

# BEING QUITE CERTAIN, VERY DECISIVE AND ABSOLUTELY WRONG

A research into the characteristics of Russian disinformation campaigns  
and the countermeasures against them



Author: Iskander Schneeweisz  
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Radboud University Nijmegen

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Author: I.W.H. Schneeweisz (Iskander)

Student number: S1083544

Supervisor: F. Colona (Francesco)

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Abstract:

In this master's thesis, research is conducted into the characteristics that define Russian disinformation campaigns and what countermeasures there are to combat these. The geographical scope is directed at the European Union, the Netherlands, and Lithuania. By simultaneously using both the theory of disinformation and framing, a picture is created of how these two forms of weaponized information reinforce each other. Methodologically, a qualitative research approach is adopted with the use of semi-structured interviews, conducted with experts in the fields of diplomacy, intelligence, and more, combined with a document analysis on EU and Dutch policy documents. The results demonstrate that Russian disinformation campaigns must not be viewed as innocent, isolated incidents, but as strategically employed weaponized forms of information that undermine democratic societies. The disinformation campaigns are unique, sophisticated, and tough to counter. They are a strategic part of hybrid warfare, with layered positive and negative objectives. Their strategies include igniting fires in society, election manipulation, and the continuous use of malinformation. Framing is essential, as it shapes both the strategies and the messages built on narratives such as historical revisionism and anti-supranational themes. They are characterized by their reliance on quantity, which is ensured by the use of troll factories and social media as spreading mechanisms. Countermeasures range from preventive measures, such as focusing on education, enhancing media literacy, or supporting independent media, to reactive measures, which include fact-checking, debunking, reporting facilities, and more. The targeted societies must increase their efforts to counter these threats, with a preference for the use of both preventive and reactive countermeasures that incorporate the local conditions and appeal to emotions. Effort is necessary as technological innovations will keep enhancing the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns and pose a greater threat to democratic institutions.

## Table of contents

<b>Chapter one</b> .....	<b>4</b>
1.1 Introduction.....	4
1.2 Research objective and question.....	5
1.3 Societal relevance .....	6
1.4 Scientific relevance.....	7
<b>Chapter two</b> .....	<b>9</b>
2.1 Disinformation .....	9
2.2 Framing.....	13
<b>Chapter three</b> .....	<b>16</b>
3.1 Research approach and design .....	16
3.2 Data collection .....	18
3.3 Participants and documents .....	20
3.4 Positionality .....	21
<b>Chapter four</b> .....	<b>22</b>
4.1 What are the key characteristics that define a Russian disinformation campaign? .....	22
4.1.1 Objectives.....	22
4.1.2 Strategies.....	24
4.1.3 Substance.....	26
4.1.4 Spreading mechanisms .....	28
4.1.5 Discussion sub question one .....	30
4.2 What countermeasures are there to combat Russian disinformation campaigns? .....	33
4.2.1 Preventive .....	33
4.2.2 Reactive.....	37
4.2.3 Additional conditions .....	39
4.2.4 Discussion sub question two .....	40
<b>Chapter five</b> .....	<b>43</b>
5. Conclusion .....	43
<b>References</b> .....	<b>46</b>
<b>Appendix:</b> .....	<b>52</b>

## Chapter one

### 1.1 Introduction

Since the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, the Russian government has embarked not only on a war against Ukraine but also a hybrid war against the European Union (Bilal, 2024). It has caused a generation that has not been exposed to the threat of war to realize that it is not self-evident to live in peace.

While there is no universally agreed-upon definition of hybrid warfare, it can broadly be described as the use of both conventional and unconventional methods to exploit an opponent's weaknesses (Van den Bulk, 2024). This includes a range of tactics such as propaganda, cyberwarfare, and disinformation. This research will focus on the latter. Since the start of the war, the Russian government's disinformation campaigns targeting the EU have intensified. As the European Commission stated, "Disinformation is an evolving threat which requires continuous efforts" (European Commission, 2018a). The Kremlin has been feeding EU states with flawed or out of context information to destabilize these democracies. This has caused the threat of Russian disinformation to become so significant that the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service has marked it as a threat that can no longer be ignored (Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst 2023).

Disinformation can be defined as the purposefully spreading of misleading information with ill-intent. It is spread to influence people's opinions, gain money, or bring harm to society, health, or democracy (Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid, 2023). Disinformation forms a great risk for democratic societies because it has the power to influence the free and public debate on which people base their daily and political decisions (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2023). Disinformation becomes specifically dangerous when combined with another form of weaponized information, framing (Bouwmeester, 2024). The Russian government uses framing in its disinformation campaigns consistently (Sinelnik & Hovy, 2024). This has created a powerful tool to steer people's opinions in a certain direction (Van Gorp, 2005).

This is why the targeted countries and international organizations have implemented plans that include countermeasures to combat this Russian aggression in the form of disinformation (European Commission, 2018a; Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2024). To completely understand the basis of this research, it's essential to have a clear definition of what is meant by countermeasures. The most fitting definition comes from an article by Alland (2002). He defines countermeasures as responses to internationally wrongful acts. Although this definition is legally oriented, it can be rephrased to also apply to disinformation. By combining Alland's (2002) definition with the wrongful act specified in this study, namely, creating and disseminating disinformation, a new definition can be formulated: countermeasures are responses designed to combat the distribution and impacts of disinformation. This definition will be used throughout this research.

This study will use interviews with experts and document analysis to dive deeper into the interconnectedness of framing and disinformation. It will examine how they are employed by the Russian government as a critical element of hybrid warfare to undermine democracies, ultimately aiming to evaluate potential countermeasures.

This will be done in accordance with the following structure: in the first chapter, the research questions will be presented and explained, while also reflecting on the relevance of this study. In the second chapter, the theoretical framework will be used to gain more knowledge about the difficult processes of disinformation and framing, as well as the debates concerning their theories. The third chapter will include all the necessary information about which research methods were used, why they were chosen, and how they were executed. In the fourth chapter, the results will be shared, and the answers to the sub-questions will be discussed. Finally, in the last chapter, the overall conclusion will be drawn, the main question will be answered, and recommendations and a reflection on the limits and advantages of this research will be provided.

## 1.2 Research objective and question

The specific objective of this research is to create a holistic understanding of what characters define Russian disinformation campaigns and explore which measures can be implemented to combat Russian disinformation campaigns. This research will not claim to deliver all the answers regarding Russian disinformation campaigns; however, this research seeks to contribute to a broader scientific debate on disinformation. It serves as a step towards building a comprehensive framework aimed at improving responses to Russian disinformation efforts. Hereby, this research strives to share knowledge on the functioning of the complex mechanisms underpinning the Russian government's disinformation strategy. And eventually sharing a comprehensive package of points which can be focused on, to defend the discussed societies against the threats of these disinformation campaigns. This research aims to do that by answering the leading question:

What are the key characteristics that define Russian disinformation campaigns and what countermeasures are there to combat Russian disinformation?

This research will focus on the European Union, The Netherlands and Lithuania. Each of these actors have been chosen for their shared confrontation with Russian disinformation but also for their specific differences. The EU has been chosen because the Russian Government targets the EU extensively with disinformation (Clarke, 2022). This makes it a good case study to dive deeper into the characteristics of disinformation because, as stated by Selakovic et al. (2024), they are a notable example

for countering disinformation through policies. Lithuania has already been targeted with disinformation and propaganda for decades. After the fall of the Soviet Union, this increased significantly due to efforts from the Russian Federation to maintain influence in the region (Denisenko, 2020). This formed a society that has experience with countering disinformation, this could lead to examples for other targeted countries, which is why Lithuania has been involved in this research. Lastly, the Netherlands has been chosen because, due to its important role in NATO, strong support for Ukraine, and involvement in intelligence operations hindering the Russian government, the threats of Russian disinformation have grown significantly in the Netherlands over the past years, and the threat is still growing (Aartsma et al., 2023). This makes the Netherlands an interesting case study because it's relatively new to fighting disinformation, leading to quick innovations in the field of countering disinformation. During this research, these three actors will be referred to as 'target societies'; this is based on their shared confrontation with the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns. To conduct this research in a structured and feasible manner, two sub questions have been created. These are:

What are the key characteristics that define a Russian disinformation campaign?

What countermeasures are there to combat Russian disinformation campaigns?

These questions will help to conduct this research and gain all the necessary data to eventually formulate an answer to the leading question. And eventually contribute to a more holistic understanding of Russian disinformation campaigns and the available countermeasures.

### 1.3 Societal relevance

As shown in the introduction, disinformation forms an essential component of the hybrid warfare strategy employed by the Russian government (Sinelnik & Hovy, 2024). Russian disinformation campaigns not only sow confusion but also pose a significant threat to the mental and physical wellbeing of society, and they form a danger to democracies (Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2020; Casero-Ripollés et al., 2023). Disinformation campaigns are undermining the fundamental principles of democratic societies because the Russian government strategically uses them as a tool through which they can influence the public and free debate, create polarization, and decrease trust in democratic institutions (Aartsma et al., 2023).

With the rise of new technologies like social media and deepfakes, the reach and sophistication of disinformation will only grow more in the coming years (Aartsma et al., 2023). This explains why, as mentioned earlier, the head of the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service has stated that

Russian disinformation has become so prominent that it can no longer be ignored (Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, 2023).

The societal importance of this research lies in the harmful impact disinformation has on democratic societies. As numerous examples have shown, Russian disinformation can infiltrate decision-making areas, such as when Donald Trump called Volodymyr Zelensky a dictator (Kottasová, 2025) or Dutch Minister of Asylum Marjolijn Faber said Zelensky is not democratically elected (NOS, 2025). These incidents demonstrate that disinformation can reach the highest levels of democratic societies.

To combat this threat, it is essential to understand how Russian disinformation campaigns operate and what societies can do to become more resilient. This research aims to contribute by developing a comprehensive understanding of the key characteristics of Russian disinformation campaigns and by identifying which countermeasures can be implemented. In an era where distinguishing facts from fiction becomes increasingly difficult and words are used as weapons, knowledge, and research like this become crucial (Fortuin, 2023).

#### 1.4 Scientific relevance

This research is relevant in the scientific field because it uses the ‘framing’ theory to analyze disinformation. Framing involves using salience and selection to emphasize certain aspects while others fade into the background, creating a specific perspective on what is seen and what is not (Entman, 1993). Including this theory enhances the scientific relevance by demonstrating the connection between disinformation and framing, as these two theories reinforce each other strongly and are so intertwined that they can only be fully understood when viewed simultaneously. Both theories are ways in which information can be weaponized and should be studied together (Bouwmeester, 2024) to create a better understanding.

Framing is crucial in disinformation campaigns, as it helps them stand out and resonate. Especially when analyzing Russian disinformation efforts, including framing is essential, as Sinelnik & Hovy (2024) show that framing is a key, integrated part of the Russian government’s disinformation strategies. This contributes to the broader scientific debate on whether framing is an innocent automatic process or a tool used to assert power. This research supports studies like Entman’s (1993; 2007) because disinformation and framing are seen as integrated elements of hybrid warfare, and this research positions itself in the debate by recognizing that for the Russian government, framing and disinformation are more than innocent processes; they are used to project power where coercion is not possible.

Therefore, when assessing countermeasures, the framing theory should be taken into account. Because framing plays a critical role in the effectiveness and persuasiveness of disinformation, integrating framing strategies into efforts to counter disinformation is essential. As Miller et al. (2024)

note, framing offers valuable opportunities for combating disinformation. However, limited research links framing and countermeasures to combat disinformation. Many studies shown how disinformation should be countered without considering to counter the underlying processes, like framing. Incorporating framing into the development of countermeasures is therefore advantageous, as it could lead to more comprehensive and effective solutions. It could also generate new insights in this fragmented scientific debate.

## Chapter two

Before being able to answer the leading question, the main concepts included must be fully understood. In this chapter, the connection between hybrid warfare and disinformation will be further explained. The various academic debates on the definitions and functioning of both framing and disinformation will be evaluated. The way both concepts operate and influence people's daily lives will be examined from a scientific perspective. This will create a deeper understanding of disinformation and framing, leading to a better understanding of the upcoming chapters in this study.

### 2.1 Disinformation

The use of disinformation is deeply embedded in the Russian government's hybrid warfare strategy (Bachmann et al., 2023). Hybrid warfare is a form of conflict that emerged shortly after the Cold War and involves the use of unconventional methods such as cyberwarfare, propaganda, or non-state actors (Bachmann et al., 2023). It's used to deceive or neutralize opponents without engaging in a prolonged military confrontation (Brown, 2018). Hybrid warfare aims to create ambiguity and deniability while it tries to complicate decision-making at the strategic level (Bachmann et al., 2023). The way Russia employs hybrid warfare is often seen as a continuation and ongoing development of previous Soviet practices, such as active measures and information operations (Bachmann et al., 2023). In this study, disinformation is not viewed as an isolated phenomenon but as a key element of hybrid warfare.

The recent decades of advances in technology and social media have made disinformation a significant element of hybrid warfare. Over the past few decades, the speed at which information is shared has dramatically increased (Chesney & Citron, 2019). On the positive side, this enables a broader audience to access information quickly and easily. However, there are also negative consequences. The rapid dissemination of information has facilitated new methods of distributing disinformation, making it easier for individuals to create and share false or misleading content (Fallis, 2015).

A few decades ago, people primarily got their news from newspapers. However, with modern technology's rise, the consumption of (dis)information has diversified (Chesney & Citron, 2019). What started with the creation of fake websites soon evolved into spreading disinformation on social media platforms. Initially dominated by false information conveyed through words, it quickly shifted to sharing disinformation via images (Chesney & Citron, 2019). Today, with the rise of artificial intelligence, this phenomenon has progressed to the creation of deepfakes, videos generated by AI that can depict anyone doing or saying anything. Chesney and Citron (2019) explore this issue in their article "Deepfakes: The New Disinformation War," warning about the growing prevalence of deepfake videos. Chesney and Citron (2019) suggest that as digital technology advances, these videos could become so convincing that distinguishing them from reality will be nearly impossible. Deepfakes have the potential to become a

powerful tool for spreading false information, with serious implications for politics and international affairs (Chesney & Citron, 2019).

These implications are also discussed by Asmolov (2018), who states that continuous engagement of people in a state of online conflict fueled by disinformation can be seen as a form of political control by the state (Asmolov, 2018). The rapid development of disinformation makes it difficult to create a single, comprehensive definition. Therefore, it is not surprising that a lengthy debate has been going on about how to define disinformation.

An author who engages in the debate on disinformation is Fallis (2015). In his publication, he discusses and critically evaluates different definitions. His article clearly shows how many definitions are lacking because they are either too broad or too narrow. Take, for example, one of the first theories proposed by Floridi (1996), where he states that disinformation is something that arises when “the process of information is defective” (p. 3). This definition includes many things that are not disinformation, making it too broad. According to Fallis (2015), Floridi is also too broad in his later publications, including one where he basically stated that disinformation is inaccurate information of which the source knows is inadequate. This definition falls short because it doesn’t consider the intention of the disseminating party (Fallis, 2015). When false information is disseminated, it’s not necessarily disinformation. Even if the information might be false, it is not necessarily misleading or meant to deceive. For example, a sarcastic joke contains false information, but it isn’t considered disinformation because there is no intent to mislead (Fallis, 2015). Eventually, Floridi developed a definition that closely corresponds to what is perceived as disinformation today. He described disinformation as inaccurate information produced with the intention to mislead the receiver (Fallis, 2015). Fallis (2015) ended his article by sharing his definition of disinformation: “misleading information that has the function of misleading” (p. 422).

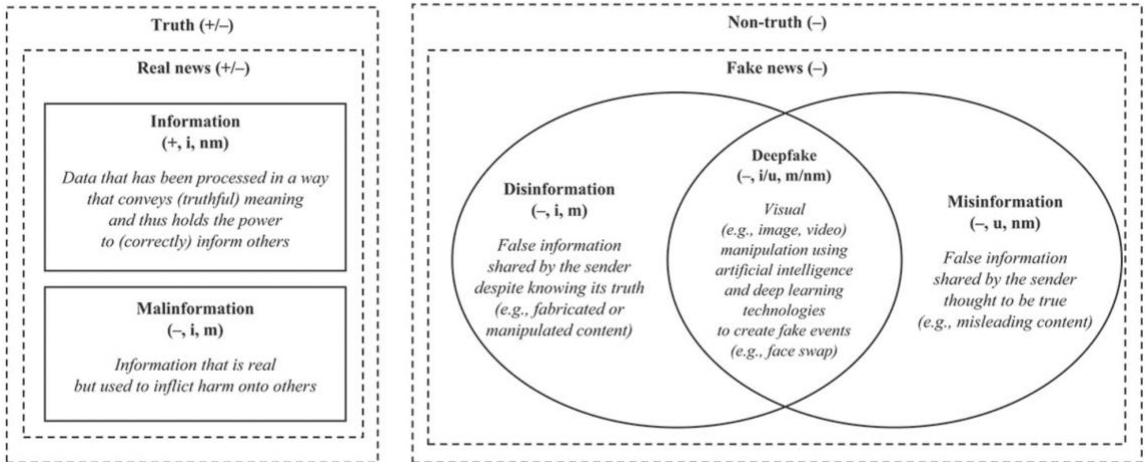
The debate on definitions is not limited to just Floridi and Fallis; there is a large body of published studies that share definitions of disinformation. A distinct definition is provided in the article by Selakovic et al. (2024), which explains disinformation as verifiably false or misleading information created, disseminated, and distributed with the intent to gain economic, political, or other benefits, with a clear aim to deceive the public. This definition differs from Starbird & Wilson (2020), who define disinformation as information that is deliberately false or misleading, with a purpose that is not always to convince but to create doubt. The definition from Starbird and Wilson (2020) doesn’t include the condition that the information must be verifiably false, as Selakovic et al. (2024) specify. Although most definitions differ on minor conditions included or how they are phrased, all recent definitions, such as Fallis (2015), Starbird & Wilson (2020), and Selakovic et al. (2024), agree that something can only be considered disinformation if it is spread with the intent to mislead, deceive, or harm.

Reading all the definitions above, disinformation might seem less sinister and more like a phenomenon that occurs when someone with malicious intentions starts typing on their computer. However, it's essential to recognize that disinformation is not an innocent phenomenon, but a strategic tool used by state actors to advance their political goals and has the power to undermine democratic institutions (Asmolov, 2018). This aligns with Starbird et al. (2019), who argue that disinformation is best understood as a campaign an assemblage of information actions employed to mislead for a strategic, political purpose. The profound impact of state-sponsored disinformation should not be underestimated. Asmolov (2018) explains one of these impacts by showing that disinformation campaigns are a way for states to assess their disconnective power, meaning that disinformation can divide societies by creating groups and deepening cleavages (Asmolov, 2018). To understand this, it's essential to develop a deeper understanding of how disinformation operates.

As the debate shows, not all incorrect information is classified as disinformation. A distinction is made between disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation. Of these, disinformation has already been extensively discussed above, while misinformation and malinformation are not. Misinformation can be defined as false information that the sender believes to be true (Lim, 2023). This differs from disinformation because, unlike disinformation, the intentions are not to deceive or mislead. Malinformation does include the intention to mislead or deceive; nevertheless, it can also be distinguished from disinformation because the information shared is not false. Malinformation can be defined as accurate but sensitive information that is shared with malicious intentions (Lim, 2023). Figure 1, derived from Lim (2023), shows this very clearly. It shows malinformation on the side of 'truth' but is also labeled as intentional and malicious. Misinformation is displayed on the side of 'non-truth' but it's labeled unintentional and non-malicious.

**Figure 1**

*The Information Dynamics*



Notes. + is positive impact; - is negative impact; i is intentional; u is unintentional; m is malicious; nm is non-malicious.

The reasons behind disinformation and malinformation often differ. However, they are frequently spread with two main goals: confusing the receiver so it's harder to distinguish truth from falsehood and influencing the receiver's opinion either in favor of the party spreading the disinformation or against an enemy (Ziemer & Rothmund, 2024). Disinformation and malinformation tend to appeal to emotions and typically include controversial statements or information, which can strongly sway people (Asmolov, 2018). How and why people are susceptible to disinformation also depends on how they cope with the information they receive.

Ziemer & Rothmund (2024) distinguish two modes of information processing based on the effort it requires. They refer to these as the 'effortless processing mode' and the 'effortful processing mode.' During effortful processing, information is critically examined to reach carefully weighted conclusions. In contrast, effortless processing involves superficial review, where information is either accepted or rejected based on familiar cognitive shortcuts without critical evaluation (Ziemer & Rothmund, 2024). The mode used depends on an individual's motivation and ability to engage and strengthen their cognitive resources. These modes directly affect how susceptible people are to believing disinformation as truth. Those relying on effortless processing are more easily misled than those using effortful processing (Ziemer & Rothmund, 2024). However, the information that is processed is often selectively chosen due to motivated reasoning, which is the tendency to process information that aligns with pre-existing beliefs rather than objectively evaluating it (Ziemer & Rothmund, 2024).

Actors who spread disinformation understand these individual processes and incorporate them into broader systematic disinformation campaigns. This has led motivated reasoning to be viewed as a major factor in susceptibility to disinformation and a significant barrier to combating it (Ziemer & Rothmund, 2024). Gaining a deeper understanding of processing modes and motivated reasoning is crucial for this study because, as Miller et al. (2024) have shown, combating disinformation doesn't only require comprehending the source of disinformation, but also the psychological factors behind it.

In the academic scene, the debate about how to counter disinformation has been intensifying. Since 2016, there has been a significant increase in studies focused on countering disinformation (Courchesne et al., 2021). As addressed in the introduction, this study uses the following definition of countermeasures: countermeasures are responses designed to combat the distribution and impacts of disinformation. This definition is partially based on the definition of Alland (2002) as explained earlier.

As Courchesne et al. (2021) have demonstrated, debates about countermeasures agree on the severity of the problem; however, when it comes to solutions, there are still significant disagreements (Courchesne et al., 2021). Notably, earlier studies have shown that fact-checking can reduce the impact of disinformation (Courchesne et al., 2021). While that has proven true, newer research has shown that fact-checking is an overly studied countermeasure, leading to a lack of research into the effects of other interventions (Courchesne et al., 2021). This aligns with the debate over whether countermeasures should focus on prevention or response to disinformation. Literature, such as Courchesne et al. (2021),

favors addressing both reaction and prevention simultaneously, while articles like Sallami and Aïmeur (2025) argue that mere reaction is insufficient and that prevention deserves greater focus. This debate acts as a barrier to fighting disinformation, but previous research has identified many other obstacles. These include the need for a cross-sector response, widespread disagreement about what qualifies as disinformation, and overcoming deeply divided societies (Stray, 2019).

This section has explored the evolution of disinformation and how new technologies facilitate its spread. It has reflected on the key debates about its definition and ways to counter it. This section highlighted the vital role disinformation plays in the Russian government's hybrid warfare strategy. Building on this knowledge in the next section, another important theory, Framing, will be examined and discussed.

## 2.2 Framing

Just like disinformation, framing has proven to be a critical part of the Russian government's hybrid warfare strategy (Sinelnik and Hovy, 2024). Research has shown that Russian disinformation campaigns consistently and intentionally use specific types of framing (Sinelnik and Hovy, 2024). And this is not surprising because disinformation and framing are both types of information that can be weaponized to target the cognitive and virtual dimensions in warfare (Bouwmeester, 2024). Frames are a helpful tool for political work to create or steer people's opinions about situations in a certain direction (Van Gorp, 2005).

To better understand how framing and disinformation work as strategic manipulation tools, we need to examine how framing influences people's daily thinking and communication. Benford and Snow (2000) show that one of the most influential researchers regarding framing, Goffman, views framing as a systematic process that happens automatically without individuals realizing it. According to Goffman, frames are interpretive schemes of our own reality. Frames help people understand, perceive, identify, and label everything that happens around them (Benford & Snow, 2000). This type of framing helps people attribute meaning to reality, and in doing so, it also serves as a way to organize experiences and motivate people to take action (Benford & Snow, 2000).

The effect that a certain frame brings to reality differs for individuals. Van Gorp (2006) explains that factors such as the receiver's level of attention, interests, beliefs, experiences, desires, and attitudes influence this process. This allows multiple individuals to witness the same event but interpret it in a completely different way (Van Gorp, 2006). An example that clarifies this was given by Van Gorp et al. (2018). He says that everyone looks through a different pair of metaphorical sunglasses. These glasses influence how we interpret reality because they are shaped and colored by our memories, ideas, and lived experiences. These glasses represent the framing everyone naturally engages in daily, and the

frame (glasses) you hold onto reality highlights certain aspects while others fall outside the frame and go unnoticed. As a result, everyone perceives reality differently (Van Gorp, 2006).

The way Van Gorp and Goffman perceive framing is as a concept that always occurs and involves all of us, as we try to make sense of the world around us. While that is correct, other researchers argue that framing is not only a systematic process but also a tool used by actors to assert power (Demmers, 2016). An author whose theory views framing less as a systematic idea and more as a powerful and strategically chosen tool is Entman (1993). Entman's definition explains that framing comes down to salience and selection. Salience means putting the emphasis on certain aspects, and to use salience, a selection must be made of which aspects get emphasized and which do not. This selection has consequences because the aspects that get emphasized will be pushed to the forefront, while the aspects that do not get selected disappear to the background (Entman, 1993). By doing this, target audiences are guided to think, feel, or decide in specific ways (Entman, 2007). And while everybody uses framing systematically, framing as Entman (1993; 2007) describes is implemented strategically by actors who can use this interplay between selection and salience to make certain aspects more accessible than others and decide how people perceive issues.

In this process, four factors influence whether a frame will succeed: the disseminating party, the message, the receiver, and the culture (Entman, 1993). The disseminating party is the actor spreading the frame. The message is the content that contains the frame, which can be visual, linguistic, or vocal. The receiver is the target audience. The culture includes all the frames common in the social circles of the receiver (Entman, 1993). The frame serves multiple functions: it defines problems, where the disseminating party sees an issue; it diagnoses causes, explaining why certain phenomena occur; it makes moral judgments about whether something should be seen as right or wrong to influence opinions; and it suggests solutions to address the problem (Entman, 1993). The entire process from disseminating a frame to reaching the target audience involves a significant role for the media and public or political figures due to agenda setting (Entman, 2007). "Agenda setting" refers to the influence that the press, media, or influential individuals have in determining whether something appears on the agenda, thereby directly affecting its accessibility to the broader public (Kuypers & Cooper, 2005). The use of agenda setting is often a strategic decision. Framing, in this sense, cannot be seen as an isolated phenomenon, because it's a highly political act (Demmers, 2016).

Entman (2007) clearly explains the relationship between framing and power. He states that since "power is the ability to get others to do what one wants" (p. 165), in noncoercive political systems, the way to assert power is by influencing what people think about. Framing is the tool political actors use to influence the agenda and considerations that determine what people will think about (Entman, 2007). When framing relates to conflict, it becomes politicized with all its associated implications (Demmers, 2016). Demmers (2016) explains that the way conflicts are framed whether intentionally or not directly

impacts their escalation and persistence, as frames can legitimize actions and mobilize support. Adjacent frames significantly influence the assignment of blame and responsibility (Demmers, 2016).

Research by Sinelnik and Hovy (2024) shows that framing and disinformation are complementary to each other. Disinformation resonates better when framing is applied, and the frames help to simplify and organize information (Vyncke & Van Gorp, 2018). However, framing is not just part of the problem it can also be part of the solution (Miller et al., 2024). Miller et al. argue that framing offers hope in addressing the psychological roots of disinformation. And because framing is included in the Russian disinformation campaigns (Sinelnik & Hovy, 2024), research shows that it might be of use to include in the countermeasures as well. Because strategies like “Deframing” and “Reframing” offer possibilities to counter frames (Vyncke & Van Gorp, 2018). Reframing refers to the offering of an alternative frame, which includes a new way of looking at a subject, without referring to the original frame. Deframing refers to the undermining of a frame by refuting the components of that frame (Vyncke & Van Gorp, 2018).

In conclusion, this theoretical framework demonstrates how disinformation and framing are two key components of the Russian government’s hybrid warfare strategy. Both concepts mutually reinforce each other to effectively mislead and persuade. And they are both essential considerations when evaluating potential countermeasures. In the following chapters of this research, the theories of disinformation and framing will help develop a better understanding of what characterizes these Russian disinformation campaigns and how they can be countered.

## Chapter three

To answer the research questions, a suitable approach is needed that captures not only the characteristics of Russian disinformation but also the countermeasures against it. In this chapter, all the choices made concerning the methodology of this study will be explained and critically evaluated. This chapter explains why a qualitative approach is best suited for this research and why the choice was made to combine document analysis and expert interviews. This will be followed by a detailed explanation of which and how the data is collected. To conclude with a statement regarding the positionality.

### 3.1 Research approach and design

This research was conducted using a qualitative research approach. A qualitative research approach is used to understand certain phenomena, the lived experiences, or the perspectives surrounding these phenomena (Hammarberg et al., 2016). Qualitative research is typically conducted to understand how or why certain phenomena occur; it can be distinguished from quantitative research because, instead of focusing on numbers, its primary focus is on words (Busetto et al., 2020). This made the Qualitative approach suitable for this research because it has been used to understand how Russian disinformation campaigns work by looking at the characteristics that define them. Adjacent to that, this research has also analyzed which countermeasures can be implemented, and this was also done by focusing on words rather than numbers. The theoretical framework has also demonstrated that framing is dependent on interpretation (Benford & Snow, 2000); therefore, a quantitative approach is not suitable for research like these that encompass both disinformation and framing, both of which are highly context dependent, word based, and interpretive (Vennix, 2019).

The leading question that is answered in this research is: What are the key characteristics that define Russian disinformation campaigns, and what countermeasures are there to combat Russian disinformation?

To provide an answer to this question, two distinct research methods have been used. These are document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Document analysis, also known as document study, refers to the process by which a researcher examines and analyzes written materials (Busetto et al., 2020). This can be executed using multiple sorts of documents, ranging from archives to reports and policy documents (Busetto et al., 2020). In this research, the focus was primarily on reports, academic literature, and policy documents. Because analyzing these documents provided a way to understand how and why government or international organizations enacted certain policies (Browne et al, 2018). This aligned with the research objective because it provided a clear foundation to identify and analyze what countermeasures can be implemented. It suits explicitly this research well because a strong emphasis in this research is put on looking at international organizations and governments, which is a shared element with document analysis (Browne et al, 2018).

To conduct this analysis and keep it feasible, certain criteria have been adopted. These criteria create an outline of which data is trying to be retrieved or ignored. A detailed description of these criteria can be found in Section 3.2, "Data Collection."

The second method used in this study is semi-structured interviews with experts. This method has been added because it enables gaining a deeper understanding and providing sufficient data on the complex contexts and issues at stake (Harrell & Bradley, 2009), regarding Russian disinformation campaigns. Experts are commonly defined as "as someone with comprehensive and authoritative knowledge in a particular area not possessed by most people" (Caley et al., 2013). The experts have been interviewed through a semi-structured approach because it provides a solid foundation in the form of the interview guide, while also leaving room to add or delete questions during the interview (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Semi-structured interviews were chosen over structured interviews due to the nature of the research objective. While structured interviews offer consistency and are well-suited for collecting quantitative data, they are less appropriate when the goal is to gain in-depth insights. This research aimed to explore expert perspectives in detail, specifically regarding their theoretical knowledge and practical experiences. This required a more flexible interview format. Semi-structured interviews provided a solid framework using an interview guide, while also allowing for the adaptation of questions to the specific expertise of each expert who was interviewed (Clarke & Braun, 2013). This adaptability was crucial in ensuring that the interviews remained relevant and informative. The interviews have been conducted either using Microsoft Teams or in person.

As explained above, this research makes use of two research methods this is known as methodological triangulation, which involves the use of multiple research methods to study the same phenomenon (Bowen, 2009). The reason for combining document analysis and semi-structured interviews is that using either one alone could have created gaps in the research. In this study, the document analysis is useful for gathering information about which countermeasures have been employed. However, it depends on interpretation, which poses a risk to the results because it might lead to including or excluding important or irrelevant data. Interviews provided an in-depth understanding of the phenomena discussed from multiple perspectives. While relying solely on interviews would reduce interpretation bias, it would be difficult to collect enough data this way. Combining both methods allows the strengths of each to complement the other: document analysis ensures sufficient data collection, and expert interviews reduce interpretation bias. The interviews also offered deeper insights by enabling questions that couldn't be answered through existing literature, resulting in richer data. These complementary methods gave this research a solid foundation to gather enough data to draw reliable conclusions conclusion.

## 3.2 Data collection

The way that data is collected has a profound impact on the results of a research. When discussing a sensitive subject like disinformation, it is crucial to clearly indicate where and how the data is collected. All the steps made regarding data collection on the two research methods, document analysis and expert interviews, will explained in this section.

### **Document analysis**

As explained in the previous section documents analysis forms is of crucial value for this research because it allows to pragmatically look at how Lithuania, The Netherlands and the EU have countered disinformation. And it provides a basis to look at what the strategies are for future countering of disinformation. The document analysis was primarily used to gather information on the second sub-question; however, it's also proven its importance for the first sub-question because it allowed for filling in some shortcomings in the interviews. An example is the addition of document analysis to clarify the use of troll factories by the Russian government, as seen in section 4.1.4 on spreading mechanisms.

The three distinct types of documents that were used where also used for distinct purposes. The academic literature was used to fill the shortcomings of the interviews as explained above. However, the academic literature was not used to gather data on the question what countermeasures can be implemented. That was done solely by the analyzing of reports, policy documents and interviews, because these already provided enough data and adding more would create an unmanageable amount of data. To ensure that the documents and data to be analyzed and retrieved would actually be a contribution to this research and the serve objectives, multiple criteria where implemented.

The first criteria concerns the relevance of these documents in providing a sufficient answer to the research question. The selected documents must address the two sub-questions involved in this research. They should either contribute to an answer on the question of Russian disinformation campaigns and their characteristics, or on the question regarding countermeasures against them.

The first criteria is purely practical, whether the data helps me answer the research question. The second criteria has to do with the key concepts addressed in the documents. In this research, some key concepts are disinformation, framing, and hybrid warfare. The documents at hand must engage with these theories to form a contribution to the theoretical side of this study.

Because this study has been demarcated by geographical locations, it's essential that the documents are as well. Here the third criteria comes in, the documents regarding the second sub question must focus on the countermeasures that can be implemented by the EU, the Netherlands or Lithuania. And regarding the first sub question this includes Russia as well.

The last criteria states that the reports or policy documents must be derived from official EU or Lithuanian, Dutch government websites. This doesn't mean that the documents are objective, I certainly do not claim that, however, because the goal of this document analysis is to uncover what countermeasures can be implemented by these three actors so it's crucial see their strategies and their frames of the issues at stake.

### **Semi-structured interviews**

Similar to document analysis, establishing clear criteria for the experts interviewed in this research is equally important. The first criteria for the selection was that they possessed expertise on the concepts of disinformation or strategic communication, hybrid warfare, or intelligence, framing, or responses to disinformation. These concepts had been addressed in the interviews, and their expertise needed to include these. Just as the concepts varied, so did the disciplines in which the experts operated. The fields involved included diplomacy, Russia studies, intelligence, military, academia, and cyber security. It was preferable to have highly skilled experts in a single area rather than experts who possess only superficial knowledge across several.

Consequently, the second criteria emphasized that experts should collectively represent a wide spectrum of disciplines. It was also important to acknowledge the limits of expertise. Therefore, selecting multiple specialists with knowledge in different fields was essential. This strategy was advantageous since combining insights from various experts resulted in better decision-making (Caley et al., 2013).

The third criteria is similar to the one used for selecting documents. The experts chosen had to be knowledgeable about the geographical scope of this research. Again, this scope included the Netherlands, Lithuania, and the EU. For the first sub-question, this geographical scope also extended to Russia.

The final criteria was that experts had to agree to participate in the research voluntarily. This does not imply they were ineligible if they preferred not to be named; it simply means they consented to be interviewed after understanding the objectives of this study.

### **Data analysis**

After retrieving the data, it needed to be analyzed. For both research methods, the same program, Atlas.ti, was used. This software allows coding of linguistic data to create a structured overview. The specific codes varied between data from document analysis and interviews. For interviews, codes included themes like characteristics of Russian disinformation, currently used countermeasure, potential future countermeasure, or context sub-question one. For document analysis, similar codes were applied, with

additional ones such as: countermeasures, framing, relevant information regarding countermeasures or narratives of Russian disinformation. Coding facilitated a more manageable analysis by highlighting empirical patterns in the documents, which were then organized into thematic categories (Bowen, 2009). The findings were derived based on these codes. And after these findings were concluded, all analyzed documents and interview transcripts were stored in the computer program RIS.

### 3.3 Participants and documents

Based on the criteria provided in the previous section, certain choices were made regarding who and which documents would be included in this study. In this section, a general overview of the experts questioned, and the analyzed documents will be given. In the results chapter, a more detailed description will be provided for each expert and document when they are first introduced. Additionally, a more detailed table of the experts and the interview guides can be found in the appendix, and the sources of the documents are listed in the references.

The final selection consisted out of eight participating experts. The selection encompasses a diverse range of roles at various levels. Their expertise was well aligned with the criteria aimed for. The selection consisted out of a Dutch ambassador, academic, intelligence officer, military general, Russian expert, and more. All together people who I would consider as real experts in their field. For each interview, as mentioned earlier, a semi-structured interview guide was made. No standardized interview guide was used; this approach was taken to leverage their expertise as much as possible and gather as much valuable information as possible from each interview. All experts, except one, gave their permission to use their names in this research and to include the interview guides as part of the appendix. The decision has been made to use their full names because the term ‘expert’ can sometimes be vague, and by using their names, people can judge their expertise by themselves.

The final selection of documents consisted of a total of six documents. Of these, three were at the EU level and three at the Dutch government level. While the intention was also to analyze Lithuanian policy documents, in reality, these documents were hard to find, eventually leading to their exclusion. The final selection included reports, policy documents, and additional literature. The decision was made to focus on overarching documents that reflected the counterstrategy rather than numerous documents that were highly focused on a single counter mechanism, even though this meant analyzing fewer documents to avoid a lot of duplicate results. A more detailed description of the documents will be provided in appendix B. In the results chapter of the study, data derived from interviews will be referred to either by mentioning the name of the expert or, within brackets, the number of the interview and the name of the expert. The data derived from the document analysis will be cited in accordance with the normal APA rules.

### 3.4 positionality

Researching such a sensitive subject, like disinformation, requires a critical reflection on the ethical dilemmas involved. To clarify my positionality, I would like to share a bit about my background. I am a Dutch student at Radboud University with the dream of someday working in the international security sector. I have been very privileged, as I have not personally experienced what it's like to live in a war zone. I strongly believe in a parliamentary democracy where the majority decides, but minority rights are protected. Because of this, I am concerned about how Dutch democratic institutions, which are already under pressure, are affected by phenomena like framing and disinformation. It also pains me to see the suffering in Ukraine, and I would be lying if I said I don't feel a strong aversion to the violence initiated by the Russian military and government against Ukraine.

I recognize that the frame I hold onto reality shapes this research, and consequently, it's unavoidable that the results are influenced as well. It prompted me to examine my methodological considerations because I understand they can impact this research. By choosing to conduct interviews with experts, I decide whose voices are heard and whose are not. The same goes for document analysis, as I have the discretion to determine which parts are emphasized and which are not. This is not a matter to be taken lightly, and while complete objectivity would be ideal, I believe it's impossible to be entirely unbiased because, as explained, framing influences how we perceive the world, often without realizing it. That's why I address my positionality by being as transparent as possible and by trying to maintain distance from the respondents.

Transparency allows readers to reflect on the research themselves and decide whether they agree with the arguments presented. I do this by clarifying the data my results are based on, showing all the sources of the data I use, sharing the interview guides, and of course by being honest about my positionality. Maintaining distance from the experts I interviewed is crucial as well, because it allows me to critically examine the data gathered from the interviews and not assume that what they tell is necessarily and objectively true. The same applies to the policy documents, from which the data is also critically evaluated before making judgments, because documents derived from the EU and the Dutch government also make use of framing.

I also want to clarify that my perspective does not necessarily represent the views of other Dutch citizens or university students. I recognize that there are many different ways to interpret the arguments presented in this research, and I do not claim that my interpretation is the only correct one; rather, it is simply one of many independent viewpoints. What I can assure is that I act with good intentions, based on my own principles and beliefs. Additionally, I always keep in mind the 'do no harm' principle, prioritizing the safety and well-being of my respondents, readers, and the potential impacts of this research. Transparency is also a key value for me, as I want everyone to be able to understand and evaluate the reasoning behind my arguments and to decide whether they agree with my position.

## Chapter four

This chapter presents the results derived from the research approaches and methods explained earlier. It shifts focus from an academic understanding of disinformation and framing to an understanding of how the Russian government employs these concepts. Additionally, potential countermeasures are discussed, including the views of interviewed experts, and analyzed documents. The results are then critically analyzed and examined for potential connections with the academic literature in the theoretical framework.

### 4.1 What are the key characteristics that define a Russian disinformation campaign?

The document analysis has shown that while multiple actors target the EU with disinformation campaigns, Russian-backed disinformation poses the greatest threat. These campaigns differ significantly from others in terms of resources, strategy, scale, and more (European Commission, 2018a). Therefore, this section will provide a deeper understanding by shifting the focus from a general overview of disinformation to how the Russian government uses disinformation and what makes their approach so unique.

This contributes to this research because, to effectively counter these campaigns, we first need to understand how they operate. Disinformation is not a new phenomenon, especially for Russia. As Hubert Smeets noted, disinformation is deeply rooted in Russian history and is crucial for the perseverance of Putin's regime. During the Cold War, it became clear that deception was used as a tool of warfare, and many of the same tactics from that era are still in use today (Interview 8, Hubert Smeets). Hubert Smeets is one of the interviewed experts. He is a Dutch journalist who worked as a Soviet Union correspondent for the Dutch newspaper NRC. In 2016, he co-founded 'Raam op Rusland,' a Dutch organization that aims to deliver independent news from and to Russia (Raam, z.d).

Hubert Smeets also acknowledged that Russian disinformation campaigns can be identified in various ways. The most important of these will be examined in the following section, including their objectives, strategies, substance, and spreading mechanisms.

#### 4.1.1 Objectives

Research into the first question showed that Russian information campaigns distinguish themselves by their objectives. The results showed that there are multiple layers of objectives when it comes to Russian disinformation campaigns. Robert Spronk, one of the experts, who has served as one of the highest ranking intelligence officers at the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service for nearly forty years where he has been working closely on issues such as Russian disinformation for decades (Meeus, 2023), discussed how the ultimate goal of the Russian government is to create a climate in which everything

countries, organizations, and more that the Kremlin considers a threat to Russian society is managed and controlled.

According to Linas Skirius, Jack Twiss Quarles van Ufford, and Hubert Smeets, the main objective is accompanied by three narrower goals: changing public opinion, destabilizing the target societies, and increasing polarization. Linas Skirius is a Lithuanian expert who is the co-founder of the Civic Resilience Initiative, an organization that focuses on countering hybrid threats, mainly from Russia (Civic Resilience Initiative, z.d). Jack Twiss Quarles van Ufford is currently working as the Dutch ambassador to Lithuania and has previously served as the Director of Intelligence at the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service. Before that, he was a security advisor to the prime minister of the Netherlands (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2024).

Han Bouwmeester reported that Russian disinformation campaigns are either focused on changing the public opinion towards things, organizations, or people that the Russian government sees as threats, or they're trying to generate a positive view on Russia. Han Bouwmeester is one of the selected experts. He is a General in the Dutch military and a Professor at the Dutch officers' academy (Ministerie van Defensie, 2023). He wrote his dissertation on modern Russian deception warfare, which included the use of disinformation and framing.

Hubert Smeets categorizes the objectives into two distinct groups: positive objectives and negative objectives. In this context, 'positive' and 'negative' do not reflect to moral judgments but rather to the fundamental aims. As Hubert Smeets put it, the Kremlin's positive objective is to persuade targeted societies that their narrative of the Ukraine war is the only true account. At the same time, their negative objective is that if this effort fails to convince people of the positive story, they want to at least instill the idea that there is no single, absolute truth anymore (Interview 8, Hubert Smeets).

Hubert Smeets explained it as follows: if you're able to undermine the idea in society that there is such a thing as factual truth, then the following situation will unfold: people might not be convinced of the positive objective, but the idea can develop that people begin questioning whether the idea they initially believed is even true, this is the negative objective. Basically, Hubert Smeets explained that the negative objective of the Russian government is successful if people start seeing actual facts as opinions, and people will begin to question themselves whether something like a fact even exists. According to Hubert Smeets, if the Russian government's negative objective succeeds, it would undermine the foundation of all democratic societies. These societies rely on the idea that people agree on the facts and then can disagree about possible solutions.

Whether the negative or positive objective holds priority in the Kremlin depends on the geopolitical situation (Interview 8, Hubert Smeets). During a conflict like the war in Ukraine the negative objective is prioritized, but if for example NATO would fall apart then the positive objective becomes more critical (Interview 8, Hubert Smeets).

Currently, the interviews show that negative objective holds priority for the Kremlin. Han Bouwmeester explained that within the Russian government, the idea persists that unity within the EU and other targeted countries poses a threat to the existence of Russian society. They believe that increasing polarization in these countries will cause them to become more fractured and politically divided, making them easier to control because a divided society slows down the decision-making process (Interview 4, Han Bouwmeester). Han Bouwmeester gave the following example: the NATO alliance consists of 32 states, and the Kremlin sees it as its most significant threat. According to Han Bouwmeester, the Kremlin wouldn't want to see anything rather than all these 32 countries falling apart, and this is what they have built their entire strategy around (Interview 4, Han Bouwmeester). These objectives are also backed by strategies, and in the following section, those strategies will be shared.

#### 4.1.2 Strategies

The interviews revealed that the Russian government uses a variety of strategies to achieve the goals explained above. For example, the increase in polarization happens because Russian disinformation campaigns strategically spread false information and misleading content on highly sensitive topics (Interview 1, Linas Skirius). Linas Skirius explained this strategy, stating that “Russia tries to look for the sharp angles, trying to ignite the fires in different camps. Sometimes they support completely opposite parts of society, which are supposed to fight each other. But they're igniting them both because they're creating confusion.” The ‘sharp angles’ mentioned in this quote refer to sensitive subjects in society that disinformation can provoke responses to. In this context, Linas Skirius's statement about ‘igniting fires in different camps’ refers to the strategy of the Russian government to use misleading information to turn different segments of society against each other. This also indicates that the Russian government constantly supports or opposes certain sides in public debates, often without the parties involved knowing it. Linas Skirius added that the Kremlin doesn't care who they need to support as long as it serves their own interests. Jack Twiss Quarles van Ufford noted that sometimes this even takes them to support both sides in a political debate, for instance, backing both the Black Lives Matter movement and the Make America Great Again movement simultaneously. This aims to achieve the Kremlin's narrow objective of polarizing targeted societies.

The overarching objective of a climate without perceived threats is also pursued through election manipulation strategies (Interview 7, Robert Spronk). Using disinformation campaigns, the Russian government actively tries to influence elections and get pro-Russian or anti-European governments in power (Interview 1, Linas Skirius). This was also revealed during the document analysis, which showed how the Russian government attempts to identify gaps through which it can infiltrate and sway European politics using disinformation (Van Huffelen & De Jonge, 2024). During these manipulation attempts, they are constantly using their disinformation campaigns to ignite the fires mentioned above. However, they are not simply choosing random topics and starting conflicts there; instead, they are deliberately

trying to find vulnerabilities and selecting those topics where their strategy will be most successful (Interview 2, Jack Twiss Quarles van Ufford).

An example of this is the EU's right to freedom of speech, which is one of its strengths. However, the Russian government exploits this as a weakness by using it to spread disinformation (Interview 3, Giedrius Sakalauskas). The document analysis has shown that disinformation often falls within the freedom of speech which makes it hard to counter and poses little risk for the disseminating party (Van Huffelen & De Jonge, 2024). Han Bouwmeester described the idea behind this strategy as follows: if they ignite enough fires, the targeted societies will be so preoccupied with themselves that they'll be unable to make decisions regarding the international situations. Han Bouwmeester added that this would cause countries to become completely numb in their decision-making.

A part of this strategy that hasn't been mentioned but that Linas Skirius touched upon is that they try to make it harder to distinguish who is right and who is wrong. He added that blurring this separation, aligns with the Kremlin's narrow objective to sow more confusion and destabilize societies.

In all the strategies above, the use of malinformation is crucial (Interview 4, Han Bouwmeester). As explained in the theoretical framework, malinformation consists of disinformation combined with half-truths that are often taken out of context. Han Bouwmeester explained how disinformation must conform to general beliefs because otherwise, it's more likely the disinformation is dismissed due to cognitive dissonance.

With cognitive dissonance, Han Bouwmeester refers to the process that occurs when people receive information that is contradictory to their general beliefs. Due to cognitive dissonance, people are more likely to disregard contradictory information (Interview 4, Han Bouwmeester). The Russian government also figured out how cognitive dissonance works. According to Bouwmeester, one of the most essential strategies for their campaigns is timing. He further adds that the Russian government always wants to be the first to comment on a situation, to avoid the influence of cognitive dissonance. Because of this, people aren't guided by their previous beliefs, making it easier to influence them. Han Bouwmeester even addresses that, for the Russian government, the timing of a message is more important than the quality of the message. Hubert Smeets explained how the use of malinformation also provides struggles for actors that want to counter disinformation because the disseminating party will always refer to the half-truth in their answer to counter allegations. Hubert Smeets pointed this out as an essential part of Russian disinformation to keep in mind, and he noted that the Russian government has become extremely good at creating malinformation.

While it hasn't been mentioned yet, the interviews also showed an important role for framing in the strategy. Hubert Smeets describes it the following "framing is een voorwaarde, is een conditio sine qua non om het verhaal wat je later wil gaan vertellen een basis te geven die onweersproken blijft." (Translation: framing is a prerequisite, is a conditio sine qua non to give the story you want to tell later

a basis that remains unchallenged) Hubert Smeets explains with this quote that framing is a necessary component of the Kremlin's disinformation strategy. According to Hubert Smeets this is the case because framing creates a strong basis that is hard to counter, meaning that if framing is used sufficiently, it becomes much harder to counter the disinformation. Hubert Smeets explains how framing is essential for disinformation campaigns because it organizes the disinformation campaigns and if the information isn't well organized, the misleading content may appear too obvious. A frame guides the target in a specific direction, which can make the disinformation seem like an undeniable truth (Interview 8, Hubert Smeets).

### 4.1.3 Substance

The heart of all disinformation is in the message itself. This is the part that holds the misleading information meant to serve its purpose. Van Den Herik, et al. (2020) mentioned that there are three characteristics that are applicable to the substance of the message to make it more likely that the receiver accepts disinformation as the truth. According to Van Den Herik, et al. (2020), the message must include provoking content that can draw an emotional reaction, it needs a powerful visual component, and it has to produce a powerful narrative. The Russian government puts a lot of effort into creating messages that contain these three elements. In this section, some of the most important narratives will be discussed.

Before conducting a thorough analysis of the used narratives, it's important to remember that just like the strategies used, the used narrative also constantly changes (Interview 1, Linas Skirius). Linas Skirius reported that, which narrative will be implemented and when, is continuously evaluated by the Russian government to fit the latest events and the current goals with the target audience at that time. He further added that this includes distinct narratives for the Russian speaking audience compared to the non-Russian speakers.

Nevertheless, there are some narratives which can be seen as overarching narratives that have been detected more often. The first narrative to be discussed came to light during both the document analysis and the interviews. This is the 'anti-supranational organization narrative'. Linas Skirius explained how this narrative is specifically focused on de-legitimizing and undermining of support for organizations like NATO and the European Union. He further added that in order to do this, the Kremlin uses the tools of defamation for these campaigns, which comes down to the dissemination of false claims with the idea to harm the person's or organization's reputation. Han Bouwmeester and Linas Skirius explain how NATO often finds itself at the center of these defamation campaigns, especially in countries closer to the Russian borders. An example of these campaigns is the narrative which was spread in Lithuania that NATO troops that have been stationed in Lithuania solely to occupy the country (Interview 1, Linas Skirius), another example occurred during the covid pandemic, with a campaign that suggested that NATO troops would bring Covid-19 to Lithuania to kill civilians (Interview 4, Han

Bouwmeester). While these defamation campaigns have been primarily spotted in countries close to the Russian border, document analysis has revealed that they are also being disseminated in African countries, often with ‘anti-EU’ or ‘anti-Western’ narratives (Van Huffelen & De Jonge, 2024).

Another key narrative underpinning many disinformation campaigns centers historical revisionism (Interview 8, Hubert Smeets). Historical revisionism is a narrative where the Russian government uses disinformation campaigns to deny the existence of entire cultures and their history (Interview 8, Hubert Smeets). Jack Twiss Quarles van Ufford gave a clear example of historical revisionism, he reported that a book presented by a Lithuanian journalist with very close ties to the Kremlin, and a preface written by Russian minister of foreign affairs Lavrov, blatantly stated that the Baltic states are not able to think objectively of Russia because they are non-existent peoples, with a not existing language and no real history, and that they are simply terrorists who are being used by Poland. This kind of narrative on historical revisionism is seen mostly in countries that have been a part of the Soviet Union or Tsar empire (Interview 2, Jack Twiss Quarles van Ufford).

Another narrative, which is closely related to history, revolves around the Second World War. Hubert Smeets addressed that the Kremlin is using this narrative about the Second World War domestically. According to Hubert Smeets, this narrative includes frames on Ukraine, because the narrative claims that Ukraine is a fascist state that is led by (Neo) Nazi's. This frame is specifically powerful domestically because it justifies actions easily. Hubert Smeets explains that this frame justifies so easily because “Rusland is een land dat eigenlijk nog altijd leeft, alsof de Tweede Wereldoorlog pas eergisteren is afgelopen” (Translation: Russia is a country that still lives as if the Second World War ended only yesterday). What Hubert Smeets means with this statement is that the Second World War, which in Russia is known as the Great Patriotic War, currently still has a more profound influence on Russian society than anywhere else in Europe. And what he is trying to say is that because of how influential this narrative still is, this subject strongly enhances black and white thinking, which has made it extremely easy to justify actions by calling the opponent a fascist or Nazi.

Hubert Smeets adds that within Russia, this frame is nearly impossible to counter, because anyone who tries to nuance the claims about fascists or Nazis is quickly discredited. Within Russia, this narrative is used to justify the war against Ukraine (Interview 8, Hubert Smeets), while in foreign politics, the Russian government justifies the war against Ukraine with the narrative that they were forced to do so due to the expansion of NATO. This shows very clearly how the Russian government is strategically choosing the narratives with the objectives and target audiences in mind. Linas Skirius mentioned that this is also why, during election manipulations, the Kremlin often switches between spreading a pro-Russian narrative or an anti-EU narrative.

Crucial to consider is that all these narratives are framed in a way that best suits the objectives. Because framing is not only as explained in the previous section a specific strategy, but it also translates

into the message. As Hubert Smeets explained, the use of framing in the story makes it a lot easier to steer people in the direction that makes them remember the part that contains the disinformation. And as Han Bouwmeester addressed, framing is the deciding factor that influences what points are going to be made in the disinformation message, what words are going to be chosen, and eventually influences how people are going to be moved.

#### 4.1.4 Spreading mechanisms

While the content of a message is important, Hubert Smeets explains that Russian disinformation campaigns rely more on the quantity than the quality of messages. That's where the spreading mechanisms become essential.

The interviews have shown that Russian disinformation campaigns can also be characterized by the multiplicity of distribution mechanisms. This plays a crucial role in disinformation efforts because effective distribution ensures the disinformation reaches the target audience. How the disinformation is delivered is also important, because as Han Bouwmeester explains, if people feel comfortable with the messenger, they are more likely to accept the information quickly. The interviews have shown that the multiple spreading mechanisms range from human-based methods to technological ones, and from large-scale dissemination to small-scale efforts. On the human side, the most recognized spreading mechanisms are agents of influence and exploited individuals (Interview 7, Robert Spronk).

Robert Spronk reported that Agents of influence are individuals who have been recruited by the Russian intelligence agency to promote Russian narratives or bring harm to organizations that oppose Russia. He added that, these agents are often trained by the Russian government and will use disinformation to achieve their goals. This differs in many ways from exploited individuals. As Robert Spronk explained these exploited individuals, who are referred to in many different ways, are people who live in targeted societies but feel affiliated with Russia in some way, sometimes from an idealistic viewpoint and other times for an opportunistic viewpoint, this leads them to spread the Kremlin's disinformation. Robert Spronk further added that these individuals are not trained and they often do not even know that they are being used by the Kremlin. In between exploited individuals and agents of influence Robert Spronk mentioned another frequently used mechanism, the front organizations. He explained these as organizations that are usually paid by the Russian government to influence public opinion in targeted societies, which they often do willingly but sometimes unknowingly.

Then there are the more technological spreading mechanisms that play a crucial part in the Kremlin's disinformation strategy. These are for starters, big and small propaganda media outlets. During the interviews, it became very clear that these propaganda machines must not be mistaken for regular media outlets, that's why they will also be called out in this research. As mentioned by Hubert Smeets, the large propaganda media outlets are usually seen as a translation of the Kremlin, also

including their disinformation. As Hubert Smeets illustrates this as followed: “Russia Today en Sputnik moet je vergelijken met de infanterie bijvoorbeeld. Alleen dan via de kabel en niet marcherend over de grond.” (Translation: Russia Today and Sputnik should be compared to the infantry for example. Only via cable and not marching on the ground). Hubert Smeets' quote emphasizes that large propaganda media outlets should not be compared to regular outlets because they are an integrated part of the hybrid warfare strategy of the Russian government. He means that they carry out operations by spreading the Kremlin's disinformation instead of using bullets.

Jack Twiss Quarles van Ufford explained that a situation in which it's harder to recognize the Kremlin's disinformation, is when it's spread by small media outlets. He added that this is because they will disseminate disinformation while using a lot of in-between actors. During the interview, he gave an example of this, of how a regional French newspaper took over Russian disinformation that was posted on a small Russian news outlet. This then got picked up by larger newspapers in France, with the result that in the end the story has grown into a nationwide story based on lies. Jack Twiss Quarles van Ufford explains how this often begins with a small newspaper that willingly, or sometimes accidentally, picks up a piece of Russian disinformation. And he adds that eventually, everyone forgets where the disinformation came from because of all these in-between actors.

Robert Spronk explained that before the war in Ukraine, the use of major propaganda media outlets and agents of influence was essential to Russian governments disinformation strategy. However, the outbreak of the war has prompted the Kremlin to seek alternatives. Because not just Russia Today and Sputnik have been banned in the EU and NATO countries, but the same applies to many agents of influence. This has shifted the focus toward social media. (Interview 7, Robert Spronk).

Hubert Smeets now recognizes that social media has become the primary tool for the Russian government to disseminate disinformation. He addressed that, especially now that social media is being combined with the use of troll factories, a tremendous amount of disinformation is disseminated every day. To provide a clear explanation of trolls and troll-factories, additional literature has been reviewed with document analysis. This has shown that trolls refer to anonymous or fake online accounts that are either automatically generated or controlled by Russian citizens (Bouwmeester, 2022). Trolls operate through a point of view that is open to interpretation and is almost never based on facts or reviewed research. The trolls are used to persuade and deceive people by posting only content, consisting of malinformation or disinformation (Thomas, 2015). They are often called ‘Kremlin trolls’ because research has traced the influential trolls back to the Kremlin (Bouwmeester, 2022).

Troll-factories or so called ‘troll farms’ are organizations that employ people to create and control these trolls, an example of such an organization is the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) (Bouwmeester, 2022). Troll-factories can conduct foreign influence operations on a large scale. An organization like the IRA employs well over a thousand people who work twelve-hour shifts to conduct

twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week influence operation (Bouwmeester, 2022). Every individual manages multiple trolls who operate on social media in various ways. They either leave comments on news articles, control Twitter accounts that spread more than fifty tweets a day, or post messages on Facebook groups and get involved in discussions (Bouwmeester, 2022). With these messages and reactions, they try to diminish the reliability of news articles, encourage people to think negatively about enemies of the Russian state and steer the domestic opinion in a positive direction for the Kremlin (Thomas, 2015). The overarching aim of these influence operations conducted through trolls is to gradually undermine the democratic process in the targeted countries and eventually disrupt the democratic institutions (Bouwmeester, 2022).

The strong suit of the use of trolls is that they make it possible to create the illusion of the crowd. Because of the speed and volume with which these trolls disseminate misleading information, it leads people to believe that the actions of the Russian government have a massive following (Thomas, 2015). With this illusion, people who rely solely on certain social media outlets as their source develop a false worldview. As already addressed by Hubert Smeets the importance of social media for the Russian disinformation strategy is enormous. And as Hubert Smeets explained, since the Kremlin's disinformation mainly depends on the quantity of its campaigns, social media allows for the largest reach with minimal regulation and also minimal risks.

#### 4.1.5 Discussion sub question one

In the first half of this chapter, the results have been shared of the research on the question: what are the key characteristics that define a Russian disinformation campaign? In this section, the interesting findings will be discussed, evaluated, and connected to the academic literature from the theoretical framework. This section does not contain a reflection the limits and advantages, those will be provided in the conclusion, where the leading question will be answered as well.

The results show a pattern in which Russian disinformation campaigns distinguish themselves in four categories: Objectives, Strategies, Substances, and Spreading mechanisms. The results showed that the Russian disinformation campaigns contain multiple layers of objectives. The primary objective is to create a climate in which all aspects considered a threat by the Russian government are under control. This is supported by three narrower objectives: changing public opinion, destabilizing the target societies, and increasing polarization. The theoretical framework shows that all these objectives are connected in some way to the existing academic literature on disinformation. Ziemer & Rothmund (2024) acknowledge that the use of misleading information is often done to change the public opinion, while Asmolov (2018) demonstrated that state actors use disinformation to undermine democratic institutions, aligning with the second narrow objective and Asmolov (2018) also explained how actors

employ disinformation to divide societies which can be seen as the third narrow objective of the Russian government: enhancing polarization.

The results are not only aligned with the existing knowledge but also extended it, by demonstrating that the Russian government distinguishes between a positive objective and a negative objective. The way Hubert Smeets distinguishes the positive objective, which is to persuade people that narrative of the Russian government is the only correct one, and the negative objective, that people start to distrust the idea that something like a factual truth exists, shows the adaptability of the Russian disinformation campaigns.

The second pillar in which the Russian disinformation campaigns distinguish themselves is the strategies. Their disinformation campaigns are strategized by igniting fires in society, manipulating elections, and exploiting vulnerabilities in society such as freedom of speech. This aligns with Asmolov (2018) because he states that deepening cleavages, which can be understood as igniting fires in society, is a strategy to enhance polarization. Simultaneously, the Russian government has consistently implemented framing in its strategies, which corresponds with Entman (2007), who addressed that framing is a political tool used by actors to assert power in a non-coercive society, by influencing what people think about. The last strategy that must not be overlooked is the use of malinformation by combining disinformation with half-truths, which aligns with Lim's (2023) description. This strategic choice not only makes misleading information more believable, but it also makes it harder to counter because the basis remains unchallenged.

The third distinct pillar is the substance of the disinformation campaigns. Although not explicitly mentioned in the theoretical framework, this remains an important characteristic. Experts have identified three specific narratives: historical revisionism, anti-supranational organization narratives, and World War Two narratives. The results show that the narrative used is carefully weighed down and evaluated to align with the objectives and target audiences at that time. During this process, framing plays a crucial role because it influences the choice of words and the points emphasized in the disinformation message. This aligns with the role Entman (1993) attributes to framing, as it involves using framing to apply salience and selection, ensuring that certain words and points are highlighted or made less conspicuous.

And while the message, as explained above, is extremely important, the results have also shown that Russian disinformation campaigns don't rely as much on the quality of the narrative as they do on the quantity of the dissemination. This can be seen as a worrying trait, given the fact that Chesney & Citron (2019) have shown that the speed at which information is shared has dramatically increased over the past decades, and this trend has not yet reached its limit. The findings indicate that in the fourth pillar that characterizes the Russian disinformation campaigns, agents of influence and major propaganda media outlets have become less important, and new mechanisms, such as social media and troll factories, have taken over as the most important spreading mechanisms. This proves the statements of Fallis

(2015) to be true, that the new innovations in technology would facilitate new methods of distributing disinformation.

The implications of these results are that while the knowledge available in the academic literature is detailed and very useful, a deeper understanding is necessary to cope with Russian disinformation. The objectives are more detailed, the strategies more thought through, the narratives constantly changing, and the spreading mechanisms are evolving day by day. To grasp the complexity of Russian disinformation campaigns, relying only on general disinformation theories is simply not enough. Furthermore, these results have shown that Russian disinformation campaigns should not be viewed as innocent, isolated phenomena. Instead, they have proven to be strategic, manipulative tools used to assert power and undermine democracies as a crucial element of hybrid warfare.

## 4.2 What countermeasures are there to combat Russian disinformation campaigns?

During the interviews taken and the policy analysis that was conducted, multiple interesting countermeasures came to light. As the interviews and policy analysis were mainly conducted on Dutch, Lithuanian or EU respondents and policies, these countermeasures are not easily generalizable for a wider range. However, it does create an in-depth understanding of what true experts and governments believe to be the way of targeting Russian disinformation.

During the analysis of the data, I noticed a specific trend that is seen back in the results, which is what part of the disinformation process the countermeasures were focused on. Based on this trend, I categorized the measures into three groups: preventive countermeasures, Reactive countermeasures, and additional conditions. These categories will form the structure of this chapter, in which the results for the second sub question “What countermeasures exist to combat Russian disinformation?” will be shared.

### 4.2.1 Preventive

Preventive measures are those taken before disinformation reaches the target audience. They encompass a wide range of measures with different objectives, targets, and approaches. The interviews clearly show that experts believe most time and effort should be focused on preventive measures. As Han Bouwmeester said, “als je reactief wordt sta je 1-0 achter, door cognitieve dissonantie” (translation: when you become reactive, you're already 1-0 down because of cognitive dissonance). What Han Bouwmeester means with this quote is that disinformation becomes harder to counter once it has reached the target. He explains that this is because of cognitive dissonance, as explained in section 4.2.1 on strategies, people are less likely to accept information that does not align with what they already believe, meaning that it becomes more challenging to convince people of true information after they have already been fed with disinformation (Interview 4, Han Bouwmeester). This is why the experts unanimously agreed that it's crucial to use countermeasures that are focused on building a resilient society that is immune to disinformation, before the disinformation already targets those societies.

All the experts also agreed upon what they believed to be the most effective way to build a resilient society, by using education. As Dutch Ambassador Jack Twiss Quarles van Ufford stated: Het beste antidoot, het beste tegenmedicijn is zorg, dat in de breedte je goed onderwijs geeft voor mensen om kritisch te leren denken. Dat ze niet alles maar voor waar aannemen. (Translation: the best antidote, the best counter medicine is make sure, that across the board you provide good education for people to learn to think critically. That they don't just take everything for the truth).

With this quote, he states that education is the best countermeasure against disinformation because proper education provides people with the cognitive tools needed not to spot disinformation and not fall for it. According to the interviewed experts education should be focused on a multiplicity

of tools that can decrease the influence of disinformation, these are: enhancing awareness, improving media literacy, and supporting critical thinking. During the interview with Eugene Loos, he stressed the importance of learning people to ask themselves critical questions. Eugene Loos is a Dutch Associate Professor at Utrecht University. His research focuses on the role of media literacy in ensuring the accessibility of reliable digital information for all citizens. He leads a research project into what measures might be effective against fake news (Universiteit Utrecht, n.d.).

According to Eugene Loos, insufficient effort is currently being put into teaching people the essence of critical thinking. He stresses that this should happen in all parts and across all levels of society. Because, according to Eugene Loos, if people can think and reflect critically on information they see, this forms a solution, not to a single type of disinformation but to all types of disinformation, whether it's regarding health, elections, or the war in Ukraine.

The claim made by Eugene Loos that too little effort is put into critical thinking as a countermeasure aligns with the outcome of the document analysis. The document analysis across all articles shows that critical thinking is not a prominent factor taken into account when implementing countermeasures because while it is shortly mentioned as a useful component to counter disinformation, very few measures seem to be based on supporting critical thinking.

Linas Skirius noted in the interview that “media literacy and investing in the ability of people to distinguish the truth from lies is super important”. With this quote, Linas Skirius refers to how, in this day and age, where disinformation becomes more believable every single day, the need for people to distinguish lies from the truth becomes more important as well. The document analysis shows that media literacy is a concept for which there are at least intentions to use it as a countermeasure. In the European action plan against disinformation, enhancing media literacy was explicitly identified as an important countermeasure (European Commission, 2018a). Likewise, the Dutch nationwide strategy to tackle disinformation mentions enhancing media literacy as a key countermeasure (Bruins Slot & Van Huffelen, 2022). The Dutch strategy incorporates enhancing media literacy as one of its five essential pillars, and the Dutch government has implemented the week of media literacy, during which lessons on media literacy are taught in schools and other campaigns are conducted (Van Huffelen & De Jonge 2024).

The calling of Linas Skirius, Giedrius Sakalauskas, and Jack Twiss Quarles van Ufford, that the focus should lie on education and critical thinking, could not be seen back in the European action plan against disinformation because ‘education’ was only mentioned once, and critical thinking wasn’t mentioned.

The countermeasures that have been discussed so far, are all focused on civilians. However, as the document analysis has shown, making sure the democratic process is as strong as it can be is a crucial element of countering disinformation (European Commission, 2020). Flaws in our democratic process

are dangerous because, as Jack Twiss Quarles van Ufford stated, the Russian government is always searching for weaknesses that they can exploit. The Dutch government tries to decrease these risks by making sure the pluriform media landscape stays intact. Document analysis shows that actions have been taken to support independent media, as it's crucial for democratic societies (European Commission, 2020).

Freedom of speech is a valuable good in the targeted societies, but as Linas Skirius explained somewhere, there are limits. This comes back in the Dutch strategy to counter disinformation as well; it states that it's important for societies that have freedom of speech to acknowledge that somewhere there are limits and these have to be regulated (Van Huffelen & De Jonge, 2024). Acknowledging the limits of free speech is also important, according to Linas Skirius, because "This is about containing the real and very dangerous enemy. So I think like this is what a state can really do. Not only invest in media literacy, but also tackle the sources of disinformation." What Linas Skirius means with this quote is that while freedom of speech is very important, boundaries must be established, and if something like disinformation falls outside those boundaries, it has to be regulated. He explained that otherwise, a very dangerous enemy, which he refers to as the Russian government, will benefit from the lack of restrictions. A good example of limiting and regulating free speech is the measures taken in the European Union to ban Russia's state propaganda machines such as Russia Today Sputnik. The Dutch strategy does focus very specific on strengthening the free and open public debate by investing in the perseverance of the plural media landscape and in enhancing civilians' resilience through media literacy (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2023). It also aims to ensure that public communication with the government is sufficient. That's why investments have been made in government websites or other platforms where citizens can access reliable information on disinformation (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2023).

However, Han Bouwmeester addressed that one of the problems with using education as a countermeasure is that a large group of people who are susceptible to disinformation are least likely to agree with the education, because they already distrust the government or other organizations that they affiliate with the government. He added that governments must put efforts into re-earning the trust of these people. Because research has shown the first signs of a pattern which seems to be positive about the relation between a government that's closer to civilians and the resiliency for disinformation as expressed by Giedrius Sakalauskas.

Giedrius Sakalauskas a Lithuanian expert with decades of experience in countering Russian disinformation. He is the founder of the Civic Resilience Center also known as Res Publica and co-founder of the Lithuania Elves Army, an army of volunteers that counter disinformation together. Giedrius Sakalauskas believes that the low bar for civilians to get in contact with the government is one of the reasons why Lithuania is so resilient against Russian disinformation. But since lowering this bar and earning trust can be a challenging task, other solutions might offer more perspective.

The interviews showed two options that can be used, one that's preventive and the other reactive. First the use of in between actors to spread these media literacy campaigns can be a valuable addition. The messenger who delivers a message is of great importance, since people are quick to believe a message if it's spread by a messenger they feel comfortable with (Interview 4, Han Bouwmeester). And in the situations in which this doesn't work, Han Bouwmeester addressed that then the source through which these people get their disinformation must be targeted, this is, of course, a reactive measure. Not by spreading disinformation about that person, because practice what you preach, but by showing the target audience why this is not a credible source (Interview 4, Han Bouwmeester). The document analysis showed that identifying the commonly used techniques with which disinformation is disseminated can help in this sense. An important note to make regarding this is that the interviews also mentioned that investing time and money in people who are so stuck in their ways and are not willing to be moved is not worth the time or effort. People must be at least bit open to what's the other side of the story is. Otherwise, it's better to focus on the younger generation according to Giedrius Sakalauskas, Han Bouwmeester and Eugene Loos.

According to Giedrius Sakalauskas and Robert Spronk, countermeasures should also include a more offensive approach of countering disinformation. With this offensive approach, they touch upon the idea that the Russian citizens are still living in a continuous information disorder. According to Robert Spronk, the citizens have a lack of access to objective news sources and still realize relatively little of the war that the Russian government has started. He further adds that the targeted societies must try to get the Russian citizens to gain knowledge about reality and bring them information that differs from the propaganda spread by the Kremlin.

Giedrius Sakalauskas and Robert Spronk both agree that the targeted societies should bring the war back to Russia through the use of facts. And they stated that the target societies should create and spread their own narrative based on equal rights, freedom of speech and the power of democracy, to show in what ways they differ from Russia. Both experts believe spreading an alternative narrative is far more important than being constantly drawn back to reacting to the Kremlin's disinformation. According to Robert Spronk, this alternative narrative should not only be directed at the Russian population, but also at the population of the targeted societies, because a strong narrative leads people to be less easily persuaded by foreign disinformation campaigns. The analyzed policy documents do not mention or refer to any possibility of a more offensive approach. This does not necessarily mean that these governments or organizations are not engaging in such actions; however, they have chosen not to make them public.

Eugene Loos addressed in the interview that it's essential to learn from the Russian government and its populist tactics. He acknowledged that the Russian government has become extremely good at targeting people's emotional side, which moves people easily. He went further to explain that

countermeasures can be deemed successful if they're able to do two things, it has to encourage critical thinking and it has to move people emotionally.

Eugene Loos provided the following example: if you believe someone is exercising too little and you want them to exercise more, you might start by explaining why exercise is important. But this alone isn't enough, because you also need to show that, because of exercise, you indeed become happier and it benefits your health. Eugene Loos's example aims to clarify that if you want to change someone's behavior or thinking, you shouldn't focus only on the cognitive side of the brain. Often, people try to alter someone's thinking by bombarding someone with a bunch of facts, hoping it will spark change. However, as Eugene Loos demonstrates, people are much more easily moved when the focus isn't solely on the rational side but also on the emotional side. Eugene Loos doesn't suggest ignoring the facts, but when conveying facts, they should be paired with an emotional trigger to engage both sides of the brain. This process should be considered when designing and implementing countermeasures.

#### 4.2.2 Reactive

In the previous section, a strong emphasis has been put on the fact that the experts showed a preference for using preventive measures against disinformation. This is mainly the case because like Hubert Smeets explained "Het ontkennen van een verhaal is veel moeilijker dan het verspreiden van een verhaal. Zeker als je dat met respect voor de feiten wil doen." (Translation: The denying of a story is much harder than the disseminating of a story. Especially if you want to do it with respect to the facts.) Nevertheless, the experts unanimously agreed that the reactive measures are of value to the countering of disinformation and should not be disregarded.

Reactive measures are those that target disinformation after it has already been spread. With these measures, a reaction is given to the misleading content to undermine the disinformation or the party responsible for spreading it. The experts stated that even after implementing preventive measures, reactive measures remain essential. According to Linas Skirius, "it should be clear what is right and what is wrong," and for people to learn from disinformation, it must be called out even after it has already reached the target.

The first reactive measure which got mentioned in each interview and in every analyzed document was fact-checking and debunking. The experts show a critical view on both methods. For example, Linas Skirius, who claimed that "Debunking is dealing with the things that already happened and already did the damage." With this statement, Linas Skirius explains the most common critique on debunking, that it's simply harder to challenge disinformation after it has already been received, because it has already caused the receiver to review it. Nevertheless, all experts, including Linas Skirius, clearly state that there is significant relevance to using debunking and fact-checking. However, they see it as a mistake use them as stand-alone solutions and they should not be used as the main countermeasures.

According to the critique of the experts this was the case for the past years. A reaffirming quote is “Fact-checken en debunken is geen verspillen, maar het grote publiek wordt er niet mee bereikt. Want als de mening gevormd wordt is dat lastig te veranderen”. (Bouwmeester) (Translation: fact-checking and debunking is no waste, but it will not reach the overall public. Because once an opinion is formed it’s difficult to change). Han Bouwmeester hereby addressed two profound problems of fact-checking and debunking: that it has to reach the right audience and that people's opinions hardly change after the disinformation has already reached them.

As mentioned earlier, fact-checking and debunking were found in each analyzed document. The critical view of the experts towards fact-checking and debunking doesn’t seem to align with the view of the EU and the Dutch government, because in each analyzed document, a strong emphasis is put on the importance of fact-checking and loads of support are going towards these countermeasures. The EU action plan from 2018 announced the development of an independent fact-checking network (European Commission, 2018a). The Dutch strategy on disinformation also calls for enhancing the fact-checking networks and says it’s an essential component of society (Huffelen & De Jonge, 2024). Fact-checking is the countermeasure that came up most in each document; it aligns with the broader desire of governments to use reactive measures instead of preventive measures, as seen in the document analysis.

In the 2018 European Action Plan Against Disinformation four pillars were created to counter disinformation. Of these four pillars the first three were focused on reactive countermeasures. The three reactive focused pillars: improving the capabilities of Union institutions to detect, analyze and expose disinformation; strengthening coordinated and joint responses to disinformation; mobilizing private sector to tackle disinformation (European Commission, 2018a). The countermeasures discussed in this plan were primarily based on supporting research into disinformation, enhancing fact-checking networks, setting up a rapid alert system to detect disinformation, and supporting independent media and fact-checkers (European Commission, 2018a). This is not only common for this plan, but just like fact-checking was a recurring countermeasure, the same can be said for enhancing research into disinformation and rapid alert systems or reporting facilities. This comes back in documents from 2018 until the documents from 2024.

According to the documents there has also been a call to action for the big media companies that signed the code of practice (European Commission, 2018a). In the code of practice, which was introduced in 2018, big media platforms and companies voluntarily agreed to take more action against disinformation. Some of the concrete measures that the EU asked these media platforms to apply are improving their fact-checking, blocking bots or fake accounts that spread mis/disinformation, the platforms need to be more transparent about the abilities of their algorithm to counter disinformation and about which countermeasures they implement (European Commission, 2018a). In the enhanced code of 2022, it became documented by law in the Digital service act, meaning it wasn’t just voluntary anymore. This code of practice including the enhanced code of practice where also examples of reactive

countermeasures. Hubert Smeets addressed the use of fake accounts to disseminate disinformation. He believes that it's so easy to use an anonymous account to spread disinformation without being held accountable, and he thinks that fake accounts should be banned. He addressed the fact that often people are against banning fake accounts due to freedom of speech, but as Hubert Smeets explained, anonymous people don't exist, so they also have no right to freedom of speech.

Other reactive measures that have been used are the creation of cyber units in intelligence services. A successful mechanism, according to Robert Spronk, because these units have been able to stop cyber-attacks, including Russian disinformation campaigns. And they are especially effective when cooperating with foreign units. This was also incorporated in the European action plan against disinformation in 2018 (European Commission, 2018a). And with the help of organizations like these cyber units, but also with reporting facilities, disinformation should be countered by taking down the spreaders.

#### 4.2.3 Additional conditions

During the interviews multiple conditions came to light which should be considered when using preventive or reactive measures. Because these additional conditions can be of use for all or most countermeasures, they will be discussed in this separate paragraph.

Giedrius Sakalauskas explained how, for countries and organizations, learning from each other is a prerequisite because there is a common challenge in fighting disinformation. During both the interviews and the document analysis, it has become clear that disinformation is not a phenomenon that is limited to state boundaries; it constantly exceeds them. Document analysis has shown that cooperation needs to be sought with other states or international organizations to counter this threat effectively (Van Huffelen & De Jonge, 2024).

Regarding cooperation, Giedrius Sakalauskas added that countries that have not been exposed to the threat of Russian aggression could learn from the countries that have. It's not without reason that Jack Twiss Quarles van Ufford said: "Ik denk dat het belangrijk is dat wij inderdaad wat beter luisteren naar landen die wat meer ervaring met Rusland hebben, om het maar even zo te zeggen. En daar is Litouwen er een van" (Translation: I think it is important that we do indeed listen a little better to countries that have a little more experience with Russia, so to speak. And Lithuania is one of them). With this statement and the context around it, he explained during the interview, that in the past too often the worries and warnings of countries like the Baltic states have been deemed unreliable and overreacting and labeled as Russia phobia. However, he added that these countries have over 250 years of experience in dealing with a neighbor like Russia, so they should be taken more seriously, especially when countering these hybrid threats.

Giedrius Sakalauskas explains that while learning from each other is a prerequisite, copying and pasting countermeasures from one society to another should not be done. He said this is the case because when implementing countermeasures, local conditions must be considered, as well as the local perspective and the type of disinformation directed at a country. The countermeasures implemented should also have a long-term vision because short term solutions will not have the desired effects (See interview 3, Giedrius Sakalauskas).

Furthermore, Robert Spronk explains that it is essential to remember that one of the most effective ways to combat disinformation is transparency. He suggests that a transparent government helps prevent election manipulation, builds trust among citizens in the government, and makes people less likely to believe disinformation because disinformation is often not transparent. According to Eugene Loos, transparency also needs to be applied when implementing countermeasures: if disinformation has been labeled as such, it needs to be transparent why, so people can judge for themselves if they agree or not. Robert Spronk did reveal that there is a limit on how transparent certain organizations can be. He added that this is the case because the balance needs to be found between making people aware of the threats without making them anxious or scared.

Additionally, document analysis has shown calls for the importance that governments not only focus on countering disinformation but also on providing reliable information themselves so that people are less likely to fall for disinformation (European Commission, 2020).

#### 4.2.4 Discussion sub question two

To conclude chapter four, the results for the second sub question, what countermeasures are there to combat Russian disinformation campaigns? have been displayed. The findings revealed a wide range of preventive, reactive, and additional countermeasures.

The results have demonstrated a discrepancy between the measures preferred by the experts and those currently implemented in the policy documents. This aligns with the academic literature, which has shown that there is agreement about the severity of the problem but not on the ways to counter it (Courchesne et al., 2021). The experts unanimously prefer preventive measures, while the analyzed documents show that of the current measures in place, the majority consist of reactive measures. The call for increased focus on preventive measures is also reflected in the theoretical framework by Sallami and Aïmeur (2025), who argue that reaction is insufficient, and prevention must be the primary approach.

The most interesting findings about preventive measures are that experts believe the solution lies in education. This education should focus on three pillars: increasing awareness, improving media literacy, and encouraging critical thinking. Although the document analysis doesn't emphasize improving critical thinking, the experts consider it one of the most promising solutions because it boosts resilience against all types of disinformation. This preference for education-focused countermeasures

can be seen as a continuation or result of the research by Ziemer and Rothmund (2024) cited in the theoretical framework. Their research outlined two modes of information processing: effortful and effortless processing. Educational efforts aim to encourage people to adopt more effortful processing in their daily lives, which makes them less susceptible to disinformation.

Another finding, which was unexpected but interesting, is that multiple experts believe that countermeasures should adopt a more offensive approach. This should involve creating a strong, original story grounded in democratic values and spreading it within targeted societies as well as in Russia. This is based on the idea that offering a compelling alternative narrative reduces people's eagerness to fall for the Kremlin's disinformation. This finding aligns with the framing theory proposed by Vyncke & Van Gorp (2018), who argue that deframing and reframing offer opportunities to counter disinformation campaigns. Creating an alternative narrative is essentially reframing because it transforms disinformation narratives into the opposite message.

Amsolov (2018) has shown how disinformation campaigns appeal to emotions, which strongly sway people. When implementing countermeasures, the role of emotions must also be taken into account. The interviews revealed that many current countermeasures focus on the rational side of the brain, while disinformation targets the emotional side, essentially fighting two different battles. Combining facts with emotions is considered to be a key factor in countering disinformation.

A measure deemed important by the document analysis, as well as the experts, is ensuring that the democratic processes stay protected. The most essential tool to ensure this is by supporting independent media and transparency in societies. Ensuring that independent media continues to exist has become increasingly important now that the rise of new technologies is diversifying the consumption of information, as addressed by Chesney & Citron (2019). Being able to receive trustworthy news has become increasingly important.

While preventive measures are preferred to be seen as the main countermeasures, the results highlight the importance of also incorporating reactive countermeasures. To help people learn not to trust disinformation, the disinformation displayed must be recognized, reported, and called out. As briefly mentioned, the document analysis has shown that most of the current countermeasures are considered reactive. These include measures such as fact-checking, debunking, creating reporting facilities, building rapid alert systems, and calls to action on major social media companies. While fact-checking is seen as an important countermeasure by the experts and documents, it also receives criticism from the experts because it draws too much attention and focus, leading other countermeasures to be underdeveloped. This also appears in the academic literature of Courchesne et al. (2021), where fact-checking is seen as a useful countermeasure but also as an overly studied measure, leading to a lack of research into other options.

Finally, the results revealed three additional conditions to consider. First, that learning from each other is essential, especially by not dismissing concerns or warnings from countries familiar with the Kremlin's way of operating. Second, measures should take into account local conditions, perspectives, and challenges. Lastly, short-term measures are ineffective; the focus should be on long-term strategies. The emphasis on considering local conditions and learning from each other reflects the issues with countermeasures addressed by Stray (2019), which acknowledge barriers of fragmented societies and a lack of cross-sector responses to disinformation.

To conclude, these results show that a wide range of countermeasures are available and that certain additional conditions must be considered. The findings indicate that while experts and the academic literature believe preventive measures should become more important, current policies are still dominated by reactive measures. An ideal future scenario would involve implementing cross-sector countermeasures, mostly consisting of education-focused strategies, along with a smaller proportion of fact-checking and debunking efforts, all while considering local conditions and appealing to the emotional side of the brain with a strong offensive narrative.

## Chapter five

This chapter synthesizes findings from each chapter to address the central question of this research. Additionally, it will discuss some limitations and advantages of this study. And before the closing remarks, some recommendations for future research and practice will be provided.

### 5. Conclusion

This study set out to answer the question: What are the key characteristics that define Russian disinformation campaigns and what countermeasures are there to combat Russian disinformation?

Because in chapter four, the two parts that this research question contains have already been discussed in detail and connected to the academic literature, this section will provide more of a synthesis than a discussion of the leading question. Nevertheless, this section will reflect on the limitations and advantages of this research and offer recommendations for future research.

The results have shown that the Russian disinformation campaigns are indeed unique, sophisticated, and very tough to counter. The Russian disinformation campaigns have proven to be a deliberate, strategic component of their hybrid warfare strategy. They are characterized by multiple layers of objectives that can be separated into positive and negative objectives. While at the same time, the campaigns are grounded in numerous strategies ranging from igniting fires in society, to election manipulations, and the continuous use of malinformation. The use of framing is an essential element, not only for the strategies but also to form the messages. These messages consist out of carefully selected narratives, like historical revisionism or anti-supranational organization narratives, to suit the target audiences. The Russian government uses troll factories and social media to reach those target audiences and ensure that the quantity is sufficient because this study has shown their campaigns are significantly dependent on the quantity of the message.

The countermeasures available to combat these Russian disinformation campaigns range from preventive to reactive measures. And should always consider fitting the local conditions and appealing emotionally. The options for preventive countermeasures include investing in education that increases awareness, improves media literacy, and encourages critical thinking. More preventive options are to adopt a more offensive approach or ensure the safety of democratic processes by supporting independent media and transparency. The reactive options include primarily fact-checking and debunking. But also creating reporting facilities, building rapid alert systems, and pushing through a call to action on major social media companies.

These two previous paragraphs summarize the answer to the leading question. And this answer has been shaped by the way this research was conducted, with all its limitations and advantages. One of these limitations is that the scope of this research focuses on the EU, The Netherlands and Lithuania,

while Russian disinformation campaigns have proven to be active in multiple other regions such as f the United States and Afrika. This might have caused this thesis to overlook important characteristics or potential countermeasures.

Another limitation that has shaped the outcome of this research concerns the document analysis. While the analyzed documents were valuable contributions, analyzing more documents could have provided a more comprehensive answer to the leading question. It's especially unfortunate that I failed to incorporate Lithuanian policy documents. This was the case because they were difficult to find. However, the group of experts included four who were either Lithuanian or had worked in the security sector in Lithuania, which brought valuable insights from Lithuanian experience. Still, it's clear that the failure to incorporate Lithuanian policy documents has influenced the results.

Besides limitations, this research also has some significant advantages. The incorporation of framing theory has enabled this research to gain a deeper understanding of how actors achieve their objectives through disinformation; this is an aspect that makes this study unique. The biggest advantage of this research is the highly qualified and well-matched selection of experts. A lot of effort was dedicated to finding experts who complemented each other. Ultimately, the extensive expertise shared by all the experts led to what I believe are very strong and interesting results.

This research resulted in some recommendations for praxis and for future research. During the conversation I had with Professor Eugene Loos, it became very clear that while qualitative research like this provides new insights and contributes to the debate, there is a growing need for quantitative research into the effectiveness of countermeasures. He addressed how it's still tough to know whether a countermeasure will have the desired effects and whether it will reach the target audience, more research into this is absolutely necessary.

Furthermore, I have two practical recommendations. The first concerns organizations that detect or counter disinformation campaigns. As Robert Spronk explained, it's crucial to raise awareness in society. However, while transparency is useful, Robert Spronk also shared that it must be carefully considered on a case by case basis whether an intercepted disinformation campaign should be made public. Because every time such information is publicized, it contributes to the agenda setting of disinformation and could also spark fear in society. Therefore, a balance must be struck regarding such a sensitive topic.

The final recommendation is directed to the individuals and organizations responsible for creating and implementing countermeasures. As this research has shown, there is a growing need for countermeasures that include a long-term strategy. While fact-checking and debunking are important, it's time to move towards a more sustainable approach and listen to the experts who call for a focus on education.

To conclude, Russian disinformation campaigns must not be viewed as innocent, isolated incidents, but as strategically employed weaponized forms of information. It's their infantry through social media, and they are successfully undermining democratic societies. The combination of framing and disinformation creates a powerful tool that can strongly mislead people. The targeted societies must increase their efforts to counter these threats, as technological innovations will continue to improve the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns. In the meantime, it's important for every individual to be aware of the danger that disinformation possesses, and it's essential to remember that it's not self-evident to live in peace.

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## Appendix:

### A: Detailed list of interviewed experts

**Interview 1:** Linas Skirius; is one of the founders of the Civic resilience initiative. This is a non-profit organization located in Lithuania, that is specialized in countering hybrid threats from Russia (Civic Resilience Initiative, z.d.). Linas is responsible for the disinformation side of the organization. This interview took place in person and was focused on both sub questions.

**Interview 2:** Jack Twiss Quarles van Ufford; is currently the ambassador for the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Lithuania. On top of that his experience as the former director of intelligence at the AIVD (2016 – 2022) and former security advisor to the prime minister of the Netherlands (2011 – 2016) made him an incredible source of information for both sub questions (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2024). The interview was conducted in Lithuania in person.

**Interview 3:** Giedrius Sakalauskas; is founder of the Civic Resilience Center also known as Res Publica. Besides Giedrius is co-founder of the Lithuania Elves Army. With his decades of field experience in countering Russian disinformation he forms a valuable source for both sub questions. The interview was taken using Microsoft Teams.

**Interview 4:** Han Bouwmeester; a Professor for the Dutch officer's academy and colonel in the Dutch army (Ministerie van Defensie, 2023). He wrote his dissertation on modern Russian deception warfare. In his dissertation, disinformation was an important subject, and the theory of framing also comes back in his work. Due to his profound knowledge on the subject the interview was revolved around both sub questions. The interview was taken using Microsoft Teams.

**Interview 5:** Eugene Loos; is an Associate Professor of public administration and organizational science and a member of BENEDMO. His research revolves around the role of media literacy for the accessibility of reliable digital information for all citizens. He also leads a research project into what measures might be effective against fake news (Universiteit Utrecht, z.d.). Adjusted on his expertise this interview was primarily focused on the second sub question. This interview took place using Microsoft Teams.

**Interview 6:** Anonymous, this respondent wanted to stay anonymous. However, to explain his/her expertise this person has had a function regarding disinformation in the Dutch government after 2014. This interview was not recorded.

**Interview 7:** Robert Spronk; in his career of close to forty years in the General Intelligence and Security Service he fulfilled multiple important roles, among which the head of operations. He has been working closely on issues such as Russian disinformation for decades (Meeus, 2023). Due to his extraordinary expertise this interview focused on both sub questions. This interview took place using Microsoft Teams.

**Interview 8:** Hubert Smeets; worked for Dutch newspaper NRC as a correspondent in the Soviet Union. In 2016 he became co-founder of ‘Raam op Rusland’, an organization that tries to enhance knowledge on Russia by bringing independent news from Russia to the Netherlands (Raam, z.d.). He is a true Russia expert which has also led to the interview revolving on the first sub question and on more background information on Russia. This interview took place using Microsoft Teams.

**B:** detailed list of the analyzed documents

**Document 1:**

Bruins Slot, H., & Van Huffelen, A. (2022). Kamerbrief over rijksbrede strategie effectieve aanpak van desinformatie. Retrieved June 2, 2025, from <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/ronld3369562e78345a02126dcd644ae9e6edc1a5b12/pdf>.

Description: This is a policy document for the Dutch government in which the Minister and the Secretary of State inform the Dutch parliament of the progress made with the nationwide strategy to combat disinformation. In this letter, they also notify the parliament of new measures.

**Document 2:**

European Commission (2018a). *Joint communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Action plan against disinformation* (JOIN(2018) 36 final). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018JC0036>

Description: This is not only one of the first EU documents on the fight against disinformation, but also one of the most important. This document outlines the foundations and measures that have been taken with EU member states to combat disinformation.

**Document 3:**

European Commission. (2018b). *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Tackling online disinformation: A European approach* (COM(2018) 236 final). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0236>

Description: This document reflects the European Commission's views on the challenges of disinformation. It outlines key principles, objectives, and specific actions to counter disinformation.

**Document 4:**

European Commission. (2020). *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European democracy action plan* (COM(2020) 790 final). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0790>

Description: This EU document outlines actions taken to strengthen the resilience of European democracies. This includes measures related to disinformation, election manipulation, and the preservation of independent media.

**Document 5:**

Ollongren, K. H. (2017). Brief van de minister van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties. *In zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl* (Report Nr. 496; pp. 1–3) [PDF]. <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-26643-496.pdf>

Description: This letter from the Dutch Minister of Domestic Affairs to the parliament addresses the upcoming challenges with artificial intelligence. Furthermore, it also addresses the risks that arise in the field of disinformation and the need for enhancing media literacy.

**Document 6:**

Van Huffelen, A., & De Jonge, H. (2024). Voortgangsbrief Rijksbrede strategie voor de effectieve aanpak van desinformatie en aankondiging nieuwe acties. *In Rijksoverheid.nl*. <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/1483fdaa-caca-4b2c-8eed-b8e3cbea52c8/file>

Description: This letter by the Minister of Domestic Affairs and the State Secretary, directed to the Dutch parliament, shows the progress made with the nationwide strategy to counter disinformation. The letter also announces extra measures that have to be taken.

C: interview guides

Interview guide 1, Linas Skirius

Let's start with asking again if I am allowed to record the interview?

Perfect thank you. Am I also allowed to mention you by name in my research? That helps with the reliability of my thesis because then people can see that the experts are in fact experts.

If anything changes during this interview feel free to say so or stop the interview.

I want to thank you for your time I appreciate it a lot that I am allowed to interview you. As you know I'm conducting research to how the Dutch government reacted to Russian disinformation campaigns from 2014. For this research it's important that I get to know more about disinformation and how to counter it. This is where I believe this interview could be of help for my research. That's why I will put the focus on multiple things mostly: what is a disinformation campaign and how can Russian disinformation campaigns be distinguished from others. And the second focus is, what does your organization CRI do and how can you counter disinformation.

1. What characterizes Russian disinformation campaigns?
2. What do you believe to be the most important thing when trying to create a resilient society?
3. Does civic resilience make a distinction between when something is called disinformation or when it's called a disinformation campaign? What makes something a disinformation campaign?
4. Do you believe that the role of countering disinformation should rest more on the shoulders of individuals, states or international organisations and why?
5. Do you believe countering disinformation campaigns to be useful for Dutch society as well?
6. What do you believe to be the best mechanisms to counter disinformation campaigns?
7. How does your organization counter disinformation?
8. Has there been important policy created that helps to fight disinformation?
9. Do you believe that the Russian disinformation campaigns are successful in Lithuania?
10. Does civic resilience imitative work together with Dutch actors or EU actors?

11. Do you have recommendations towards dutch actors or dutch society to regarding the fight against disinformation?
12. How do you see that new forms of disinformation like for instance deepfakes have an impact on your work field?

### Interview guide 2, Jack Twiss Quarles van Ufford

Allereerst bedankt voor de tijd dat ik u mag interviewen. Vind u het goed als ik dit interview opneem? Vind u het goed als ik u bij naam noem in mijn onderzoek als een van de experts die ik heb geïnterviewd?

Wilt u nog dat ik een korte introductie geven over wat mijn onderzoek inhoudt of is dat niet nodig? Als u op enig moment wil stoppen met het interview of vragen niet wil beantwoorden is dat helemaal goed.

Ik pas elk interview aan, dat ik doe op basis van de experts die ik op dat moment interview. En gezien het feit dat u niet een functie heeft bekleed die heel interessant is voor mijn onderzoek maar zelfs 3, heb ik het interview opgedeeld in drie delem. Gebaseerd op de functies die u heeft bekleed sinds 2014. Starten met u functie als raadsadviseur van min pres, vervolgens als directeur inlichtingen bij de AIVD en tot slot in u huidige functie in Litouwen.

<u>Raadadviseur Buitenlandse Zaken en Defensie</u> <u>bij het Kabinet Minister-President, Ministerie van Algemene Zaken</u>
1. U periode als raadsadviseur liep tot met 2016, een jaar later is het eerste rijks brede plan tegen desinformatie geïntroduceerd, is het opstellen van dit plan al een prioriteitspunt geweest in de jaren dat u raadsadviseur was? Of is dit pas later gestart?
2. En welke punten zie jij als aanleiding dat desinformatie een thema werd?
3. Gezien de annexatie van de Krim en het Oekraïne referendum ,speelde desinformatie gedurende de periode dat u raadsadviseur was al een significante rol?
<u>Periode als directeur inlichtingen bij de AIVD</u>
4. In 2016 werd voor het eerst het belang van desinformatie benoemd in het AIVD-jaarcijfers, hoe was de bestuurlijke opvolging van deze signalen? Kwamen er teams bij de politie of gingen meer mensen in de AIVD erop aan de slag of wat werd er met deze signalen gedaan?

5. Hoe bespreek je zoiets met de minister-president en wat voor reactie komt hier dan op is dat moedwillig om te handelen of werd het gezien als slechts iets kleins?
6. Er zijn veel manieren van desinformatie, wat zou jij zien als de gevaarlijkste en welke manier wordt misschien het meest onderschat?
7. Hoe vind u dat het toen u aantrad bij de AIVD stond met de weerbaarheid van de Nederlandse samenlevingen voor dreiging als desinformatie en hoe vind u dat Nederland er momenteel voor staat?
8. In het interview met Linas van CRI kwam ter sprake dat wij als Nederland misschien de dreiging niet genoeg beseffen, Heeft u het gevoel dat wij als Nederland ons al genoeg beseffen wat voor gevaren desinformatie voor ons vormt?
9. Op welke manieren verschilt de capaciteiten om desinformatie tegen te gaan van Litouwen met die van Nederland?
10. Welke effecten merk je in het diplomatieke domein van de opkomst van Russische desinformatiecampagnes?
11. Nederlandse troepen die gestationeerd zijn in Litouwen hebben enkele keren te maken gekregen met Russische desinformatie, Wat is u rol als ambassadeurs hierin? En wat voor maatregelen zijn hiertegen genomen?
12. Gedurende loopbaan welke counter mechanisme heeft u voorbijzien die de Nederlandse overheid (en daarmee ook de Nederlandse krijgsmacht of inlichtingendiensten) gebruikt om desinformatie tegen te gaan?
13. Zijn er manieren om desinformatie tegen te gaan die niet worden toegepast maar waarvan u denkt dat ze dat wel zouden moeten zijn?
14. Welke rol ziet u weggelegd voor het diplomatieke vlak wanneer het aankomt op de bestrijding van Russische desinformatie? Wat ken je dus eigenlijk als diplomaat

15. Denkt u dat de rol van het tegengaan van desinformatie en de effecten van desinformatie meer moet rusten op de schouders van individuen (oftewel de zelfredzaamheid van burgers), de staat of juist internationale organisaties?
16. Hannah vertelde dat de NAVO een campagne wil starten in de Baltische staten die het vertrouwen in de toekomst vergoot maar de angst in de samenleving niet aanwakkert. Hoe zou de Nederlandse overheid dit moeten? en heb je het gevoel dat het verschilt tussen Nederland en Litouwen? Word het bijvoorbeeld in Nederland vaker voor gekozen om desinformatie aanvallen niet publiek te maken?
17. In litouwen zijn sinds de start van de oorlog alle media dus Russische propaganda bestrijden geblokkeerde, Zou je als overheid meer censuur moeten toepassen op media die desinformatie verspreiden, en hoe verhoudt zich dat tot de vrijheid van meningsuiting die in Nederland zo belangrijk wordt gevonden?

**Interview guide 3, Giedrius Sakalauskas**

Dear Giedrius first of all i want to thank you for allowing me the change to interview you, I appreciate it a lot. I would like to know if you are okay if record the interview? And if I'm allowed to mention you by name in my research as one of the experts I have interviewed?

I'm conducting research to how the Dutch government reacted to Russian disinformation campaigns from 2014. I have three sub questions of which two are important for this interview.

- What are disinformation campaigns how does Russia use them?
- To what extend is the Netherlands being hit by Russian disinformation campaigns?
- What strategies are there to counter disinformation and how does the Dutch government use them?

During this interview I'll put the focus on: what is a disinformation campaign and how can Russian disinformation campaigns be distinguished from others. And the second focus is, which mechanisms are there to counter disinformation and this is of course also related to civic resilience center and the elves.

1. From your expertise what characterizes Russian disinformation campaigns?
- What are their most important goals?
- What are their strengths or their weaknesses?

2. Do you believe that Russian disinformation campaigns are successful in Lithuania?
3. How do your organizations make a distinction between disinformation and a disinformation campaign? When becomes something a disinformation campaign?
4. Another expert I spoke to told me that debunking is not as effective as you want it to be because the damage has already been done before that. However, with the elves army the organizations is mostly focused on debunking if I understand correctly, do you believe that to be a useful or essential counter mechanism?
5. One of the trickiest points of combating disinformation is reaching the target audience that is most susceptible to disinformation, these people usually feel some form of distrust towards the government which could lead them to dismiss the warnings on disinformation, in what way do you think these people can best be reached?
6. How important do you believe that organizations like yours are in the realm
7. Do you believe that the role of countering disinformation should rest more on the shoulders of individuals (so civilians themselves), states (so the government), or international organizations (for example EU, NATO) and why?
8. What do you believe are the most effective mechanisms to counter disinformation campaigns?
9. Which policies implied by the government do you think support the fight against disinformation and which policies do you believe are hindering the fight against disinformation?
10. A society like in Lithuania is used to the constant threat of Russian aggression near it's border, however a society like the Netherlands doesn't seem to feel the threat that is 1600 kilometers away, do you think that this asks for different ways of countering disinformation? And if so what measures do you believe to be successful in both countries and what measures only in Lithuania or only in the Netherlands?
11. Does the civic resilience initiative collaborate with Dutch or EU actors?
12. Do you believe that countering disinformation campaigns is also useful for Dutch society?
13. Do you have recommendations regarding disinformation towards actors who are in charge of countering Russian disinformation in Dutch society? Or to our society in general?
14. How do you see that new forms of disinformation like for instance deepfakes have an impact on your work field?

#### Interview guide 4, Han Bouwmeester

(Before taking the interview already agreed for recordings)

Goedemiddag, allereerst heel erg bedankt voor de tijd en mogelijkheid om dit interview te doen. Zoals u weet ben ik momenteel bezig met mijn masterscriptie. Dit doe ik voor de studie “Human geography: conflict territories and identities.” En ik schrijf mijn scriptie over hoe de Nederlandse overheid heeft gereageerd op Russische desinformatiecampagnes vanaf 2014. Om deze te beantwoorden voer ik een beleidsanalyse uit en neem ik interviews af met experts. Voor de interviews probeer ik een breed scala aan experts te interviewen. En daarom heb ik u ook gevraagd, zodat u met uw expertise een blik kan werpen op mijn onderzoek.

De deelvragen die ik heb opgesteld zijn:

- What are disinformation campaigns and how does Russia use them?
- To what extent is the Netherlands being hit by Russian disinformation campaigns?
- What strategies are there to counter disinformation and how does the Dutch government use them?

Interview guide Han Bouwmeester:
1. In uw proefschrift schrijft u dat <i>dezinformatsiya de russische versie is van desinformatie</i> , wat maakt deze vorm anders dan normale desinformatie? En wat zijn de belangrijkste kenmerken van Russische desinformatiecampagnes?
2. Wat zijn de sterke punten en wat zijn de zwakke punten?
3. Tijdens mij bachelor onderzoek heb ik u mogen interviewen omtrent de framing tussen Rusland en Oekraïne, hoe ziet u dat framing en desinformatie met elkaar in verband staan? En hoe belangrijk is framing voor Russische desinformatiecampagnes?
- Draagt het hebben van kennis over framing bij aan het beter begrijpen van desinformatie?
4. Er zijn veel manieren van desinformatie, wat zou u zien als de gevaarlijkste en welke manier wordt misschien het meest onderschat?
5. Bent u, gezien u grote kennis over het onderwerp, ook betrokken bij besluitvorming omtrent het beleid tegen Russische desinformatie?
6. In het artikel <i>Dezinformatzia in Lithuania</i> noemt u meerdere redenen waarom meer kennis over desinformatie relevant is voor Nederland. Dit zijn onder meer omdat Nederland een target vormt voor Russische desinformatie door de kritische opstelling tegenover Russische agressie in Oekraïne, het onderzoek naar de mh17 en de bijdrage aan FBI-missies. Hoe bracht die dreiging zich op deze momenten tot uiting?
7. Denkt u dat de rol van het tegengaan van desinformatie en de effecten van desinformatie meer moet rusten op de schouders van individuen (oftewel de zelfredzaamheid van burgers), de staat of juist internationale organisaties?
8. Wat ziet u als belangrijke counter mechanisme om Russische desinformatie tegen te gaan?

9. Zijn er manieren om desinformatie tegen te gaan die niet worden toegepast maar waarvan u denkt dat ze dat wel zouden moeten zijn? Of juist manieren die nu veel worden gebruikt maar die een averechts effect hebben?
10. Zijn er lessen uit de Koude Oorlog die vandaag nog relevant zijn in het bestrijden van Russische actieve maatregelen?
11. Tijdens het interview dat ik met u had voor mijn bachelor scriptie noemde u kort de theorie van cognitieve dissonantie en dat de eerste waarneming van een mens het gene wordt waar de volgende waarnemingen aan zullen worden getest. Een veel gebruikte theorie van desinformatie tegengaan is het de-bunkten, oftewel achteraf publiceren dat een artikel desinformatie is en waarom het dat is, wat denkt u van deze manier van desinformatie tegengaan en hoe verhoudt zich dat tot de cognitieve dissonantie?
12. Een van de lastigste dingen aan het tegengaan van Russische desinformatie is het bereiken van de groep die er het meest vatbaar voor is, vaak leeft in binnen deze groepen al wantrouwen of afkeer naar de overheid, hoe denkt u dat hiermee om moet worden gegaan?
13. Hoe vindt u dat het momenteel staat met de weerbaarheid van de Nederlandse samenleving tegen Russische desinformatiecampagnes? En hoe is deze weerbaarheid veranderd sinds 2014?
14. Voor mijn onderzoek ben ik onder andere naar Litouwen geweest waar ik ook met experts heb gesproken. Litouwen is een vooruitstrevend land als het aankomt op het tegen gaan van Russische desinformatie, mede doordat de samenleving gewend is om onder soviëet regime te leven. Denkt u dat countermechanisme die gebruikt worden in landen als Litouwen ook werken in landen als Nederland? Of is door de geschiedenis en cultuur van het land een andere of meer gematigde aanpak nodig?
15. Tijdens het bestrijden van desinformatie wil je neem ik aan dat mensen zich bewust zijn van het risico, daarvoor wil je als overheid ook bewustzijn creëren maar tegelijkertijd wil je ook dat angst in de samenleving niet wordt aangewakkerd, welke afwegingen denkt u dat hiervoor moeten worden gemaakt ?
- Betekent dit ook dat er soms voor wordt gekozen om het niet publiek te maken dat er Russische desinformatiecampagnes hebben plaatsgevonden?
16. In een van u artikelen noemt u de doelen van deceptie in oorlogsvoering als: being quite ertain, verry decisive and absolutly wrong. Is dit niet ook een zeker zin het doel en of onbedoelde effect van desinformatie?

### Interview guide 5, Eugene Loos

(Before taking the interview already agreed for recordings)

Aller eerst bedankt dat u mij te woord wil staan. Het was echt heel fijn dat u dat zo makkelijk wilde doen. Want ik ben dus bezig met mijn onderzoek en ik heb uw naam al meermaals voorbij zien komen. En toen ben ik nog verder gaan kijken, want ik wilde nog wat extra experts hebben, om te interviewen voor mijn masterscriptie

Ik zit op de faculteit van Management Wetenschappen van de Radboud Universiteit. En daar doe ik de studie, de master Human Geography, Conflicts, Territories and Identities. En in het verlengde van mijn bachelorscriptie die ik heb geschreven over framing tussen Rusland en Oekraïne, ben ik daarop voort gaan bouwen in een iets specifiekere onderwerp, namelijk hoe je dus Russische desinformatie kan tegengaan. Dat doe ik door middel van interviews met experts af te nemen en een beleidsanalyse toe te passen op verschillende beleidsnota's.

Ik wil tijdens dit interview vooral focussen op counter mechanisme voor desinformatie en hoe deze werken. Daarnaast zou ik graag meer te weten komen over de organisatie BENEDMO.

1. Wat is volgens u het belang van organisaties als BENEDMO en dergelijke voor de bestrijding van Russische desinformatie?
2. Wat ziet u als de sterke of zwakke punten van Russische desinformatie, dus wat zorgt ervoor dat de Russische desinformatie resoneert in de samenleving of wat zijn juist punten waar de desinformatie zwak is en dus gecountered kan worden?
3. Wat is de rol van benedmo in het counteren van desinformatie? Welke andere organisaties ziet u als belangrijke schakels in het tegengaan van desinformatie?
4. Wat ziet u verder als belangrijke counter mechanisme om Russische desinformatie tegen te gaan?
5. Denkt u dat de rol van het tegengaan van desinformatie en de effecten van desinformatie meer moet rusten op de schouders van individuen (oftewel de zelfredzaamheid van burgers), de staat of juist internationale organisaties
6. Hoe staat u tegenover het idee dat we niet alleen defensief moeten bestrijden maar ook juist offensief?
7. Wat maakt een counter mechanisme succesvol?
8. In een van uw latere artikelen noemt u de theorie van pre-bunking, hoe gaat dit in zijn werk wanneer het plaatsvindt op Rusland? Zijn de Russische campagnes voorspelbaar genoeg dat het mogelijk is de inhoud al te pre-bunken?
9. Zijn er manieren om desinformatie tegen te gaan die niet worden toegepast maar waarvan u denkt dat ze dat wel zouden moeten zijn? Of juist manieren die nu veel worden gebruikt maar die een averechts effect hebben

10. In hoeverre is het mogelijk om desinformatie te bestrijden via hert recht? En hoe zorg je dat een actor als Rusland zich hieraan houdt?
11. In Litouwen heb ik onder andere gesproken met iemand van het civic resilience initiative, zij leren kinderen over desinformatie door de ontwikkeling van een minecraft achtige game. In Litouwen wordt al op jonge leeftijd aandacht besteed aan hoe je om moet gaan met desinformatie, zouden wij dat in Nederland niet ook moeten doen? Volgens de ambassadeur ligt de focussen in nederland meer op kinderen beschermen. Lopen wij anders niet achter de feiten aan?
12. Een van de lastigste dingen aan het tegengaan van Russische desinformatie is het bereiken van de groep die er het meest vatbaar voor is, vaak leeft in binnen deze groepen al wantrouwen of afkeer naar de overheid, hoe denkt u dat hiermee om moet worden gegaan?

### Interview guide, 7, Robert Spronk

(Before taking the interview already agreed for recordings)

Goedemorgen,

Ik ben nu bezig met mijn masterscriptie voor de studie Human Geography, Conflict Territories and Identities, heet het. Het is een hele ingewikkelde naam, maar het komt er eigenlijk heel erg op neer, dat het vooral gaat over internationaal veiligheidsbeleid. En waar ik dan momenteel heel erg mee bezig ben, is onderzoek doen naar hoe je kan reageren op Russische desinformatiecampagnes.

En daar was mijn onderzoeksvraag eerst heel erg afgespeld op hoe heeft Nederland gereageerd. Maar nu is het meer geshift naar dat ik meer kijk naar hoe kan je reageren op Russische desinformatie campagnes, welke countermechanismen zijn er? En daarvoor heb ik twee deelvragen:

welke karakteristieken heeft de Russische desinformatiecampagne?

En welke countermechanismen zijn er tegen Russische desinformatiecampagnes?

En zo ben ik nu dus een beleidsanalyse aan het doen, en interviews met experts. En tot nu toe heb ik, vorige week heb ik Han Bouwmeester geïnterviewd, wat erg interessant was. En dan heb ik dus Jack geïnterviewd.

Maar ik heb ook in Litouwen verschillende experts geïnterviewd. Omdat zij er natuurlijk veel dieper inzitten. En die hebben we er veel langer mee te maken gehad al.

Dat is waar ik het nu ook op ga inrichten. En ik denk zeker met, uw expertise, dat het in ieder geval een interessant gesprek gaat worden.

1. Op welke manieren heeft u tijdens u 41 jaar durende loopbaan bij de AIVD te maken gehad met Russische desinformatie?
2. Wat zijn de belangrijkste kenmerken van Russische desinformatiecampagnes? Wat zijn de sterke punten en wat zijn de zwakke punten?
3. In 2016 werd voor het eerst het belang van desinformatie benoemd in het AIVD-jaarverslag, denkt u dat dit te laat was en er al eerdere seinen waren gemist of is dat niet het geval? En hoe was de bestuurlijke opvolging van deze signalen? Kwamen er teams bij de politie of gingen meer mensen in de AIVD erop aan de slag of wat werd er met deze signalen gedaan?
4. Afgelopen jaar is naar buiten gebracht dat de AIVD samen met de MIVD en de Amerikaanse inlichtingendiensten een Russische cybercampagne hebben verstoord. Deze cybercampagne omvatte ook desinformatiekanalen, wat is de rol die de AIVD speelt of zou moeten spelen in het tegengaan van Russische desinformatie?
5. Denkt u dat de rol van het tegengaan van desinformatie en de effecten van desinformatie meer moet rusten op de schouders van individuen (oftewel de zelfredzaamheid van burgers), de staat of juist internationale organisaties?
6. In een interview met u gepubliceerd in het NRC staat de volgende quote: Spronk denkt ook dat het Westen de informatieoorlog naar Rusland moet brengen. „Je kunt natuurlijk het Russische opinieklimaat beïnvloeden – zoals zij dat hier doen. De Russische bevolking ziet alleen staatspropaganda. Maar met cyber kun je bijvoorbeeld de Russische media proberen te manipuleren en over te nemen. Dan daalt het besef van de enorme Russische verliezen ook daar neer.” Ziet u dit als een reële manier die we zouden moeten toepassen om als counter mechanisme te werken?
7. Wat ziet u verder als belangrijke counter mechanisme om Russische desinformatie tegen te gaan?
8. Zijn er manier om desinformatie tegen te gaan die niet worden toegepast maar waarvan u denkt dat ze dat wel zouden moeten zijn? Of juist manieren die nu veel worden gebruikt maar die een averechts effect hebben
9. In het interview dat u met NRC hield stond ook dat u vind dat we Rusland zo volledig moeten isoleren als kan. Tot hoeverre is het mogelijk om Rusland te isoleren wanneer het aankomt op de heimelijke beïnvloeding en verspreiding van desinformatie?
10. Ik ga ervan uit de dat de AIVD wil dat er bewustzijn is in de samenleving over de gevaren van Russische desinformatie, als overheid wil je dit bewustzijn creëren

<p>maar tegelijkertijd wil je ook dat angst in de samenleving niet wordt aangewakkerd, aangezien de aivd de actor is die als eerst op de hoogte is van zulke heimelijke beïnvloedingscampagnes, wordt er ook voor gekozen om niet altijd bekend te maken dat nederland doelwit is geweest zodat die angst niet groter wordt?</p>
<p>11. Een van de lastigste dingen aan het tegengaan van Russische desinformatie is het bereiken van de groep die er het meest vatbaar voor is, vaak leeft in binnen deze groepen al wantrouwen of afkeer naar de overheid, hoe denkt u dat hiermee om moet worden gegaan?</p>
<p>12. Tijdens mijn periode in Litouwen vertelde een van de experts die ik interviewde dat hij het gevoel had dat wij ons in Nederland nog niet genoeg beseften welke dreiging desinformatie voor ons en onze democratie vormt, de AIVD is de organisatie waarvan je zou verwachten dat die het best weten hoe reëel bepaalde dreiging zijn. Daarom aan u de vraag, denkt u dat wij het ons in Nederland goed beseffen? En hoe is het besef veranderd sinds 2014?</p>

#### Interview guide 8, Hubert Smeets

(Before taking the interview already agreed for recordings)

Goedemorgen,

Bedankt dat u mij te woord wil staan. Ik ben nu bezig met mijn masterscriptie voor de studie Human Geography, Conflict Territories and Identities, heet het. Het is een hele ingewikkelde naam, maar het komt er eigenlijk heel erg op neer, dat het vooral gaat over internationaal veiligheidsbeleid. En waar ik dan momenteel heel erg mee bezig ben, is onderzoek doen naar hoe je kan reageren op Russische desinformatiecampagnes. En daar was mijn onderzoeksvraag eerst heel erg afgespeld op hoe heeft Nederland gereageerd. Maar nu is het meer geshift naar dat ik meer kijk naar hoe kan je reageren op Russische desinformatie campagnes, welke countermechanismen zijn er? En daarvoor heb ik twee deelvragen:

- welke karakteristieken heeft de Russische desinformatiecampagne?
- En welke countermechanismen zijn er tegen Russische desinformatiecampagnes?

En zo ben ik nu dus een beleidsanalyse aan het doen, en interviews met experts. En tot nu toe heb ik, vorige week heb ik Han Bouwmeester geïnterviewd, wat erg interessant was. En dan heb ik dus Jack geïnterviewd.

Maar ik heb ook in Litouwen verschillende experts geïnterviewd. Omdat zij er natuurlijk veel dieper inzitten. En die hebben we er veel langer mee te maken gehad al. Alleen een echte Rusland deskundige die ontbrak nog. Dus bij deze ideaal dat u dat wil doen.

Het interview heb ik opgesplitst in verschillende delen. Waarin het eerste deel bestaat uit het de rol van Desinformatie in de Russische plannen. Vervolgens ga ik meer in op de kenmerken van zo'n campagne en vervolgens op wat er nu aan wordt gedaan of tegen kan worden gedaan.

1. Hoe belangrijk is het verspreiden van desinformatie voor zowel het binnenlandse als buitenlandse beleid van Rusland?
2. Welke rol speelt framing in de Russische desinformatie campagnes?
3. Wat denkt u dat de belangrijkste doelstellingen zijn die het Kremlin heeft met de verspreiding van desinformatie?
4. Toen ik voor mijn onderzoek in litouwen was vertelde een desinformatie expert mij dat Rusland onder andere bezig is met het vervagen van de grens tussen goed en fout. Kwaad en goed. Denkt u dat het Kremlin weet dat zij aan de foute kant van de geschiedenis staan en dat ze om deze reden met hun desinformatiecampagnes de harde grens van goed en fout proberen te vervagen?
5. In andere interviews die ik heb gehouden kwam naar voren hoe Rusland verschillende strategieën gebruikt in de verspreiding van desinformatie om hun doelstellingen te halen, dit zijn strategieën als het inspelen op actualiteiten en het ondersteunen van meerdere groepen in de samenleving. Wat ziet u terug van de strategieën die Rusland gebruikt met hun desinformatie?
6. In een interview op NPO-radio 1 verteld helga salomone dat Rusland probeert om in elk esters land minstens een westerse nieuwssite over te nemen waar Kremlin propaganda op wordt verspreid in de lokale taal, hoe ziet u dit? Is dit inderdaad hoe het gaat?
7. Uit het onderzoek dat ik tot nu toe heb gedaan komen er verschillende narratieven naar voren, wat ziet u als de belangrijkste narratieve in Desinformatiecampagnes?
8. Welke verspreiding mechanisme gebruikt Rusland om hun desinformatie te verspreiden?
9. Welke countermechanisme denkt u dat gebruikt moeten worden om desinformatie tegen te gaan?

