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# What a Human-Centred Approach Reveals About Disinformation Policies: The Baltic Case

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## Abstract

The Baltic countries' responses to disinformation are widely recognized for their effectiveness in balancing "hard" and "soft" approaches while upholding democratic values (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2024). This article argues for additional efforts and more focused approaches to sustain societal resilience amid increasing geopolitical uncertainties and national political and economic risks, resulting in challenges of a more "epistemic character," such as growing information-related vulnerabilities, informational inequalities, and polarization. To expose inconsistencies and gaps in the current strategies and agendas for countering disinformation, the article proposes a human-centred approach based on the critical realist framework elaborated by Margareth Archer (1995, 2020). While Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have advanced beyond mere risk awareness in their national policies, this article argues that a more targeted approach is necessary—one that goes beyond the protective logic of securitization and toward evidence-informed awareness of the divergences and information-related inequalities among people.

## Keywords

agency; Baltic countries; countering disinformation; disinformation; governance; informational inequality; media literacy; risk awareness; vulnerability

## 1. Introduction

Significant variations exist in how European-wide frameworks for societal resilience development are integrated into national policies and communication governance models (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2023). When addressing digital disruptions, such as the rise of disinformation, misinformation, and the dominance of other forms of dysfunctional content, including hate speech and radicalization in digital discourses, two opposing yet coexisting logics, and the necessary tools to mitigate them, emerge. On the one hand, there are apparent attempts to impose measures associated with "hard power," based on ideas of protectionism, and "exceptional decision-making," in specific circumstances, indicating a willingness to respond with more substantial (regulatory) positions when faced with particular challenges and crises (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2023). On the other hand, advocating for measures for platform accountability, strengthening fact-checking in the media, and providing media literacy programs for citizens are essential "soft" strategies (Sádaba & Salaverría, 2023).

Although a wide range of policy approaches (cf. Tuñón Navarro et al., 2025) are found across Europe, there is no clear understanding of which efforts might yield explicit and desirable outcomes. As European-wide strategies for information resilience are not uniformly integrated into national resilience strategies, different national policy steps deserve to be identified and specifically discussed (Balčytienė & Horowitz, 2023; Dragomir & Túñez López, 2024).

Our analysis uses exemplary cases from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to study the adaptations of the EU policies as well as specific national measures elaborated to combat disinformation in the Baltic region. We examine how the policy approach, influenced by awareness of disinformation risks, is implemented at the structural level, and which characteristics—those starting with the individual and expanding to various sectors (Truusa, 2021)—are involved in addressing information threats. We also examine how these approaches integrate with more "soft" perspectives on media literacy and media education, which have been developed for democratic expression and active citizenship.

Since we are examining the outcomes of the decision-making process reflected in structural reforms, the primary focus of the analysis is consistency in communications policy framing and the actual experiences of citizens.

For this task, the perspective of critical realism (Archer, 1995) appears of exceptional significance. While acknowledging the presence of dominant objective social structures, the critical realist approach stresses the human-centred view, namely, it aims to examine people's understandings and perceptions of the studied reality. It is our hypothesis that policy formation and the development of strategic responses to counter disinformation can be a good focus for analysis when examined from the perspective of decision-making by engaged agents (social actors and stakeholders). Hence, our study focuses on the complex interplay and balance among structural, agentic, and communicative (cultural) powers and their manifestations in complex social relations.

The study's main questions follow the societal resilience development goal, explicitly analysing the actors' (stakeholders') participatory roles and their effectiveness in policy making. While adhering to the whole-of-society ideals, which run on inclusion and universalist values, the analysis seeks to reveal

characteristics of current policies and models of information exchanges and their related strengths and weaknesses in a specific geographic, political, and cultural context.

As an important contextual factor, it needs to be noted that the above-mentioned Baltic countries, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, implemented economic and political transformations based on strict neoliberal principles. These countries, once described as the "paragons of neoliberalism" (Salyga, 2023, p. 2), embraced market-oriented reforms; prioritizing free-market capitalism, privatization, and limited government intervention coupled with the promotion of individualism (Bohle & Greskovits, 2007; Norkus, 2023). Unfortunately, this has happened at the expense of social welfare programs and public services, leading to diminishing social bonds and a reduction of safety nets for the population (Bērziņš et al., 2024; Ķešāne, 2023). Hence, it is worth studying what expectations are posited on people by the neoliberal policy agendas in the midst of the disinformation crisis.

The discussion begins with the argument that evidence-informed policy formation and resilient civics do not simply result from a linear process or aggregation of actions. Instead, such aims manifest as the result of an ongoing process of policy framing and negotiations between ideals and the visions sustained by various actors.

## 2. Background: Informational Vulnerability and Risk Awareness

To begin with, the global spread of online disinformation should be addressed as a "wicked problem" following the definition by Peters (2017), who states that a wicked problem is "complex, involving multiple possible causes and internal dynamics that could not be assumed to be linear, and have very negative consequences for society if not addressed properly" (p. 385). A wicked problem cannot ever be solved: At best, it can be managed if proper strategies are in place, which draws on co-regulation performed by governments and platforms with, more importantly, the involvement of civil society and citizens (Montgomery, 2020).

Wicked problems typically emerge from inter-dependent socio-cultural contexts, adding complexity and ambiguity for policymakers and researchers. Drafting policies to address wicked problems requires a holistic understanding of the entire context, which, in the case of online disinformation, is determined by the specificities of the national information ecosystem on one hand and a wide range of stakeholders seeking different solutions on the other. If addressed this way, disinformation pressures us to examine the broader struggle with implications for institutions, media systems, audience media consumption patterns, and many other issues. Similarly, it invites various approaches for scholarly analysis, including those encompassing digital, technological, and socio-political outcomes. So, addressing online disinformation as a wicked problem cannot yield a single definitive approach leading to a successful solution.

Despite numerous scholarly attempts to clarify the fuzziness of the disinformation phenomenon and the responses to combat it—ranging from structural and legal protection systems at the governmental level to fact-checking and media literacy efforts by various organizations—there are still quite a few uncertainties. In most cases, the emphasis is on promoting societal resilience as a favourable outcome around which all solutions to mitigate disinformation should revolve (Humprecht et al., 2020). On the other hand, societal resilience is not a fixed point that can be reached; instead, it needs to be defined as a complex state characterized by multilayered features, some of which can be determined from structural (macro and mezzo) or agentive (micro) perspectives (Balčytienė & Horowitz, 2023).

In the last decade, numerous steps have been taken to counter disinformation at the level of the EU. The main lines of action include: (a) developing policies to strengthen European democracies, making it more difficult for disinformation actors to misuse online platforms, and pushing towards the increased responsibility of online platforms; (b) countering foreign interference and cyberattacks through awareness-raising projects, advanced technological solutions, and improved coordination; (c) building societal resilience against disinformation through media literacy and awareness raising; (d) cooperating with institutions, national authorities, civil society, and other organizations (Borz et al., 2024; Datzer & Lonardo, 2022; European Commission, n.d.).

All these action lines are well-prepared and thoughtfully expressed; however, we argue that gaps still exist in this approach, which can be referred to as "unresolved issues." These issues are context-dependent and thus require more effective and coordinated responses that would not suffer from terminological unclarity, unclear and untested legal foundations, a weak evidence base, and a lack of political mandate (Pamment, 2020; Peukert, 2024). Indeed, numerous steps at the EU level have been framed towards countering disinformation, including the creation of special government agencies like the East StratCom Task Force (2015), the adoption of the High-Level Group on fake news and online disinformation (2018), the development and supervision of two Codes of Practice on Disinformation (2018 and 2022), and the adoption of the Digital Services Act in 2022, which obliges the largest online platforms and online search engines to assess and mitigate systemic disinformation risks stemming from their services (Peukert, 2024). Still, the contextually determined challenges posed by various approaches to the disinformation problem applied by the member states weaken the coordination of efforts advanced by the EU institutions.

With this in mind, we contend that national countries' responses to the influx of disinformation should be examined to better understand how the European strategies to protect democratic communication processes manifest in national policies and what the national and regional solutions are that countries choose to work on. Our main argument is that there must be a balance between the structural measures (macro level), most explicitly evident in policy initiatives and governance decisions, and the micro-level features, such as the level of information and communication rights and media use preferences manifested by ordinary citizens (Ala-Fossi et al., 2019; Horowitz et al., 2024).

Therefore, following this line of analysis, countering disinformation must be seen not only as a technologically geared politico-economic challenge and a services-relating issue on the side of global technological infrastructures and platforms' policies but also as a sociopolitical and sociocultural process at both national and regional levels, involving various actors (stakeholders) and requiring their response, awareness, and engagement. When analysed from a processual and human-centred perspective, each actor's (or group of actors') understanding and performed role count, and thus, the conceptual definition of risk awareness (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2024) appears well-suited for highlighting specificities of strategic thinking to establish communicative practice among those partners. In broad terms, risk awareness concerning disinformation represents a comprehensive strategy covering various dimensions. The dominant approach applied in different analyses relies on examining the system-level characteristics (see, for example, Humprecht et al., 2020, 2021) and individual capacities (Jolls, 2022) required to minimize disinformation's detrimental effects.

In our analysis, we argue that a country's level of risk perception is indicated by strategic policymaking and the development of long-term strategies to address emerging informational inequalities and information-related vulnerabilities. Our argument is framed according to such a line of thinking: Since decision-making and information processing are socio-cultural processes sensitive to values and communication traditions relevant to a national context, as well as a country's geopolitical location and memory politics (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 2012), we want to suggest that such cultural variations in information-related thinking across countries will also manifest in strategic policymaking.

By advocating for this approach, however, we endorse that information-related risks and crises are not solely linked to physical phenomena, such as digitally accelerated communication leading to an overabundance of information. Instead, these risks represent connections to people's evolving media awareness and self-efficacy assessments, which are influenced by social, cultural, and psychological factors, and lead to informational vulnerabilities (Balčytienė & Iarovyi, 2023). Thus, we argue that by taking a broader view of people's skills and life experiences, a human-centred approach could provide invaluable insights, considering people's ability to react to rapidly changing digital media environments (Balčytienė & Horowitz, 2023).

Following such a line of thought, the policy-thinking and conceptualization of (dis)information vulnerability and responses to it, via risk-awareness strategies and other measures, must be extended to incorporate new aspects—not only those understood in classical terms, such as socio-economic disparities like age, education, and income, but also to address people's worldviews and epistemic variations. In this context, informational vulnerability is defined by additional factors, namely individual information accessibility and responsible media use (for an accountable practice and communication rights perspective, consult, for example, Horowitz et al., 2024), as well as individual self-efficacy assessments.

To conclude, all societies selectively identify vulnerabilities, and it is unlikely any polity could free itself of them. In the era of digital communication, individuals and groups are likely to become sensitive and vulnerable to disinformation due to their limited knowledge, understanding, and control of macro-level situations, media representations, and micro-level communication rights.

## 3. Cultures of Resilience: Human-Centred Analytical Framework

In the prevalent mindset, the Baltic countries are often praised for their coordinated efforts and resilience against disinformation (Balčytienė et al., 2024; Keršanskas, 2021). Though this might be a valid result, more explanation is needed about what specific institutional or cultural arrangements (or a combination of both) in these countries play the most decisive role in contributing to such assessments. In other words, insights are needed regarding governance arrangements focused on countering disinformation and key contextual factors that define their specifics.

To address these questions, we intend to follow the critical realist tradition using Margaret Archer's morphogenetic/morphostatic analysis approach (Archer, 1995, 2020). Drawing on the work of Roy Bhaskar (2008), in morphogenetic/morphostatic analysis, Archer proposes the idea that every structural arrangement in a studied social domain must be viewed within the historical context of implemented patterns of change. This approach is primarily actor-oriented and, therefore, human-centred, highlighting the role of agential responses in shaping social actions and outcomes. In other words, it strongly emphasizes individual

decision-making, specifically the relationships and interactions between different agents and the reflectivity of consequences.

By keeping a human-centred focus, critical realists generally review social dynamics by identifying distinctive causal powers and the actors' responses to these, exercised at a given time. In this way, the analysis does not ignore temporality or the structural contextualization of actors' interactions, interests, and commitments. As argued by Archer (2020, p. 138):.

> What is distinctive about social reality—or any section of it—is it's being intrinsically, inherently, and ineluctably 'peopled.' Its ontological constitution is utterly activity-dependent, even though people's thoughts and actions give rise to factors that are 'not people'—the most important being culture and structure..

Furthermore:.

> For any process to merit consideration as a generator of social change, it must necessarily incorporate (i) structured human relations (context-dependence), because there is no such thing as 'context-less action' and calling it 'situated' makes no difference; (ii) human actions (activity-dependence), because even the most distant outcomes, such as GDP or climate change in the Anthropocene, would not exist without the continuous actions of people, and (iii) human ideas (concept-dependence), because activities like 'voting,' 'paying rent,' or 'opening a bank account' require that actors have some notion of what they are doing, however vague or misguided. (Archer, 2020, p. 138).

As briefly mentioned in previous sections, a "human-centred" (also referred to as "people-focused" by Margaret Archer) view becomes highly significant when uncovering the actions and ideas of different agents involved in creating specific responses, such as drafting strategies for media literacy programs in our case. The decentralizing nature of the internet attracts many participants to the information space, with a considerable number who also harbour malicious intentions. If not adequately addressed, unlimited digital expressions risk leading to the acceptance and "normalization" of dysfunctional forms of communication, such as spreading false information, promoting hate speech, and increasing radicalization. In response to such harms, various analysts (Cammaerts, 2024; Siapera, 2023) suggest defending democracy through new governance frameworks prioritizing public and democratic interests over private and commercial ones sustained by the politico-economic functioning of platforms. Calls like these are inspired by human-centred views that advocate universalist values..

However, until now, as conventional solutions, the applied disinformation countering efforts have been typically focused on developing digital resilience against disruptive communication, including regulatory measures, media fact-checking, and media literacy initiatives aimed at individuals and groups (Brogi & De Gregorio, 2024). Despite implementing these various policy measures to address disinformation, the detrimental effects on the population remain evident throughout Europe. As the Flash Eurobarometer 522 study reveals, citizens in different EU states admit to needing assistance to respond effectively to manipulative content: 39% of the respondents believed that people using online platforms should get better at distinguishing false and misleading information, whereas only 12% of the respondents thought that people are sufficiently equipped, on their own, to identify what is true and what is false (European Commission, 2023, p. 46).

Our human-centred perspective suggests that structural–institutional and organizational–cultural aspects are significant for sustainable democratic ways of life. Quite naturally, since disinformation distorts traditional routines and methods of knowing and trusting institutions (Neuberger et al., 2023), the functions of conventional news media are crucial in this context. Comparative studies show that in countries where public service media are highly used, people express more trust in both media and political institutions (Balčytienė & Horowitz, 2023; Humprecht et al., 2021; Kõuts et al., 2013; Newton, 2016). Public service media are sustained by ideals of inclusion, accountability, service, care, and social solidarity; hence, functioning information structures act as viable frameworks to maintain these social norms in people's daily practices. Fact-checking journalism also acts as a mediator in assisting citizens in navigating the informational space. In many countries, a firm reliance on fact-checking, aimed at verifying the accuracy of publicly disseminated claims, is recognized as one of the critical activities to mitigate the harms of disinformation (Miller & Vaccari, 2020) or even considered a "democracy-building tool" (Amazeen, 2020, p. 90). In fact, according to Bateman and Jackson (2024), the current scientific evidence supports fact-checking as a generally helpful instrument; however, at the same time, studies demonstrate that the effects of fact-checking vary substantially and are related to a myriad of contextual factors, the influences of which are not yet fully known (see Arcos et al., 2022, for systematic review). One central problem is related to the fact that manipulated information can be produced extremely quickly, but fact-checking and disseminating a response need considerable time and resources; hence, nothing prevents false information from reaching large audiences before it gets debunked (see, e.g., Vilmer, 2021). The conclusion is that while fact-checking is beneficial, focused efforts are needed, more than mere fact-checking, to solve epistemically grounded problems. Changing a person's worldview is nearly impossible just by bringing more facts (cf. Nyhan et al., 2020; Walter & Tukachinsky, 2020); thus, other, more informed efforts are required.

To assist in such argumentation, our focus employs the concept of "locus of control," which enhances the analytical lens provided by the human-centred view. In his framework for media literacy, Potter (2004) used this concept to emphasize that media literacy depends not only on people's skills for handling different sources of information but also on their assessments, feelings, and self-perceptions. James W. Potter famously wrote that media literacy is "the set of perspectives from which we expose ourselves to the media and interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter" (Potter, 2004, pp. 58–59). Hence, individuals who feel confident in their ability to find and consume high-quality information, and are responsible for proactively doing so, are less likely to fall for disinformation. Passive information users, on the other hand, are more vulnerable to disinformation threats (Bateman & Jackson, 2024). Similarly, Maksl et al. (2015) found that individuals with a "high locus of control" score higher in news consumption and resilience against false information. However, a "high locus of control" in the media consumption process might trigger unwanted effects, as argued by Mihailidis (2009, p. 9): "Critical thought can quickly become cynical thought."

In conclusion, although individual capacities matter greatly, they are interrelated with the perceived role and quality of the external environment, formed via information cultures and historical traditions (Balčytienė et al., 2024; Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 2012). This last observation also sums up that people's views and "locus of control" must be considered central in policy design, paying attention to structural, institutional, and organizational-cultural matters.

## 4. Policy Responses and Examples From the Baltic Countries

In the following section, examples from the three Baltic countries highlight how notions similar to those used in Europe-wide frameworks for societal resilience development are integrated into national policies and communication governance models. The analysis outlines the coexistence of two opposing perspectives: the notion of "hard power" and securitization seen in institutional efforts and the "softer" approach related to citizen empowerment (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2023).

### 4.1. Institutional Restructuring as a Component of a Comprehensive Defence System

According to the human-centred approach, which flexibly incorporates contextual, agentive, and ideational aspects, truly understanding resilience to disinformation requires focusing on multiple environments—cultural, economic, legislative, technological, political, and educational—and collaborative actions (Liu et al., 2017, 2020). Regarding such contextual factors and their interdependency, the Baltic States have been united in the mission to develop societal resilience and collaborate on information warfare and strategic communication for more than a decade (cf. Baltic Assembly, 2009). In 2014, the Baltic Assembly issued a resolution calling on the parliaments and governments of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, as well as the Baltic Council of Ministers, "to develop strategic communication capabilities that can help protect against information attacks and hostile propaganda, also information tools and channels used in civil emergencies" (Baltic Assembly, 2014, p. 4). Since then, the topic has been a priority, and the Baltic Assembly has issued different calls for joint strategic actions. In particular, it has been advised that joint measures need to be implemented in the region for "counter-acting Russian propaganda and increasing public awareness of disinformation campaigns launched by external forces," both of which are seen as measures for decreasing the vulnerability of societies (Baltic Assembly, 2015, p. 2). Furthermore, the Baltic States have not only declared to be united in this mission, but have also supported similar efforts in Eastern partnership countries, e.g., Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine (cf. Baltic Assembly, 2015) years before the Russian military invasion of Ukraine; and emphasized the need for continuous cooperation and strengthening of strategic communication capabilities amongst the whole EU and NATO alliance (Baltic Assembly, 2015).

Moreover, since 2015, the promotion of strategic communication, "including the provision of quality, unbiased information within the region, protection of European values, increasing public awareness about democratic values, supporting independent media," has been a shared priority for the Baltic states (Baltic Council, 2015, p. 4). To reach this goal, the Baltic Centre of Media Excellence, a hub for "smart journalism," was established to facilitate professional dialogue in the region. In addition, the Baltic Assembly (Baltic Assembly, 2017, p. 2) has emphasized the need to "develop joint educational programs and projects on strategic communication," as well as to "develop joint bilateral and trilateral programs and projects amongst state-funded mass media" (Baltic Assembly, 2018, p. 2).

At the individual country level, we see a strong leaning towards securitization as a driver in institutional reforms. For example, in Estonia, the National Defence Development Plan 2017–2026 emphasizes the need for developing strategic communication and psychological defence to combat disinformation. To achieve this goal, a dedicated strategic communication team was founded under the Government Communication Unit of the Government Office in 2018; and the Estonian Defence Forces have established their own Strategic Communications Centre and a Cyber and Information Operations Centre. The latter is crucial as the Internal

Security Strategy 2020–2030, issued by the Ministry of the Interior (2020, p. 13), states that Estonia must be equipped to counter cyber-attacks and address hybrid threats. The topic of informational resilience or similar terminology is in fact present in different strategy documents e.g., the Estonian Foreign Policy Strategy 2030 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020) compiled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Estonian Digital Agenda 2030 (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, 2021) prepared under the leadership of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, the National Defence Development Plan 2031 prepared by the Ministry of Defence (2021), and the foundations of the National Security Concept of Estonia (Republic of Estonia Government, 2023).

In Latvia, the State Chancellery issued a conceptual report (Latvian State Chancellery, 2023) regarding the security of the state's strategic communication and information environment for the years 2023–2027. It states that the informational space and its security are equally dependent on three pillars: (a) effective communication by state and municipal institutions with their target audiences; (b) a strong and high-quality media environment and journalism offering; (c) a skilled, educated, and engaged society that can recognize and resist manipulations in the informational space (Latvian State Chancellery, 2023, p. 2). The authors of the report envision that by 2027, at least 75% of Latvia's population (aged 18 and older) will possess basic media and information literacy skills. The authors of the report state that:

> Achieving this goal will require resources, recognizing that investments in people and their resilience strengthen national security and defence against hybrid threats. It is also necessary to enhance the psychological resilience of the population against information manipulation operations and foreign interference in the information space to promote successful and effective crisis management in the future. (Latvian State Chancellery, 2023, p. 19)

In 2023, the National Crisis Management Centre was established as a structural unit of the Government Chancellery in Lithuania to coordinate the activities of national authorities in preventing and counteracting information threats. This Centre manages and coordinates the state's strategic communication in national security. In 2024, it consolidated and developed a unified model for monitoring and analysing information incidents, utilizing a standardized data format methodology and advanced technological solutions.

In addition to these institutionalized efforts, legal norms exist in all three countries that address hooliganism or public order disturbances, which can be applied to those who spread false information. For instance, in 2024, Lithuania amended its criminal code to outlaw manipulated social media accounts that disseminate information to harm the constitutional order, territorial integrity, defence, or other state interests; and explicitly forbids the dissemination of disinformation (Buholcs et al., 2024). In Latvia, however, amendments to the Latvian Criminal Law, from 2024, made the use of deepfakes to manipulate elections illegal (Buholcs et al., 2024); while Estonia has taken steps to fight against health disinformation by adding a subsection to the Public Health Act (6 §12; Riigikogu, 1995), and a special subsection of the Penal Code (1 §278; Riigikogu, 2001) describes the misdemeanour offence of making false emergency calls. Among other "hard" power measures against disinformation, the three Baltic countries have accepted legal norms that allow blocking content that violates public interests (Buholcs et al., 2024).

Overall, aspects of securitization in the fight against disinformation emerge, echoing the processes currently occurring in the EU (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2023). The above-identified examples mainly highlight the work

done on a macro level, which outlines reliance on strategic communication, institutional and structural changes, and more substantial restrictions in national laws. However, these measures seem to represent just "one side of the coin"; alongside those efforts, we see a strong dependence of institutions on media literacy skills within society. As Tessa Jolls argued, the changing security landscape and disruptions require citizens to serve as the first line of defence (Jolls, 2022). Hence, in this context, "media literacy is a way to help ensure resiliency and problem-solving skills, providing people with the agency they need as active participants in the online and offline worlds" (Jolls, 2022, p. 6).

The following section outlines the responses taken by Baltic countries to strengthen societal resilience through media literacy activities.

### 4.2. Media Literacy for Empowerment and Active Citizenship

On the policy level, resilience building within the media sector is generally seen as strongly related to sufficient media literacy in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, combined with trust in media (see, e.g., Balčytienė et al., 2024; Kõuts-Klemm et al., 2022). Policymakers in all three countries are actively devising strategies to enhance public awareness, and this approach appears beneficial when, internationally, we see decreasing interest in news, declining trust in journalism, and scepticism of media literacy (Newman et al., 2024; OECD, 2024). The measures include media literacy in school curricula, providing up-to-date teaching materials, and developing mentorship and supervision programs for various groups (news media, teachers, librarians, and creative artists). Hence, in general, even though the media literacy policymaking has been filled with conceptual confusion (cf. Teperik et al., 2022), steps in the direction of media literacy and media education have been undertaken since the Baltic states regained their independence in 1990 (Kine & Davidsone, 2021). This effort has intensified in the last decade, with some differences between the three countries.

In Estonia, following the broad security ideas, the components of media literacy have been touched upon in state documents related to national defence (e.g., Ministry of Defence, n.d.; Republic of Estonia Government, 2017). These documents do not use the term "media literacy" but instead tackle the steps needed for promoting "psychological defence" i.e., "informing society and raising awareness about information-related activities aimed at harming Estonia's constitutional order, society's values and virtues" (Republic of Estonia Government, 2017, p. 20). The documents highlight the need to inform the public about information-related dangers while ensuring that everyone has access to diverse information sources to build a more resilient society (Voltri, 2021). In addition, the Education Strategy 2021–2035 developed by the Ministry of Education and Research has included "raising the learner's awareness of the opportunities and risks of the information society" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2021, p. 21) as one of the goals for the future. However, diving deeper into the actions, it is more difficult to pinpoint what, exactly, is planned or the budget being directed to it.

In Latvia, in a similar vein, after the annexation of large parts of Ukraine by Russia in 2014 and the immense increase of Kremlin-supported propaganda campaigns, a gradual shift has happened from notions of media literacy as mainly connected to digitization and digital skills education to increasingly seeing media literacy as a crucial element for national security and the country's ability to build societal resilience against Kremlin propaganda (Denisa-Liepniece, 2022). The highest planning document in force, the National Development Plan for 2021–2027, states that media literacy and critical thinking can be seen as the best defence of Latvia

against hybrid threats (Cross-Sectoral Coordination Center, 2020). Also, the Guidelines for National Security in Latvia (Republic of Latvia, 2023) highlight media literacy as one of the most crucial elements for ensuring national security. In the guidelines, it is said that the Latvian state must promote the strengthening of people's media literacy in formal and informal education, as well as support the efforts of public and commercial media to promote media literacy in all age groups. In the educational sector, The National General Secondary Education Standard (Cabinet of Ministers, 2019) underlines the necessity for media literacy skills improvement, albeit under the label of digital literacy, probably more than any other policy document, highlighting that it is essential to improve people's ability to assess media effects, take individual responsibility critically, act to prevent the impact of low-quality media content, and create media content following ethical and legal principles.

In Lithuania, media literacy, civic preparedness, and societal resilience-related issues have gained much more attention in recent decades. Different policies and strategies (The Law on Public Information Provision, Lithuanian Culture Policy Strategy, National Development Plan 2021–2030, Public Information Policy Strategic Directions 2019–2022, Library Development Policy Strategic Directions 2016–2022, and the strategic directions of the media and information literacy of the National Martynas Mažvydas Library) are stressing the significance of media and information literacy in enabling the various publics to assess publicly available information on its own and resist undesirable information threats, stimulating civic activity, participation, and creativity. Since 2016, the objectives of raising digital and information literacy have recently been high in the Lithuanian Government's agendas, coupled with societal resilience. The shift is linked to external challenges, such as the pandemic and other health-related risks, Russian aggression and war in Ukraine, geo-political turbulence, and growing regional national security threats. The role of media and quality information is receiving heightened significance in providing verified information. Hence, the Ministry of Culture is leading media literacy policy proposals and implementation. Several programs and policy documents have been initiated in response to technological developments, social implications, and changed media situations.

In short, over the years, the Baltic States have committed to promoting and developing media literacy within society and have taken steps to reach out to members who have been hard to reach due to language barriers or different media consumption habits. In addition, Baltic countries have taken various steps to strengthen high-quality, responsible, and reliable journalism within the region. However, recent analysis concludes with some problematic aspects: few long-term projects in the media literacy field, competition (rather than cooperation) among media literacy project creators in the fight for funding and insufficient collaboration among various stakeholders overall, which leads to media literacy projects being sporadic and fragmented and largely dependent on international donor funding (Locmele & Buholcs, 2024).

## 5. Discussion

From the policy steps reviewed above, we can conclude that all three countries acknowledge the necessity of individuals' heightened responsibility in the form of media literacy when speaking about societal resilience. This outcome is evident in how the role of state interventions, strategic communication, and media literacy is perceived in all three countries.

In the case of the Baltic countries, it is not just the current geopolitical context, the influx of disinformation, and cyber threats—namely "external" causes—that call for individuals to be media literate and to adopt a responsible and vigilant approach to the information environment. Our analysis of policy steps reveals an "internal" gap. We define it as a firm reliance on individual responsibility in addressing information-related matters. Addressing individual needs is crucially important, yet, we argue, that this focus is counterproductive in the case of media literacy policies.

Since the early 1990s, the three Baltic countries have undergone a steadfast politico-economic restructuring. Furthermore, the three countries are characterized as winners of transformations. However, regarding policies, a much larger metanarrative has been evident in all countries; namely the rhetoric of goal orientation, which also translates as thinking that aligns with neoliberalist approaches emphasizing competitiveness and innovativeness but generally neglecting broader social values. Because of such "persistence" and goal orientation, the Baltic countries have succeeded and have even been described as the "paragons of neoliberalism" among European countries in many aspects of life (Salyga, 2023, p. 2). Only the most recent analyses outlined the need to examine the implications of policies on individual life cases and people's worldviews while also exploring discontent, various inequalities, and transformational traumas at a much deeper level. As a matter of fact, social discontent and inequalities also echo in how people approach the media and the broader information environment—whether they feel represented, or if their concerns are seen by a wider public. And if not, these unaddressed issues might turn into informational vulnerabilities exploited by disinformation campaigns.

Therefore, we argue against embracing media literacy as a panacea for societal resilience without addressing the broader structural forces at play on an equal level.

All of the above relates closely to what was identified by Joseph (2013) who argued that resilience, encouraged via securitization and protectionist views, "encourages the idea of active citizenship, whereby people, rather than relying on the state, take responsibility for their own social and economic well-being" (p. 42). Here, we also want to acknowledge Druick (2016), who expressed concerns about media literacy discourses becoming too closely tied to the logic of neoliberalism. She argued that positioning media literacy as a tool for "inoculation" against a degraded culture, and, in Foucauldian terms, the promotion of the emergence of "homo economicus," might be a dangerous path. In other words, it is wrong to believe that a "[media] educated subject will be protected against a destructive system thanks to guidance that will make him or her aware of the connections between knowledge and power" (Druick, 2016, p. 1138). This approach, as she warns, aims to frame media institutions generally as a democratic counterforce—which seems to be scaringly overlapping with current populist and conspiracy reasonings (Hameleers, 2020) and adds to societal insecurity (Wojczewski, 2020).

In general, a balanced approach is required—one that promotes media literacy and continues to elaborate on the socio-political conditions under which media literacy is exercised, ensuring that societal resilience efforts do not reinforce the very neoliberal logics that contribute to societal insecurity, informational vulnerability, and information-related inequalities in the first place.

## 6. Conclusion

As demonstrated, there is no single answer to what makes some societies more resilient than others and which strategies in countering disinformation work best in which geographic and cultural context. The Baltic countries' policies on combating disinformation, on the one hand, align with the EU's broader strategies but also display some distinct features rooted in their specific geopolitical context. The Baltic approach differs in urgency and scope, driven by a more acute perception of geopolitical threats, especially from Russia. The geographic closeness to Russia, as well as historical memories, also explain why the Baltic states often adopt more robust measures than the EU-wide approaches. Their regulatory environment can be assessed as more restrictive, with laws explicitly addressing the manipulation of information during times of crisis or heightened tensions.

Moreover, the Baltic states are working on state-sponsored strategic communication as a defence mechanism, which complements the EU's emphasis on co-regulation and media literacy. They have established specialized institutions and initiatives that contribute to national resilience and serve as models for EU cooperation in countering disinformation. These efforts illustrate a more proactive stance in promoting media literacy campaigns tailored to counteract Russian influence, reflecting their front-line status in the EU's broader fight against external information threats.

We argue that building resilience to disinformation by promoting institutional transparency and accountability and strengthening people's political and media literacy capacities are essential to mitigating its impact on societal trust. Democracies with lower institutional and interpersonal degrees of trust appear vulnerable to heightened uncertainty and prone to populist manipulations. Also, even in more mature democracies with high levels of institutional trust, press freedom, and media literacy, online disinformation poses challenges to national security and societal coherence.

The public's perception of risk and its response are subjective. Therefore, it is essential to adopt a research approach that allows an integrated view of the development of coordinated institutional and individual strategies and integrated social and communication policies to guide against the implications of disruptive communication, including informational vulnerabilities.

We began our discussion by exploring the complex nature of disinformation, which is both structural and discursive, along with the informational vulnerabilities that must be addressed to tackle the social and cultural causes leading to manipulations and insecurities effectively. Our analysis reveals that in the Baltic countries, in their efforts to combat disinformation, different institutions, such as those on the governmental level, operate with varying institutionally framed logic and routines and pursue diverse goals. The foundations of Baltic resilience seem to rely on interconnected networks of grassroots movements, including NGOs, libraries, schools, and media outlets.

Critical Realism's perspective allowed us to uncover general agentive groups when addressing the crucial question of fostering collective reflexivity and agency in contexts of heightened uncertainty and social change. It allowed us to simultaneously approach structural solutions, such as legal regulations and the empowerment of individuals. As a "peopled" approach, critical realism also involves recognizing potential limitations, such as the risk of overemphasizing individual responsibility (aligning with neoliberal narratives)

without adequately addressing structural inequalities. Thus, while enhancing citizens' media literacy skills and fostering critical thinking, policy reforms must address the root causes of disinformation, which are not solely linked to individual citizens' information choices or actions but arise from persistent inequalities.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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