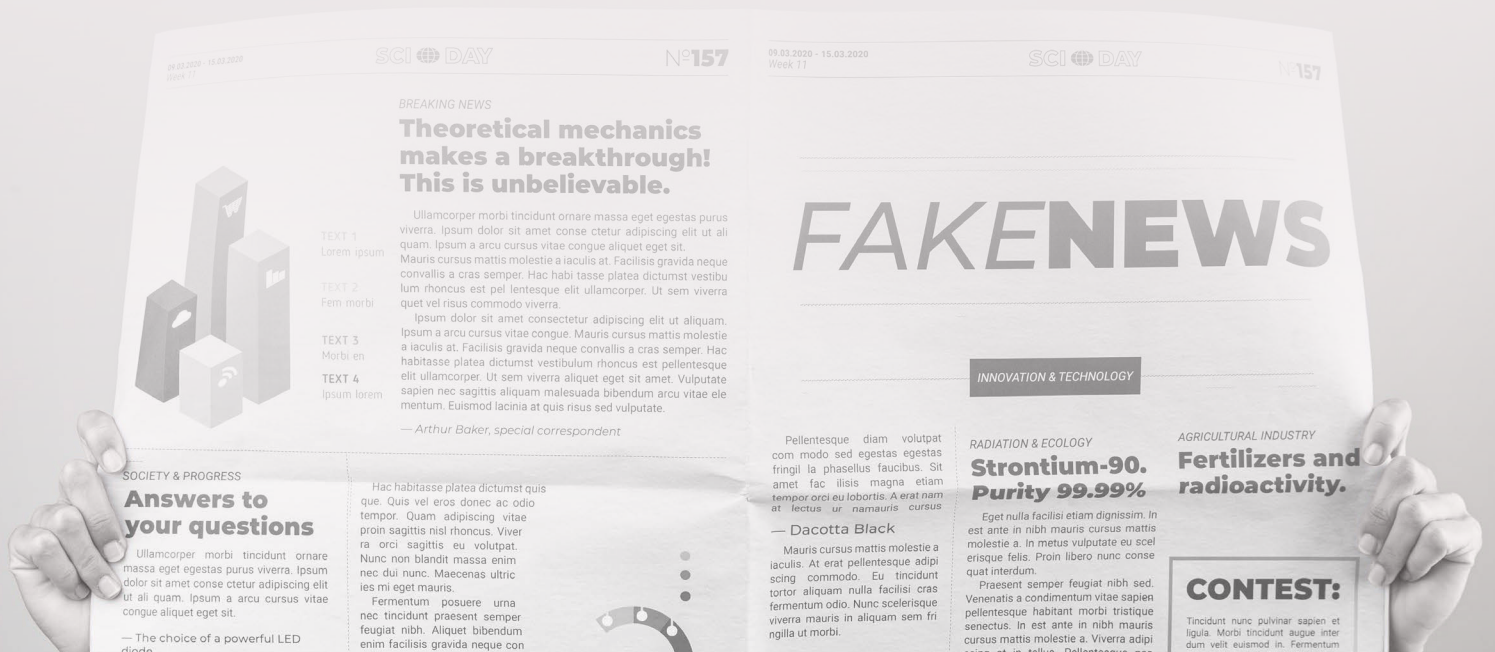




**Eastern Europe
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Fortifying Democracies: Lithuania's Comprehensive Approach to Counter Disinformation and Propaganda

Dr Nerijus Maliukevičius



09.03.2020 - 15.03.2020
Week 11

SCI DAY

Nº157

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BREAKING NEWS

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— Arthur Baker, special correspondent



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Vladimiro Ivanovo nuotr.

Dr Nerijus Maliukevičius, Vilnius University, Institute of International Relations and Political Science.
Vokiečių g. 10, LT-01130 Vilnius,
nerijus.maliukevicius@tspmi.vu.lt

Introduction

Disruptive information operations by authoritarian regimes (Russia and China) have been the subject of numerous studies. We have built up a pretty good understanding about the characteristics, prevalence and the toolboxes used by malign actors targeting democracies. It is important to move into a qualitatively new phase of policy analysis and to assess appropriate response strategies for building civic resilience and strengthening the democracies in authoritarian neighbourhoods. Lithuania is internationally recognised as a frontrunner in combating Russian information attacks. This is due to the country's extensive experience of navigating complex relations with Russia – an authoritarian neighbour known for leveraging propaganda and disinformation to achieve its political objectives. The evolution of the sophisticated countermeasures in Lithuania is therefore informed by a history of direct engagement and the necessity to create innovative and effective response strategies.

This policy paper outlines the whole-of-society approach employed by Lithuania to counter Russian malign information operations. It highlights Lithuania's innovative multilayered approach, encompassing legal, media, civic and StratCom initiatives, to enhance the societal resilience against propaganda and disinformation. Amidst growing global concerns over the integrity of information ecosystems, Lithuania stands out owing to its proactive measures to enhance societal resilience and uphold democratic values against external information threats. Through analysing Lithuania's whole-of-society approach,

this paper aims to provide actionable insights and best practices that can be adapted by other nations facing similar challenges. Lithuania's experience underscores the importance of providing a coordinated, comprehensive strategy that leverages the strengths of diverse societal actors, to effectively counter the sophisticated landscape of modern disinformation and propaganda campaigns.

1. The whole-of-society approach to countering Russian propaganda and disinformation

Since regaining independence, Lithuania has faced ongoing information pressure from Russia, which views its neighbour as a sphere of influence. Lithuania has discovered, through trial and error, that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to counteract Russian malicious information operations. The Kremlin employs disinformation and propaganda to undermine Lithuania's standing in key international bodies such as NATO and the EU, and to strain its relationships with allies, complicating collaborative efforts in foreign and defence policies. The targets of these campaigns include NATO's bolstering of its presence in Lithuania and energy initiatives designed to reduce the dependence on Russian energy sources. The

aim of these disinformation efforts is to disrupt the information landscape, fostering an environment of mistrust. At critical moments, this atmosphere can immobilise the public and decision-making processes, hindering the accurate assessment of situations or potential responses to hostile actions. Attacks may be precisely directed at high-profile figures (e.g. the Minister of National Defence or the commander of a German battalion in Lithuania) or may address wider historical narratives (e.g. periods of partisan resistance or Soviet occupation), fostering societal distrust in the government, individuals, institutions and facts.

Edda Humprecht, Frank Esser and Peter Van Aelst pointed out in their study¹ that there are structural factors in every society that either hinder or contribute to societal resilience. The factors that reduce resilience include societal polarisation, prevalent populist communication, low trust in the media, a weak public service media, media audience fragmentation and isolation, along with uncritical and extensive social media usage. These elements intensify the impact of the malicious operations by authoritarian entities. Conversely, resilience can be bolstered through a well-rounded response that encompassed a multi-tiered strategy aimed at addressing these vulnerabilities. This strategy is known as the whole-of-society approach, whose aim is to build comprehensive societal resilience against disinformation and propaganda.

Resilience is usually understood as the ability of any given referent object to withstand the immediate impact of major disruptions, regardless of whether such disruptions are societal or personal in nature.² It represents the physical and mental robustness of a society in the face of a crisis. Comprehensive societal resilience consists of three partly overlapping phases:³

- Attributes that increase the resistance and immunity of a system/society in order to absorb the immediate impact of the crisis;
- Resources needed to maintain the general functionality and identity of a system/society while adverse conditions persist;
- Broader institutional and societal attributes not only in adapting positively to the post-threat situation, but also by initiating a reflective learning process to enhance the comprehensive resiliency of a system/society to face another similar disruption in the future.

The whole-of-society approach follows these three overlapping phases as part of a unified strategy,

while allowing for adjustments based on specific contexts of the emerging crisis. This strategy includes continuous learning and cooperation mechanisms among democracies to effectively counter long-term authoritarian threats, thereby enhancing the “democratic deterrence” against malign actors. A whole-of-society approach represents layers of resilience: personal resilience; community and sub-regional resilience; institutional resilience; and forward-looking resilience.⁴

2. Lithuanian lessons learned: successes and challenges

Lithuania’s journey towards developing a comprehensive, multi-layered strategy has been characterised by both accomplishments and obstacles. A notable achievement is the progress in its institutional strategic communication coordination, overseen by the government with parliamentary scrutiny. In 2023, the National Crisis Management Centre (NCMC) under the Lithuanian Government commenced operations. This key institution plays a pivotal role in managing the crises and emergencies triggered by hostile interventions. The NCMC operates a crisis situation centre around the clock, actively monitoring threats to national security. This centre coordinates strategic communication regarding national security and mobilises NGOs and volunteers on a nationwide basis. It assesses security threats, informs the relevant authorities, alerts the National Security Commission about significant incidents, provides management recommendations, delivers annual crisis management reports, plans crisis responses, and fosters national and international cooperation through various exercises.

Another strength in Lithuania’s defence against malicious disinformation and propaganda is the spontaneously formed StratCom community, which encompasses individuals from state bodies, NGOs and academia. This community’s development is crucial for enhancing societal resilience through collaborative efforts among various actors. The community facilitates the exchange of knowledge, experiences and personnel, enabling a more agile, swift and effective reaction to crises.

Lithuania has also fortified its legal and procedural framework to counteract malign influences. The

adoption of procedures on 26 August 2020 for coordinating strategic communications in national security marks a significant improvement in the fight against disinformation. This legislation provides a structure for strategic communication coordination, detailing the processes required for threat prevention and crisis management, including the monitoring and evaluation of informational threats, and the response to information incidents. It delineates the roles of different governmental bodies in planning, assessing and revising strategic communication campaigns, according to the changing security landscape, thereby enhancing Lithuania's resilience to informational threats and bolstering national security.

Strategic communication capabilities are being enhanced, both nationally and internationally. International initiatives to combat disinformation and propaganda play a crucial role in bolstering Lithuania's societal resilience. The key platforms include:

- The *Rapid Alert System (RAS)* at the EU level, a pivotal element of the EU's strategy against disinformation, rooted in the December 2018 Action Plan against Disinformation endorsed by the European Council. The RAS fosters information exchanges on disinformation campaigns and facilitates coordinated responses among EU institutions and Member States. Utilising open-source data, it integrates insights from academia, fact-checkers, online platforms and international partners, for thorough analyses.
- *Nordic-Baltic cooperation* has evolved from its initial support for the independence of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia into a robust partnership spanning various areas, including the fight against disinformation, propaganda and cyber threats. Sweden's Psychological Defence model and Finland's Total Defence strategy are exemplary in terms of demonstrating how democracies can fortify their resilience against authoritarian pressures.
- The *Lublin Triangle initiative*, whereby in 2023, Ukraine, Lithuania and Poland published the "Resilience to Disinformation" report through civil society organisations. This document, presented on a global scale, underscores the imperative of international collaboration in countering Russian propaganda and safeguarding democratic values and cultural heritage, drawing valuable lessons from Ukraine's defiance of Russian aggression.
- The *Transatlantic StratCom community*, facilitated by the Atlantic Council in Washington DC, convenes expert meetings on Strategic

Communications and Digital Disinformation. These gatherings include US Congress members, administration officials, Lithuanian representatives, global StratCom leaders, the media and the academic community, reinforcing the importance of transatlantic dialogue in strategic communication efforts.

- The *Future of Democracy Forum*, held in Vilnius, serves as a global platform for democracy and advocates to confront the pressing issues democracies are facing amid rising authoritarianism. The forum underscores Lithuania's dedication to strengthening the global democracy alliance, while highlighting the necessity for democracies to unite in sharing their experiences and strategies against autocratic disruption and disinformation. Attracting a wide array of participants, the forum facilitates discussions on empowering those committed to democratic principles, featuring high-ranking officials, activists, human rights defenders and independent media bodies from across the globe.

The Lithuanian Government actively promotes and orchestrates effective inter-institutional public initiatives aimed at enhancing media literacy and bolstering societal resilience. Between 2018 and 2020, it launched the cyber and information resilience campaign "Boost Your Immunity," which is accessible online and through regional media, radio and TV. This campaign delivers engaging and informative content about identifying and countering online threats. "Boost Your Immunity" serves as an educational tool, empowering internet users to recognise and protect themselves against online dangers through content tailored to three key life aspects: "Be Safe at Work" targets employers and employees, emphasising the support available for small and medium-sized enterprises; "Browse Safely" provides guidance for users of all ages on navigating online risks; and "Recognise Lies" offers strategies to discern and resist fake news, covering various facets of internet safety and misinformation in a comprehensive manner.

Lithuania's resilience has been further strengthened by successful civic initiatives against disinformation. Projects like Debunk.org and the Civic Resilience Initiative have mobilised Lithuania's media and citizens to debunk falsehoods, with an emphasis on fostering international civic collaboration to combat disinformation. These initiatives encourage the creation and dissemination of accessible, user-friendly tools designed for diverse demographics, including youth, seniors and ethnic communities. The active participation of Lithuanian media is vital in preventing the spread of harmful disinformation promptly.

The Lithuanian Elves' initiative, aimed at combating internet trolls on social networks, has garnered significant international acclaim. This creative civic effort that demonstrates the power of innovative approaches to fighting disinformation has captured the interest of the English-speaking media. Inspired by Lithuania, similar Elf initiatives have emerged in other countries, contributing to the formation of new international civic cooperation networks.

Additionally, Lithuania's legal framework for addressing disinformation and violent propaganda on television channels from unfriendly nations stands as a testament to its strengths. The Lithuanian Radio and Television Commission has effectively implemented European regulations to impose sanctions and restrictions against the promotion of violence and incitement to hatred, showcasing Lithuania's commitment to maintaining a safe and truthful information environment.

On the flip side, the challenges encountered in combating disinformation have provided Lithuania with invaluable insights for that enhancement and development of a more effective whole-of-society approach. Among these lessons, a critical vulnerability is the cybersecurity gaps that adversarial entities exploit in their disinformation efforts. In recent years, there has been a rise in sophisticated disinformation attacks against NATO partners in Lithuania, notably targeting cybersecurity weaknesses in the Lithuanian media, local governments and state institutions. Disinformation is frequently inserted into legitimate news content by compromising media outlets (e.g. breaches at The Baltic Times, BNS, Kas vyksta Kaune and Valstiečių laikraštis). Therefore, it's imperative for the media infrastructure in Lithuania to be recognised as part of the nation's critical infrastructure, warranting heightened cybersecurity measures.

Like other European countries, Lithuania is grappling with legal frameworks that lag behind in effectively curbing disinformation and violence-inciting propaganda on new media platforms and social networks. The rapid advancements in information technology and media are outstripping governmental regulatory efforts, with adversarial states exploiting these technologies to disseminate disinformation. Balancing new media regulations with democratic values such as freedom of expression and transparency, while implementing moderation and accountability measures for disinformation and violent propaganda, demands collaboration among the public authorities, experts and major social network representatives.

Furthermore, the media literacy initiatives in Lithuania are currently disparate, pointing to another gap in the fight against hostile disinformation. Although numerous media literacy programmes are in place within Lithuanian schools – featuring interactions with journalists, experts and NGO representatives – there is a need for strategic coordination and a long-term, systematic approach to these efforts.

Increasing Lithuania's presence in the English-speaking digital domain is crucial for effectively countering disinformation, particularly in the global struggle against autocratic malign influences. The significance of targeting Russian-speaking audiences has been underscored following Russia's aggression in Ukraine. However, Lithuania's English-language media footprint is notably lacking, especially in comparison to the well-resourced English-language media from authoritarian states such as Russia and China. Therefore, elevating the English-language informational offerings from both public and commercial Lithuanian broadcasters is essential in order to equalise the global digital playing field.

Through assessing its experiences, strengths and weaknesses, Lithuania has organically evolved a whole-of-society approach to tackle disinformation and propaganda, learning from each challenge and adapting its strategies accordingly.

3. Lithuanian whole-of-society model

Lithuania's approach to countering Russian disinformation is characterised by a comprehensive, whole-of-society strategy that employs a multi-faceted approach, engaging various stakeholders at different levels. This strategy is structured around four primary pillars: regulatory oversight; enhancement of the professional media environment; civic engagement; and strategic communication initiatives:

- 1. Regulatory Framework:** Lithuania has established an extensive legal and regulatory framework specifically designed to tackle disinformation. The aim of this framework is to provide a solid foundation for combating the spread of false information by setting clear standards and protocols.
- 2. Information Environment:** The country is committed to cultivating a robust, adaptable and trustworthy media environment. Such an envi-

ronment is crucial for countering the spread of propaganda and misinformation, while ensuring that the public has access to accurate and reliable information.

- 3. Community Participation:** Lithuania places a significant emphasis on encouraging active engagement from civic groups. These groups play a vital role in identifying disinformation campaigns, fostering analytical skills among the populace, and promoting a culture of scepticism towards unverified information.
- 4. Strategic Communication:** The nation is proactive in its strategic communication efforts, working closely with the EU, NATO and other allies to ensure the delivery of a unified and coherent message. This collaborative approach has enhanced the effectiveness of their campaigns against disinformation.

Lithuania has taken extensive regulatory and institutional steps to prevent the proliferation of totalitarian and authoritarian ideologies, particularly in light of the substantial threat posed by Russian disinformation efforts targeting media outlets. A key component of Lithuania's defensive strategy against these harmful information campaigns is an emphasis on transparent and professional journalism. This includes empowering local media outlets to fact-check and debunk misinformation in an effective way. The whole-of-society strategy adopted by Lithuania involves widespread public and non-governmental engagement in educating the populace about disinformation tactics, improving critical thinking skills and promoting fact-checking habits. Volunteer organisations, such as The Elves, are instrumental in detecting and exposing disinformation efforts. Furthermore, the Lithuanian government is actively engaged in strategic communication to counteract the Kremlin's narratives, and ensuring that accurate and unambiguous information is disseminated. These efforts are bolstered by close cooperation with international bodies like the EU and NATO, creating a more coordinated and potent global response to Russian propaganda and disinformation.

4.1 Regulatory Framework

Developing effective legal frameworks to address disinformation requires a careful balance between protecting national and individual security, and preserving the freedoms that define a democratic society, such as the freedom of the media. Lithuania has consistently adopted a firm legal stance against

disinformation, as is reflected in the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania. Its key provisions include:

- The prohibition of war propaganda within the Republic of Lithuania, underscoring the nation's commitment to peace and stability.
- The principle that the freedom to express convictions and disseminate information must not be used to justify criminal activities. This includes the incitement of national, racial, religious or social hatred, violence and discrimination, as well as engaging in slander and spreading disinformation.⁵

These constitutional stipulations illustrate Lithuania's approach to maintaining a secure and respectful information environment, balancing the imperative of freedom of expression with the need to curb harmful activities that could threaten societal harmony and security.

Furthermore, the Criminal Code of the Republic of Lithuania specifies legal consequences for actions that undermine societal harmony and individual dignity:

- Article 170 imposes criminal liability for public acts of ridicule, contempt or incitement to hatred against individuals or groups based on nationality, language, origin, ethnicity, social status, and beliefs or opinions.
- Article 170.2 criminalises the public endorsement, denial or significant minimisation of genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes that are recognised by Lithuania, the European Union or international court final judgments.⁶

The Code of Administrative Offences in Lithuania enacts measures to counter the public representation and dissemination of symbols associated with Nazi, Soviet, totalitarian or authoritarian regimes. These regulations are part of Lithuania's comprehensive legal framework that is designed to address the legacy of totalitarian regimes and prevent the glorification of oppressive historical symbols. This legislation encompasses:

- A prohibition on publicly displaying or distributing the flags or coats of arms of Nazi Germany, the USSR or the Lithuanian SSR.
- A ban on the Nazi swastika, SS insignia, the Soviet hammer-and-sickle emblem and the Soviet five-pointed red star insignia.
- A restriction against the public distribution of images of leaders from the Nazi German Party or the Soviet Communist Party who played roles in the repression of the Lithuanian population.

- The broader prohibition of other symbols representing totalitarian or authoritarian regimes.⁷

The Law on the Provision of Information to the Public in Lithuania includes specific provisions aimed at regulating the content disseminated by the media to ensure public safety and maintain the democratic fabric of the society. Key aspects of these regulations include:

- The prevention of any media content that might instigate actions against the sovereignty of the Republic of Lithuania, its territorial integrity and its political independence.
- A ban on spreading war propaganda, inciting war or hatred, and promoting ridicule or humiliation.
- A prohibition on instigating discrimination, violence or physical violence against individuals or groups based on age, sex, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, race, nationality, citizenship, language, origin, social status, belief, convictions, views or religion.⁸

These provisions underscore Lithuania's commitment to preventing the media from being used as a tool for undermining national security, promoting violence or discriminating against individuals or groups, thereby safeguarding both individual and societal rights within a democratic context.

Lithuanian law mandates that the country's media regulator, the Radio and Television Commission (RTCL), can suspend broadcasts if they fail to comply with the legal standards. These RTCL decisions are subject to the approval of a Lithuanian administrative court. Following Russia's escalated aggression against Ukraine, Lithuania has halted the retransmission of eight Kremlin-backed propaganda TV channels, including Planeta RTR, Rossija 24, NTV Mir, Belarus 24, PBK Lithuania, TVCi, MIR24 and RBK-TV. The RTCL also requested that YouTube remove these channels from its platform, leading to their suspension. Moreover, the RTCL has scrutinised websites for the illegal distribution of Russian TV programmes, disinformation, war propaganda and hate speech. Consequently, it has directed network service providers to block access to a significant number of such sites.

4.2 Information Environment

Media and social networks enable malicious actors to bypass geographical barriers and craft virtual rea-

lities for their target audiences. Authoritarian regimes aim to take advantage of the openness of democratic societies by carrying out aggressive information operations within their information spaces. These operations are designed to amplify existing contradictions and tensions. Consequently, the resilience of the information ecosystem against such hostile external interference is of paramount importance.

Russian TV channels have long been a primary source of the propaganda and disinformation targeting Lithuania. In 2022, following Russia's initiation of full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, Russian TV channels were promptly banned in Lithuania, which significantly diminished their influence. Even before the RTCL implemented strict administrative measures against these channels, their popularity was in decline. This decline was attributed to the natural decrease in the use of the Russian language within Lithuania. Data from the 2022 Civic Attitudes Survey further confirmed this downward trend in the viewership of Russian TV channels, with as many as 82.5% of respondents reporting they had not watched Russian TV channels (such as PBK, RTR, ORT, NTV, etc.) in the preceding month⁹.

In addition, Lithuania has been proactive in fostering alternative Russian-language media channels to counter the Kremlin's state media, acknowledging the significance of catering to Russian-speaking minorities. Despite these efforts, independent Russian-language news channels such as Meduza, Nezavisimaya Gazeta Baltiya, Radio Svoboda and Current Time have struggled to gain popularity. According to the 2022 Civic Attitudes Survey, a staggering 84% of respondents reported not having watched any of these media channels in the previous month.

The distrust of Russian TV surged following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. This heightened scepticism underscores the necessity for a Western English-language media presence in Lithuania's media landscape, as it is crucial for combating disinformation effectively. While authoritarian regimes like Russia and China both heavily invest in and support their state media, there remains a notable absence of Western media outlets in Lithuania's information space.

To combat the spread of propaganda and disinformation, Lithuania has initiated regular training sessions for local journalists. In 2023, the Civic Resilience Initiative (CRI) organised six workshops across various Lithuanian cities targeting journalists, public librarians, teachers and municipal administrators. These workshops covered topics such as identi-

fyng disinformation techniques, analysing recent instances of false news, and discussing the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, pandemic-related challenges and local political misinformation. Additionally, media fact-checking and debunking initiatives are playing a vital role in strengthening Lithuania's media landscape. "Checked by 15min," Lithuania's pioneering fact-checking project launched in August 2016, exemplifies such efforts.¹⁰ As a member of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), this project, managed by seasoned journalists, scrutinises the information disseminated on social networks and the internet. It particularly concentrates on evaluating the statements made by politicians, public figures and other notable individuals. This focus ensures that misinformation can be identified and addressed, contributing to a more informed and discerning public discourse. The "Debunk" project¹¹ is a national initiative that unites the public, media and government officials in the fight against fake news. It enables journalists, engaged citizens and various social groups to collaborate effectively, to quickly identify and halt the spread of disinformation.

Additionally, international investigative journalism efforts are bolstering the resilience of the media landscape, by uncovering the intricate structures behind disinformation campaigns and demonstrating the breadth and interconnectedness of these networks.

A robust media landscape acts as a crucial defence mechanism for Lithuanian society against aggressive propaganda and disinformation, serving as a form of social and cultural immunity against information warfare. This layer of defence is vital in Lithuania's comprehensive strategy to counter Russian disinformation, illustrating the importance of media resilience in safeguarding society.

4.3 Community Participation

Civic engagement and non-governmental efforts form a crucial aspect of Lithuania's comprehensive whole-of-society approach. NGOs and civic activists play a significant role in educating the public about the risks of disinformation, promoting media literacy projects and adding an additional layer of defence against malicious information attacks. The "Checked by 15min" and "Debunk" projects exemplify the collaboration between the Lithuanian media and civic sectors in combating fake news, while drawing in international partners as well.

Debunk.org is an NGO that develops simple, user-friendly tools to counter disinformation for various audiences, including young people, the elderly and ethnic communities. It has evolved into an independent technology thinktank and NGO that operates in eight countries, concentrating on disinformation analysis and conducting educational media literacy campaigns. The group collaborates with NGOs and research centres from 14 countries, and provides weekly reports on the disinformation surrounding Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹² The NGO has also partnered with the Lithuanian public broadcaster to investigate disinformation actors on Facebook, influencing Lithuania's consideration to criminalise social media bot farms and manipulation of social media algorithms. Moreover, Debunk.org has worked with Lithuanian authorities to challenge Meta's content moderation policies during the Ukraine war, leading to Meta consulting with the Lithuanian authorities for improvements in content moderation.

The Civic Resilience Initiative (CRI) is another Lithuanian NGO that has made significant contributions to analysing the weaponisation of illegal migrants by the Belarus regime. In 2021, Lithuania experienced a surge of illegal migrants from Belarus, perceived as a retaliation against EU sanctions. CRI's investigation highlighted the deliberate use of disinformation by Belarusian and Russian authorities to exacerbate the crisis.¹³ Furthermore, the CRI has developed the "Disinformation and Civil Society Mapping Report of the Baltic States," a comprehensive analysis of the disinformation landscape in the Baltic States, with a particular focus on disinformation related to the war in Ukraine.¹⁴ The CRI is part of the Ukraine War Dis-Info work group, collaborating with several analytical centres to monitor the Kremlin's propaganda across 11 countries.¹⁵ The NGO publishes regular media monitoring reports on anti-Ukrainian war propaganda in the Baltic States, concentrating on the most prevalent propaganda narratives in the region's Russian-language news outlets. In 2023, the CRI partnered with Google to announce a new initiative to combat disinformation in Central and Eastern Europe, which is aimed at enhancing media literacy, building resilience and actively tackling disinformation.¹⁶

The Lithuanian Elves are known for their fight against internet trolls on social networks, garnering exceptional international attention and being recognised as one of Lithuania's most successful campaigns against disinformation. This initiative showcases how creative civic mobilisation can be organised virtually, while inspiring similar Elves initiatives in other countries and fostering new interna-

tional civic cooperation networks. These networks that monitor the internet with an aim to deplatform malign actors engaged in disinformation activities, with the fight embodying the mystique of a mythical battle between Elves and Trolls, are attracting various volunteers. In Lithuania, anonymous Elves come from diverse professions, many of whom are members of the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union, a paramilitary organisation focused on national defence.

These NGOs are engaged in various projects to promote media literacy competencies in Lithuania, including initiatives in Russian and Polish-language schools, which are particularly vulnerable to Russian propaganda and disinformation.

Civic engagement serves as the foundation that unites all other elements of a comprehensive society-wide approach. It is especially crucial for building societal resilience, as it relies on activism, cooperation, trust and collective action.

4.4 Strategic Communication

The final layer of Lithuania's comprehensive strategy to combat disinformation involves proactive strategic communication, a crisis management system and coordinated messaging, in partnership with the EU, NATO and other allies. The government manages and controls the national strategic communication coordination capacities, which are subject to oversight by parliamentary committees.

In evaluating Lithuania's institutional experiences in combating disinformation, it is crucial to recognise the consistent dedication in relation to enhancing strategic communication skills. The establishment of the Threat Management and Crisis Prevention Bureau within the government, followed by the creation of the National Crisis Management Centre (NCMC), has bolstered the country's ability to coordinate its responses to crises. The enactment of the Procedure for the Coordination of Strategic Communication in the Field of National Security on 26 August 2020, has further strengthened the coordinated efforts against disinformation. This legislation is significant, as it defines information threats as follows:

Information threats include war propaganda, incitement to war and hatred, attempts to distort the historical memory, and the dissemination of other unfounded and misleading information that goes against the national security interests of the Repu-

blic of Lithuania. The aim of these threats is to foster distrust and dissatisfaction with the Lithuanian state and its institutions, the democratic system and national defence. They seek to amplify national and cultural divisions, weaken the national identity and citizenship, discredit Lithuania's membership in NATO and the EU, undermine NATO's capabilities and commitment to defend its allies, diminish our citizens' resolve to defend their country, and influence the country's democracy, electoral processes and political party system. Information activities are also directed at the public and policymakers in other EU and NATO member states, to encourage decisions unfavourable to the Republic of Lithuania.¹⁷

As a small country, Lithuania can only effectively counter disinformation on the international stage with the support of its partners. There is a need to expand the international StratCom community to include foreign journalists, academics, current and former politicians, and public figures. In addition, the fight against disinformation must be actively promoted at international forums and conferences.

4.5 Ten Recommendations to Fortify Democracies

Drawing on Lithuania's comprehensive experience in combating disinformation, we can formulate strategic recommendations for other nations that are aiming to bolster their democratic resilience. Lithuania's integrated strategy, which combines governmental coordination, legal reforms, civic engagement and strategic communication, highlights the vital role of cohesive societal efforts in effectively countering harmful external influences. This approach demonstrates how a combination of policies and public engagement can form a robust defence against attempts to undermine democratic institutions and processes. The following ten recommendations encapsulate the essence of Lithuania's successful strategies. By adopting these practices, democracies can better equip themselves to withstand the challenges posed by authoritarian regimes, thereby ensuring the integrity of their information ecosystems and the robustness of their democratic values.

1. **Strengthen the Government's StratCom Coordination:** Enhance the strategic communication competences across government institutions, while emphasising the need for increased financial and human resources. Such coordina-

tion should leverage the existing institutional capabilities and successful civic initiatives, while also expanding the strategic communication capacities to include diverse communities and digital platforms.

2. *Sustain and Expand Resilience Campaigns:* Continue and broaden successful disinformation resilience campaigns to involve a wider community engagement, including local communities and media outlets, with a focus on digital literacy and on combating misinformation and conspiracy theories.
3. *Enhance Early Warning Systems:* Adapt to the rapid pace of modern disinformation campaigns by investing in effective monitoring and early warning systems. Active participation and information sharing amongst international partners and allocating necessary resources for the monitoring systems will be of crucial importance.
4. *Secure Media Infrastructure:* Recognise the media infrastructure as part of the nation's critical infrastructure, while ensuring robust cybersecurity measures to prevent its exploitation by hostile states. Media engagement is vital for preventing the spread of harmful disinformation.
5. *Integrate Media Literacy into Education:* Mainstream media literacy into educational curricula as early as possible, to equip the younger generation with the skills needed to navigate media and social networks from a critical viewpoint.

6. *Develop Accessible Anti-Disinformation Tools:* Initiate the development and dissemination of user-friendly tools to help diverse audiences identify disinformation, with examples such as the Bad News Game, Which Face Is Real and others.
7. *Update the Legal Frameworks for New Media:* Reform the legal structures to address the challenges of disinformation and hate speech on social media, while ensuring the regulations align with the democratic values of free expression and transparency.
8. *Foster Regular Expert Dialogues:* Organise forums, discussions and conferences to build resilience among policymakers, institutional representatives, academics and journalists on the international, national and local level.
9. *Encourage International Cooperation:* Strengthen international inter-agency and NGO collaborations, to counter disinformation campaigns more effectively through collective action.
10. *Increase English-Language Visibility:* Enhance the presence in the English-speaking information space, to counteract the narratives set by adversarial states. Support for English-language media content and projects is vital to ensure a global outreach.

Endnotes

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