challenges of the Contemporary Disinformation”. <https://cri.lt/#projects>.

¹²¹ “Media Literacy for All”. <https://www.media4change.co/lt/activity-areas/media-literacy/>

¹²² “Very Verified”. <https://veryverified.eu/lt/home-lietuviskai/>

¹²³ “The On-ramp Media Literacy (Lithuanian)”. <https://www.medialit.org/courses>

of core ideas and tools that are fundamental to media literacy's inquiry-based pedagogy.

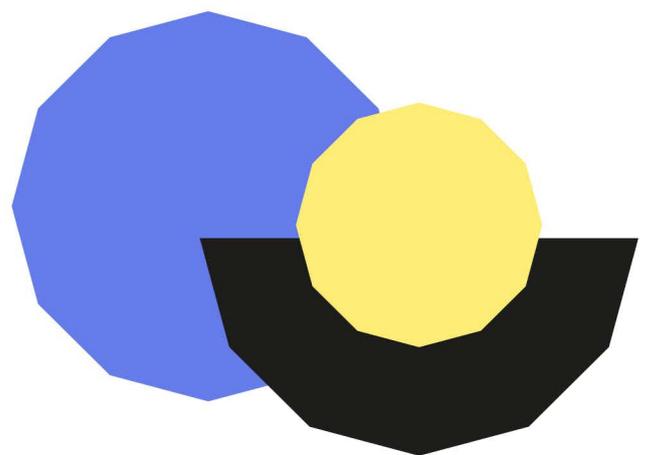
Finally, different think tanks and educational institutions, including universities and high schools, have been active in promoting and advocating media and information literacy. The Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis is a think-tank organization, which is running Media and Democracy Program aimed at increasing media literacy and critical thinking skills in different societal groups¹²⁴. In 2018, a UNESCO Chair on Media and Information Literacy for Knowledge Inclusive Societies was established at Vytautas Magnus University¹²⁵.

Among DIGIRES' findings is that the more we talk about disinformation narratives (representations), the more attention is being paid to "media literacy" actions.

Among the many programs and initiatives focused on media literacy and raising critical awareness competences, many function only as short-term projects, and their sustainability (funding, people involved) is uncertain. Furthermore, the impact of their programs, trainings, and testing of created products has not been realistically assessed.

Additionally, it appears that the efforts of these activities to address the aspect of media "literacy" are too narrowly, focusing mostly on the understanding/production and critical thinking and assessments of the circulating content (i.e., representations in digital media).

DIGIRES is convinced that contemporary perception of such complex phenomena as disinformation and fake news requires a certain shift. These must be understood not as "information commodities" alone, but as "performative commodities"¹²⁶ – as highly personalized, meta-data informed, and algorithmically managed processes. Acquiring such degree of awareness and learning "to go beyond" what is seen in digital representations is impossible without a deep understanding of technological powers of digital platforms and user interfaces.



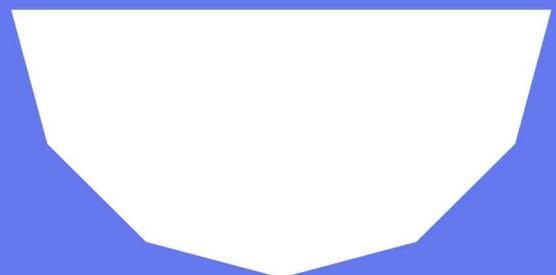
¹²⁴ It is also the coordinating institution of the National Media and Information Literacy Network in Lithuania.

¹²⁵ The UNESCO Chair program is intended as academic inquiry and advocacy actions dedicated to designing and implementing MIL-inspired initiatives for empowering democratic citizenship and civic agency of different social groups in Lithuania and the Baltic region. The main highlights of the UNESCO Chair include curriculum development, research actions, training activities, national and global networking.

¹²⁶ T. Philip Nichols & Robert Jean LeBlanc (2021) Media education and the limits of "literacy": Ecological orientations to performative platforms, *Curriculum Inquiry*, 51:4, 389-412, DOI: [10.1080/03626784.2020.1865104](https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2020.1865104).



Policy and governance tactics as anti-disinformation acts: National and European answers



7. Policy and governance tactics as anti-disinformation acts: National and European answers

Lithuania has several programs to combat disinformation on a political level. In 2018, the Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas) issued a decision to prepare a resolution on disinformation and other hybrid threats. In 2020, the Seimas approved the “Description of the Procedure” for strategic communication in the field of national security. It establishes the procedure for coordinating the strategic communication of reporting institutions, monitoring and assessing of information threats, responding to information incidents and information pressures, and planning of strategic communication campaigns. The incident assessment system is often mentioned as a good practice in Lithuania’s fight against disinformation in the field of policy. The plan to implement the provisions of the 18th Government Program also includes several measures to combat disinformation. Among those, the XI priority/mission (“To develop strong and secure Lithuania”) lists several actions such as 11.3.6. (To implement strategic communication campaigns against the disinformation and propaganda campaigns geared at reducing the will of the Lithuanian citizens to defend themselves) and 11.3.7 (To develop a national action plan to combat disinformation by developing multi-stakeholder partnerships). The XII mission (“Strengthening influence of Lithuania”) also lists activity 12.2.4. which indicates strengthening regional partnerships against disinformation in the region.

Likewise, media literacy and civil engagement related questions are addressed by several ministries (see Figure 2), although practical actions are divided to address education, lifelong learning, national security, media related issues:

- The Ministry of Culture is responsible for media and information (library) policies,
- The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport is responsible for media literacy competencies in formal/informal/nonformal education, lifelong learning,
- The Ministry of National Defense is responsible for the citizens’ civic resistance competencies.

To a certain extent, by listing actions to combat disinformation the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also engages in social and civic resilience and, thus, media and information awareness and digital civic preparedness raising actions.

All in all, comparative monitoring initiatives show that gaps in the resilience assurance system are found at all levels of analysis - macro, mezzo, micro. Based on data of all stakeholders in digital resilience in Lithuania (see Figure 2), it is obvious that, although a macro-level institutional awareness exists on several issues of heightened concern (e.g., in combating cyberattacks or naming disinformation as a threat to national security), there is little analysis of future strategies or on the impact of performed actions in relation to implementations of (risks assessments, research and analysis) projects and (public education and trainings) programs.

For example, if examined from media policy perspective alone, media policy strategies in Lithuania - media pluralism, media transparency assurance, media accountability - reveal a lack of systematicity and relevance.

The “Media ownership transparency” problem has been mostly addressed to assure higher standards for economic/business transparency of media entities. Yet, there are new foci that arise from a rapidly changing digital communications arena, information disruptions, and persisting uncertainties in the geo-political context in Europe, such as Russian aggression in Ukraine. Therefore, several new issues linked to information/communication disruptions¹²⁷ must be addressed and possibly, also resolved in the context of media/communications ownership transparency, as well as other issues¹²⁸. Knowing which physical persons and entities are active players and own and control the production and distribution of information, and what potential spheres of influence might arise from these varying forms of ownership has always been listed as an issue of heightened significance.

Lithuania’s results in international media literacy and civic resilience monitoring initiatives have remained unchanged for several years. In most recent studies, the MPM2021/2022 data reveals medium risks to media literacy (42%). On the one hand, this is a relatively good result, because it seems to ensure the *status quo* - media education programs are implemented, different vulnerable groups identified and reached with MIL trainings, and effects obtained do not dramatically distort the overall situation in the country.

All in all, there are alarming developments that call for decisive policy steps in making digital media literacy competencies and digital skills of citizens a heightened priority: the increased acceleration and amplification of digital disinformation; audiences’ increased preferences for social networks as their first news channel and source of news; their reluctance to verify digital news; and the ongoing restructurings of the news media systems.

The European Commission’s guidance clearly stresses that profusion of disinformation, false information, and manipulations is a major challenge disrupting informed opinion formation process, which is at the core of will formation and democratic citizenship in Europe. EC is committed to a more transparent, safe, and trustworthy online environment.

In the past few years, the EC initiated several policies that address information disruptions. In June 2022, major platforms and advertisers, fact-checkers, research centres, and civil society groups delivered a Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation, which enlists commitments to demonetize the dissemination of disinformation¹²⁹, guaranteeing transparency of political advertising, enhancing cooperation with

¹²⁷ Media ownership transparency must be explored in line with heightened efforts to assure digital resilience. For that, more systematic ‘forms of knowing’ of who (persons, groups, businesses) is behind the digital information infrastructures and media networks must be developed.

¹²⁸ Some relevant questions: What has significantly changed in communications arena/infrastructures in Europe, and what problems are arising because of these digital transformations that require to address the issue of media ownership transparency with a new attitude? Who are the owners (private and legal persons, groups, secondary businesses), and what are their potential networks of (political, economic, cultural) influence across different countries and regions in Europe? How widespread is the problem of media ownership ‘transparency’ in Europe: what types of data are missing, what is the ‘relevance’ of the missing data, and how the gaps in the current systems of data collection must be corrected? What are variations in regulation and legal safeguards to protect/restrict media ownership in different legal/political/cultural contexts and traditions?

¹²⁹ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/2022-strengthened-code-practice-disinformation>.

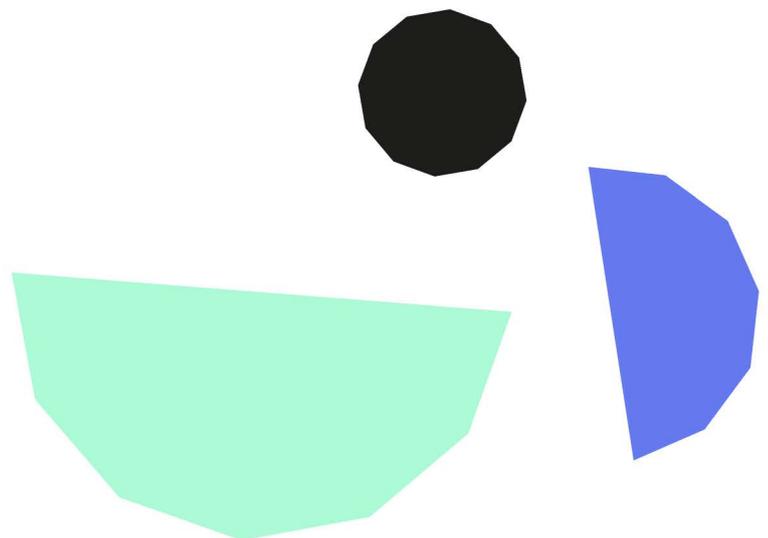
fact-checkers, and facilitating researchers' access to data. These actions form a co-regulatory framework of obligations and accountability of online platforms in line with the Digital Services Act.

The European Democracy Action Plan cites strengthening media freedom and countering disinformation among its main strands. To counter disinformation, the EC is seeking to improve the EU's existing toolbox. This was also cited in the "Tackling online disinformation – A European approach", the Action Plan against Disinformation.

The newest European Union policies focused on information disruptions and media responses, such as European Media Freedom Act¹³⁰(EMFA), signal important forthcoming changes to increase media pluralism and secure conditions for media democratic functioning. Included are advancements in supporting professional journalism and public service media operations, thus, addressing the ideal of common good. EMFA, for example, also stresses the significance of communication monitoring and institutions to observe pluralism developments in the media sphere.

Altogether, these are very good transnational guiding strategies. But again, as revealed by DIGIRES, national media flaws¹³¹, such as growing media concentration, lack of media ownership transparency, lack of transparency in state/public financing and others linked with the economic side of national media operations, are left to national states to regulate.

Ideologies and values embedded in policies and co-governance remain core determinants to ensure information and media functioning for the public good. And we still know too little about how this works or doesn't work in practice.

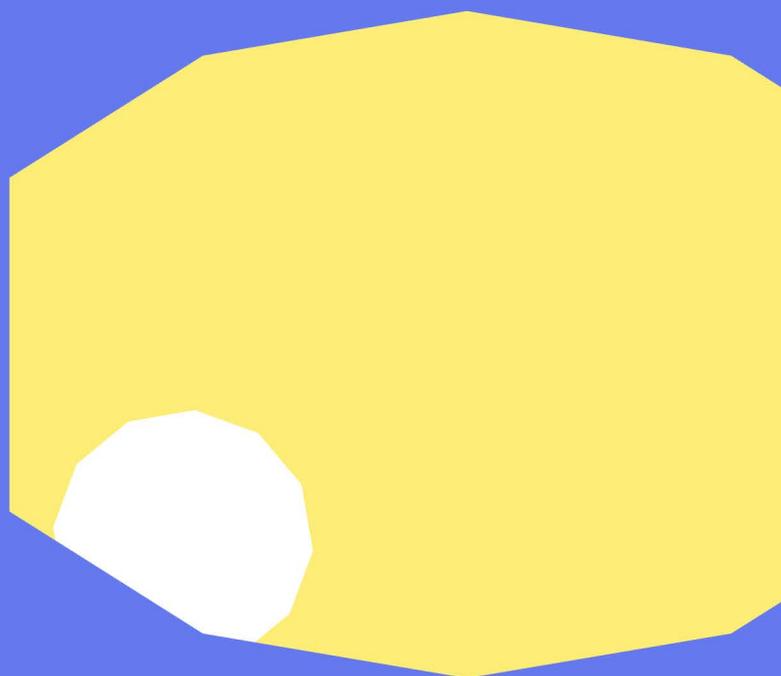


¹³⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_5504.

¹³¹ Balčytienė, A, Juraitė, K. (2022). Baltic Democracies: Re-configuring Media Environments and Civic Agency, *Journal of Baltic Studies*. Doi: [10.1080/01629778.2022.2117833](https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2022.2117833).

8.

Further areas of
inquiry for **DIGIRES**



8. Further areas of inquiry for DIGIRES

There are certainly similar and distinctive patterns in the disinformation activities in the Baltic region.

For example, the spectrum of disinformation narratives responds to and feeds on negative attitudes of the counter publics, and, as it is natural for disinformation, leads to negative social effects, including mistrust, skepticism, group polarization, or else. The narratives are either known and familiar to the researchers, as noted earlier, or easily forecasted and predictable on specific themes or occurrences like war against Ukraine, Ukrainian refugees, or energy security/economic stability, for example.

However, *forecasting* is not always the same as *forestalling*, and there are certain gaps that should be addressed. For example, how will disinformation towards different demographic target groups adapt as the agenda on controversies in certain spheres develops – e.g., when middle-class progressive pro-European youth faces new utility bills? Or how should national and European identities relate when conflicting issues are raised?

In comprehending possible gaps and long-term planning to address them, the role of social and digital resilience as the protection mechanism – a kind of immunity - becomes more important, and valuable for constructing the allied policy of disinformation pre-bunking and debunking.

Based on this review, several arenas are identified for further research in the field of social and digital resilience to information disruptions, focusing on the needs in a small state.

What needs to be done, by whom, and, if possible, how – expert observations

Based on the broad scope of analysis and informed opinions and views expressed by our disinformation analysts, information wars' specialists, media professionals, and media literacy experts, DIGERES concludes that Lithuanian society, its democratic institutional structures - legal frameworks, rule of law, civic resourcefulness, national security and defense - public awareness and determination to withstand and resist crises, reveals resilience to information disruptions and such an outcome is due to several developments.

DIGERES lists several issues that contribute to social and digital resilience in Lithuania. Concurrently, some obvious areas (such as lack of focus and coordination in policy making) are identified, which until now had an overtly symbolic role in the fight against disinformation. These issues were revealed in this State-of-the-art analysis, and they were also mentioned by experts interviewed in DIGIRES panels and discussions.

First, it is important to start with an assessment of the role of the media. From what was discussed earlier, it is obvious that, the role performed by the institutionalized media - journalists, editors, fact-checkers - plays an exceptional part in preventing digital information disruptions. Disinformation narratives are extensively uncovered by journalists and fact-checkers; hence, broadly speaking, it could be said that professional news media create a kind of a *safety net* that does not miss radical views:

As for the means of combating disinformation, they are sufficient in Lithuania today. Most Lithuanian citizens strongly oppose Russian aggression in Ukraine. The mass media, both television and radio, are also very straight and courageous in speaking out against Putin's rule. There are many anti-Russian, anti-Kremlin organizations (in the country). Finally, there is a dedicated investment in tracking Russian disinformation and attempts to discredit it. People who tend to support Russia find themselves in the shadows, so their influence is very small, and there is really no need to take any repression against them because it would only make them more popular. Therefore, I would not think that any additional measures should be applied in Lithuania today¹³².

Despite the undoubtedly significant role, the experts interviewed by us were clearly critical of the media:

We need more accomplishments from the media because it is what society relies on and reacts to in the time of crisis. Now we have a situation where the public's engagement with (media) content is heavily dependent on "half-truths", i.e., misleading and clickbait headlines that create misleading claims. It is precisely this strategy ("clickbaitism") that reduces trust in those institutions (media), or leaders who "play" such tricks with the public. When such tricks are played on society, then we have problems that can affect its resilience. I believe that because of the media's freedom, if the public trusts it (media), we have higher public resilience¹³³.

Still, regardless of historic experience and a certain immunization against manipulative incidents, according to our interviewees, disinformation campaigns in Lithuania can also have serious long-term outcomes and consequences:

The most effective propaganda is the one we do not notice. In the same way, we cannot see radiation, but it kills the body, and the consequences come out later¹³⁴.
We are only now slowly beginning to understand what is happening to us, and, therefore, we are only now beginning to talk more about disinformation. In the past, the doses of disinformation we received were much lower, and people were more resilient. Something that you encounter infrequently may not affect you as much as something in which you "soak" all the time. I would agree that Facebook and other algorithmic social networks are destroying democracy: as their users, we sacrifice the ability to see more things outside of our field of interest and are bombarded with misinformation¹³⁵.

In addition to continuously assaulting the public's perceptions of specific topics like trust in democratic institutions, the democratic way of life, memory politics, etc., disinformation also attacks "critical thinking" and, more generally, the epistemic structures of knowing. As our respondent said:

¹³² Interview with the political scientist.

¹³³ Interview with the media NGO representative.

¹³⁴ Interview with the information wars' specialist.

¹³⁵ Interview with the former fact-checker, currently an editor.

“Disinformation suppliers cover themselves with the principles of freedom of speech, claiming that it is only an “opinion”, hence, it has the right to exist. But the problem with disinformation is that it goes against free speech. Spreading some falsehood, event, or position about something that has not happened at all does not contribute to the diversity of opinions. It (misinformation) is understandable when people accidentally make a mistake or do not have enough facts to form an opinion about some process. People understand such things and their limitations. They can look for more knowledge and reconsider their opinion. But disinformation “screams” that what you think is enough, that you do not need to delve into other issues – that everything is just an opinion, and it has an equal “right” to coexist with the truth¹³⁶.”

In the long term, it is worth considering the important role of the academic environment for contributing to the path to social and digital resilience. There are several important factors making universities potentially key actors: their interdisciplinary experience, covering such scholarly areas as communication and journalism, sociology, psychology, philosophy, law, IT, political science; the presence of appropriate technical, linguistic, and subject-based knowledge; the ability to stock, process, and analyze large datasets; and extensive opportunities in sharing, discussing, and reassessing the knowledge.

The academy is an actor not bound hand and foot by political obligations and/or the necessity to meet popular demands; thus, working behind *closed* doors, yet in a *free* intellectual environment it is possible to concentrate human capital on developing strategic policies on sensitive issues. Naturally, these studies and deliberations should include substantial representation from the Government, civil society, and media, so that their outcomes will be applicable.

Furthermore, in confronting information disruptions, rigorous experimental designs and methods are needed to determine how to measure the impact of disinformation on society and on individual groups. As envisaged, new types of *measuring metrics* - for example, new types of qualitative assessments rather than quantitative data collections - must be developed. New approaches must be designed to track the long-term impact of past disinformation campaigns and their possible delayed consequences on social resilience; to assess whether there is a cumulative effect of disinformation on society; why the vulnerable groups are more vulnerable (and how to mitigate that vulnerability), and so on.

Our expert informants also voiced a justified criticism of radical decisions made by politicians:

“In the fight against disinformation, the important thing is not to simply “turn-off” television programs that satisfy the needs of consumers, but to replace these with offers of a different way of life. We need greater access to culture, education, and other social and cultural arenas that would help people choose an alternative source of information. It is necessary to encourage people to learn languages - French, German, Spanish, English, so that they can understand not only Russian programs. No doubt, people must have more financial resources or a higher value of a “cultural passport”, which would allow them to access other ways of spending their leisure time instead of just watching TV at home. Until we create

¹³⁶ Interview with the media NGO representative.

an alternative to the disinformation channels, we only have an imitation of the fight against disinformation. Cultural, social, and educational activities must be financed significantly more (than they are financed at present)¹³⁷.

Obviously, an adequate political will is of paramount significance when talking about structural (macro) level approaches to social and digital resilience. Macro level thinking and policies based on the actual data-informed knowledge - not on the political preferences - must be developed. As foreseen, these will be more likely to withstand future turbulences. As one expert pointed out:

We do not have politicians or political parties that would pay much attention to media literacy. Initiatives in this area come through the decisions of governmental or non-governmental organizations. It is non-governmental organizations that usually try to engage the public in an initiative, and it does not receive as much attention and support as it would have been desired. All media literacy initiatives are implemented through the Ministry of Culture. Although it would make more sense if they were carried out at the initiative of the Ministry of Education and Science¹³⁸.

The DIGIRES study, as well as the experts we interviewed, consistently point to overly fragmented media literacy activities. Though there are substantial media literacy programs and initiatives carried out by different stakeholders (see Figure 2), it is still unknown what kind of aims these are focused on, whether these are innovative and respond to the latest scientific achievements in literacies trainings, how much is invested in such activities and how the effect is measured.

It is obvious that an active approach to digital media literacy is needed:

Immunity to propaganda and disinformation needs to be (actively) developed and cultivated. Media literacy is a very important matter. But if people do not fact-check, it means they do not think it is important. It (media literacy) is about teaching people first that it is important and why it is important (...) A person must understand for himself/herself that his/her health, for example, and perhaps even his/her life, the quality of his/her life, the decisions he/she makes, and other things may depend on it¹³⁹.

Additionally, policy elaborations addressing development of resilience should be focused and provide specific tools for use by different actors.

Strengthening the social and digital resilience is largely about breaking the principle of “always fighting the last war” and preparing society for future challenges. Such an approach is important in the context of Russian and Belarusian aggressive moves but should also acknowledging that they are not the only and last threat to

¹³⁷ Interview with the Lithuanian journalists' professional union representative.

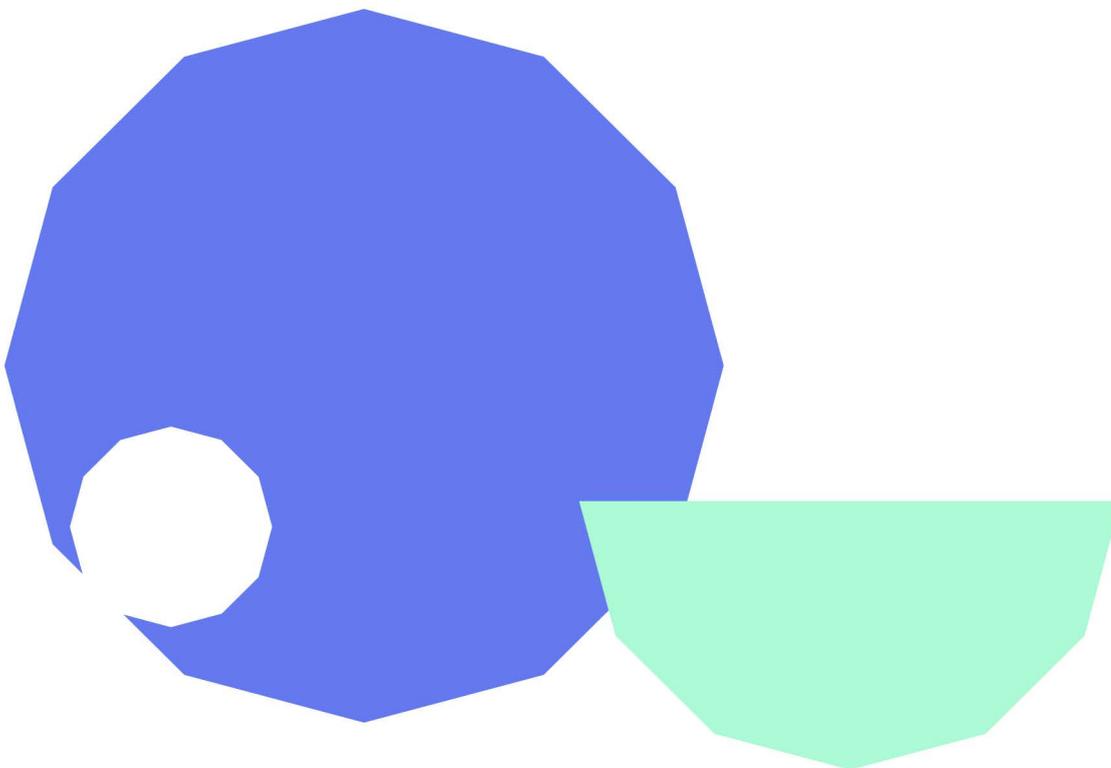
¹³⁸ Interview with the media NGO representative.

¹³⁹ Interview with the information wars' specialist.

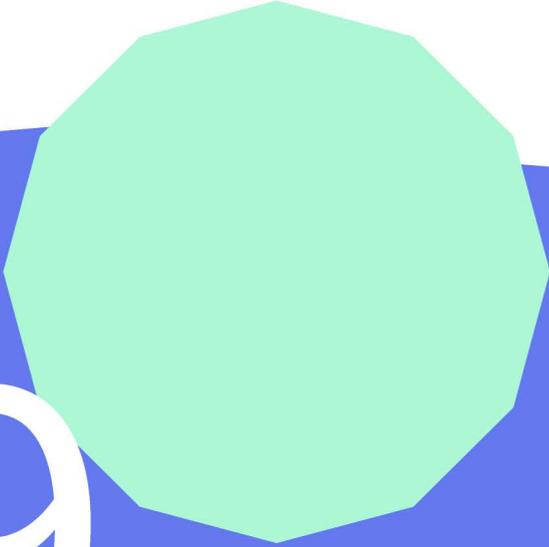
democracy and Europe's way of life. Therefore, it is important to emphasize once again that socio-economic inequalities are an important factor that can harm democracy from within and should therefore be addressed as part of resiliency building. As our respondent pointed out:

“Well, I would say that one of the main things that could help to build resilience is not just trying to spread the word about being resilient, but there are other social and economic issues that must be considered. These are social policy issues that should help solve people's “bread” problems first and offer “games” later. When I am interviewed as an expert on disinformation issues, I emphasize that simply providing people with knowledge about disinformation is not enough. It is necessary to approach the problem more broadly because resentment has arisen on some basis. Dissatisfaction, the desire to find fault has arisen because of insufficient social policies. First, when taking any measures to solve this problem, it is necessary to think both about social policy and about strengthening people's communicative competences and media awareness¹⁴⁰.

To conclude, for developing policy and coordinate its implementation, in the experience of the three Baltic countries of the Baltic region is very important. These countries have a similar historical context, as well as a diverse experience in implementing cyber security, media policies, and different target audiences of disinformation within the country. The involvement of partners within the framework of NATO-EU, as well as Ukraine, is valuable from the point of view of Europe's common future and identity.

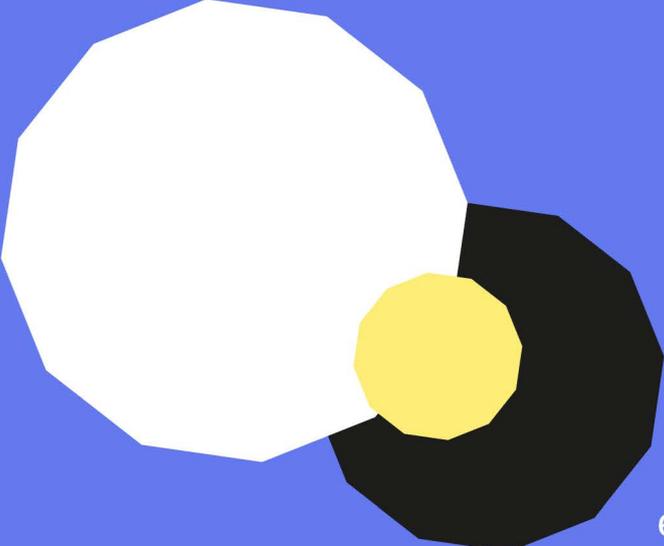


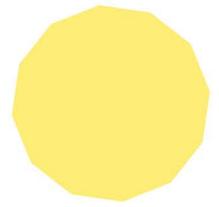
¹⁴⁰ Interview with the media NGO representative.



9.

DIGIRES outcome –
multisectoral integration
and multistakeholder
partnerships as agents
of change





9. DIGIRES outcome – multisectoral integration and multistakeholder partnerships as agents of change

Disinformation poses huge challenges to democratic sustainability and creates large-scale consequences. Its effects cannot be ignored and should not simply be reduced to technologically driven abundance and acceleration of fake news' dissemination. As revealed in this report, there is a growing emphasis on having focused and contextualized understanding of socio-cultural mechanisms - linguistic, attitudinal, identity/history focused - through which disinformation and fake narratives operate.

In this State-of-the-art report, such a need is listed as a call to action for an integrated multistakeholder agenda that would enforce a joint vision of a multisectoral and multistakeholder partnership and cooperation.

To reiterate, a socio-cultural and constructivist perspective to social and *democratic resilience* allows building a connective link between increasing flows of digital disinformation and the publics' relentlessness to being deceived. For that purpose, the role of institutions and their actual importance and actions in combating deceptive content must be articulated; also, the publics' perceptions leading to the adoption of beliefs must be explored and assessed:

1

Viewed from such a multi-focused perspective, DIGIRES accepts that disinformation is a complex and multi-layered phenomenon, whose comprehension requires a contextually focused, deeply engaged, and critical awareness-supported analysis backed with varied sources of expertise.

2

DIGIRES is an ambitious pilot project that in just one year has evolved into an active player and promoter of digital resilience ideas in Lithuania, the Baltic Sea region and throughout Europe.

During its first year of existence, DIGIRES has organized trainings for more than 70 representatives and specialists, including regional journalists, librarians, health specialists, more than 150 communications students and 550 high school students; participated in public events, expert panels, and discussions that were widely broadcast by the news media and social networks; presented research results at national and international conferences and events; and established solid partnerships with stakeholders in Lithuania and abroad.

As a multistakeholder network and association, DIGIRES sees its role as applying scientific knowledge and

¹⁴¹ Some of the most popular DIGIRES panel sessions: "Diskusijų festivalis „Būtent!“. DIGIRES – kas atsakingas už mūsų skaitmeninį atsparumą?" (2022 September 2) <https://www.delfi.lt/video/transliacijos/anonsai/diskusiju-festivalis-butent-digires-kas-atsakingas-uz-musu-skaitmenini-atsparuma.d?id=91129857>; "UNESCO Week: Diskusija „Kas atsakingas už mūsų skaitmeninį atsparumą?" (2022 September 19) <https://www.delfi.lt/video/transliacijos/anonsai/diskusija-kas-atsakingas-uz-musu-skaitmenini-atsparuma.d?id=91266249>; "DIGIRES: žinome, kaip veikia dezinformacija. O kas toliau?" (2022 December 6) <https://www.delfi.lt/video/transliacijos/anonsai/digires-zinome-kaip-veikia-dezinformacija-o-kas-toliau.d?id=91949261>.

innovations in media work and digital resilience trainings for different groups of people. The DIGIRES consortium closely surveys the latest policy steps in European politics, especially those related to the efforts to provide safeguards to media pluralism and freedom, to promote the creation of a safe digital environment for users and supporting everything that is linked to platform accountability. As argued in the sections above, in recent years, very important decisions have been made in European policy in the field of combating disinformation. Consequently, for the future, DIGIRES sees its role in clarifying what frameworks are created by the EU legal acts for national steps in the fight against disinformation.

In conclusion, DIGIRES proposes to regard the current phase of risks in the digital environment as an *eye-opening instance*.

At the core of this vision is the notion that national resilience and digital media and information literacy competencies must not be seen only as attributes of *soft power*, i.e., as if these were only “recommendatory guidelines” for individual learning instructions by some enthusiasts or initiatives proclaimed by some NGOs. Briefly, it looks like a strategy of the whole-of-society is listed in programs. What is required is a comprehensive approach that focuses on *informed and educated citizenship*: political will is required to put forward strategies that are much more strategically focused on decisive *inclusion* and not only on recommendatory *engagement*.

It is necessary to turn digital (media and information) literacy, as well as source verification acts and fact-checking, into competences of *hard power* – so that knowledge and practical doings become a sustainable, democratic resilience-oriented, and mutually empowering force that provides a decisive response to manipulations and attacks on human rights and democracy. A force that grows “from below” – from actions of citizens’ of all age groups, expertise, professions, and social standings. A force for which space for development is created by structures and institutions “from above” – those of government, IT, media, education, and cultural services.

DIGIRES suggests that a political and social *contract* is required to make such a shift a reality of the digital future in Lithuania.

The question is who the actor will be who will make the first move.

