Debunk EU

Baltic states, April-June, 2020

CORONAVIRUS DISINFORMATION

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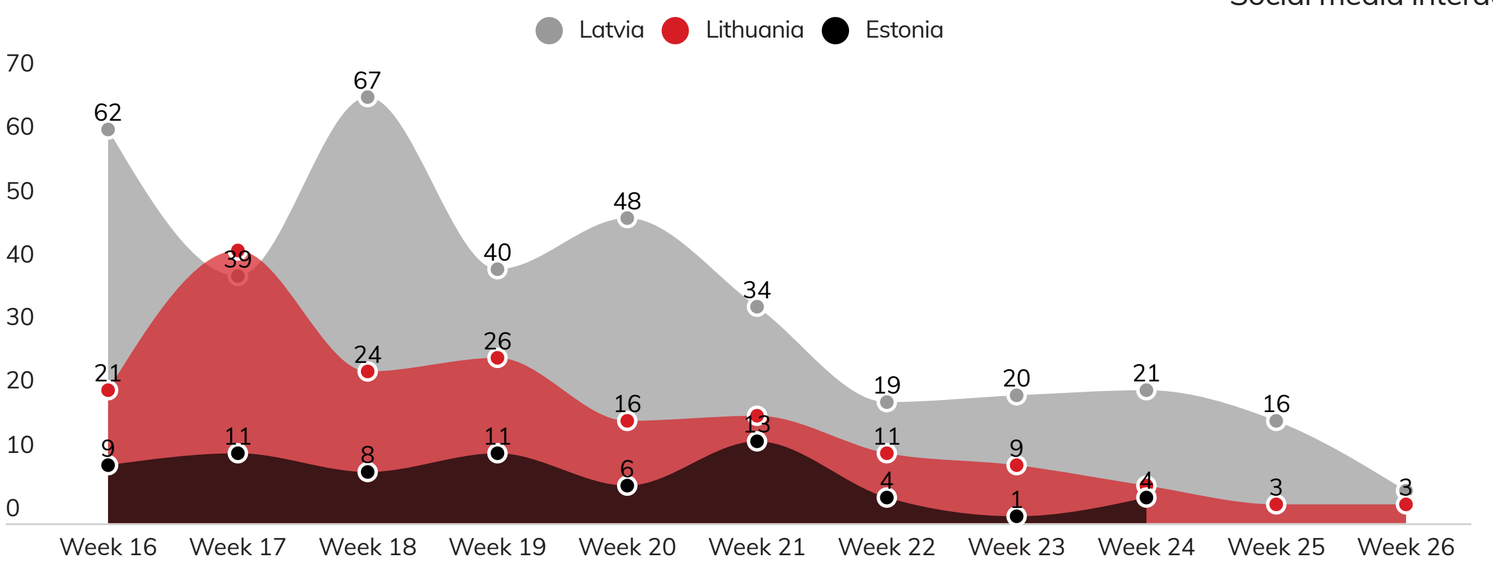
April-June, 2020

Scope

In April-June 2020, Debunk.eu analysed **9 881** articles and spotted **617 disinformation cases** related to Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in the context of COVID-19 - **179** cases in connection with Lithuania, **371** with Latvia and **67** with Estonia. The articles reached over **123.4 million contacts** through the analysed online websites.

Weekly dynamics of disinformation cases



Methodology

Debunk.eu analytical methodology allows evaluating not only quantitative parameters such as mentions of an analysed object but also a number of qualitative features of publicity such as narratives and reach. The reach is calculated for every single article taking into account the following data:

· SimilarWeb traffic
· Alexa rating
· Backlinks
· Social media interactions (reactions, shares and comments)

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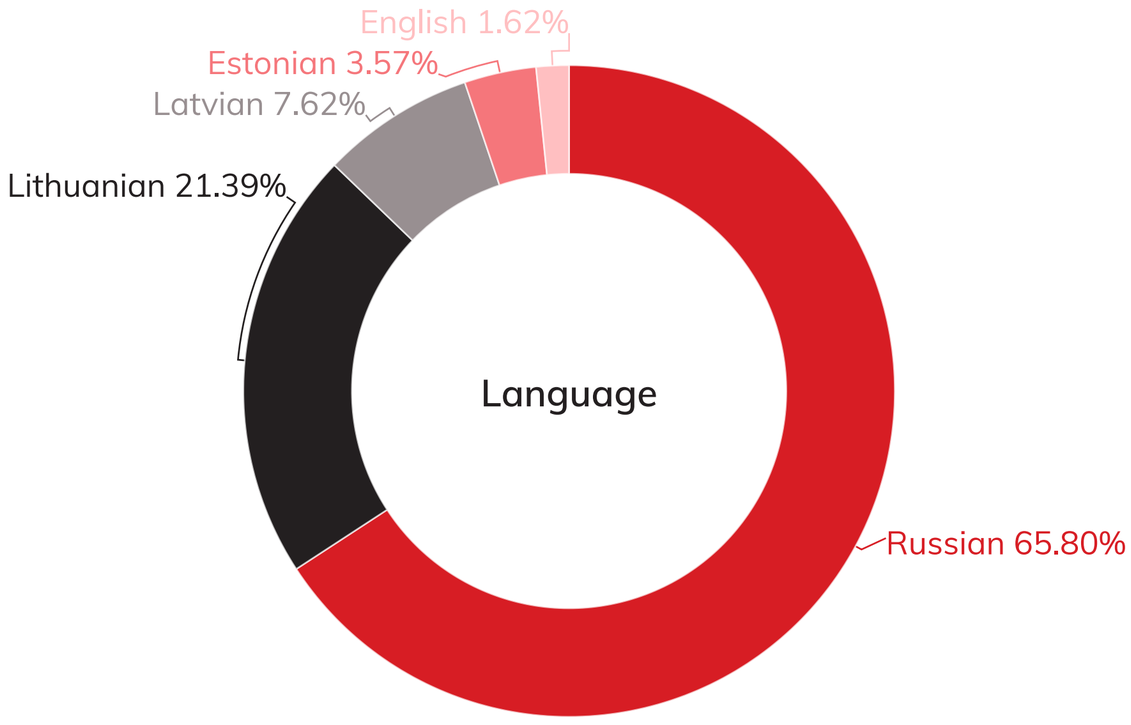
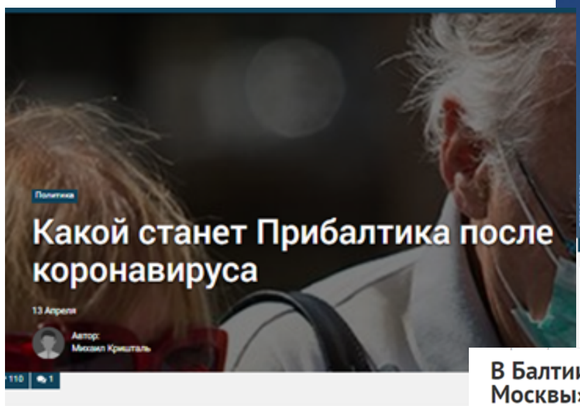
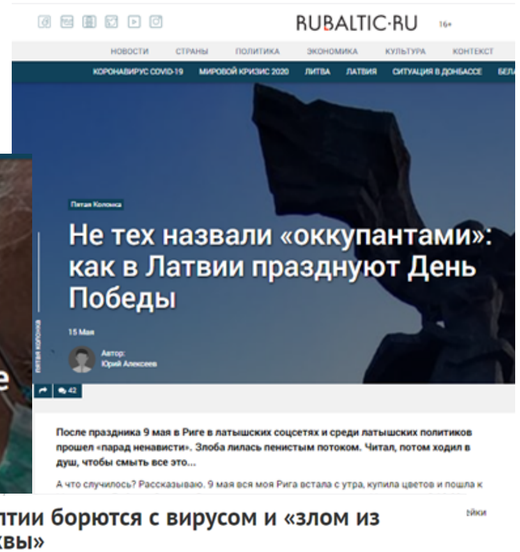
Articles by languages







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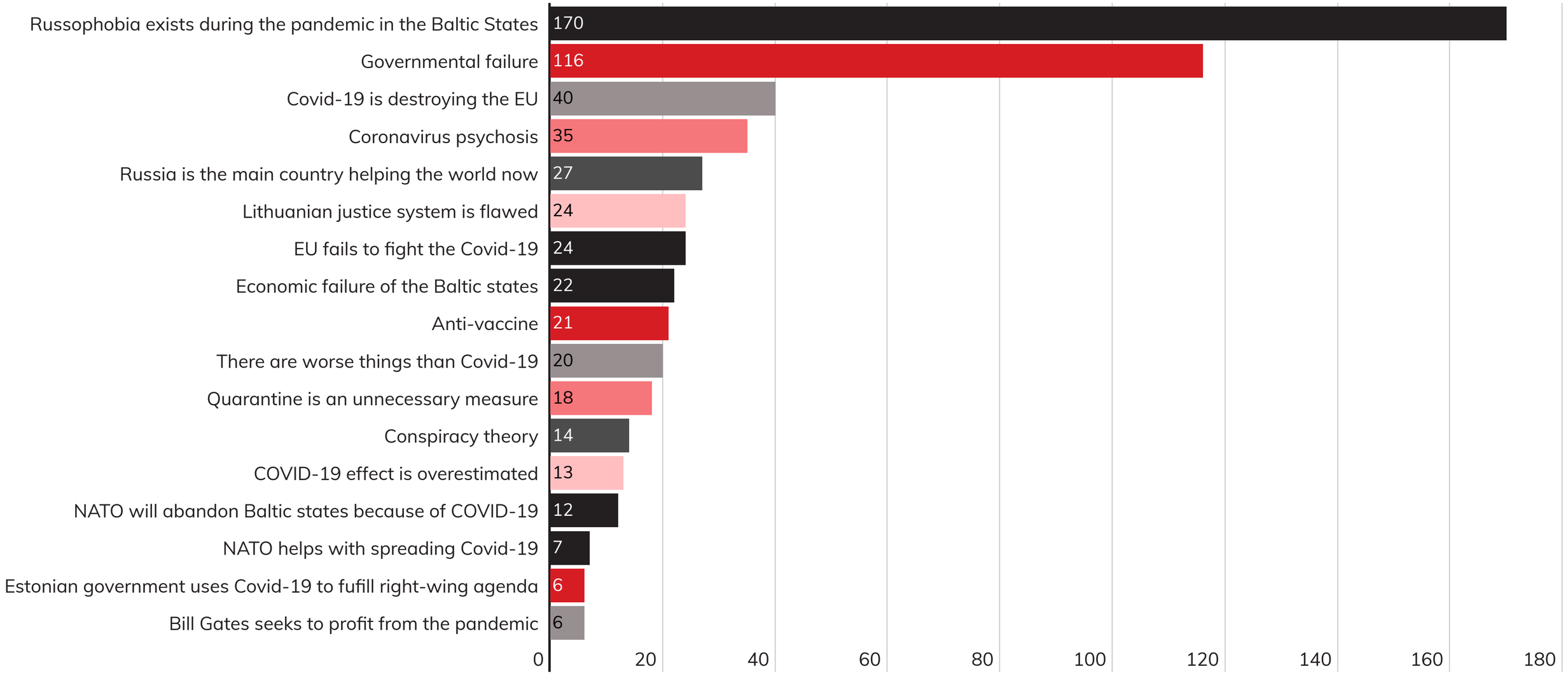
Main narratives



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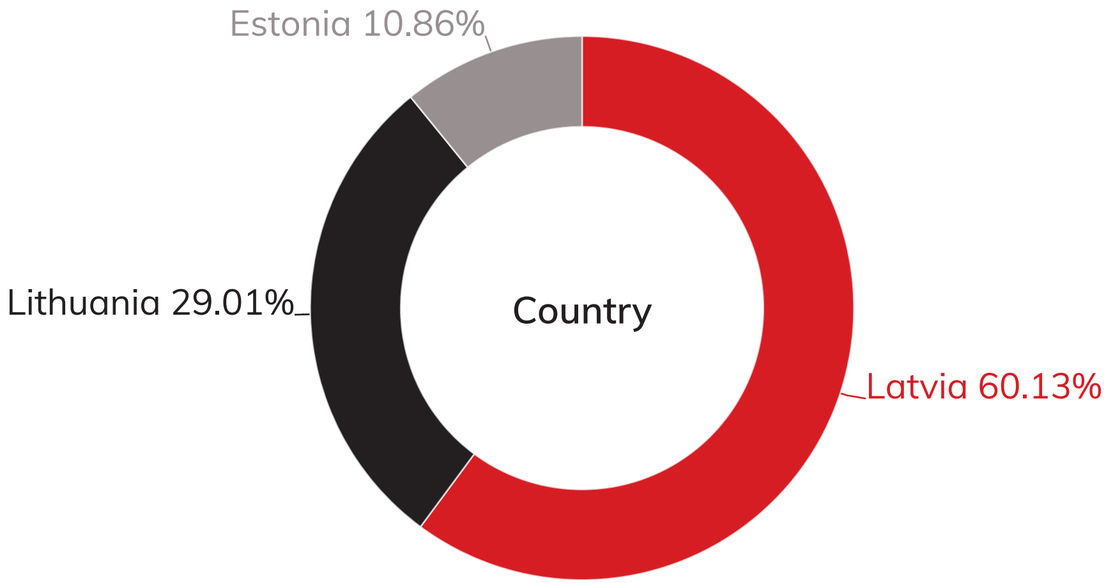
TOP 5 narratives per country

1	Russophobia exists during the pandemic in the Baltic States **(11)**
2	Economic failure of the Baltic states **(9)**
3	EU fails to fight the Covid-19 **(6)**
4	Estonian government uses Covid-19 to fulfill right-wing agenda **(6)**
5	There are worse things than Covid-19 **(6)**



1	Coronavirus psychosis **(33)**
2	Lithuanian justice system is flawed **(24)**
3	Anti-vaccine **(15)**
4	Quarantine is an unnecessary measure **(14)**
5	Russophobia exists during the pandemic in the Baltic States **(14)**

1	Russophobia exists during the pandemic in the Baltic States **(145)**
2	Governmental failure **(106)**
3	Covid-19 is destroying the EU **(36)**
4	Russia is the main country helping the world now **(23)**
5	EU fails to fight the Covid-19 **(16)**

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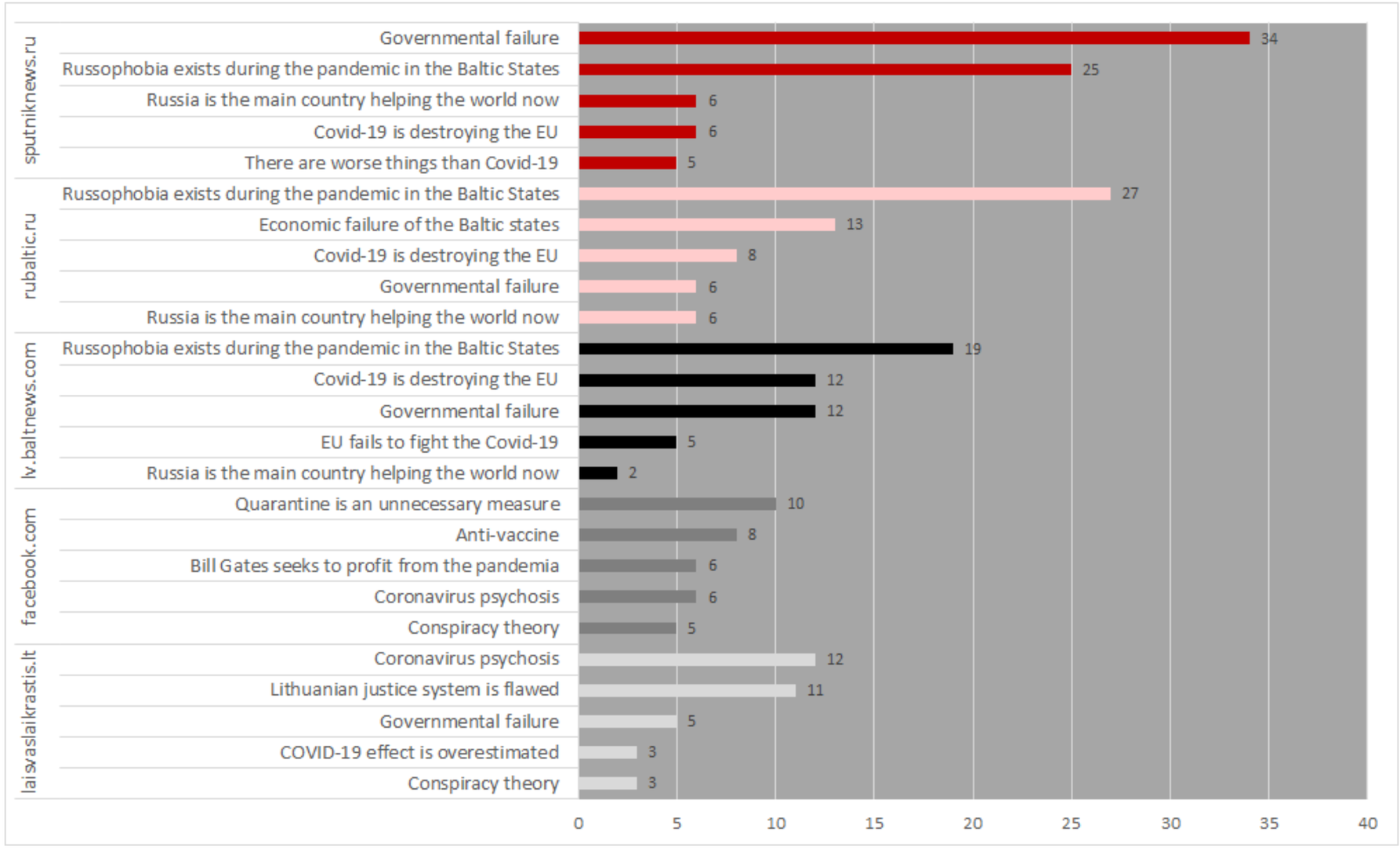
TOP5 narratives in TOP5 websites



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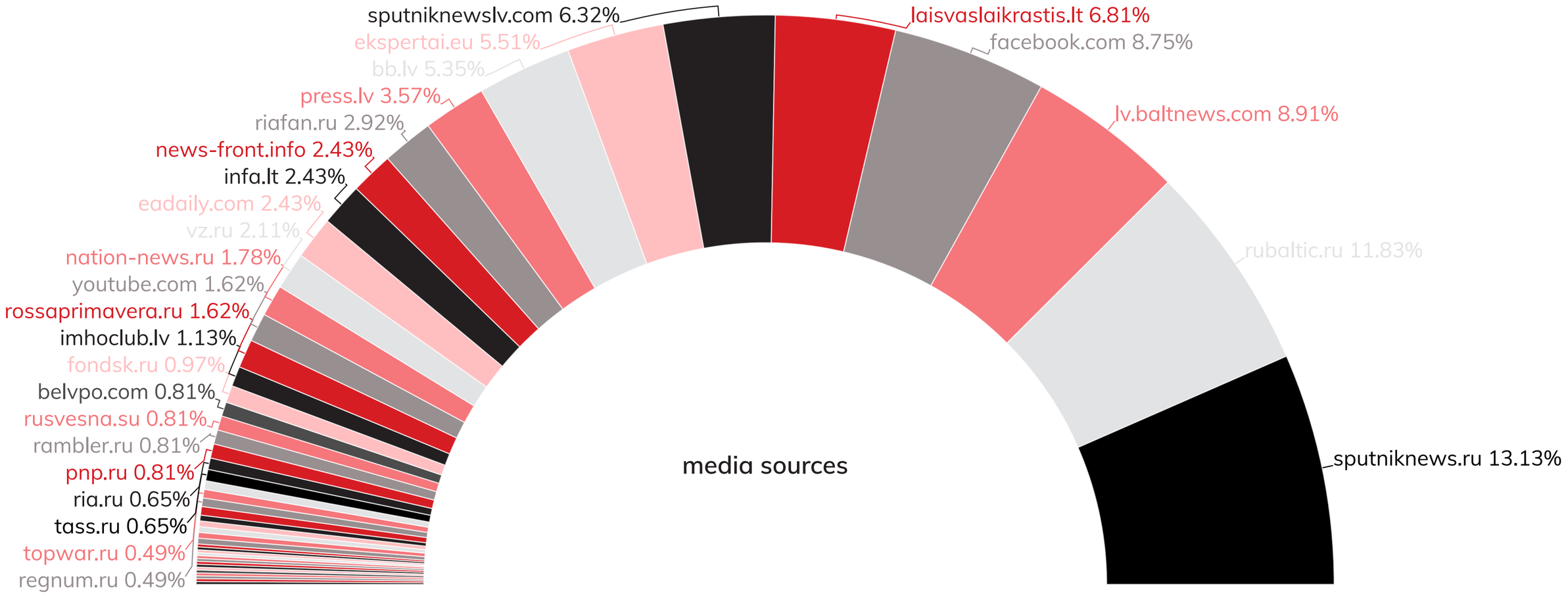
Disinformation cases by media sources



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Lithuania

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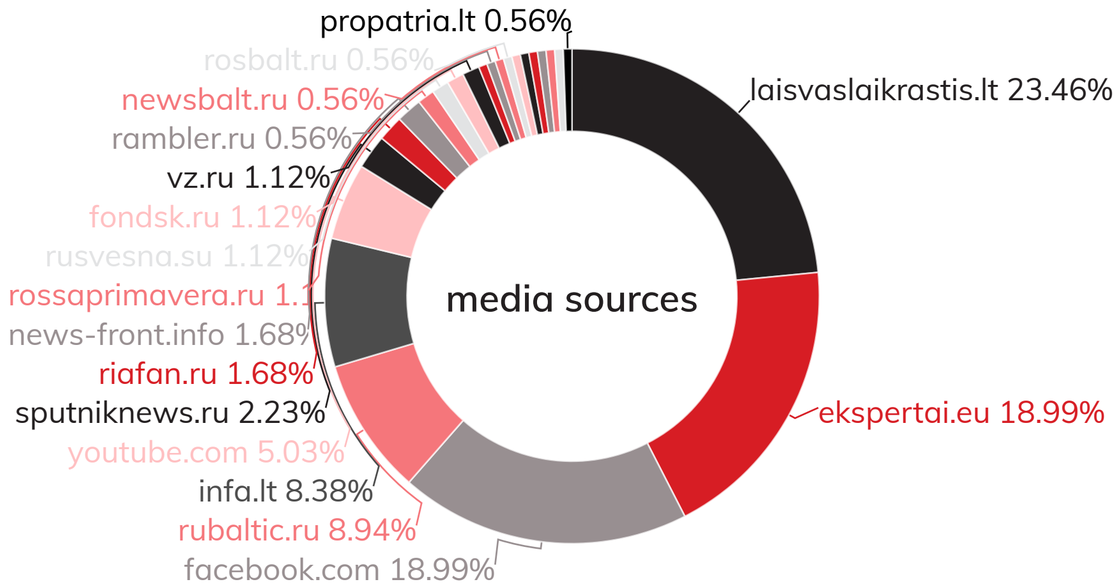
LITHUANIA

N=179

• In April-June 2020, disinformation related to COVID-19 was mostly spread by three media sources in Lithuania - laisvaslaikrastis.lt, ekspertai.eu, and posts and videos on Facebook, which constituted almost two-thirds of the overall publicity (61.4%).

• Compared to Latvia and Estonia, in terms of narratives, Lithuania stood out with the biggest scepticism towards the measures applied by the government (quarantine, vaccines), at the same time trying to diminish the image of the justice system of the country.

• One of the most interesting things observed during the pandemic is that M.G. Maksimalietis, the creator of UNFOLLOW 15min social media group had gathered an unprecedented following within an extremely short period of time. Most followers have joined the group as a direct result of the movement restrictions implemented by the authorities because of the quarantine and yet the administrators of this group have excelled in using the original momentum gained by the COVID-19 crisis for political gains.



CORONAVIRUS DISINFORMATION

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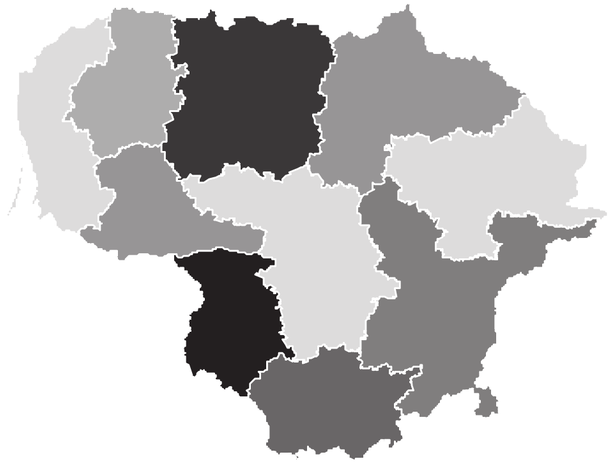
LITHUANIA

The subject of COVID-19, right after the pandemic began, has immediately been taken by previously existing propaganda media outlets who previously were known for its pro-Russian, anti-NATO, anti-EU stance such as **www.laisvaslaikrastis**, **www.ekspertai.eu**, **www.rubaltic.ru**, **www.infa.lt** and others. The same could be observed regarding previously known individuals such as **Jonas Kovalskis**, **Kazimieras Juraitis, Ugnius Kiguolis** and etc. who previously were known for their anti-Western position and who rapidly took on the topic of COVID-19. Some previously relatively unknown in the world of propaganda individuals like **Andrius Lobovas**, **Astra Astrauskaitė** have also began taking on the topic of the virus and were known to spread conspiracy theories about the origins of COVID-19, its supposed relation to the implementation of the 5G network and the harm of vaccination. Some of these individuals have been posting videos where they provoked the police by not wearing face covers in public, entering public places with no mask and etc. One of the most notable people to criticize the decisions of the government to tackle the COVID-19 crisis was one of the signatories of the Lithuanian Act of Independence **Zigmas Vaišvila** who made numerous statements regarding the supposedly overkill measures taken by the minister of health **Aurelijus Veryga** to stop the spread of the virus. Z. Vaišvila was regarded as something of a leader by the communities of the various COVID-19 disinfo social media groups. Quite a few of those social media groups have been created with the intent of spreading false information and articles, videos and posts by the above mentioned individuals or news outlets were actively shared



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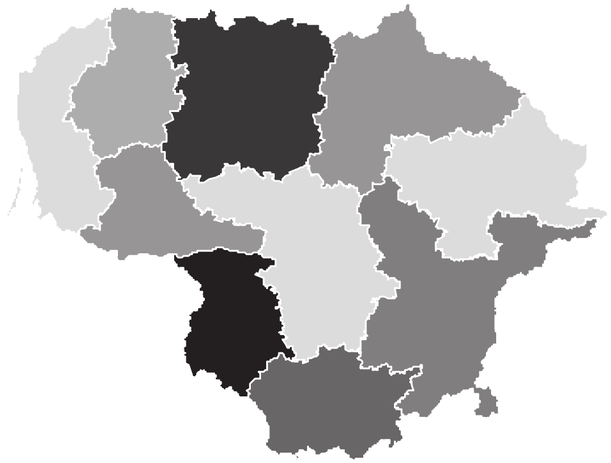
LITHUANIA

One of the largest groups was the one created by a known proponent of 'natural' medicine M.G. Maksimalietis. The group was called 'UNFOLLOW 15min' and though it was recently taken down by Facebook administration – at its peak the group numbered more than 50K members. Even though there were other similar social media groups, UNFOLLOW 15min was the most numerous and was the main platform to organise a series of protests in front of the Lithuanian Parliament in Vilnius (15min.lt is the second most popular news website in Lithuania). The protests were held against the restrictions related to the quarantine imposed by the Lithuanian government. Although at first the topic of the protests was indeed related to the quarantine – subsequent protests quickly began to take an outright anti-governmental stance with no clear objectives. As new cases of COVID-19 have been observed less frequently and quarantine restrictions were lifted more by the day, most COVID-19 focused social media groups became less and less active and some almost died out. The most active misinformation and conspiracy theory spreading individuals and news outlets seemingly have switched to the topic of 'Black Lives Matter' protests in the U.S. and Western Europe. Interestingly, the switch to the topic of BLM protests happened almost instantaneously and although the topic of COVID-19, vaccination and 5G is still being brought up – it is no longer the main focus.



Latvia

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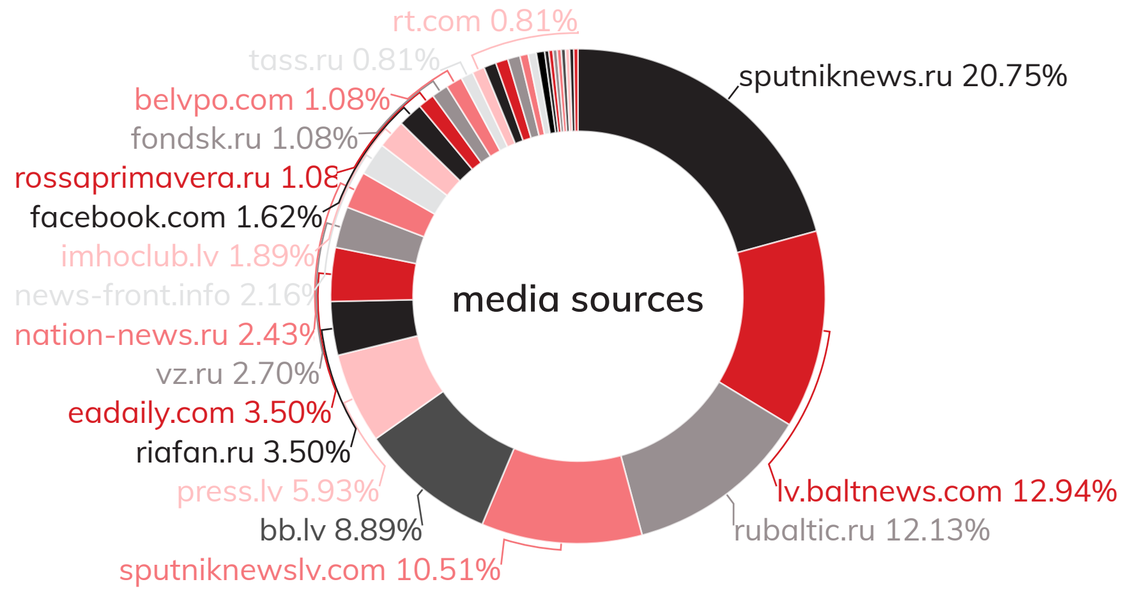
N=371

LATVIA

• In April-June 2020, disinformation related to COVID-19 was mostly spread by three media sources in Latvia - sputniknews.ru, lvbaltnews.com and rubaltic.ru, which constituted almost half of the overall publicity (45.8%).

• Compared to Lithuania and Estonia, in terms of narratives, Latvia stood out with the extremely large share of Russophobia (39.1%) followed by governmental failure (28.6%).

• The pandemic and period of emergency in Latvia was fruitful to continue similar narratives present throughout the recent years, moreover, recruit them around the issues concerning the health crisis and virus. Many activists and experts, spreading propaganda, found the period as a perfect tool to intensify their views which undermine Latvia, NATO and EU. The crisis empowered media platforms funded by Russia. They legitimised Russia's incapability to fight the consequences caused by the crisis undermining the image of other countries, for instance, the Baltics in general or Latvia.



CORONAVIRUS DISINFORMATION

LATVIA

April-June, 2020

Because of the large number of the Russian speaking citizens in Latvia and the existent cross-cultural issues between Latvians and the Russian minority, the most prevailing narratives on which media has elaborated were '**Russophobia**' and '**Failed State**'. The COVID-19 crisis and the pandemic caused a faultless period in media for Russian owned and funded platforms to spread disinformation and negative implications concerning the economic and social consequences caused by the emergency as well as government decisions for multiple issues regarding the Russian minority in Latvia.

The mass stream outlets publishing in Russian and delivering disinformation in Latvia avoided elaborating on completely ridiculous information regarding the COVID-19. Instead, the platforms often used highly ideological content or statements to influence the perception of readers frequently undermining the image of Latvia and emphasizing its inability to fight the consequences of the crisis. Moreover, stressing the incompetence of Latvia to represent the Russian minority during this though period. Often the outlets covering misleading information used the interviews and statements of well-known people in Latvia, primarily known within the Russian community, to present the disinformation or propaganda as sincere information.

Undoubtedly, the media covered other narratives as well. When the NATO training was ongoing, the media funded by Russia elaborated on the activity as a provocation towards Russia, promoting a sense of insecurity and fear between the readers. Moreover, the outlets positioned NATO as the possible source which could cause the second wave of the virus and by doing so undermined the Alliance's ability to secure the region. Likewise, the outlets twisted the European Union's portrayal numerous times, stressing Union's dissolution and presenting the Baltic countries as a weak region which the other member states might leave unsupported.

CORONAVIRUS DISINFORMATION

LATVIA

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The impact of the disinformation spread in Latvia is serious. Latvia was highly vulnerable during the health crisis, especially, towards the information impacting citizens' daily life – about social and financial issues which were stressed almost in each case of disinformation. The misleading information on the country's inability to fight the consequences, most probably, lowered the trust towards the government and leaders, especially within the Russian speaking part of the society. Therefore, the consequent distrust probably resulted in a fragile view on the European Union's ability to support Latvia and posed fear on the country's endangered position in the region under the umbrella of NATO.

Taking into account the sizable Russian speaking community in Latvia and the country's territorial location, the disinformation narratives such as '**Russophobia**', '**anti-NATO**' and '**anti-EU**', most probably, will continue to dominate in media as well in the future. The narrative of 'Russophobia' is repeatedly used by various political leaders who spread harmful propaganda to gain the support of the electorate. For instance, the media platforms funded by Russia such as Sputnik and Baltnews, most of the time, repeat the statements of politicians who present the Russian Community in Latvia or political party Harmony, which present the Russian speaking citizens in various policies. Even more, in many cases previously mentioned and other media outlets show the undermining image of the EU and NATO to legitimise Russia's actions - military as well as political and economic course in the region.

Estonia

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CORONAVIRUS DISINFORMATION

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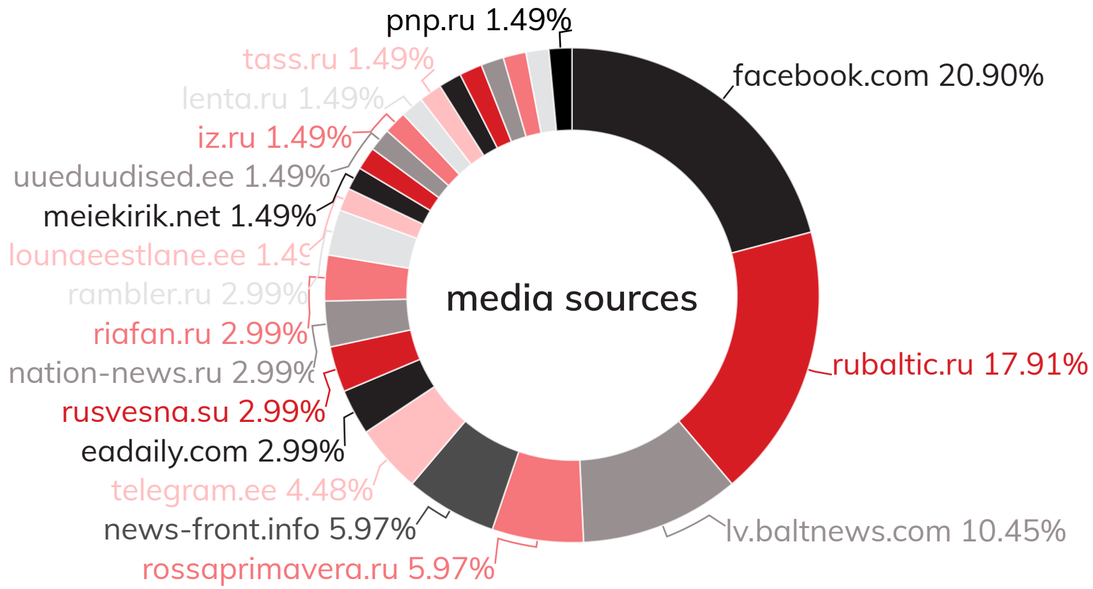
ESTONIA

N=67

• In April-June 2020, disinformation related to COVID-19 in Estonia was mostly spread though Facebook - its flow made one-fifth of the overall publicity (20.9%) and was followed by rubaltic.ru with 17.9%.

• As it was the case with Latvia, Estonia also stood out with Russophobia and Failure narratives, yet in Estonia, the media focused not on the governmental but on the economic failure of the Baltic states (16.4% and 13.4% respectively).

• During the crisis, Estonia and the Baltic states were accused of continuing the anti-Russian rhetoric and use the pandemic to strengthen their position and dislike of Russians living in the Baltic states. Instead, it was said, they should be working on finding ways to let Russia help with the economic recovery. One major economic topic in Estonia was the lack on foreign labor and the impact that had on the local farmers. Narratives focused on the possibility that the whole crisis is made up and dangers of the not vet existina vaccine.



CORONAVIRUS DISINFORMATION

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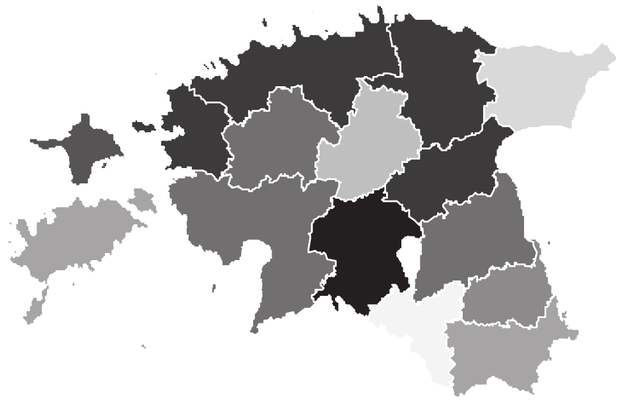
ESTONIA



Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the presence of Russophobia in Estonia was presented in hostile media outlets, mainly using selective content technique. During the crisis, Estonia and Baltic states were accused of continuing the anti-Russian rhetoric and use the pandemic to strengthen their position and dislike of Russians living in Baltic states. Russian hostile articles focused on the existence of Russophobia in the Baltic states and how Estonian government officials are making the continuation of the rhetoric despite the COVID-19 crisis more important than working on finding ways to let Russia help with the economic recovery. Hostile media focused on Estonia's failure to recognize the need for the help from Russia. Without the help from Russia, Estonia and other Baltic states will not economically survive the COVID-19 pandemic and how much the Baltic states could benefit from the economic relations with Russia. But instead of working with Russia, Estonian officials are being accused of focusing on anti-Russian rhetoric. At the same time the topics also concentrated on an overall economic and political downfall of Estonia. The economic recovery in Estonia is totally depending on EU and EU will not help Estonia from the economic downfall during and after the COVID-19 crisis. One major economic topic in Estonia was the lack on foreign labour and the impact that had on the local farmers. This resulted to huge difference of opinion between the Parliament and local farmers.

Social media outlets focused on the different conspiracy theories pertaining the worldwide quarantine and the issues around the coronavirus vaccine.

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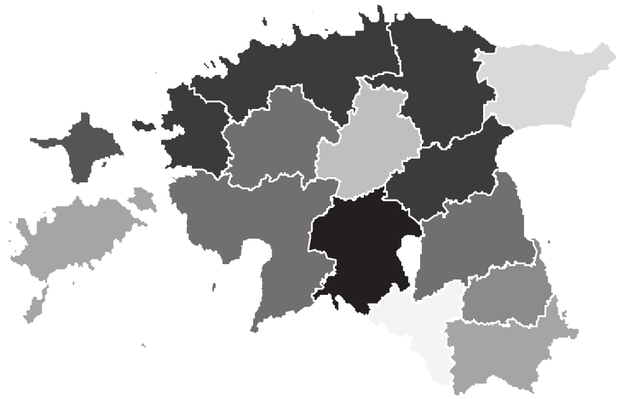
ESTONIA

Narratives focused on the possibility that the whole crisis is made up and dangers of the not yet existing vaccine. Estonian media outlets presented claims that the coronavirus pandemic is a venue to control the population and the virus does not cause the disease. Social media had discussions about the conspiracy theories about how the vaccine is a way for Bill Gates to make money and elected governments will make the vaccinations mandatory in order to insert microchips with the vaccine into the people for tracking purposes. One anti-vaccine Facebook group gained notoriety during the hight of the epidemic by posting several conspiracy theories pertaining the vaccine and validity of the COVID-19 as a disease.



CONCLUSIONS

April-June, 2020

- In April-June 2020, **617 cases** of disinformation related to COVID-19 were spotted in Russian, Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian websites and Facebook groups; the flow of (dis)information showed a declining trend towards the end of June.

- The largest share of disinformation in the context of COVID-19 in the Baltic states was related to **Latvia (60.1%)** while **Lithuania's** and **Estonia's** shares amounted to 28.3% and 13.2% respectively.

- **65.8%** of the articles related to COVID-19 disinformation were published in **Russian language**, followed by Lithuanian (21.4%) and Latvian (7.6%).

- **Russophobia** stood out as the main narrative in the Baltics - although it was extremely visible in Latvia (39.1%), the narrative also made to TOP5 in both Lithuania and Estonia.

- More than half of the coronavirus releated disinformation in the Baltic States **(55.8%)** was spread by the following **6 media outlets**: sputniknews.ru (13.1%), rubaltic.ru (11.8%), baltnews.com (8.9%), facebook.com (8.8%), laisvas laikrastis.lt (6.8%) and sputniknewslv.com (6.3%).