



SEEKING LEGITIMACY:

Considerations for Strategic Communications in the Digital Age

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“Debunking disinformation costs way more than creating it.”

—*Debunk.org*

Introduction

While the Soviet Union in particular developed well-honed strategies for propaganda during the Cold War, the last ten years have seen an explosion in the speed and reach of a new breed of disinformation. Messages now travel far and wide on social media at the speed of thought, as people look to Twitter and TikTok for news. Governments find themselves attempting to sort out which stories will pass and which stories will stick, as they struggle to bet limited resources against emerging problems. Democracies are particularly vulnerable to disinformation because laws are designed to protect free speech, not to protect the state from speech.

Propaganda spreads easily across borders in the digital age. One recently uncovered web portal served multiple potential sympathisers in several languages; it provided pro-Kremlin activists from many countries with templates for letters opposing the destruction of Soviet monuments, including offers to help write and translate the letters into English and French.² By one estimate, dozens of well-crafted pieces of pro-Kremlin disinformation appear every week—more than any country can handle alone.³

Tactical response to specific pieces of information is difficult. Doing it well requires rapid attribution of the disinformation, agile crafting of a response, and a clear grasp of what is legally permissible for that government. Teamwork across national borders can only help with the daunting task of anticipation and agility.

Even if governments choose not to mix it up in the melee of hand-to-hand information combat, with its attendant risks, most seek to create more resilient populations with media

literacy programmes. Further, all NATO allies seek legitimacy when speaking publicly about national and NATO priorities, in particular countering negative NATO narratives.

Each nation will face its own calculus on which stories to engage and which to dismiss, but they would do well to remember that, just as disinformation travels across borders, so can government messages, often reaching audiences far removed from the intended recipients and unintentionally clashing with other official messages.

Indeed, artificial intelligence and machine learning (AI/ML) are already having an impact on messaging practices, and we are likely to see a near future where AI/ML can craft tailored messages in any language at scale, both for good and for ill. Before that future becomes the present, governments must find ways to align messaging whenever possible to have a fighting chance against smart and scalable disinformation campaigns.

This project seeks to understand the challenges that countries are facing in the modern media environment, and how they could unify messaging to increase legitimacy and resilience. This project’s objectives are the following:

- Identify how the dissolution of boundaries is perceived from a NATO alliance member perspective, especially how populations are affected when they receive simultaneous but separate messaging intended for different audiences;
- Evaluate whether any legal frameworks are in place for governing such

- situations, in particular the opportunities for new structures;
- Discuss strategic communications practices and how they may need to evolve to match the reality of a fluid information environment.
 - Examine ways synchronisation or deconfliction might play a role, and
- how such practices could create resilience among NATO allies in the information space; and
- Address the impact of contradictory messaging on NATO's legitimacy and suggest ways strategic communications practitioners might approach this problem.

Methodology

Researchers selected five target countries: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, and Sweden. These countries were selected because they share borders and similar geopolitical concerns, have large English-speaking populations, have all been long-time targets of Russian messaging operations, and as a result have a sophisticated media literacy strategy. Researchers gathered existing data on the media and digital landscape of each country, including where people in the target nations obtain information and how likely they are to trust that source. We then evaluated a demographic map of languages to see whether messages might spread through populations connected across borders by a common language like English or Russian.

Researchers then examined the messaging strategy of the five European nations to identify areas where messages were aligned or misaligned, particularly regarding

pressing national security concerns. It then evaluated two cases of messaging in response to an international crisis: Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers evaluated whether messaging was misaligned or if target governments struggled to push back on disinformation. In particular, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, as covered in Sweden and Norway, researchers identified where national strategies conflicted with each other to cause confusion or gaps in credibility.

From a review of the literature on effective communications strategies, researchers distilled best practices that apply in a European security context, especially for NATO allies and aspirant countries, and crafted a set of recommendations for streamlining communications practices. Finally, researchers identified follow-on questions that should be answered in future research.

Mapping the Media Environment

This section describes the media environment in the Nordic and Baltic countries in general before later sections discuss the specifics of the five particular target countries, including the challenges inherent in such an exercise.

To identify how the dissolution of boundaries is perceived from an allied perspective, researchers unsuccessfully sought empirical data that would show how information flows through the five studied countries and across borders. Further studies to close this gap would be worthwhile; however, in the meantime, we constructed a relevant case study on Norway and Sweden to explore how differing messages in neighbouring countries might be reflected across that border. From this case study, we can then attempt to logically infer that populations in the target countries would at least be exposed to messages from other countries, as suggested in the following analysis.

We know that populations in Nordic and Baltic countries are more trusting than the rest of Europe of their governments and traditional media.⁴ We also know that social media usage in these countries is average to high, compared with the rest of the world. For example, 83.3 percent of the population of Finland used social media actively as of January 2023.⁵ In Sweden, approximately 9.25 million individuals, or an estimated 90 per cent of the population, used social media in 2022.⁶ In Finland and Sweden, 45 per cent of the public uses social media for news; 31 and 29 per cent, respectively, use Facebook for news, and 29 and 27 per cent, respectively, share news via social media, messaging, or email.⁷ We also know that any topics discussed on social media platforms quickly find their way into other news outlets.⁸ For example, in Norway, official media covered international events like the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement.⁹ Finally, majorities of Nordic and Baltic populations speak both their native language and at least a second language. Majorities or

significant minorities speak English well, ranging from 80 per cent of Swedes,¹⁰ to 54 per cent of Estonians,¹¹ to 31 per cent of Lithuanians.¹² In some northern European nations, it is official government policy to translate statements and announcements into English. Several of these countries also have a substantial Russian-speaking population as a legacy of the Soviet Union. Moscow has targeted these Russian-speaking populations with news and social media, in large part because of the recognised ability of social media to spread information across national boundaries when people share a common language.¹³

Some research sought similarities between the spread of disinformation and the spread of an illness, like COVID-19. According to one study:

Given the unprecedented scale and pace at which misinformation can now travel online, research has increasingly relied on models from epidemiology to understand the spread of fake news. In these models, the key focus is on the reproduction number (R_0)—in other words, the number of individuals who will start posting fake news (that is, secondary cases) following contact with someone who is already posting misinformation (the infectious individual). It is therefore helpful to think of misinformation as a viral pathogen that can infect its host, spreading rapidly from one individual to another within a given network, without the need for physical contact.¹⁴

According to another study looking at Twitter globally, false news on Twitter is about 70 per cent more likely to be shared than true news, and it takes true news six times longer than false news to reach 1,500 people.¹⁵ Vosoughi et al. used a data set of rumour cascades on Twitter from 2006 to 2017, looking at

126,000 rumours spread by around 3 million people. The false news reached more people than the truth and diffused faster.¹⁶

Given this set of facts, we logically assume that, while populations in the five target countries under study seek reliable information from traditional news outlets, they will

also be exposed to messages on Facebook and other social media platforms from alternative, international sources—including disinformation and messages from governments of other countries.



CAPTION: A map of languages in Nordic and Baltic countries, showing native Russian speakers. Large percentages of the populations of these countries also speak English as a second language, particularly those under the age of 30, suggesting that messages in both Russian and English can travel quickly.

SOURCE: Jakub Marian¹⁷

A Review of National Messaging Strategies

This section describes the strategic communications approach of the five selected countries, highlighting their efforts to combat disinformation internally. Researchers acknowledge

that each of these nations is undertaking far more effort than reflected here, so this report seeks to be representative rather than comprehensive.

Estonia

Estonia has among the most resilient and sophisticated approaches that researchers evaluated for this study. It has an aggressive public education campaign about recognising disinformation, largely mandatory media literacy classes in school, and a coordinated state strategic communications strategy. Estonia ranked fourth in the 2022 Media Literacy Index, in part due to a multi-decade strategy for educating its population about online safety and security.¹⁸ Top-ranked nations have ‘the highest potential to withstand disinformation and misinformation based on their quality of education, free media, and high trust among people,’ according to the Open Society Institute.¹⁹

Since 2010, Estonia has taught media literacy to students from kindergarten through high school, and 10th grade students are required to take a 35-hour course on media and influence. Estonians now see media literacy education as just as important as core courses

like mathematics and reading, according to a former strategic communications adviser to Estonia’s government.²⁰ While Russian language schools in Estonia do not yet require media literacy courses, they offer elective classes in an attempt to reach the approximately 25 per cent of the Russian-speaking Estonian population.²¹ The Estonian government is also working to reach the older Estonians who missed in-school media training through advertisements, public service announcements, and an annual Media Literacy Week.²²

Estonia is also taking a proactive approach to responding to misinformation, acknowledging that responding is not enough in a fast-paced information environment.²³ Estonia has prioritised internal coordination, with official documents highlighting the need to issue clear, coordinated guidance to present a united view within Estonia as well as externally.²⁴

Latvia

While Latvia used to have a relatively large Russian language media presence, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Latvian media regulator decided to ban the distribution of media channels registered in Russia.²⁵ That decision is set to remain in place until Russia halts the conflict and returns all occupied territory to Ukraine—including Crimea.²⁶ Meanwhile, Riga has become a haven for

journalists in exile from Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia, with the Media Hub providing assistance to more than 500 media workers.²⁷

Latvia has worked to educate its citizenry on recognising disinformation and on critical thinking in general. In 2022, the State Chancery published a book titled *Handbook against disinformation: recognise and oppose*

(Rokasgrāmata pret dezinformāciju: atpazīt un pretoties). Ten authors from the Chancery and five universities collaborated in writing the book as part of Global Media and Information Literacy Week, although there is little evidence of impact to date.²⁸ The Latvian news portal lsm.lv has a series of articles called 'Re:Check,' which evaluates the statements of Latvian politicians and officials. While it is not meant to counter disinformation, it aims to hone the critical thinking skills of the audience and remind them that purported facts should be verified.²⁹ The investigative journalism centre Re:Baltica has studied media and society³⁰ and publishes reports on 'Fake News' with a focus on Russian disinformation.³¹ The TV3 series 'Melu teorija' (Theory of Lies) interviews experts on Russia's disinformation tactics.³²



Caption: Latvia's Handbook Against Disinformation: Recognise and Oppose

Source: Publicitātes attēls³³

Lithuania

Lithuania has long been a target of Russian propaganda and recognised the way that social media expanded the scope of the problem. Deputy Interior Minister Kęstutis Lančinskas said that 'Fighting against [propaganda] groups on social media is like fighting windmills. We have tried to do this, to deconstruct [fake stories]. Eventually, we decided that we would simply do our job and provide real information to the public'.³⁴

Earlier this year, Vilnius launched a new centre with a mission to 'track, expose, and co-ordinate international efforts against Kremlin propaganda'.³⁵ The creators of the centre seem to be drawing on some organisational strategies from the military while looking for a much broader set of skills; they stated that the new centre will use the capabilities of the military but

will also incorporate the public, economic, and energy sectors.³⁶

Separately, Lithuania-based Debunk.org describes itself as an 'independent technology think-tank and non-governmental organisation that researches disinformation and runs educational media literacy campaigns'. It analyses disinformation campaigns in the Baltics, Poland, Georgia, Montenegro, the United States, and North Macedonia. The Debunk 'elves' comprise an estimated 5,000 volunteers and 50 active elves working with the Debunk team to check content that they view as suspicious, to debunk stories, and to name and shame websites that spread disinformation.³⁷ Elves have even formed partnerships with media outlets to respond quickly to campaigns.³⁸

Finland

Finland ranked first for the fifth time in the OSI Media Literacy Index in 2022.^{39, 40} The Finnish government has a plainly stated, highly communicative strategic communications

strategy, along with a promise that 'The government will communicate in such a way that people can trust they will be given correct and reliable information in a fair and timely manner. Trust

is built and maintained through consistent communications'. The government pledges to provide information on works in process, with objectives and impact clearly described, using 'good, clear language'. The strategy goes on to say that 'Everybody affected by government decisions has the right to receive information on those decisions in understandable Finnish and Swedish. All key decisions will also be translated into English'.⁴¹

In Finland, teaching media literacy begins in preschool, according to a recent New York Times report, and is required all the way

through school.⁴² An eighth-grade class edited their own photos to see how easy it is to create disinformation; another teacher used a search term like 'vaccination' to demonstrate how algorithms work and why the first results might not be reliable; and others used Russian media about the war in Ukraine as examples of propaganda.⁴³ Finland's Media Education Authority, KAVI, which is a part of the Ministry of Education and Culture, is charged with 'promoting media education, children's media skills, and the development of a safe media environment for children'.⁴⁴

Sweden

Sweden ranks sixth in the OSI media literacy index.⁴⁵ Stockholm has long taken a forceful approach led by the government to combat disinformation. Still, Sweden continues to face disinformation campaigns that it must frequently expose. For example, a recent press release by the Swedish government continued to push back against a falsehood that appeared in December 2021, claiming that Swedish social services have been taking Muslim children into care without a legal basis. The government allowed the National Board of Health and Welfare to ramp up efforts to counteract the rumours, in conjunction with other Swedish agencies.⁴⁶

In a major move to counter foreign disinformation campaigns ahead of last year's September elections, Stockholm created a new Psychological Defence Agency in January 2022 to protect Sweden from foreign malign

influence.⁴⁷ The agency reports to the Justice Department and primarily addresses foreign disinformation rather than falsehoods perpetrated by domestic groups. Post-election, Stockholm tasked the agency with combatting the disinformation about stolen Muslim Children outlined above.⁴⁸

The Counter Information Influence Section at the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) has trained more than 14,000 Swedish public servants since 2016 in countering disinformation.⁴⁹ Since 2014, the Swedish government has been trending toward a centralised messaging approach. When a new government took office, all ministry press secretaries became employees of the Prime Minister's office. They would hold morning meetings led by the Prime Minister's chief press officer, with an eye toward focused, coordinated messaging.⁵⁰

Stories Without Borders

Understanding the larger media landscape, researchers developed case studies on two topics: Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which was consistently opposed by the target countries, and Sweden's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was highly

controversial. In both cases, a clear, credible, official government message was critically important to roll back Russian disinformation campaigns, which sought to sow divisions using both as wedge issues.

The Ukraine Invasion

Researchers conducted a brief survey of tweets issued by official accounts in the five selected countries in the first month of the unprovoked Russian war against Ukraine, under the assumption that Twitter messaging was representative of a country's larger messaging strategy. The 123 tweets were from prime ministers, the foreign ministries, EU representatives, defence ministries, and sometimes the ambassador to the UN. Acknowledging that tweets are hardly an ideal proxy and that a more comprehensive review would have been preferable, the data set still provided some notable insights about the consistency of messaging among the five nations.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine was not controversial within the target countries, as evidenced by government statements. All five countries quickly issued general statements of support for Ukraine and condemnation of Russia. States diverged somewhat on finer points of communications:

- Finland led with the message that the Russian invasion was an attack on European security as a whole. Lithuanian officials repeated that theme the next day, and Swedish officials two days later. Estonia and Latvia issued similar Tweets in mid and late March 2022, respectively.
- All five nations spoke of Russia's actions as a clear violation of international law, particularly after a statement by the International Criminal Court. Finland's Ministry of Foreign

Affairs sent at least five tweets in the first two days of the war. Sweden did not follow until mid-March.

- Estonia and Latvia were broadcasting their Ukraine aid packages on Twitter the day after Russia invaded. Sweden and Finland tweeted about their own aid packages three days later.
- Throughout the month of March, Swedish, Lithuanian, and Estonian officials issued tweets warning to be on the lookout for Russian disinformation about the war.
- All five countries in the first month of the war talked about supporting Ukrainian refugees, although Sweden, Estonia, and Lithuania were active in the first two weeks, while Finland and Latvia pushed out those messages after March 10.

This data set, while limited, shows that regional governments often were addressing similar themes within a few days of each other, suggesting that they were aware of the contents of each other's messaging; there is no indication, however, that the contents were coordinated in any formal or intentional sense. On an issue like supporting Ukraine, which is uncontroversial and where values of these nations are in alignment, formal coordination may be less necessary than on another, more divisive issue. The next section explores one such divergence, on COVID-19 messaging.

COVID-19 in Norway and Sweden

Countries around the world differed widely on how to handle the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the early days when hard science on the issue was scarce. The divide between two neighbours, however, was particularly illustrative of divergent messages spilling across borders.

Stockholm chose a different path than most of the Nordic countries for dealing with the pandemic, declining to implement stringent lockdowns like Norway did.⁵¹ Norway also sought transparency in its data collection and decision-making, while Sweden was accused of hiding potentially useful information from its population.^{52, 53} An illustration of the differences was given by this Swedish academic, writing in an online scientific magazine:

I write this as a less than detached academic. This essay has been hard for me to write, as I have, since my birth, identified as Swedish and Stockholmer. During this pandemic, I have lived in Stockholm – one of the European capitals hit hardest by Covid-19 – while working remotely at a Norwegian institution. I have witnessed the radically different strategies and stricter, faster measures implemented in Norway, while having to live through the Swedish authorities let the virus run through society.⁵⁴

She goes on to describe Swedish messaging as ‘misleading’, and she postulates there may have been a Swedish backlash to international pressure, driving a doubling down on Sweden’s ‘business as usual’ approach:

One wonders if the Swedish strategy would have been different if the people heading the FoHM had been less focused on being “right” and more on being attuned to the variety of scientific opinions

and evidence available nationally and internationally? I believe that this failure of scientific leadership, compounded by the national government’s blind trust in the FoHM, explain a great deal of the difference in the Swedish approach to Covid-19 when compared to Norway and other Nordic countries.⁵⁵

As of June 2020, Sweden’s lead epidemiologist had admitted on Swedish radio that too many people died in Sweden, but he also said that Sweden should have taken measures ‘between’ what Sweden did and what the rest of the world did.⁵⁶

Sweden saw much higher death tolls than its Nordic neighbours, and in Norway and elsewhere, the Swedish strategy was presented as a failure.⁵⁷ For example, cross-country skiers coming to Sweden in January 2021 for the world cup were allowed to self-test for COVID-19, causing the visiting teams to object and ridicule Sweden’s procedures on Twitter as ‘unprofessional’. The controversy was covered in Norway’s biggest newspaper.⁵⁸ A study published in 2022, which included authors from Sweden, Norway, the United States, and Belgium stated:

“The Swedish response to this pandemic was unique and characterized by a morally, ethically, and scientifically questionable laissez-faire approach, a consequence of structural problems in the society,” the team wrote. “There was more emphasis on the protection of the ‘Swedish image’ than on saving and protecting lives or on an evidence-based approach”.⁵⁹

In mid-2020, BMC Public Health published a study on public trust in the Norwegian and Swedish governments in the first month of

the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that more Swedes than Norwegians had confidence in their government: 17 per cent of Norwegians and 37 per cent of Swedes had ‘high trust’.⁶⁰

A 2021 study by Falkheimer and Raknes, however, looked at the varying messaging strategies from Oslo and Stockholm on COVID-19, specifically how highly conflicting messages were perceived on the other side of the border. They found that Norwegian media coverage of

the Swedish strategy was ‘massive and mostly critical’. By February 2021, the Swedish population’s trust in Sweden’s health agencies had dropped from 75 per cent in March 2020 to 57 per cent. Meanwhile in Norway, trust levels remained high.⁶¹ While it is impossible to say whether the trust deficit was due to critical news coverage across the border, the media pointing out the differences in strategies and outcomes likely contributed.

Conclusions: The implications of mixed messages

Populations in the target nations trust traditional media, generally trust their governments, and have likely received at least some media consumer training from their education systems or their governments, making them relatively savvy media consumers. They also consume international news and social media, and almost certainly are exposed to disinformation or mixed messages from international sources on the latter. Given a porous media landscape, made more so by common languages like English extending across the region, it is logical to assume that populations are receiving messages not just from their own governments but from other governments, particularly on controversial subjects like race relations and the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, they are a good case study for how a media-savvy population consumes both legitimate and illegitimate messaging. While the existing literature does not go far enough to definitively state that official messaging affects public opinion across borders, messages from neighbouring governments that are in opposition to each other are likely to cause headlines because of the perceived discrepancies, likely leading to confusion.

Even within Baltic and Nordic nations, policies on national security issues vary, and having a consistent messaging strategy is a secondary goal to crafting actual policies. Those policy differences will necessarily be reflected in official statements and messages, as with the COVID-19 case study. However, there may be times when policies are largely in alignment, but minor differences are amplified by careless messaging, as with early messaging about the Ukraine crisis.

While each country above has a relatively comprehensive strategic communications strategy and a focus on combatting disinformation internally, available literature on attempts to coordinate messaging across governments was scarce.⁶² Meanwhile, the practicality of a coordinated messaging strategy is clear, particularly across an alliance: a unified message is far more likely to bolster the legitimacy of institutions like NATO and the EU. The next section recommends additional research along these lines and steps that can be taken to harmonise messaging to increase legitimacy.

Recommendations

Researchers created a slate of recommendations aimed at creating better coordination across like-minded states as either a nation state or ally within NATO. These steps will improve legitimacy and minimise opportunities for bad actors to create wedges. First, we examine areas where more research would be helpful, in particular to understand

the most productive channels for cross-border messaging. Next, we describe ways allies might build on existing legal frameworks to facilitate more collaboration in communications. Finally, we go past existing efforts and offer opportunities for a coordinated shift to the offensive in strategic communications.

Conduct Further Research on Effects of Messages

Two aspects of this research deserve further study: isolating the effect of differing messaging strategies and attempting to identify an impact on public opinion.

First, one of the most challenging aspects of this research was differentiating between substantive differences in policy and stylistic differences in messaging. Clearly, with the COVID-19 example, Norway and Sweden had dramatically different policy approaches, in addition to varying messaging strategies. With the unprovoked Russian war against Ukraine example, the five target countries seem to have had similar policies and similar, though slightly varied, messages. A deeper study could parse the differences in policy more closely and compare the policies of the five governments alongside the messaging. Ideally, a follow-on study would identify a topic that has several elements: (1) the subject was controversial with the public and thus received a lot of media attention that highlighted competing viewpoints; (2) neighbouring countries had policies in close alignment to each other; and (3) the messaging strategies of those neighbouring countries were different. That would allow researchers to isolate the variable of the varying messaging strategies better and discover how messages cross borders—via what outlets and in what quantity.

Second, further research should be done on how well government messages resonate

with unintended recipients and whether those recipients are active or passive. Most existing research on the spread of messages tends to be location-agnostic, seeking to prove messages spread, but not where. For the purpose of crafting narratives that would bolster the legitimacy of NATO and its allied states, it would be useful to know whether information flow takes place in English, Russian, or machine translation of other languages. Further, it would be especially useful to understand whether certain populations proactively look to neighbouring governments for alternative information to that presented by their own capital. For example, seeing how a message from the government in Stockholm is translated and moves across Europe—tracing its path through both traditional media outlets and via sharing on social media—would be instructive, particularly if researchers could conduct public opinion polling to attempt to gauge the impact of the messaging.

One follow-on study might examine surveys on whether and how residents of Finland are exposed to official statements from Sweden, perhaps by finding how often the local press cites press releases from the Swedish government. Further, data analysis tracking of when and how a message from Stockholm appears in Finnish social media accounts could illustrate the speed of information flow. Public opinion surveys before and after such messaging could illustrate any actual impact of the mixed messages.

Separately, a follow-on study comparing messaging strategies of southern or eastern European countries to those of northern European countries could show how widely different approaches result in mixed messages, and whether those messages travel as quickly as those between Nordic neighbours. A 2019 study assessed that central and eastern European countries are particularly vulnerable

to ‘cascading narratives’, due to porous borders and a pervasive digital environment, but also because there are a relatively high number of platforms for disinformation to spread through.⁶³ Examining in particular how narratives about the unprovoked Russian war against Ukraine spread in central and eastern European nations would add a valuable counterpart to the study of Nordic and Baltic nations.

Further Develop the Legal Underpinning for More Coordination

Researchers were unable to find definitive NATO or EU legal guidance that would direct or constrain allied state collaboration in their messaging. The NATO Treaty, Berlin Plus Agreement, and the recently passed Digital Services Act (DSA) all set the stage well for such cooperation, however, and the trend line toward coordination is clear.

The NATO Treaty preamble, the foundation for allied cooperation, speaks to united efforts for collective defence to preserve peace and security. While the Treaty predated the internet and social media by several decades, it generally contemplates cooperation against a range of threats and for a collective defence. The Berlin Plus Agreement, signed on the 50th anniversary of the NATO Treaty, extends that collaboration explicitly to the EU. Signed at the dawn of the internet era, and after the Soviet Union, with its effective propaganda machine, had dissolved, it explicitly allowed greater EU and NATO collaboration, specifically allowing the EU to use NATO planning capabilities to address ‘crisis management operations’. The NATO press release associated with the Berlin Plus Agreement states that NATO assets can ‘contribute to effective conflict prevention and to engage actively in crisis management, including crisis response operations’.⁶⁴ ‘Crisis’, at the time, was almost certainly meant to mean armed conflict, but in the nearly 25 years since that agreement, the danger of hybrid warfare as a non-kinetic way to undermine democratic institutions and the health of the alliance has

come into acute relief. The lines in the agreement that reference shared communication units and headquarters could be extended to cover strategic communications that combat a misinformation campaign.⁶⁵

A piece of EU legislation that came into force in November 2022 takes a significant step forward in the realm of cooperation to rein in harmful activity on social media platforms. The DSA puts in place a slate of requirements and procedures to address illegal activity on social media platforms that reach more than 10 per cent of the population of Europe. It creates a ‘crisis response mechanism’ and allows for the ‘drawing up of voluntary crisis protocols to coordinate a rapid, collective and cross-border response in the online environment’.⁶⁶

While researchers are not able to point to a specific provision in any of these documents that explicitly allows or requires allies to coordinate messaging in the face of dangerous misinformation, the sum of these seminal documents suggests that both NATO and the EU structures would allow—even encourage—collaboration. The NATO alliance was conceived of as a collective defence structure; the Berlin Plus Agreement extends that collaborative defence to the EU; and the DSA takes the EU’s legal reach to pushing back against misinformation on large social media platforms. The combination of the three suggests that European allies can certainly work together to defend themselves against

threats in the digital realm, particularly if they are spread via cross-border platforms like large social media apps. NATO allies and EU states could form a study group of

international law specialists to determine what opportunities and restrictions might exist on establishing coordinated messaging strategies.

Build on Existing Efforts to Counteract Disinformation to Go on the Messaging Offensive

Drawing on the authorities discussed above, both explicit and implied, national-level and coalition-level leaders can do more to continue refining unified messaging strategies and to build a populace resilient to assaults on NATO legitimacy. NATO employs a fact-based and proactive communications posture.⁶⁷ Due to the sheer volume of foreign information manipulation, responses are selective and debunk/expose certain hostile information activities based on NATO's assessment of risk.⁶⁸ In 2014, NATO was the first international organisation to set up a counter-disinformation portal, which is promoted through social media posts and has served as a template for many NATO allies in their efforts to counter disinformation.⁶⁹ Governments should embrace resilience as the goal, distinct from the unrealistic aspiration of a total absence of mis- or disinformation. Resilience accepts that populations will be exposed to confusing or harmful messages and builds ways for those populations to critically evaluate that information and keep an open mind to more credible information. The EU's External Action Service (EEAS) describes population resilience in part by saying, 'Being able to critically assess, use and create information is a key skill in the 21st century, allowing citizens to navigate the information environment and make well-informed choices'.⁷⁰ A Wilson Center report describes tackling the 'holistic information ecosystem' to encourage resilience, including education, journalism, and long-term generational solutions.⁷¹ The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency in the United States drives home the education point for creating resilience, advocating for a population that understands

disinformation tactics and can recognise them at the source.⁷²

An essential component to a resilient population is a government strategy that bolsters public confidence on a regular basis with clear, coherent messages, particularly around disinformation. NATO states individually have efforts underway to combat disinformation, and the EU has several Union-wide initiatives. The NATO Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy and the NATO Spokesperson co-sign strategic communications frameworks. These could expand to include not only defensively flagging disinformation, but also proactively crafting and coordinating recommended messaging strategies on a range of issues, perhaps expanding to a formalised structure for coordination in the future.

Independent organisations like the StopFake.org project in Ukraine and Debunk.org, described above, have worked to counter Russian disinformation using small armies of volunteers and could provide a model for collaboration.^{73, 74} Debunk.org has also created a 'BadNews' game adapted for Baltic audiences, helping people learn to spot manipulated information.⁷⁵ It also began a civic resilience course aimed at teaching university students critical thinking when it comes to interacting with media.⁷⁶

The EU has a set of task forces established to counter disinformation underneath the Strategic Communications and Information Analysis Division (AFFGEN.7) of the European External Action Service, including the

Western Balkans Task Force, the Task Force South, and the EU's Rapid Alert System on Disinformation.⁷⁷

The East StratCom Task force, set up in 2015, involves those countries that Russia views as within its rightful sphere of influence, and it has a defensive and offensive element. Defensively, the task force identifies likely disinformation and adds it to a database called EUvsDISINFO. Offensively, it develops communications products that promote EU values and policies in countries like Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine.⁷⁸ According to the EU, the East StratCom Task Force 'has developed communication campaigns explaining complex policy issues and illustrating how citizens in Eastern Partnership countries benefit directly from the EU's financial and technical support to democratic and market reforms. It has additionally improved and professionalised communication standards'.⁷⁹ The European Commission also has at least two relevant expert groups: one launched in 2021 on disinformation and digital literacy, and one on media literacy.^{80 81} NATO has enhanced cooperation with the EU, G7, and United Nations, and these collaborations could expand their mandate to a proactive messaging posture in addition to defensive measures, suggesting messaging themes to allied states.

Another set of current efforts focuses on strengthening the journalistic cadre with an eye toward inuring them to false stories perpetrated by bad actors. For example, the Baltic Media Centre of Excellence, also created in 2015, promotes the professional development of journalists in the Baltics and Eastern Europe. It also works on developing media literacy among the public.⁸² These services could serve as connectors between journalists and legitimate sources of news, particularly coordinated efforts coming out of the EU or a new NATO structure.

Techniques that encourage audiences to think analytically or consider the accuracy of news content 'improve the quality of people's news-sharing decisions and decrease

acceptance of conspiracy theories', according to a study on misinformation.⁸³ The same study found that 'technique based immunization' is more scalable as an education approach: 'scholars have started to identify the common building blocks of misinformation more generally, including techniques such as impersonating fake experts and doctors, manipulating people's emotions with fear appeals, and the use of conspiracy theories'.⁸⁴ Indeed, a study in Science Advances from 2022⁸⁵ found limited benefits from participants watching short videos explaining five common logical fallacies and manipulation strategies: 'When their laboratory trials were replicated in the "real world" through a YouTube ad campaign, people's ability to recognize some of these techniques increased by about 5% on average'.⁸⁶

NATO and the EU should consider developing a bloc-wide strategy for both offensive and defensive messaging that capitalises on these findings. For example, a set of case studies in local languages, English, and Russian that can help Europeans recognise common disinformation techniques could be shared repeatedly by government spokespeople. NATO headquarters introduced a message coordination document in 2016, widely shared with senior leaders from NATO allies and the chain of command as well as with communications professionals in capitals across the alliance. Communications staff at NATO headquarters also shares talking points with colleagues ahead of ministerials, summits, or on key themes.

A unified message is a more powerful message, particularly when trying to confront a national security crisis or push back against disinformation on a wide variety of platforms. Studies of how mis- and disinformation spread have found that the brain is more likely to assume that repeated messages are true. That 'illusory truth' can take hold for even implausible claims.⁸⁷ Strategic messaging strategies should take a similar approach in saturating the market, and messages that are consistent no matter the spokesman have a greater chance of achieving that saturation.

In an article in 2016, Jakub Janda laid out an argument for ‘robust civil society projects focused on myth-busting and fact-checking in their national language on a daily basis’ and for supporting state activities with private foundations that could be viewed as independent and legitimate by the state.⁸⁸ Regarding the state’s role, Janda suggested treating disinformation as a distinct and potent threat:

*This threat is so dangerous and difficult to grasp that putting it into the bucket with other security threats and putting existing bodies within the state administration in charge of dealing with it is insufficient. Therefore, specialized bodies with several dozens of experts in various fields need to be created as a matter of urgency. Hence, in each EU member state, a national STRATCOM team should be created.*⁸⁹

Janda suggests creating multi-functional teams involving communication and media experts but also foreign policy and homeland security professionals. These teams would report to ministries of the interior and have some sort of regular tie-in to heads of state. Further, he argued for a role for intelligence agencies, adding disinformation to annual threat reports.⁹⁰

This concept could be taken at least to the regional and then to the NATO level—first in a loose, informal capacity, then in a more formalised, multidisciplinary approach. Trying to create a formal coordination mechanism would likely be too burdensome for communications professionals who need to work fast, be agile, and respond to domestic political concerns as well as foreign policy issues. Negotiations over nuances in messaging would take hours or days that would be better used responding rapidly to a sticky and persistent disinformation campaign.

Instead, allies could create a central, online messaging hub, where communications professionals can input their messaging on foreign policy issues, and their counterparts

can either mirror the same language, or shape their own messages to avoid potential, accidental conflicts. The portal should be private, however, so communications professionals can test out—and label as such—messages not formally approved by their internal structures. Early coordination of test messages instead of late announcements of official messages would save critical time. The portal also should not become a mechanism for breaking news, but rather an internal NATO collaboration zone.

When such a mechanism has been established, and trust has developed organically, a NATO-related body should gather allies in a conference to talk about what works with the current system and what could be improved. The conference should at that point consider creating a more formalised coordination mechanism, building on the trust established in the closed portal. That gathering would also be an ideal forum for discussing digital arena messaging challenges and how allies can improve the speed at which they identify disinformation campaigns and respond to them.

A structure where intelligence agencies can share relevant threat information (downgraded to unclassified) with each other and with communications professionals could be a logical parallel step. The role of intelligence agencies in the information space has been controversial, especially in the United States, where there is both tradition and statute preventing foreign-facing intelligence agencies from examining domestic speech. In 2022, NATO allies went from a debunking to pre-bunking posture by declassifying unprecedented amounts of intelligence to call out Russia’s military build-up for the full-fledged invasion of Ukraine.⁹¹ This declassified content was used in the Secretary General’s messaging through press conferences, speeches, op-eds and interviews, which also served as ways to coordinate allied messaging and likely have contributed to maintaining NATO’s unity. Creating a space for intelligence professionals to share unclassified threat information on speech that is clearly adversary-propagated disinformation—without in any way crafting

messaging strategies—could facilitate rapid responses to disinformation campaigns. However, in order to build trust, these mechanisms would need to be transparent, even to the point of being publicly available.

Some have called for a new centre that would serve these purposes as a formal institution. One report highlighted ‘the need for coordination in the fight against disinformation, and for a new centre that operates regionally, nationally, and internationally’.⁹² While a new centre within NATO may someday prove useful, moving more slowly and building the muscle memory of coordinating among allies is more likely to result in both quick victories and voluntary cooperation, rather than one more step

in the arduous process of getting messaging strategies approved.

Nordic governments, in particular Sweden, are already working on centralising and coordinating their internal messaging.⁹³ Extending that coordination to neighbouring countries should not be too much of a reach. A study about Sweden from 2020 found that ‘there are clear signs of professionalization of government communication and functional pressures for the government to be as well coordinated as possible...to speak with one voice—and this requires centralized media/news management and resources; a coherent approach, or simply “not to give a messy impression”’.⁹⁴

In Closing

Coordinating messaging is difficult within any bureaucracy, and coordinating between bureaucracies is even more difficult. But the payoff of having a clear set of messages to share across NATO borders is worth the time and effort, particularly if technological solutions can minimise the friction in sharing messages securely. As the Estonian government recently said, ‘Responding is not enough in a fast-paced information society, and the state’s strategic communication must take a proactive approach to getting messages that are

important for Estonia across both in Estonia and in the information space of our allies’.⁹⁵ Nordic and Baltic nations are a logical place to start such an effort, given their shared threat picture, highly media-literate societies, and widespread trust in governments. Coordination tested there could then be expanded, along with additional research, to other parts of the NATO alliance. The long-term result would likely be a stronger alliance that enjoys a high degree of legitimacy amongst its population.

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The NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE) is a NATO accredited multi-national organisation that conducts research, publishes studies, and provides strategic communications training for government and military personnel. Our mission is to make a positive contribution to Alliance's understanding of strategic communications and to facilitate accurate, appropriate, and timely communication among its members as objectives and roles emerge and evolve in the rapidly changing information environment.