Do(n't) Shoot the Messenger: Psychological Responses to Kremlin Narratives in Nordic-Baltic Audiences

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Foreword

This report is co-authored by Aiden Hoyle, Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørv, Charlotte Wagnsson, and Bertjan Doosje. The report is a product of the PhD research fellowship by Aiden Hoyle, who did part of his experimental research on emotional responses to Kremlin's narratives at the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (COE) in Riga.

Aiden Hoyle's work made an important contribution to the Centre's Nordic-Baltic project, which has been running since 2016. This ongoing effort monitors and analyses Russian and Chinese influence operations in the Nordic-Baltic region, which includes Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden. Since its inception, the project has published several reports mapping and comparing narratives hostile to national interest, regional cohesion, and the realisation of strategic interests within the European Union and NATO.

Drawing on the expertise of subject matter experts representing the eight countries and research conducted by the COE, this project has significantly advanced the understanding of a common threat. But what about its impact? Aiden's research offers a rigorous novel approach to understanding how hostile narratives affect audiences and suggests what nations can learn from these findings in terms of their own strategic communications.

Implementation of this research would not have been possible without partnerships. We would like to thank the UiT The Arctic University of Norway, the Swedish Defence University, the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research (TNO), and the Dutch Defence Academy for their cooperation.

Introduction

In July 2023, Sweden's Minister for Civil Defence, Carl-Oskar Bohlin, announced that Swedish authorities had uncovered a disinformation campaign by "Russian-backed actors" that was targeting Sweden.[1] Exploiting an ongoing controversy in Sweden, where a series of demonstrations had seen protestors burn copies of the Koran, the campaigns had been "amplifying incorrect statements such as that the Swedish state is behind the desecration of holy scriptures".[2] Bohlin suggested that "state and state-like actors with the aim of damaging Swedish interests and … Swedish citizens" were attempting to "create division and weaken Sweden's international standing".[3] Another official later suggested that "the image of Sweden has changed. We have gone from being seen as a tolerant country to being a land that is anti-Muslim – that's how we are seen …".[4] The campaign was assumed by the Swedish government to be driven by Russia's desire to complicate Sweden's bid to join NATO.

Bohlin's description of a Russia-backed disinformation campaign that attempts to discredit Sweden's international standing could be considered an example of how recent academic analyses have characterised the guiding principles of Kremlin malign information influence. Scholarship has identified evidence and trends that demonstrate how the Kremlin's narrative foundations are designed to damage the image of states on different dimensions, including portraying them as weak and unstable, as morally repugnant[5], and/or exacerbating insecurity and instability in a target state.[6] This framework has been reproduced in several subsequent analyses[7], and corresponds with prior analyses of Kremlin disinformation campaigns.[8]

Particularly relevant for this Swedish example, Hoyle et al discuss how very negative portrayals of target states in Kremlin narration often coincide with nadirs in interstate tensions with Russia.[9] Implying that the Swedish state supported the Koran burnings can be interpreted as a manifestation of this mechanism; Sweden's pursuit of NATO membership has been perceived as antagonistic by the Kremlin.[10]

Destabilising effects

In the last decade, concerns have grown regarding the possible destabilising effects that malign information influence campaigns may have on societies, centring around fears that Kremlin narratives may antagonistically shape how citizens see their own domestic political life. These concerns have spurred institutional change and legislation to analyse, expose, and limit the Kremlin's influence in national information spaces. For example, the EU and NATO have both developed institutions such as The East StratCom Task Force (est. 2015), The European Centre for Countering Hybrid Threats (est. 2017), and NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (est. 2014) specifically to deal with Russian malign information influence. In 2022, the EU introduced a blanket ban of Russian state-sponsored media within EU borders.[11]

However, these developments have only partially been mirrored in academic research; little experimental research has examined if, and what types of, responses in different European publics can be triggered by Kremlin malign information influence. A handful of experimental studies have looked at the attitudinal shifts in various general publics triggered by exposure to Kremlin hostile narration.[12] Yet, the effects of malign information influence on trust or different emotions – which are often discussed as elements that prime society for conflict and instability[13] – have remained largely underexplored in experimental research, with only a handful of studies testing for these types of responses to Kremlin narration.[14] This research is described in more depth below.

The current study seeks to continue this burgeoning research agenda by broadly replicating and extending the framework and method adopted by these studies. The study seeks to experimentally test for trust and affective responses to two common types of Kremlin narratives in Nordic-Baltic audiences, providing a nuanced analysis of possible motivations underlying responses to these narratives. To achieve this, we replicate the experimental approach adopted in previous studies, adjusting the methodology to account for the target of the responses after exposure to Russian media narratives.

In comparison to the previous studies, the current study widens the scope and examines the responses of five different audiences across four different states: Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Estonia. The fifth audience stems from the division of the Estonian audience to reflect its significant ethno-cultural divide between Estonian and Russian speakers. By Estonian speakers, we mean inhabitants of Estonia whose first language is Estonian, and by Russian speakers, we mean those whose first language is Russian.

The Nordic-Baltic region

Countries in the Nordic-Baltic region are particularly salient to focus on when analysing Kremlin malign information influence as the region holds particular strategic importance for the Kremlin. Norway, Finland, and Estonia all share a border with Russia, and regions such as the Baltic Sea or the Arctic – areas of strategic importance to the Kremlin and often described as theatres for persistent Russian hybrid threat activities and warfare[15] – are within the region. Prior to, but particularly after, the Russian escalation of their war in Ukraine, tensions in both interstate and substate relations between Nordic-Baltic countries and Russia have substantially increased, with an accompanying increase in hybrid threat activities.

As such, evolving geopolitical events from 2014 to 2022, culminating in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, have severely ruptured most of the ties these countries have developed after the Cold War. Together with the consequent developments of Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO in 2023 and 2024 respectively, the severing of ties and development of overt defence postures can be seen to increase the potential for states to be targets of Russian malign information influence. As already discussed, the Kremlin interprets these moves, among many others as antagonistic.[16]

Malign information influence campaigns targeting audiences in the region have long been documented.[17] Recent reports have suggested that they have been increasing in the last years, as the suspected campaign around the Swedish Koran burning case could demonstrate.[18]

Evidence of an increase of information influence operations does not imply success, however (depending on how that is measured). There has been a demonstrable increase in operations or attempts to influence, but not all efforts could be regarded as successful across target societies in, or regarding, the Nordic or Baltic states.[19] Monitoring, including through experimental research, is crucial as continuous activities could push or alter societal trust and security perceptions over a tipping point over time, resulting in significant polarisation and destabilisation within the target state. Monitoring is also central to better understanding if and when such operations could be considered successful.

Narrative strategies

Russian state-sponsored media can be considered vehicles for the Kremlin to project antagonistic strategic narratives. Strategic narratives are defined as "a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors".[20] If used in a hostile manner – to damage another state's image or to provoke and/or polarise an audience – these strategic narratives can be considered antagonistic.[21]

Narratives are central to the Kremlin's communication with both its domestic and international target audiences. Long-standing strategic narratives used by the Kremlin to explain their own conduct include the idea that Western policy towards Russia is Russophobic[22], or that Russian interventions into nearby countries, such as Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, are frequently driven by a claimed motivation to protect Russian speakers from discrimination or genocide.[23] When it comes to Western states, Russian media narration has often focused on framing them as dysfunctional, suffering from institutional failure, and being marred by political conflicts.[24] Additional research from the, which has addressed how the Kremlin frames Nordic-Baltic countries, suggests a similar pattern.[25]

Categorising the types of overarching narratives the Kremlin uses to narrate Western states, Wagnsson and Barzanje created a framework of Russian antagonistic narrative strategies.[26] This categorisation included two mirroring strategies, **destruction** and **suppression**, which characterise two major narrative undercurrents in Russian internationally-oriented, state-sponsored media content. Destruction narratives are those that seek to undermine a state's capabilities, attempting to make the target state look weak, chaotic, and incapable. Suppression narratives, on the other hand, are those that attempt to discredit a state's moral image or legitimacy, often making it seem perverse and in contrast to traditional, conservative values.

Wagnsson and Barzanje discuss how these two narrative trends map broadly onto the Kremlin's aims for the Russian image internationally: to be seen as a Great Power, and as an arbiter of traditional, Christian values on the world stage. These narrative strategies have been observed in several other studies. Destruction and suppression narratives were observed in the narration about the other Nordic countries[27] and the Netherlands.[28] Meanwhile, analyses of Russian media narration about Latvia revealed a lower level of suppression narratives, and emphasis on destruction narratives.[29] This aligned with other studies on Estonia.[30]

Using this framework as a basis, later research has developed a model predicting different trust and emotional responses to these narrative strategies identified by Wagnsson and Barzanje.[31] The model posits that the narratives work through a type of mechanism called "mediation" – which implies that the occurrence of certain effects are dependent on the prior occurrence of other effects. In the models of destruction and suppression narratives, the models predict that people's reactions to the narratives occur because the narratives have the function of inducing threat perceptions – in other words, targeting their senses of security and insecurity.

Specifically, the model links destruction narratives, which emphasise a state's weakness, incompetence, and lack of cohesion, with an increase in **realistic threat perceptions**, which are defined as threats to their physical or economic security. This can be feelings of safety on the street, for example, or feelings that one may not have a secure income. The model then predicts that these feelings of realistic threat should lead to reactions such as lower trust in institutions and stronger feelings of fear and anger.

Suppression narratives, which in the above examples criticised the target state's moral standing as strange and overly woke, were conversely connected to **symbolic threat**

perceptions. These narratives were linked to symbolic threat perceptions – threats to a person's ingroup image, values, morals, or norms. These threats can include feeling like your traditions are being stamped out, or that people are not allowing you to embrace your culture. Symbolic threat perceptions are targeted by information influence and/or disinformation campaigns with the intent to polarise, though the extent of their success for doing so have been still unclear.[32] The model links the increase in symbolic threat perception with reactions such as lower levels of outgroup trust – how much people trust perceived 'others', and higher levels of a range of negative emotions such as anger, shame, and disgust. The full models are shown in Figure 1.
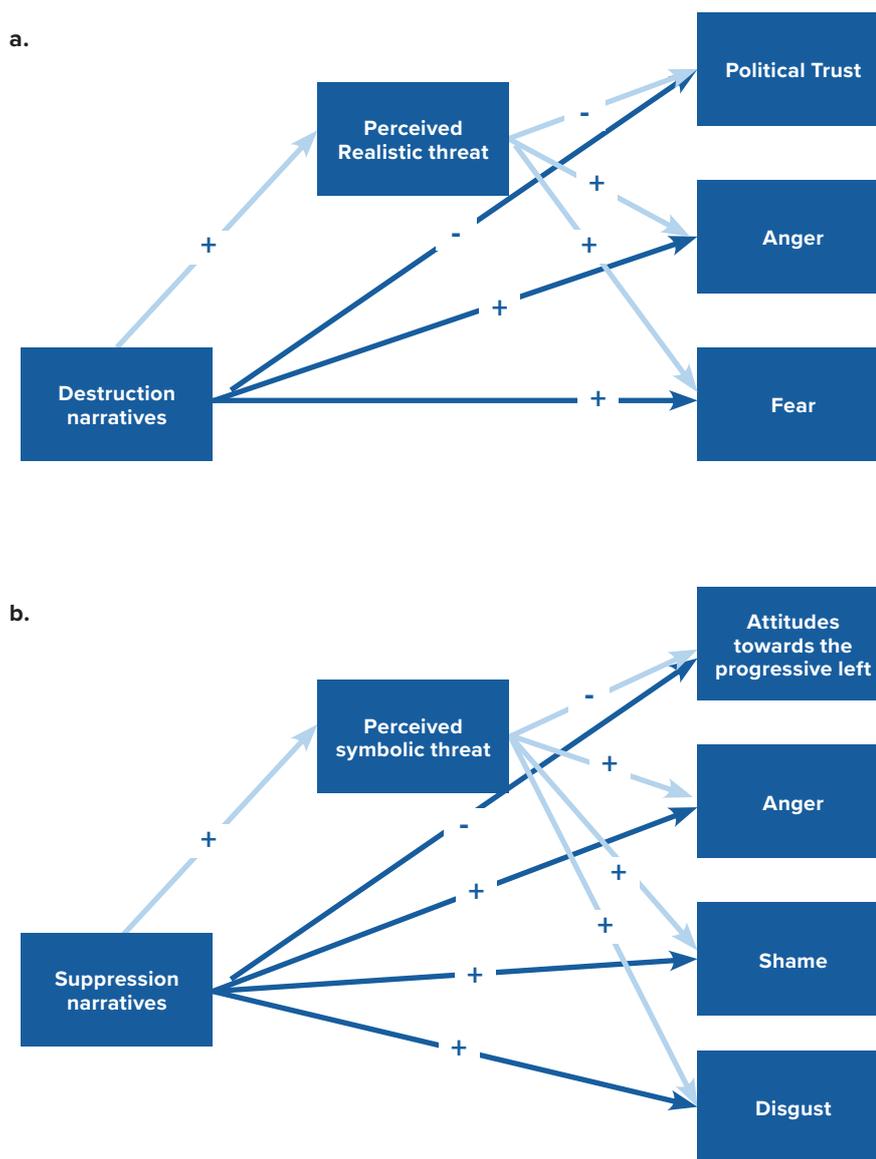
a.

b.

FIGURE 1A & B. Depicting the models of predicted responses to destruction and suppression narratives. Direct effects – a measure of the effects without them depending on the threat perception mechanism – are in dark blue. The indirect effects – accounting for if the effects occur through the threat perception mechanisms – are in lighter blue.

Previous research testing narrative strategies

Survey experiments testing these strategies involved showing participants actual articles taken from *RT* or *Sputnik* which demonstrated these strategies, and then comparing their responses on the effects listed in the model with participants who read neutral, fact-based 'control' articles about the same topics. The results of these experiments were mixed.

Compared to participants who read neutral articles, Swedish participants indicated significantly higher levels of anger after reading *Sputnik*/*RT* articles demonstrative of the destruction narratives, and significantly higher levels of anger and disgust after reading suppression articles. Dutch participants were significantly higher in anger and fear, and significantly lower in institutional trust, after consuming *Sputnik/RT* destruction narratives, while reading suppression articles led them to indicate higher levels of shame and disgust, in comparison to those who read neutral articles.

However, the data did not support how the authors thought the models were functioning: the responses did not depend on threat perceptions. It appeared as if the data did not support the predicted model, and the narratives did not function as conceptualised.

Yet a subsequent study replicating and advancing the experimental method further developed the somewhat complex picture of these responses.[33] Two experiments conducted in Latvia, addressing the Latvian and Russian speaking populations separately to reflect the ethno-cultural divide inherent to Latvia's media space and society, revealed support for the full model – but only among Russian speakers. For these participants, reading articles representing the destruction narratives led to higher levels of realistic threat perceptions, and consequently, a higher level of anger and fear, when compared to a control group. This suggested that the narrative *did* function as predicted in Russian speakers. In contrast, exposing Latvian speakers to the same articles (in Latvian language) resulted only in higher levels of anger for these participants, and this was not dependent on threat perceptions.

Post-experiment focus groups pointed to a more complex mechanism at play, whereby the Russian speakers' responses to *RT* and *Sputnik* articles were driven by their support of the articles' content but the Latvian speakers' responses to the same (translated) articles were driven by anger towards the outlet – an awareness that the outlet was Kremlin-sponsored and a frustration that they would publish on such topics. The research team concluded that "responses may have different drivers despite appearing the same"[34] and argued that the "linkage" between Russian speakers and Russia – the maintenance of personal or cultural connections with a foreign state through various means[35] – contributed to Russian speakers' acceptance of and subsequent reaction to Russian strategic narration. They emphasised this distinction as an important line to pursue for future research.

The current study

Delineating the specific motivations behind different responses is an important theoretical step as it provides nuance and shapes how we think about the provocativeness of Russian narratives. It is important to understand which audiences respond by *engaging with* the narratives, versus reacting *against* the narrative. Which audiences align with the narrative, and their responses reflect this alignment? Which audiences, rather, respond to the idea that this narrative has been written to deceive the recipient?

This insight has ramifications for how one might build effective and sustainable countermeasures towards such hostile narration. With countermeasure and intervention development being costly and time-consuming, there is a need for evidence-based insights into purpose/ design as well as effects of information influencing narratives, so that national governments can build appropriate responses to Russian malign information influence.[36] Evidence that demonstrates that significant audience numbers respond angrily *against* the narrative may support less active mitigation measures, such as simply ignoring. Conversely, evidence that the audiences appear to be *buying into* the narrative may motivate more active or engaging influence mitigation approaches, such as confronting or blocking.[37]

It is this distinction that the current report addresses. We broadly replicated the experimental approach adopted in the aforementioned studies, while tweaking the methodology to more closely examine the nature or character of any significant responses (e.g. responding to the message content or the message outlet) triggered by exposure to Russian media narratives.

We chose five audiences – Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian, Estonian speakers in Estonia, and Russian speakers in Estonia – each of which comprised a sub-study of the whole experiment. We presented all five audiences with destruction narratives embedded within fictitious news articles and measured their responses. Conversely, suppression narrative articles were shown only to Swedish, Finnish, and Norwegian audiences, a methodological decision motivated by aforementioned research on Latvia and Estonia – which observed little to no suppression narratives being deployed that described the target societies.[38] This converges with findings from other studies looking at the narration of Estonian society.

We based our hypotheses primarily on the discussions of Hoyle et al, regarding their Latvian results.[39] Therefore, we predicted that Russian speakers would be reactive to the *content* of the message, and all other audiences would be more reactive to the message *outlet*. We formalised these thoughts in four main hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: For non-Russian speaking audiences (Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Estonian speaking), we expected that reading destruction narratives would lead to higher levels of anger towards the outlet, when compared to a control group.

Hypothesis 2: For Russian speaking participants, we expected that reading destruction narratives should lead to lower levels of political trust and higher levels of anger and fear about the content, when compared to a control. Further, these effects would be mediated by perceived realistic threat. That is, the lower levels of political trust, and higher levels of anger, and fear would be dependent on higher levels of perceived realistic threat. This model is depicted in Figure 1a.

Hypothesis 3: For Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish participants, we expected that reading suppression narratives would lead to higher levels of anger towards the outlet, when compared to a control group.

Hypothesis 4: For Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish participants, we expected that reading suppression narratives would not lead to significantly different levels of anger, disgust and shame towards the content when compared to a control group.

Method

To test these four hypotheses, we designed an online survey experiment. A survey experiment is a specific research design where participants are randomly assigned to different groups (experimental and control) and then exposed to different stimuli, in this case, fictitious news articles representing different narratives, to measure their responses.

A sample of participants, that were representative of the demographics of the countries being tested, was recruited by the research company *Norstat*. We recruited a sample of 650 participants per sub-study. All participants were above 18 years old and residents of the country being studied. After removing those who did not complete the survey or who took longer than a specified time, the final samples consisted of just under 650 participants for each study.

In total, we ran eight sub-studies, five testing the destruction narratives and three testing the suppression narratives, to correspond with the above hypotheses. Participants in each sub-study were divided randomly and equally into one of two groups: an experimental group and a control group. In the experimental group, participants read two articles that were reflective of either the destruction strategy or, in the case of the three Nordic countries, the suppression strategy. Conversely, in the control group, participants read neutral articles about the same topics. The intention behind this was that any differences in responses between these groups should come due to the manner (design) in which the Kremlin narrates.

Experimental group

Building on recommendations from the prior studies[40], the articles in the experimental group were crafted specifically for this research. The articles addressed existing, potentially contentious issues within the test society/country, but presented information by emphasising altered or distorted facts and using emotionally charged language. They were written to mimic the style of Russian state-sponsored media and were loosely based on articles identified in prior narrative analysis.[41]

After creation, the articles were successfully pre-tested to an English-language audience using a trial run of the experiment to ensure that the articles were effective in conveying the intended messages. Full details of the pre-test can be found in the Appendix. After the pre-test, the articles were translated into Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, Estonian and Russian. References to relevant country-specific details, such as names and locations, were tailored for each sub-study country, but otherwise, the text remained the same across all sub-studies. Each translation was subsequently checked twice by different native speakers to ensure coherence and accuracy.

For studies testing responses to the destruction strategy, the experimental articles had the titles: "*[country] Police Chief Sounds Alarm Over 'Unprecedented' Increase in Crime*" and "*Poll: 7 out of 10 [country people] suffer from the economic bite*". The former described a chaotic situation where crime appeared to be spiralling out of control in the test country, and the national police chief bemoaning a lack of financial support from the government. The second article discussed the negative ramifications of the government's economic decision-making for citizens of the test country. The financial strain was presented as rupturing trust in the government and generating debate in the society as to whether the economic policy is reckless. Both articles were representative of common reporting themes by *RT* and *Sputnik*, and reflect different elements of the destruction strategy: that the country is marked by physical insecurity,

economic precarity, irresolvable internal conflict, and an incompetent government.

For the suppression strategy, the article titles were: "*[Country] university staff outraged over compulsory 'woke' training*" and "*Outrage over national museum adding warnings to artworks*". The first article focused on belittling university policies to increase awareness of racial or gender disparities, quoting them as 'promot[ing] a culture of hypersensitivity' and 'part of a wider attempt by the left to impose their values on society'. The second, similarly, commented on the 'uproar' over museums adding warnings about the racial history of certain art pieces and discussed the 'ridicule' that the warnings attract on social media. The warnings were characterised as 'ridiculous' and 'left-wing indoctrination funded by taxpayers'. Both articles represented suppression themes that are common to Russian state-sponsored media reporting about the Nordics.[42] They emphasised efforts to increase racial or gender sensitivity as 'ridiculous' and 'too woke', thus targeting the moral image and legitimacy of the state and state authorities.

Control group

As in the previous studies, the control groups received factual information about the same topics as the experimental group, presented in a neutral and unemotional manner. The purpose of this was to isolate the impact of the strategic narrative itself, rather than just the information content. In other words, it aimed to highlight the effects of the design, or way the articles convey the information.

The destruction control articles were titled: "*Rise of crime in [Country]*" and the second, "*Rise in economic instability*". The suppression control articles were titled: "'*Woke' trainings in [country] organisations*" and "*Racism warnings in [country] cultural organisations*".

Survey questions

After reading the articles, we asked participants specific survey questions to measure their thoughts and feelings. Most of the questions measured responses using a Likert scale. A Likert scale is a type of question where participants rate their responses on a scale, often from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). An overview of the questions asked to participants can be found in Table 1.

Perceptions of realistic threat	We assessed generalised perceived realistic threat through two questions, "In response to the texts, to what extent do you believe that [country] society is in physical danger?" and "In response to the articles, to what extent do you believe that [country] society is in economically unstable?", measured on a 7-point Likert scale.
Perceptions of symbolic threat	We assessed generalised perceived symbolic threat through two questions, "In response to the articles, to what extent do you believe that traditional values in [country] society are under threat?" and "In response to the articles, to what extent do you believe that [country] cultural identity is changing for the worse?", measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).
Political trust	We measured trust in government using nine questions measuring the perceived benevolence, competence, and integrity of the state's government, used in a previous study measuring political trust in Latvians.[58] The participants indicated how far they agreed with these statements on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "completely disagree" (1) to "completely agree" (7), such as: "The [country] government truly cares about the welfare of the [country] people".
Attitudes towards progressive left	We measured attitudes towards the progressive left by asking them to indicate how much they "like," "value," and "feel connected" to this group after receiving a description on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).
Emotions towards content	We measured emotions towards the content by asking two questions explicitly enquiring about their emotional responses to the stories they read in the articles, e.g. "I feel [emotion] about the rise in crime in [country]" for destruction narratives, and "I feel [emotion] that they introduce race warnings in [country]" for suppression narratives. We measured anger, fear, interest, happiness, surprise, sadness, disgust, shame, and guilt responses on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).
Emotions towards the outlet	We measured three different emotional responses towards the message outlet: anger, disgust, and gratitude, through questions such as "I feel [emotion] at the outlet that published the articles that I read", rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).
Manipulation check	To ensure our manipulation was valid, we asked participants who saw the destruction articles "To what extent do you feel the articles you read focused on presenting the [country] government as failing?" Those who saw suppression articles will be asked: "To what extent do you feel the articles you read focused on criticism of [country]'s progressive policies?". They indicated this on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).
Attention check	Participants were given an instructed-response question embedded in the political trust scale.

TABLE 1: The questions that were administered to participants in each sub-study, after reading their articles.

Analysis and results

After collecting the survey responses, we analysed the data to test our hypotheses. The analysis of different hypotheses necessitated the use of different analytical methods, ranging from mean comparisons to model testing. We explain each analytical method, provide an overview, and explain the results of these analyses by discussing each hypothesis separately. For the full results, please see the Appendix, where we present the raw means and standard deviations, as well as the full statistics supporting our assertions.

Hypothesis 1

Our first hypothesis predicted that **Swedish, Norwegian, Finland, and Estonian-speaking participants who read articles detailing destruction narratives would indicate higher levels of anger towards the outlet when compared to a control group**. To test this, we used a statistical test called Welch's two-sample t-test, which compares the averages (means) of two groups to establish if they are significantly different from each other.

Running four Welch two-sample t-tests indicated that in each country, groups showed a significantly higher level of anger when exposed to destruction narratives, supporting this first hypothesis. These differences are depicted in Figure 2. For context and completion, we have also included the responses of Russian respondents to compare the differences.
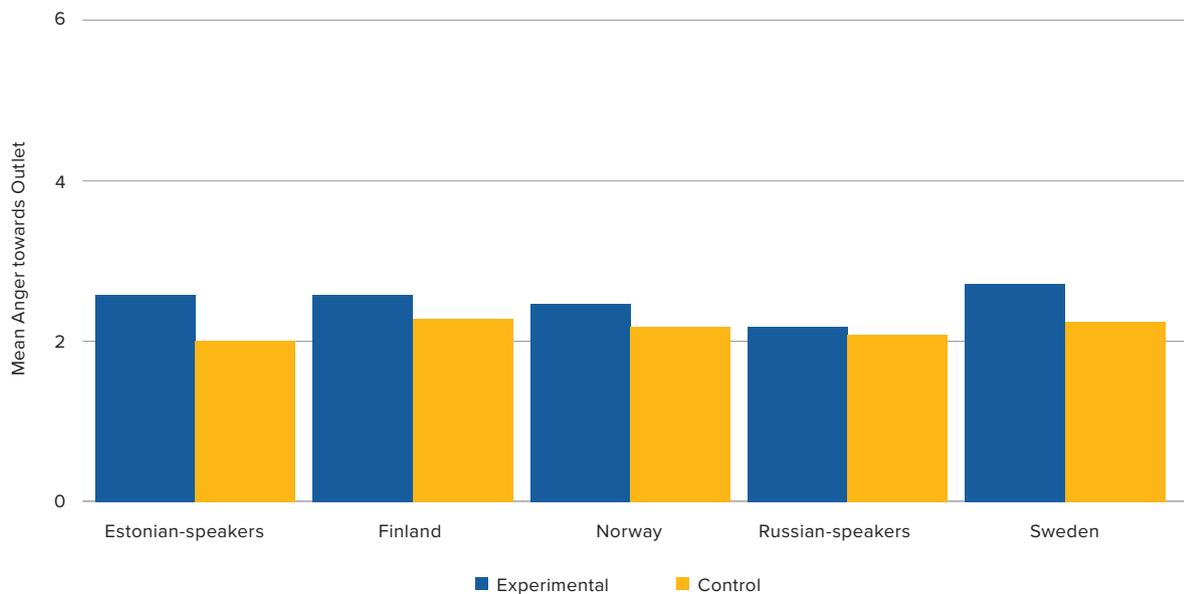
FIGURE 2: A graph depicting the mean level of anger towards the outlet by group and country.

Hypothesis 2

Our second hypothesis focused on Russian-speaking participants living in Estonia, where we expected **that reading destruction narratives would lead to lower levels of political trust and higher levels of anger and fear about the content when compared to the control group**. Moreover, we predicted that these effects would be *mediated by perceived realistic threat* – that the responses in political trust, anger or fear caused by the destruction narratives would be because participants felt a greater sense of realistic threat. This prediction is captured in the model presented in Figure 1a.

To test this, we used path analysis, a method that helps us understand how different variables are connected and influence each other. This helped us test our 'mediation' mechanism – if the responses to the narratives were dependent on the threat perception function that prior authors had conceptualised for destruction and suppression narratives.

This analysis revealed that political trust, anger, and fear were influenced indirectly, through another factor – people's sense of a realistic threat. In other words, the perceived threat explained the changes in trust, anger, and fear. In this, the narrative again appeared to work as conceptualised in Russian speakers. The relationships are depicted in Figure 3. Hypothesis 2 is supported.
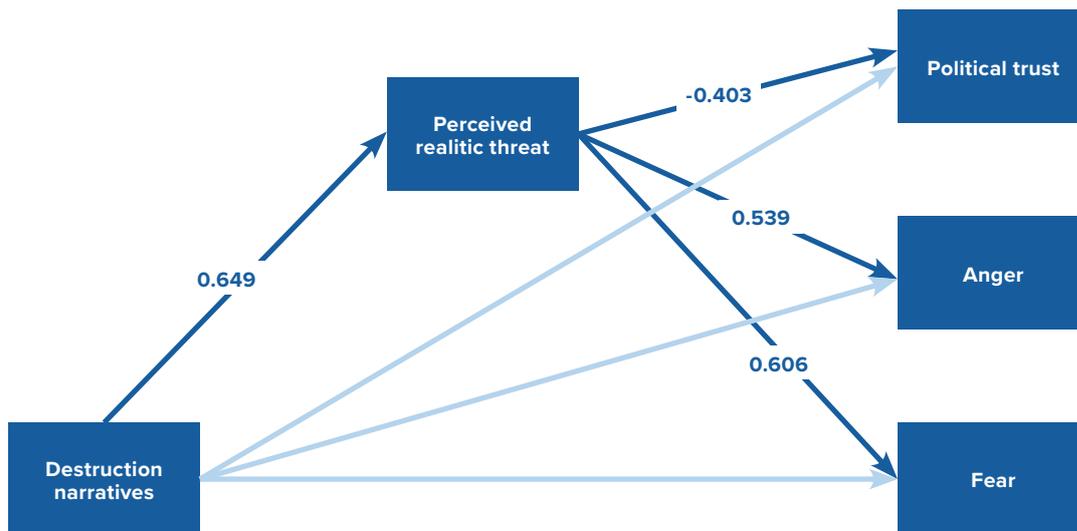
FIGURE 3: A path model indicating the significant pathways in our analysis. It shows that, compared to control group, participants who were exposed to destruction narratives indicated significantly higher levels of perceived realistic threat, which in turn, contributed to a lower level of political trust and higher levels of anger and fear. The numbers represent unstandardised beta coefficients, which is a type of statistic that indicates the strength and direction of the relationships between variables.

Hypothesis 3

Our third hypothesis, like our first hypothesis, predicted **that reading suppression narratives would lead to higher levels of anger towards the outlet when compared to a control group.** Therefore, we employed the same statistical testing – Welch's two-sample t-test – to establish if there were significant differences between our experimental and control groups in each country.

Overall, our findings were mixed for the third hypothesis. While both Swedish and Finnish participants who read suppression narratives were statistically significantly higher in anger towards the outlet when compared with their counterparts who read control articles, the same pattern was not seen in the Norwegian study. Despite there being a difference in the mean level of anger towards the outlet between the experimental and control groups, this difference was not large enough to be deemed statistically significant. In other words, the Norwegian data did not provide enough evidence to say with certainty that the difference between the experimental and control groups was meaningful. Therefore, the results were not strong enough to conclude that the suppression stories meaningfully affected Norwegian participant's anger towards the outlet. This can be observed in Figure 4.
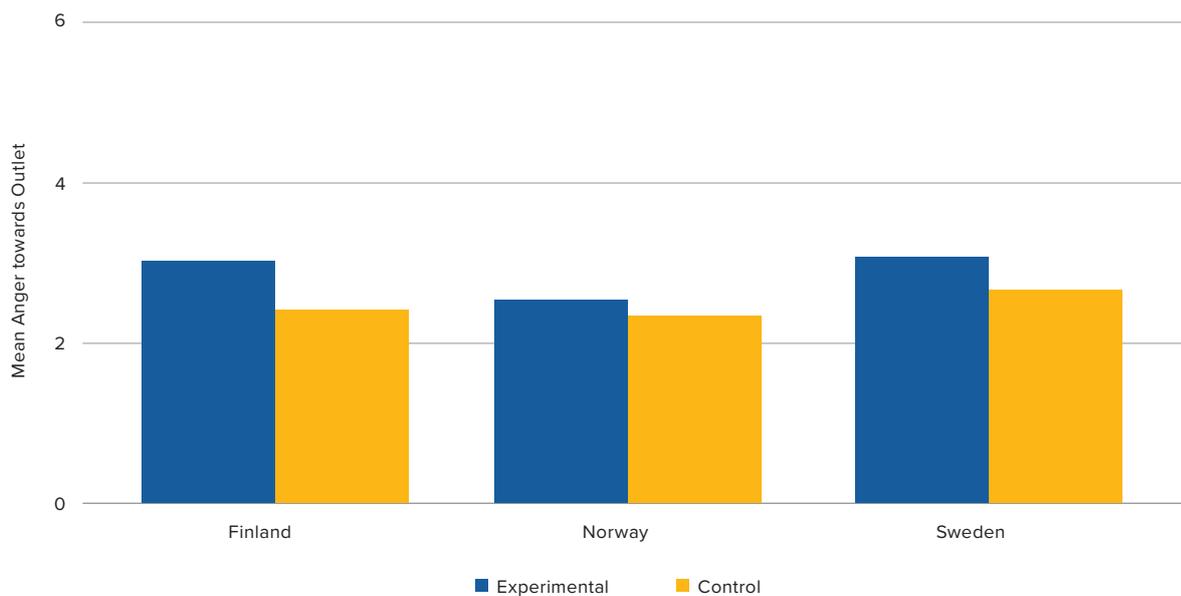

FIGURE 4: A graph depicting the mean level of anger towards the outlet by group and country.

Hypothesis 4

For our last hypothesis, we were expecting that **reading suppression narratives should not lead to significantly different levels of anger, disgust, and shame toward the content when compared to a control group, for the Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish participants.**

Because we were predicting a non-significant result, we used Bayesian t-testing. This type of testing provides more detailed information about the strength of evidence for a hypothesis, rather than simply indicating whether a result is significant or not. Therefore, even if a result is non-significant, Bayesian testing can suggest that there may still be some evidence for a difference, albeit not strong enough to be conclusive.

The results of this test for hypothesis 4 showed strong to extremely strong evidence that the emotions differed between the experimental and control groups, leading us to reject our fourth hypothesis. In each country, the negative emotions tested were meaningfully higher in those participants who read suppression narratives, when compared to those who read control articles. These differences can be observed in Figure 5.

Exploratory analyses

The results from testing hypothesis 2, which indicated that the destruction narratives appeared to 'function' as conceptualised in Russian speakers in Estonia, inspired further examination. We used the same path analysis method, testing the same model using the data from Estonian-speaking, Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish participants. These analyses showed that, similarly to what we observed in Russian speakers in Estonia, the full narrative mechanism (pictured in Figure 1a) was also supported in the data drawn from the Swedish, Norwegian, and Finnish participants. The only audience in which the model was not supported was Estonian speakers.

This development prompted further testing of the suppression narratives, where we sought to test the second model, presented in Figure 1b: that suppression narratives should lead to higher levels of perceived symbolic threat, which in turn should lead to more negative attitudes towards the progressive left, and higher levels of anger, shame, and disgust. Testing this mechanism with path analysis revealed, again, full support for the model in Swedish, Finnish, and Norwegian participants. The narratives appeared to be working as conceptualised.
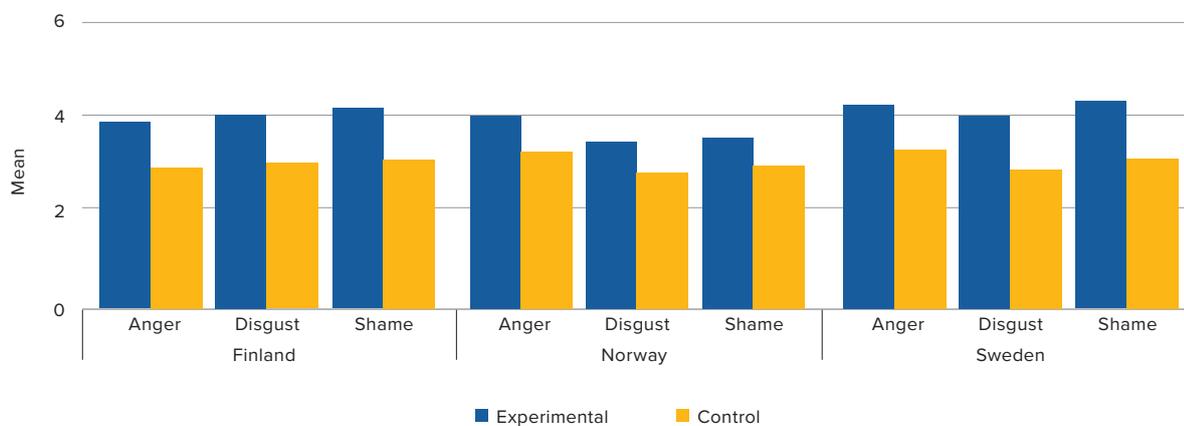

FIGURE 5: A graph depicting the mean anger towards the outlet by group and country

Discussion

The current study set out to provide a more nuanced investigation of the responses that European audiences may have to two types of narrative strategies frequently adopted in Kremlin malign information influence: destruction narratives and suppression narratives.

Although previous research had identified significant responses, the results were not consistent across narrative strategy nor audience, and the mechanism through which the narratives were working was unclear. Recent research has posited that these inconsistencies may, in some way, be explained by the distinction that some audiences may react more strongly to the *content* of the narrative, agreeing or disagreeing with the content and allowing it to provoke them, whereas some audiences may be reacting towards the *messenger* of the narrative.

Our more nuanced investigation took the form of an online survey experiment, which yielded several key findings.

1. As predicted, and in contrast to exposure to control articles, exposure to destruction narrative articles led to higher levels of anger towards the message outlet in Swedish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Estonian-speaking audiences – that is, all the audiences except the Russian-speaking audience residing in Estonia.

2. As predicted, we observed full support for how we modelled the mechanism of destruction narratives in the Russian-speaking audience of Estonia. This indicates that destruction narratives seemed to "work" as conceptualised among Russian speakers in Estonia – they led to higher levels of perceived realistic threat, which in turn, led to lower levels of political trust and higher levels of anger and fear.

3. As predicted, exposure to suppression narratives, in contrast to exposure to the control group articles, led to higher levels of anger towards the message outlet in Swedish and Finnish audiences. However, this was not the case in the Norwegian audience.

4. Countering our expectations, exposure to suppression narratives, in contrast to control articles, also led to significantly higher levels of anger, disgust, and shame about the content of the narratives in Swedish, Norwegian, and Finnish audiences.

5. Exploratory analyses also revealed that, and in contrast to previous research, the destruction and suppression narratives seemed to 'work' as conceptualised in most audiences. Only the Estonian-speaking audience in Estonia did not respond significantly to the narrative they were exposed to.

How can we make sense of this pattern of results? Perhaps a pertinent place to start is with the absence of support for the full destruction model in the Estonian-speaking audience. In their study of Latvian-speaking and Russian-speaking audiences in Latvia, Hoyle et al discussed the role of linkage – an idea put forward to explain the success of Russian soft power[43] – to explain why destruction narratives 'worked' as conceptualised in Russian-speaking audience. Based on this discussion, we predicted that non-Russian speakers would not be reactive to the content of the destruction narrative, a prediction that was not supported in all but the Estonian-speaking audience. What might explain this lack of provocation in the Estonian and Latvian speaking audiences?

One possibility is that the proximity of Russia to Estonia and Latvia, the historical ties between the countries, and the enduring relevance of Russian influence in Estonian and Latvian society[44] means that Estonian and Latvian speaking audiences are more actively thinking about the topic of Russian disinformation and are consequently more familiar with its narratives and more critical of media articles. Indeed, Estonia and Latvia were two of a handful of states that had already taken measures to curb Russian state-controlled broadcasting before the European Union ban in 2022[45], indicating that Russian influence was already taken seriously as a threat by their governments. It does, however, contrast previous research in the attitudinal domain (in a US context) showing that exposure to negative narration by Kremlin media about Ukraine substantially reduced American participants' assessments of the Ukrainian government regardless of their awareness of the information source.[46] Fisher's study would counter our interpretation, suggesting that recognition of, or increased familiarity with, foreign propaganda does not diminish its impact.

An alternative option is that the narratives of state failure are less appealing or accepted by Latvians and Estonians due to shared historical consciousness. Regaining their independence in 1991, after the fall of the Soviet Union, both states have undergone substantial nation-building processes centred around achieving political stability, economic prosperity, and implementing a 'return to Europe'.[47] It might be reasoned, then, that audiences who share the collective memory of fighting a war for independence in 1918 and fighting (by different means) to regain it in 1991 may hold a heightened motivation to see their states succeed, and more intrinsic resistance to destruction narratives of Estonia or Latvia 'failing', explaining this difference in results with countries like Sweden, Norway or Finland. Survey data looking at patriotism, support for independence, and support for typical Kremlin narratives paints a mixed picture regarding this speculation, with some indicating plausibility while others indicating a scepticism to the success of Latvia and Estonia by their populations.[48] Therefore, future research might seek to focus on how Estonian and Latvian-speaking, or even Lithuanian, majorities interact with the narratives of state failure common to Kremlin narration of the Baltic States.[49]

While such ideas might offer explanations for the lack of responses in Estonian speakers, what might explain the presence of the significant responses obtained in Sweden, Norway, and Finland? Here, we saw that for both strategies, the audiences were often reactive towards both the outlet *and* the content, not one or the other. Indeed, this extended across not just the hypothesised responses, but to other exploratory responses. Moreover, the original hypothesised mediation models, presented in Figure 1, were fully supported by the data from each of these audiences. Why might these apparent counterintuitive results occur?

One explanation could be that perhaps, despite frustrations towards the messenger of the content, audiences were still moved by the narratives they consumed. In some ways, this is not surprising; there have been warnings for decades about the detrimental effects that the transition to digital media consumption may have on (the lack of) source scrutiny.[50] Indeed, Braum and Rahman have shown across several studies that emotional news headlines had a significant impact on how subsequent information is processed and on consequent social judgments, regardless of whether the source was perceived as credible or not.[51] A similar mechanism is possibly at play in our results, and thus a pertinent future direction of research would be to also include a measurement of how credible participants perceived the outlet.

It is worth noting that in Latvia and Estonia, the 'messenger' – Russian state-sponsored media – has been more negatively portrayed in public discourse than in the Nordic countries. It might be that many in Nordic countries do not realise that *RT* or *Sputnik* are directly funded by the Kremlin. Data collected by the EU Barometer suggests that disinformation is more front of mind for, for example, citizens of the Baltics than compared to those from the Nordics. When asked "How often do you think that you have been personally exposed to disinformation and fake news over the past

7 days?", only 5% of Swedes and 6% of Finnish answered 'very often', compared to 14% in Latvia. Meanwhile, when asked how confident they were about identifying disinformation, Baltic audiences displayed more caution, with 56% of Estonian respondents saying confident, compared to 70% of Swedes.[52]

Nevertheless, a subsequent question would be: why did we find these effects when previous studies, such as Hoyle et al's study in the Netherlands and Sweden[53] did not? In this study, only direct effects were observed, with no evidence of indirect effects. One possible explanation could be methodological. Improvements to the methodology may have helped distil the effects more clearly. In contrast to Hoyle et al. (2021), we use more refined measurements of realistic or symbolic threat, and we distil the targets of the response variables more clearly, including specifying the affective responses to focus on the content and the trust variables to centre around the government or progressive political groups, respectively. One potential reason is that these more precise measurements mean the effects are better able to be surfaced from the data. A distinct but related alternative explanation pertains to the articles given to participants. We made the methodological decision to craft the stimulus materials ourselves, lifting the style and tropes used in Russian state-sponsored media articles from prior qualitative analyses. Although care was taken to emulate the style of Kremlin narration, we cannot exclude the possibility that our stimulus materials were more potent or provocative than authentic Kremlin-sponsored media articles, and thus able to generate stronger effects.

Lastly, the presence of effects in this study might speak to the transient, ephemeral, and unpredictable nature of when disinformation campaigns can generate responses. Effective disinformation campaigns do not create entirely fictional news; often campaigns target existing hot-button topics in societal discourse and amplify, reframe, or decontextualise these topics.[54] A possibility is that the topics detailed in the stimulus materials have increased in prevalence in general societal discourse over the last years, and that this increased prevalence means the topics are more provocative. Reporting of crime in the Nordic media has become more frequent and not too dissimilar from the reporting of *RT* or *Sputnik*.[55] Similarly, research has shown that public discourse of 'woke' topics has increased intensively in the last decade[56], now described as "hypervisible" in contemporary society.[57] Such an explanation may shed light on the inconsistency with which responses are found across audiences. Significant effects may be more likely if they are occurring at a time where extant discourse on a topic is rife – Kremlin narration is more effective at generating responses as it 'twists the knife' and builds on pre-existing tensions. This explanation may also underscore the challenge posed by trying to counter the Kremlin's narratives and limiting its possible effects.

Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, the current study sought to provide a nuanced exploration of audience responses to Kremlin narratives, specifically examining the dynamics of destruction and suppression narratives across diverse North Baltic populations. The series of experimental studies executed provided a complex array of results, with distinctive response patterns observed in Swedish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Estonian (both Estonian-speaking and Russian-speaking) audiences that confirmed some of our hypotheses while rejecting others. Ultimately, this inconsistent set of results means that the current study contributes more questions for the current research agenda than it provides answers.

Specifically, it provides more substantial indications that Kremlin narratives may function differently across different audiences. It raises questions about whether this variety in function is due to audience-specificities such as awareness of foreign influence, context-specificities such as extant discourse in society increasing provocativeness, or due to a refinement of the methodological process. Overall, this research underscores the multifaceted nature of malign information influence, urging continued comprehensive and nuanced exploration for the development of targeted strategies to counteract disinformation in diverse geopolitical contexts.

Given its limited scope, this experimental research cannot fully address Kremlin narrative strategies in the Nordic-Baltic region. However, its findings offer valuable insights for national strategic communications planning.

First, the research reveals significant variation in how different European audiences react to destruction and suppression narratives. For instance, Swedish, Finnish, and Norwegian audiences showed heightened anger toward both the outlet and content of these narratives, while Estonian- and Russian-speaking audiences responded differently. National strategic communication efforts should recognise these audience-specific reactions and tailor counter-narratives accordingly. A "one-size-fits-all" approach is unlikely to be effective, so a nuanced understanding of local contexts and historical experiences is key. Countries should adapt their messaging to reflect the emotional and cognitive triggers unique to different demographics.

Differences in how Russian-speaking populations and other groups perceive content from Kremlin-sponsored outlets like *Sputnik*, suggest not only a lack of awareness regarding, or perhaps a rejection of, the outlet's role as a tool of malign influence and disinformation but also a divergent level of threat perception concerning Kremlin influence activities in the region. This calls for a deeper understanding of these audiences to determine why *Sputnik* (and similar outlets) may not be viewed with appropriate suspicion and criticism, and how best to educate the public on this issue.

The responses to destruction narratives among Russian-speaking and Nordic audiences indicate their potential to demoralise and disorient citizens and their feelings of security. Specifically, the observed decrease in political trust and heightened levels of anger may act as triggers for political behaviours, such as political disengagement of civil disobedience, that run counter to national interests, particularly regarding how citizens view state institutions. Suppression narratives, on the other hand, and Nordic audiences' responses to them highlight how the Kremlin's narration may amplify ongoing antagonistic discourse in society and weaken cohesion. Further research is required to understand the levels of exposure to such narratives – whether through *Sputnik* or other Kremlin propaganda outlets and their proxies – and to assess how their effectiveness might be pre-emptively mitigated through proactive national strategic communications.

These results also provide additional evidence that disinformation campaigns are most effective when they build on existing societal tensions or amplify hot-button topics already present in public discourse. National-level strategic communications should prioritise

real-time monitoring of public discourse to quickly identify potential topics that could be exploited. Governments can then proactively broach these topics, pre-empting potential co-opting by Russian narration.

Finally, the apparent resilience of Estonian-speaking audiences to destruction narratives – which we ventured to explain through their historical consciousness and awareness of Kremlin influence operations – should not be assumed. Nor should it be assumed that this form of resilience is limited to the Estonian-speaking populations alone. Historical narratives that shape inclusive, national identities can be effective in the Nordic region, as well. As a form of resilience within Nordic total defence strategies, for example, national-level strategic communications could prioritise not only the continued promotion of national values and clear articulation of national interests and policies, but also the consistent application of policies that counter Kremlin allegations of state weakness, incompetence, lack of cohesion, and threats to physical or economic security. Nordic states can learn and modify where appropriate, from the Estonian and Latvian-speaker experiences, where a historical consciousness and national identity may act as a shield against Kremlin narratives. The promotion of stories, underpinned by actions, of resilience, national progress, common and inclusive values, and independence could bolster this shield even further.

Appendix

Tables

Table reporting means and standard deviations for responses to destruction narratives

	Realistic threat		Political trust		Anger towards outlet		Anger about content		Fear about content	
Sweden	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Experimental	4.81	1.14	3.10	1.34	2.74	1.47	5.56	1.26	5.28	1.35
Control	4.33	1.25	3.44	1.38	2.31	1.38	5.34	1.31	5.13	1.44
Norway	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Experimental	4.14	1.31	3.79	1.40	2.49	1.47	4.91	1.46	4.65	1.52
Control	3.68	1.09	3.91	1.27	2.19	1.28	4.85	1.32	4.57	1.43
Finland	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Experimental	4.45	1.30	3.26	1.32	2.55	1.41	4.68	1.39	4.73	1.44
Control	4.12	1.10	3.33	1.37	2.32	1.29	4.59	1.42	4.67	1.40
Estonia	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Experimental	4.12	1.39	3.42	1.50	2.61	1.42	3.88	1.49	4.24	1.56
Control	3.99	1.23	3.38	1.52	2.01	1.27	3.84	1.49	4.23	1.42
Russian speakers in Estonia	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Experimental	5.08	1.14	2.11	1.14	2.23	1.40	5.14	1.42	5.27	4.52
Control	4.43	1.15	2.41	1.35	2.10	1.34	4.70	1.43	4.94	1.45

Table reporting means and standard deviations for responses to suppression narratives

	Symbolic threat		Attitudes towards PL		Anger towards outlet		Anger about content		Disgust about content		Shame about content	
Sweden	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Experimental	4.63	1.74	3.01	1.84	3.00	1.55	4.28	1.67	4.03	1.92	4.28	1.92
Control	4.26	1.64	3.23	1.82	2.63	1.54	3.31	1.55	2.84	1.67	3.09	1.78
Norway	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Experimental	4.22	1.89	3.31	1.65	2.57	1.51	3.98	1.76	3.49	1.81	3.49	1.85
Control	3.94	1.70	3.43	1.65	2.33	1.40	3.30	1.52	2.82	1.61	2.99	1.64
Finland	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Experimental	4.07	1.93	3.28	1.63	3.00	1.54	3.87	1.68	4.03	1.89	4.14	1.86
Control	3.52	1.76	3.44	1.76	2.38	1.55	2.94	1.51	3.01	1.71	3.13	1.76

Full statistics for hypothesis testing

Hypothesis 1

	df	t	p	d
Sweden	607.49	3.82	<.001	0.30
Estonian speakers in Estonia	613.11	5.58	<.001	0.44
Norway	597.53	2.39	.017	0.217
Finland	589.82	2.46	<.013	0.17

Hypothesis 2

Model fit:
The model fit the data well, $\chi^2 = 38.82$, $df = 4$, $p = .00$, CFI = 0.952, RMSEA = .12, 90% CI [.088, .156], SRMR = .043.

Direct effects:
Political trust: = b = -0.09, SE = 0.09, p = .326, 95% CI = [-0.279, 0.093]
Anger: b = 0.06, SE = 0.11, p = .575, 95% CI = [-0.150, 0.269]
Fear: b = -0.07, SE = 0.11, p = .525, 95% CI = [-0.287, 0.146]

Indirect effects:
Political trust: b = -0.26, SE = 0.05, p < .001, 95% CI = [-0.355, -0.168]
Anger: b = 0.38, SE = 0.06, p < .001, 95% CI = [0.257, 0.495]
Fear: b = 0.39, SE = 0.06, p < .001, 95% CI = [0.269, 0.518]

Hypothesis 3

	df	t	p	d
Sweden	578.97	3.24	<.001	0.267
Norway	602.336	1.75	.07	0.147
Finland	606.95	4.89	<.001	0.41

Hypothesis 4 (reporting log Bayes Factors)

Anger towards the content
Sweden BF_{10} = 22.37
Norwegian BF_{10} = 9.8
Finnish BF_{10} = 27.07

Disgust towards the content
Swedish BF_{10} = 26.96;
Norwegian BF_{10} = 8.87;
Finnish BF_{10} = 20.86

Shame about the content
Swedish BF_{10} = 25.41;
Norwegian BF_{10} = 5.07;
Finnish BF_{10} = 20.30

Full statistics for exploratory analysis

Testing destruction narratives in Swedish participants	β	b	SE	p
Direct effect on political trust	-.104	-0.284	0.11	.009
Direct effect on anger about content	-.03	0.75	0.08	.380
Direct effect on fear about content	-.07	0.99	0.09	.03
Indirect effect on political trust	-.02	-0.60	0.11	.015
Indirect effect on anger about content	.12	0.30	0.10	<.001
Indirect effect on fear about content	.13	0.35	0.11	<.001
Testing destruction narratives in Norwegian participants	β	b	SE	p
Direct effect on political trust	.028	0.074	0.09	.413
Direct effect on anger about content	-.081	-0.226	0.09	.018
Direct effect on fear about content	-.09	-0.262	0.09	.006
Indirect effect on political trust	-.075	-0.199	0.05	<.001
Indirect effect on anger about content	.10	0.284	0.06	<.001
Indirect effect on fear about content	.11	0.324	0.07	<.001
Testing destruction narratives in Finnish participants	β	b	SE	p
Direct effect on political trust	-.014	-0.037	0.11	.730
Direct effect on anger about content	-.046	-0.130	0.10	.185
Direct effect on fear about content	-0.47	-0.131	0.09	.160
Indirect effect on political trust	-.015	-0.04	0.02	.032
Indirect effect on anger about content	.073	0.205	0.06	.001
Indirect effect on fear about content	.079	0.223	0.07	.001
Testing destruction narratives in Estonian-speakingn participants	B	b	SE	p
Direct effect on political trust	.03	0.08	0.10	.393
Direct effect on anger about content	-.02	-0.04	0.10	.665
Direct effect on fear about content	-.03	0.09	0.09	.324
Indirect effect on political trust	-.03	-0.07	0.06	.204
Indirect effect on anger about content	.03	0.082	0.07	.204
Indirect effect on fear about content	.03	0.097	0.08	.203
Testing suppression narratives in Swedish participants	β	b	SE	p
Direct effect on attitudes towards PL	-.003	-0.01	0.12	.924
Direct effect on anger about content	.23	0.75	0.11	<.001
Direct effect on shame about content	.26	0.99	0.14	<.001
Direct effect on disgust about content	.26	0.97	0.14	<.001
Indirect effect on outgroup trust	.05	-0.18	0.06	.005
Indirect effect on anger	.06	0.20	0.07	.005
Indirect effect on shame	.04	0.17	0.06	.006

	β	b	SE	p
Indirect effect on disgust	.05	0.17	0.06	.006
Testing suppression narratives in Norwegian participants	β	b	SE	p
Direct effect on attitudes towards PL	-.001	-0.04	0.11	.687
Direct effect on anger towards the content	.17	0.55	0.11	<.001
Direct effect on shame	.13	0.56	0.14	<.001
Direct effect on disgust	.16	0.44	0.14	<.001
Indirect effect on attitudes towards PL	-.04	-0.11	0.05	.046
Indirect effect on anger	.04	0.14	0.07	.047
Indirect effect on shame	.04	0.13	0.07	.047
Indirect effect on disgust	.04	0.14	0.07	.048
Testing suppression narratives in Finnish participants	β	b	SE	p
Direct effect on attitudes towards PL	.01	0.04	0.12	.687
Direct effect on anger	.20	0.64	0.11	<.001
Direct effect on shame	.20	0.74	0.13	<.001
Direct effect on disgust	.20	0.73	0.13	<.001
Indirect effect on attitudes towards PL	-.06	-0.19	0.05	<.001
Indirect effect on anger	.09	0.29	0.08	<.001
Indirect effect on shame	.08	0.29	0.07	<.001
Indirect effect on disgust	.08	0.29	0.08	<.001

Pilot test

To ensure that the stimulus material would be understood as intended, we conducted a pre-test using participants recruited from Prolific Academic. Data collection began and finished on the 13 April 2023.

For the destruction articles, we presented 87 participants with either the two experimental condition articles written to replicate the destruction strategy, or the two control articles featuring the similar information. The articles were presented in English, and thus participants had to be English speakers, and over 18 years old. To ensure that the article was suitably demonstrative of the destruction strategy, we administered the manipulation check item: "To what extent do you feel the texts you read focused on the failure of Swedish state institutions?". A Welch two-sample t-test indicated that perceptions that the texts focused on Swedish state failure were significantly higher in participants who received the experimental condition articles (M = 5.58, SD = 1.03) than those who received the control condition texts (M = 3.25, SD = 1.28): $t(82.57) = 9.436$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.16$.

For the suppression articles, we presented 89 participants with either the two experimental condition articles written to replicate the suppression strategy, or the two control texts featuring the similar information. As in the destruction pre-test, we administered the corresponding manipulation check item: "To what extent do you feel the texts you read focused on criticising progressive policies in Sweden?". A Welch two-sample t-test indicated that perceptions that the texts focused on criticism of progressivism were significantly higher in participants who received the experimental condition articles (M = 5.26, SD = 1.27) than those who received the control condition texts (M = 2.42, SD = 1.35): $t(82.77) = -10.29$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.32$.

Endnotes

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