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Countering misinformation in the EU: origins, evolution, and prospects

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Part II: Origins and Evolution of Counter-Misinformation in the European Union

This part analyses the origins and development of EU counter-misinformation policies, revealing the complex causal mechanisms behind their evolution (empirical contribution) and refining scholarly explanations of the observed dynamics (theoretical contribution). It unpacks three milestones in the development of EU information governance:

- (1) the creation of the East StratCom Task Force (2015) in response to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea (2014) and the escalation of EU-Russia tensions;
- (2) the EU's unpreparedness to tackle information challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak (2020); and
- (3) the adoption of the EU broadcasting ban on Russian state-sponsored media *RT* and *Sputnik* in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2022).

Each chapter deconstructs those responses, unveiling underlying dynamics and key actors.

Chapter 2 explains how Latvia influenced EU information governance by leading a coalition to address pro-Kremlin propaganda following the 2013-14 Ukraine crisis. Its lobbying efforts led to the creation of the first joint EU measure against misinformation, the ESTF. This chapter thus establishes the socio-political context in which EU counter-misinformation policies emerged, underlining the importance of a crisis that heightens perceptions of insecurity, combined with interested states' persuasion to adopt joint measures. It refines the European studies literature, confirming the usefulness of the Council Presidency for small state influence, as well as affirming the public dimension of EU foreign policymaking.

Chapter 3 analyses the inadequacy of the EU's approach—then mostly based on non-binding and voluntary frameworks—to deal with the information challenges brought up by the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. It shows the multidimensional nature of the challenges, mixing both internal and external drivers as well as public health and geopolitics. Subsequently, the EU strengthened its information governance approach with binding legal instruments such as the Digital Services Act, proposed in December 2020 and adopted in September 2022.

Chapter 4 shows that the EU has progressively securitised misinformation, notably with the ban of *RT* and *Sputnik*, catalysed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It highlights the central role of the Baltic states in the framing of misinformation as a security issue, as well as the growing role of the European Commission as an entrepreneur in information governance. This shift illustrates a geopolitical turn in EU decision-making, raising concerns about transparency, democratic oversight, and fundamental freedoms. It refines collective securitisation theory by clarifying how the recursive interactions between agents and audiences take place in EU foreign policymaking circles, showing the blurring distinction between the two and highlighting the importance of public inclusion in foreign policy debates for legitimacy.

Chapter 2—Small State Influence in EU Security Governance: Unveiling Latvian Lobbying Against Disinformation

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Counter-disinformation policies have become a prominent subject of study in Europe. The story of their early development in the European Union reveals the surprising influence of small states, in particular Latvia. This paper exposes how, as a first-mover in a growing coalition of like-minded states, Latvia shaped the development of counter-disinformation policies in the EU starting with the creation of the East StratCom Task Force in 2015. This has had a significant impact on the governance of disinformation, providing valuable lessons for the study of small states' influence in the EU. Building on 30 interviews with policy-makers, this case study demonstrates that utilising the Council Presidency can be a fruitful strategy for small states seeking to make a mark on EU security governance, with a plethora of examples as to how they can get other states and institutions on board, thereby securing long-lasting leverage.

Introduction

Europe is 'a continent of small states' says Anders Wivel²⁶⁰. The question of how they can promote their interests in international fora, in particular the European Union (EU), is therefore a substantial point of enquiry. This article explores a small state's influence on EU security governance, a notably difficult enterprise for governments with limited means given the much broader resources of big states in this policy area. It focuses on one puzzling case study, EU counter-disinformation policies, a field in which Latvia positioned itself as a prime mover and impacted significantly.

Disinformation, 'the intentional and systematic manipulation of information deceiving a target audience to cause public harm, generate profit and/or advance political goals'²⁶¹, has become an important field of EU action. The 2018 *Action Plan Against Disinformation* has empowered it to fight information disorders in and out of its borders. However, joint efforts initially arose as common security policies for the eastern neighbourhood. The EU's first notable policy was the *Action Plan on Strategic Communication* and the creation of the East StratCom Task Force (ESTF) in 2015, under the Latvian Presidency of the EU. Its most characteristic outputs have been the *EU vs Disinfo* website and newsletters, which debunk pro-Kremlin reports. Soon after, the European External Action Service (EEAS) created two sister task forces to cover the

²⁶⁰ Baldacchino and Wivel 2020, 100.

²⁶¹ Vériter et al. 2021.

EU's southern neighbourhood and Western Balkans. Olsson et al. characterized this as 'the most institutionalized issue-specific efforts in the history of EU public diplomacy'²⁶².

This development is surprising because a collective solution was favoured over national ones at a time when Member States' interests were not aligned. Until then, public diplomacy had been in the remit of national governments and, whilst it is now evident why concern should be geared towards the Kremlin, European leaders had different priorities at the time. This was particularly visible after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. A senior official from the EEAS confirmed that 'there was not a strong political willingness to go ahead' with a joint response (Interview #18). The crisis highlighted a division between states advocating for tough sanctions, such as Poland, Sweden, and the Baltic States, and those who had intended to form a friendlier relationship with Russia, such as Italy, Spain, Greece, and Hungary²⁶³. EU Member States' varying history, proximity to Russia, and diverging economic and security interests (often tied to energy supply) resulted in a rainbow of positions ranging 'from the obsessive to the disinterested'²⁶⁴.

In this climate, EU counter-disinformation policies emerged for the first time, a consequence of Latvia's influence. They did so exclusively towards Russia and have been skewed towards Russia ever since. Six years after its creation, the ESTF still had more resources and a broader mandate than other, newer similar units for other regions²⁶⁵. Interviews revealed that Latvia actively lobbied for joint measures against disinformation from Russia, impacting their design, status, and financing. How did such a small state successfully influence EU security governance over a divisive subject? To answer this question, the paper builds on the qualitative analysis of primary sources analysed in triangulation, including 30 interviews with policy-makers, meeting minutes, policy documents, press releases, and voting records.

Latvia's actions have had long-lasting repercussions on counter-disinformation and strategic communication, providing valuable lessons for the study of small states' influence in the EU. The article demonstrates that, with the support of a growing coalition, Latvia persuaded other Member States about the security threat that pro-Kremlin disinformation constituted for the EU. It promoted policy proposals which suited its interests and would not have been deemed legitimate otherwise at the time. In this process, four factors were crucial: credibility and expertise, support from big states, early opportunities for compromise, and solutions which allowed Latvia to continue influencing policy implementation. To secure those, Latvia strategically utilised its Presidency of the Council (January-June 2015) and coordinated with counterparts across institutions. It jumped on a momentum created by the media, think tanks, and academia, as large parts of the Western public were experiencing modern Russian propaganda for the first time through reports of 'little green men' in Crimea. Last but not least,

²⁶² In Bjola and Pamment 2019, 78.

²⁶³ Croft and Emmott 2014; Meister 2014.

²⁶⁴ MacFarlane and Menon 2014, 99.

²⁶⁵ ECA 2021.

Latvia was flexible enough to adapt proposals and accept early compromises to safeguard its interests.

Small State Influence in EU Security Governance

The literature on small states highlights that it is an under-studied field in International Relations, particularly in Security Studies²⁶⁶. In Europe, changes in decision-making rules, the widening of security, and the relatively decreasing importance of traditional military instruments has led to broader opportunities for small states to shape security governance²⁶⁷. Studying their behaviour in the EU policy-making apparatus enhances our understanding of small states as specific and prominent actors in European governance. This literature review briefly covers the definition of small states, their sources of power in European governance, the strategies they use for influence, as well as research gaps.

Whilst the scholarship on small states in the EU appears both ‘diverse and fragmented’²⁶⁸, it concurs in saying that there is no universal definition of a small state. Three positions stand out: (a) material views, based on population, GDP, or territory, (b) ideational views, based on socially constructed self-perception of smallness, and (c) relational views, based on comparative power asymmetry²⁶⁹. Recently, scholars have favoured the relational view because it recognises both the limited capacity of small states and the importance of perceptions²⁷⁰. Thorhallsson and Wivel explain: ‘Being a small state is seen as tied to a specific spatio-temporal context, not a general characteristic of the state: a state may be weak in one relation, but simultaneously powerful in another.’²⁷¹. This paper thus adopts a relational definition, considering Latvia as a small state in European security.

The factors which determine a small state’s influence in EU security governance are twofold: capacity and structural factors. In terms of capacity, small states are evidently constrained by the limited size of their administration and resources. To compensate, they can bet on the informal and personal relations between their politicians and civil servants. In small states, they tend to be individually more influential than their counterparts in larger states²⁷². Furthermore, Long argues that ‘the weaker the state in terms of traditionally salient military and economic resources, the more it must specialize in and develop (...) diverse approaches to power.’²⁷³. Small states seeking influence in European security governance thus have a lot to gain from

²⁶⁶ Micallef Grimaud 2018, 2.

²⁶⁷ Weiss and Edwards 2022, 1–2.

²⁶⁸ Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006, 651.

²⁶⁹ Baldacchino and Wivel 2020, 6; Long 2022, 14.

²⁷⁰ Baldacchino and Wivel 2020, 7; Long 2022, 14; Panke 2012, 315.

²⁷¹ Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006, 654.

²⁷² Baldacchino and Wivel 2020, 65.b

²⁷³ Long 2022, 65.

specialising in a field that is not military, for example cybersecurity or strategic communication²⁷⁴.

When it comes to structural factors, the conditions specific to EU security governance come to light. Consensus-based decision-making in the Council of the EU, where the common foreign and security policy is discussed, means that all states are – in theory – on an equal footing. However, it is generally accepted that holding the rotating Presidency of the Council can increase influence over negotiations, particularly for small states²⁷⁵. It is the norm that EU presidencies should nonetheless not visibly pursue national interests in that position, lest they be subject to blocking resistance from other states²⁷⁶.

The strategies that small states can use to influence EU security governance are directly informed by capacity and structural factors. In *A Small State's Guide to Influence World Politics*, Long presents an elaborate typology of influence strategies based on policy divergence, preference cohesion, and relational issue salience. He emphasises the importance of relations with great powers²⁷⁷. In the EU, this translates to coalition-building with big Member States, where smallness can be useful to influence decision-making while appearing non-threatening²⁷⁸. This is particularly relevant for small states holding the Presidency of the Council, as their role of mediators can be exploited if they remain seen as honest brokers²⁷⁹. Several scholars show that small states can use their Presidency to punch above their weight in EU security governance, when they are selective and concentrate their efforts on novel themes²⁸⁰.

Overall, the literature on small state influence in EU security governance is growing into a rich corpus of contributions. Some other cited factors for success include timing and adapting to context²⁸¹. It remains unclear how external factors such as crises come into play in this regard, although Tom Long does indicate the type of influence strategies that small states tend to use on the world stage following a divisive event²⁸².

Process and Methods

This paper focuses on the creation of the ESTF in 2015 and its evolution until the time of writing as the key outcome of interest. Since its formation, the unit has continuously expanded and gained support. Therefore, this article also considers three subsequent outcomes: first, the

²⁷⁴ Jakobsen 2009, 87; Wivel 2005, 397.

²⁷⁵ Micallef Grimaud 2018, 29; Weiss and Edwards 2022, 192.

²⁷⁶ Jakobsen 2009, 87.

²⁷⁷ Long 2022, 171.

²⁷⁸ Baldacchino and Wivel 2020, 11; Jakobsen 2009, 85.

²⁷⁹ Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006, 663.

²⁸⁰ Björkdahl 2008, 138–139; Panke and Gurol 2018.

²⁸¹ Björkdahl 2008, 151; Micallef Grimaud 2018, 274–276.

²⁸² Long 2022, 70.

creation of the South StratCom Task Force (SSTF) and the Western Balkans StratCom Task Force (WBSTF) in June 2017, which tackle disinformation in the EU's southern neighbourhood and Western Balkans, second, the allocation of €1.1 million funding from the European Parliament in October 2017 to further EU strategic communication in its eastern neighbourhood, which cited the ESTF as a direct recipient and, finally, the adoption of the *Action Plan against Disinformation* in December 2018, which tackles disinformation within the EU's borders.

During fieldwork, the Multiple Stream Model developed by Kingdon served as a conceptual framework to identify and regroup data in the complex and opaque milieu of EU security policy-making²⁸³. This model allowed to consider a variety of actors and dynamics simultaneously influencing outcomes. It was particularly helpful to shine light on causal mechanisms in a process where 'events do not proceed neatly in stages, steps, or phases'²⁸⁴. The multiple streams are however fuzzy concepts which do not provide an optimal categorisation of explanatory factors. For clarity, the analysis below is therefore structured chronologically along the key policy outcomes.

The empirical analysis builds on data from press releases, 30 interviews, and more than 300 official documents analysed in triangulation to compensate for gaps and biases. Official documents included Council conclusions, records from Council Preparatory Bodies, European Council conclusions, Joint Communications, Action Plans, reports, resolutions, tenders, non-papers, budgetary papers, speeches, statements, and voting records. The preliminary analysis of these documents guided the conduct of anonymous, semi-structured interviews. Interviewees were selected based on their role in the policy-making process, or knowledge of it, covering a wide variety of actors involved at all stages and across six institutions (see Appendix). All interviews were transcribed and coded using the Nvivo software to select evidence for the analysis according to Kingdon's streams (see Appendix).

The Disinformation Threat in the EU: Origins and Perceptions

The perceived problem posed by disinformation rose sharply in the EU following the 2014 crisis in Ukraine and was initially understood as an issue linked to Russia, despite diverging attitudes. As mentioned earlier, some states entertained friendly relations towards the Kremlin, some were extremely wary, and most were simply indifferent. When asked about the development of EU strategic communication (StratCom) policies, a high-ranking official from the Council noted: 'It has to do, of course, with the drastic change in perceptions of Russia as a threat in our eastern neighbourhood. There is a sequence of events and institutional steps that led to these changes of perceptions.' (Interview #6). Looking back at the development of EU StratCom policies, 80% of interviewees spontaneously mentioned disinformation over the

²⁸³ Kingdon 2014.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 205.

Ukraine crisis of 2014 as a catalyst. This section introduces why and how those perceptions evolved over time.

On the one hand, a series of events heightened tensions between the EU and Russia and threatened countries close to their border. One can consider that this chain of events started as early as the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 but only reached a pivotal point with the 2014 Ukraine crisis, which made the Russian threat more tangible for most European states: ‘ (...) the interest was very much close to European interest, to the national, to some Member States’ interest. The Ukrainian crisis was inside Europe.’²⁸⁵. On the other hand, some states highlighted a disinformation problem related to the crisis and persuaded others that it required a European response. For the Baltic States, ‘the whole discussion started already before [2014]’ but their concerns were not shared with most EU countries²⁸⁶. Then, ‘coincidentally, Russia made it more evident with everything that happened in Ukraine’, which triggered Latvia to boost its lobbying efforts²⁸⁷. Altogether, this led counter-disinformation policies to occupy the attention of EU leaders and created the conditions for Latvia to shape European governance in this field. It built on relational issue salience to prepare the ground for coalition-building with big Member States, which Long argues to be crucial for small state influence²⁸⁸.

The 2014 crisis in Ukraine over its Association Agreement with the EU and the illegal annexation of Crimea which ensued constituted a critical juncture for European security²⁸⁹. When Russia incited violent conflict in Europe, the Baltic states felt highly threatened. A Latvian official explained:

It was a very widely shared feeling which people in Brussels could never understand because they have never had this. But for those who have experienced it, who used to be children when they were deported, well then, these feelings were brought back immediately in the Spring of 2014.²⁹⁰

These traumatic memories led the Baltic states to bolster their defence budget and strategic communication, fearing the influence of Russian media in their country, where a large part of the population is Russian-speaking²⁹¹.

Shortly after the outbreak of protests in Kyiv, in January 2014, Latvia opened the NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence in Riga which it funds at 85%²⁹². This organisation provides in-depth assessment of foreign information manipulation and interference, with a heavy focus on Russia. With the opening of this centre, Latvia positioned itself as an expert on disinformation.

²⁸⁵ Interview #18

²⁸⁶ Interview #7

²⁸⁷ Interview #11

²⁸⁸ Long 2022.

²⁸⁹ Cross and Karolewski 2017; Juncos and Pomorska 2021.

²⁹⁰ Interview #12

²⁹¹ Interview #12

²⁹² NATO 2017.

The centre later proved a useful resource to increase its legitimacy, as NATO was (and still is) considered by most EU Member States as the most credible security provider in Europe. By developing a niche expertise on a novel and non-military security issue, Latvia geared up for fruitful influence on EU security governance.

There is extensive evidence showing that Russian media such as *Russia Today* (now *RT*) and *Sputnik* regularly spread false information as propaganda²⁹³. In the aftermath of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, Russian media outlets attempted opening local branches in the Baltic states, which national authorities shut down with varying difficulties²⁹⁴. Latvia was the first of the Baltic States to act against *RT* and *Sputnik*, showcasing once again its leading role in the fight against disinformation.

Limited by European laws protecting freedom of expression and of the press, the Baltic states decided to take the issue to the EU, hoping for a more meaningful response:

We wanted somehow to prevent this, but we realised we can't do this because there are EU regulations, there are these mother companies registered in the UK or Sweden, and we cannot do anything. So, we realised that you have to work [at the] EU level, this is something that you cannot do alone. (...) So, we said we have to promote this in Europe.²⁹⁵

This testimony points out to the debut of their extensive persuasion efforts to raise awareness about pro-Kremlin disinformation and develop joint policies countering it, which were non-existent at the time. The EU was chosen as a framework for action rather than NATO because of its regulatory power and the comparative breadth of its budget and policy instruments, and Latvia naturally emerged as the leader of those efforts²⁹⁶.

Latvia held the rotating Presidency of the Council between January and June 2015, six months during which it strategically steered discussions while chairing meetings with representatives from the other EU Member States²⁹⁷. Few were supportive, initially, but the Baltic states formed a coalition of 'advocates' with Denmark and the UK. Lobbying intensified over time and continued even after the implementation of policy changes because they were perceived to be insufficient. Gradually, more states acknowledged the issue and supported joint action. "It went from 'these terrible Balts are always afraid of Russia' to 'they were right and what Russia is doing is unacceptable'"²⁹⁸. A high-ranking official from the Council shared that, in hindsight, the Baltic States had 'a clearer perception of what was going on'²⁹⁹. The political softening-up

²⁹³ EUvsDisinfo 2024.

²⁹⁴ Euractiv with AFP 2016; Latvian Public Broadcasting 2015; RFE/RL 2019; Wright 2020.

²⁹⁵ Interview #12

²⁹⁶ Interviews #2, #3, #7, #8, #10, #12

²⁹⁷ Interviews #11, #12, #29; Council of the EU 2015a; Council of the EU 2015b; Council of the EU 2015d; Council of the EU 2015e; Council of the EU 2015f; Council of the EU 2015g.

²⁹⁸ Interview #11

²⁹⁹ Interview #6

is notably illustrated by the increasing number of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) voting in favour of key texts on the matter. Between 2016 and 2019, favourable votes increased by 27 percentage points³⁰⁰.

Four clusters of states can be identified on the early question of counter-disinformation: ‘advocates’, ‘supporters’, ‘converted’, and ‘opponents’, summarised in Table 1 below. Under Latvia’s leadership, advocates initiated lobbying, promptly joined by supporters, who provided resources for the ESTF. The team was initially staffed with Seconded National Experts (SNEs) from the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, and the UK, as well as two delegates from the Council and the European Commission. Some states changed position; others remained disengaged. Those who disapproved of an EU response to disinformation progressively decreased as more grew convinced of the threat it posed and the joint measures it required, as the next sections delve into.

Table 3: EU Member States clusters based on initial support for EU policies countering pro-Kremlin disinformation³⁰¹

	Advocates	Supporters	Converted	Opponents
	Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, UK	Czech Republic, Finland, Poland, Sweden	France, Germany, Netherlands, Spain	Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Portugal
<i>early persuasion efforts</i>	✓	✗	✗	✗
<i>input on policy proposals</i>	✓	✗	✗	✗
<i>voluntary contribution of SNEs to the ESTF</i>	✓	✓	✗	✗
<i>recognition of threat posed by pro-Kremlin disinformation</i>	✓	✓	✓	✗
<i>recognition of the need for EU StratCom policy developments</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓

Creating the East StratCom Task Force, or the Art of the Possible

On 8 January 2015, Estonia, Lithuania, Denmark, and the UK presented a set of policy proposals in a non-paper entitled *EU strategic communication responding to propaganda*. It proposes a list of actions ‘in response to Russia’s active propaganda campaign in the Eastern Neighbourhood and certain EU Member States’ which it considers ‘a real threat to security’³⁰².

³⁰⁰ European Parliament 2016; European Parliament 2019.

³⁰¹ Interviews #1-#30; Lidegaard et al. 2015; Council of the EU 2015e; Council of the EU 2015g.

³⁰² Lidegaard et al. 2015.

The document suggests boosting the EU's StratCom policies as a response. Latvia had just inaugurated its Presidency of the Council, hence why it did not sign the document: 'It did not sign it formally (...) to remain as independent, honest, and neutral a broker as possible during the Presidency. But in substance, in the preparatory stage of that letter, Latvia was very much part of it.'³⁰³ This highlights the strategic importance of the non-threatening image of small states seeking to influence EU security governance through their Presidency. It is unlikely that big states such as France or Germany would have been able to act similarly without a strong backlash.

According to interviews, coordination between the advocates occurred naturally, although 'initially, it did come very much from very close contacts between Foreign Ministers'³⁰⁴, another advantage for small states. To persuade others of the problem posed by pro-Kremlin disinformation and the need for European measures, they emphasised the instability it created in the EU's neighbourhood, the danger it posed for democracy, and the harmful impact it had on fundamental values³⁰⁵. Persuasion was driven by the Latvian Presidency team and carried out especially by staff from the advocates' Permanent Representations in Brussels active in the various configurations of the Council³⁰⁶. When asked who led lobbying efforts, a Commission representative who attended those discussions plainly answered: 'Latvians.'³⁰⁷

Persuasion occurred through events, Council meetings, and bilateral meetings with high-ranking officials, departments of the European Commission, and national representatives in Brussels. One interviewee explained:

[We] made some rounds, met some officials in a couple of DGs. After that, we tried to keep the idea on hold, promote it, explain it, and come back to it from time to time. It was not only COEST delegates, it was also our Permanent Representatives and the PSC Ambassadors, who also sent it around and promoted it. (...) In the Permanent Representation, it was one of the priority issues.³⁰⁸

A high-ranking official from the Council recalled that the topic was brought up 'almost at every meeting, as a subject of discussion of the agenda or as intrusion into discussions which would be either geared at Russia or Ukraine', including in the Foreign Affairs Council chaired by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission (HRVP)³⁰⁹. Latvia also organised events and informal meetings in its

³⁰³ Interview #7

³⁰⁴ Interview #7

³⁰⁵ Lidegaard et al. 2015.

³⁰⁶ Interviews #6, #7, #12

³⁰⁷ Interview #29

³⁰⁸ Interview #10

³⁰⁹ Interview #6

capital, as per the practice of the Presidency. Strategic communication was a key topic of discussion³¹⁰.

Getting support from other Member States and EU officials was, however, no easy task. Among EU institutions, the European Commission particularly did not support the advocates' proposals, which initially foresaw a role for DG COMM³¹¹. 'The Juncker administration, they were critical (...) to the extent that they felt that this was an undue influencing of the media space'³¹². This was confirmed by a Commission official directly involved in the process³¹³. Even years later, it proved uncooperative: 'I remember my breakfast meeting with the newly appointed [General Secretary of the European Commission] (...) he refused to accept the fact that there is disinformation, that there is a campaign organised.'³¹⁴. In contrast, the Council was deemed supportive³¹⁵. These differences were due to the difficult attribution of competences for a complex and intermestic issue³¹⁶ but also the individuals at the head of those institutions. Several interviews related the supportive attitude of the Council to the nationality of its then President, Donald Tusk, who was familiar with pro-Kremlin disinformation given its prevalence in Poland.

While the Ukraine crisis raised initial alertness, the Charlie Hebdo attack of January 2015 gave fresh ground for the advocates to present their proposals. A Latvian representative explained: 'The last point was this shooting in Paris, which made this issue much more tangible for France, for big countries.'³¹⁷. First, the Kremlin had used the attacks as an opportunity to spread propaganda in Europe³¹⁸. Second, while Russian diplomats were publicly condemning the attack, state-sponsored media were portraying it as a result of the Western liberal ideology and migration policy. Another common argument in Russian media was that it had finally put a limit to freedom of expression and the disrespectful, provocative culture of the West³¹⁹. Peaceful protestors with placards saying 'Je suis Charlie' were arrested by Russian authorities, whilst those who claimed the attack was a 'justified punishment' were allowed to demonstrate at the French Embassy³²⁰. This did not sit well with the French and, with the growing support

³¹⁰ Interview #7; Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2015a; Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2015b.

³¹¹ Interviews #5, #7, #11, #16, #21

³¹² Interview #23

³¹³ Interview #29

³¹⁴ Interview #11

³¹⁵ Interviews #11, #15, #20, #21, #23, #24

³¹⁶ Interviews #9, #10, #29

³¹⁷ Interview #11

³¹⁸ For example: Spuntik International 2015.

³¹⁹ Clement 2015.

³²⁰ Molard 2015.

of influential states in a ‘capitals-driven process’³²¹, it did not take long before a consensus grew among the EU 28.

On 26 January 2015, Latvia invited the Director of the NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence for an informal lunch with Ambassadors from the Political and Security Committee (PSC), exposing the breadth of pro-Kremlin disinformation³²². Latvia used NATO’s credibility to spur consensus on the adoption of EU measures against pro-Kremlin disinformation. The meeting ‘was quite an eye-opener for many’ said a representative present at the time³²³ and, as a result, PSC Ambassadors agreed on the ‘development of a strategy and action plan’³²⁴.

Three days later, EU Foreign Ministers tasked the HRVP ‘to step up efforts, in cooperation with Member States and EU institutions, to further improve strategic communication in support of EU policies’, the first concrete step towards the creation of the ESTF³²⁵. The conclusions mention the creation of a dedicated communications team as well as a triptych of objectives mixing public diplomacy, fact checking, and media support – a reflection of Member States’ different priorities on the question of disinformation.

The second and final step towards the creation of the ESTF came ‘in the context of preparations of the European Council and in COREPER, because that’s where the political attention was focused’³²⁶. In March 2015, the 28 EU heads of states reiterated their agreement to act against pro-Kremlin disinformation, this time with clear demands:

The European Council stressed the need to challenge Russia’s ongoing disinformation campaigns and invited the High Representative, in cooperation with Member States and EU institutions, to prepare by June an action plan on strategic communication. The establishment of a communication team is a first step in this regard.³²⁷

The new policy was to be focused on Russia its overall substance, scope, and financing were not determined. This was a problematic situation for the EEAS, given Member States’ divergence on the question: “they made this hot potato and passed it on, like, ‘now deal with it’.” Explained a member of the ESTF involved in its creation³²⁸.

A delegate from the Council disclosed that the advocates remained flexible to yield results: ‘You have to leave things open, so that you can actually negotiate. (...) It’s easier to promote something when it’s vague.’³²⁹. Whilst they wanted new policies addressing disinformation *in*

³²¹ Interview #7

³²² Interviews #8, #12; Council of the EU 2015b.

³²³ Interview #8

³²⁴ Interview #29

³²⁵ Council of the EU 2015c.

³²⁶ Interview #7

³²⁷ European Council 2015.

³²⁸ Interview #20

³²⁹ Interview #10

and out the EU's borders, they had to compromise for a solution that initially addressed it mainly *outside* of the EU. The hot potato was passed on to the EU's external action, as the Commission was reluctant to get involved: 'It's not purely foreign and it's not purely domestic. So, we stayed out in that sense and that is why strategic communication, the East StratCom Task Force, went to the EEAS.'³³⁰ The team was put together in April 2015 and helped drafting the *Action Plan on Strategic Communication* published in June 2015.

The financial compromise reached on the ESTF was that the advocates should pay for it. The states willing to invest in the team could send their own staff, thus covering personnel costs (see Table 3). This solution was technically feasible, did not entail budgetary constraints for most, and was deemed acceptable for the time being. For three years, the ESTF had no other source of funding. It did not have an operating budget. Interviews exposed that this situation incited its members – loyal national experts, mainly from small states – to be inventive in their work, often partnering with other units and institutions to indirectly use their resources, including in the European Commission. Whether this could have been possible for SNEs from big states is, at best, questionable. Once again, the non-threatening image and the close relationships between civil servants of small states constituted an advantage. Some did not hesitate to invest their own resources: 'We paid ourselves for our first projects. (...) It's not only about expertise. It's also about motivation. The point is that SNEs have better drive, better vision of where to go.'³³¹.

The growing public attention to disinformation, detailed in the next section, proved to be fertile ground for their work. 'We established a Twitter account, just by making it, the next day we had 5000 followers and we had not even put out a tweet!'³³². 'The team had a life of its own, kind of growing outside proper structures, doing all sorts of things that [the EEAS] did not have control over.'³³³. For many projects, e.g. the launch of a website and social media accounts, the task force simply 'didn't ask'³³⁴. Interviews indicate that the configuration of the task force, made of SNEs, led the contributing states to feel ownership of it and ultimately resulted in more autonomy allowing it to be particularly impactful – a valuable lesson for small states seeking influence in the EU.

In sum, within the six months of its Presidency, Latvia's coalition presented policy proposals, convinced reluctant Member States of their importance, and got EU leaders to demand the creation of a team to implement those policies. The privileged position of the Presidency allowed Latvia, as leader of this coalition, to promote its ideas while spurring compromise between Member States. Keeping an image of honest broker and gaining the support of big states such as France was essential in this process. In addition, the advocates utilised the close-

³³⁰ Interview #29

³³¹ Interview #20

³³² Interview #23

³³³ Interview #15

³³⁴ Interview #20

knit relationships of their civil servants to coordinate lobbying efforts across Permanent Representations and in other institutions and organisations, notably utilising NATO to enhance their credibility. Finally, Latvia's flexibility allowed it to assure leverage early in the development of EU StratCom policies. The next section reveals how Latvia's coalition ensured that the interests secured under its leadership continued having impact through time.

From Hot Potato to Headlines: Gaining Support and Funding

Once the ESTF established, the advocates continued lobbying for EU measures against pro-Kremlin disinformation. 'Of course, when we got something, we started asking for more. We started asking for finances.'³³⁵ National representatives from the coalition, both in the Council and in the ESTF, coordinated to lobby for the task force to get EU funding. A delegate working in the Council explained:

Sometimes I even coordinated with [member of the ESTF] to know what the problems might be which would be suitable for the briefer to take up. So, I would prepare some questions with [member of the ESTF], so that we can get [their] story as an answer to my question. Then, we always said that we see how well it's working, that it's very useful, we are continually supporting, but we think that it would be high time for considering EU money for that. I reported to the PSC Ambassador, where the issue was taken up in the PSC, then the PSC Ambassador said the same thing, then the same in COREPER II. Then, when it was relevant and there was a meeting, then the Ministers would say the same thing.³³⁶

The advocates also found crucial allies in the European Parliament. Several interviews confirmed that representatives from the advocate countries directly coordinated with MEPs to gain funding for the ESTF. Already in 2015, MEPs had adopted a resolution in light of the situation in Ukraine which called for a 'communication strategy to counter the Russian propaganda campaign'³³⁷. In May 2016, Polish MEP Anna Elżbieta Fotyga drafted a report 'on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties'³³⁸. This report led to a resolution adopted in November 2016 underlining the importance of EU StratCom activities and calling for more support from EU Member States and institutions. As exposed further in this section, it was the European Parliament which eventually provided the first line of funding for the ESTF.

Simultaneously, exogenous events reinforced the advocates' efforts. 'We wouldn't have made it on our own and I think the Russians helped us a lot.'³³⁹ – an interesting choice of words referring to notable disinformation cases that touched other countries after the Ukraine crisis,

³³⁵ Interview #10

³³⁶ Interview #10

³³⁷ European Parliament 2015.

³³⁸ European Parliament 2016.

³³⁹ Interview #12

summarised in Table 2 below. ‘There was a number of developments in the world that justified the case that Latvians were making.’ Confirmed a Commission official³⁴⁰.

Table 4: Events that impacted EU Member States’ stance on counter-disinformation policies³⁴¹

Date	Event	Impact
17 July 2014	Downing of MH17	Rising awareness and hardening stance on pro-Kremlin disinformation in The Netherlands
7 January 2015	Charlie Hebdo attacks	Rising awareness about foreign interference and strategic communication in France
January 2016	Lisa case	Rising awareness and hardening stance on pro-Kremlin disinformation in Germany
May 2017	Macron leaks	Hardening stance on pro-Kremlin disinformation in France
1 October 2017	Catalunya referendum	Rising awareness and hardening stance on pro-Kremlin disinformation in Spain
4 March 2018	Skripal case	Rising awareness about pro-Kremlin disinformation in Europe
March 2018	Cambridge Analytica scandal	Rising concerns about the free and fair conduct of elections in Europe (in particular European elections)
18 April 2019	Mueller Report	Rising concerns about the free and fair conduct of elections in Europe (in particular European elections)

The most prominent of these cases concerned MH17 – the Malaysian Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur downed over eastern Ukraine in July 2014, the Lisa case – the fake story of a girl who allegedly got raped by Arab migrants in Berlin in January 2016, the Macron leaks – the exposure of French President’s e-mails during his electoral campaign in May 2017, the Catalunya referendum – the information manipulation that surrounded the referendum on Catalunya’s independence from Spain in October 2017, and the Skripal case – the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal by Russian officers in Salisbury in March 2018.

A few other incidents contributed to the increasing attention toward disinformation in Europe: the terrorist attacks against Charlie Hebdo in Paris on 7 January 2015, as explained earlier, the Cambridge Analytica scandal of March 2018, which unveiled the widespread use of personal digital data for political advertising, and the Mueller Report of April 2019, which exposed Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election.

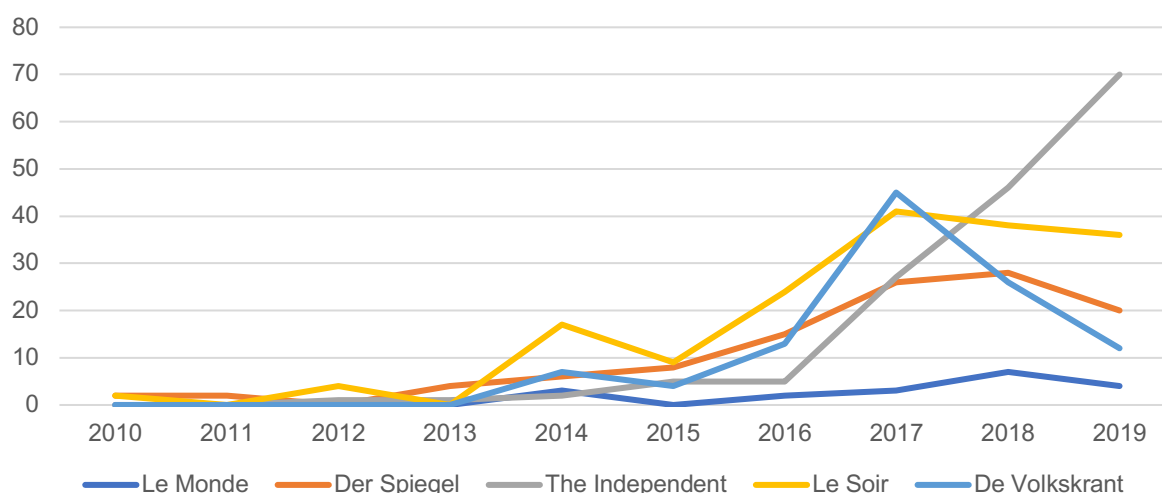
Increasing public awareness about disinformation, and therefore pressure to act, was an essential element to gain support and funding for the ESTF. According to one third of interviewees, ‘strategic communication’ and ‘disinformation’ became trendy topics over time in the EU bubble. Figure 1 below illustrates the increasing number of publications mentioning

³⁴⁰ Interview #29

³⁴¹ Interviews #1-#30; European Commission and HRVP 2018; European Council 2018a.

disinformation and Russia in five leading Western European newspapers. Reports of disinformation incidents in the media increased policy-makers' receptivity. Through their representatives in Brussels, the advocates added to this momentum by contributing to pieces lamenting the EU's lack of response. For example, Lithuanian MEP Petras Austrevicius, wrote a piece for *EUObserver* claiming that the EU was making a 'strategic error' and calling out politicians 'especially in France and Italy' for underestimating the threat posed by Russian disinformation³⁴². It details the resources used by the Kremlin in its influence operations, highlights the risks for European elections, and calls for more support to be given to the ESTF.

Figure 8: Publications on Russian disinformation in leading Western European newspapers, 2010-2019³⁴³ – author's graph



A Latvian representative explained that it was useful to pressure certain political figures, in particular HRVP Federica Mogherini³⁴⁴. They added: 'Mogherini is very... how to say... not weak... but her weak point is what the media writes about her.'³⁴⁵ The HRVP, who had a non-antagonistic and global vision for EU StratCom policies, was perceived to be unsupportive of the ESTF³⁴⁶. Several open letters were written to her attention, demanding more action countering pro-Kremlin disinformation³⁴⁷. This was relayed by other prominent media praising the work of the ESTF, including the *New York Times* and *Time Magazine*³⁴⁸. Over time, more awareness grew about the risks of influence operations, not only from Russia but also from

³⁴² Austrevicius 2016.

³⁴³ *Le Monde* 2020; *Le Soir* 2020; *The Independent* 2020; *De Volkskrant* 2020; *Der Spiegel* 2020.

³⁴⁴ See Heath 2017; Rettman 2017.

³⁴⁵ Interview #12

³⁴⁶ Interviews #9, #14, #15, #17, #20, #21, #23; Wagnsson and Hellman 2018.

³⁴⁷ Janda 2017; Janda 2018.

³⁴⁸ McDonald-Gibson 2017; Scott and Eddy 2017.

other actors, and not only in the EU's eastern neighbourhood, but also in its southern neighbourhood, the Western Balkans, and within its own borders.

This context positively influenced lobbying efforts over EU counter-disinformation policies. As disinformation became a popular topic of conversation within the Brussels bubble, some followed suit by fear of being left out. A member of the ESTF explained: 'At some point, there's an opening for gaining some political points out of it. Basically, it became too expensive not to be engaged in this. Public opinion changed.'³⁴⁹ In June 2017, in the aftermath of the Macron Leaks, the EEAS created two new regional task forces for the EU's southern neighbourhood and Western Balkans. The British and Polish Foreign Ministers had approached the HRVP to propose that the ESTF cover more geographical areas, but it was later decided that two separate units would oversee this, the WBSTF and SSTF. 'I always felt that there was a bit of politics behind it. It was basically to sort of push down the status of the ESTF' shared an official from the EEAS³⁵⁰.

The ESTF obtained its first own budget in October 2017 when the European Parliament allocated €1.1 million for EU StratCom activities in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans, citing the ESTF as a direct recipient³⁵¹. For this, the Parliament used the budget line of Pilot Projects and Preparatory Actions designed to test new initiatives before they have a legal basis. 'Basically, behind the scenes, [member of the ESTF] wrote a pitch and supported [EP Rapporteur] in the negotiations.'³⁵² The EEAS used the new funding to bolster and enlarge the ESTF as well as for the two newly created task forces, the SSTF and WBSTF³⁵³. Thanks to renewed initiatives from the European Parliament, the budget of the ESTF rose to €3 million in 2019 and €4 million in 2020³⁵⁴.

To sum up, after Latvia spurred political consensus to create the ESTF in 2015, its coalition succeeded in obtaining funding for the unit through the European Parliament in 2017. The lobbying efforts that developed under its Presidency continued beyond the creation of the ESTF, resulting in the team's growth in status and resources. Moreover, the advocates' persuasion efforts contributed to expanding the EU's counter-disinformation response with the creation of new task forces for other neighbouring areas. The advocates coordinated with a growing coalition of representatives in Brussels and benefitted from the drive and expertise of the ESTF to form alliances with Parliamentarians, European Commission staff, and Council staff to become more impactful. The rising public awareness about disinformation was instrumental in this process, providing more ground for the advocates to further their cause. They jumped on a public momentum to gain wider support and make a deeper mark on EU

³⁴⁹ Interview #20

³⁵⁰ Interview #15

³⁵¹ European Parliament 2017.

³⁵² Interview #15

³⁵³ Interview #15; ECA 2021.

³⁵⁴ Interviews #15, #23; Ibid., 50.

strategic communication. The larger consequences of their efforts are outlined in the next section.

Epilogue: From European External Action to Internal Policies

Progressively, disinformation gained salience as a security threat not only for the EU's neighbours but also for its own citizens, which led to the broadening of policy responses from foreign and security policies to internal market policies – part of the advocates' original ambitions³⁵⁵. Even though Latvia's control over policy developments faded with time, the effects of its leadership are undeniable and lasted through time. To this day, the ESTF remains the best-funded EU disinformation body with the largest mandate and a considerable influence over EU StratCom policies.

With the 2019 European Parliament elections approaching, EU Member States soon concurred in asking for joint measures to protect from disinformation's harm domestically. In 2018, EU leaders repeatedly urged the European Commission and HRVP to draft an action plan to combat disinformation³⁵⁶. As a result, the EEAS and the European Commission's DG CONNECT jointly designed concrete policies. In December 2018, they released the *Action Plan against Disinformation*, a 13-page document detailing strategy and activities to counter disinformation in and out of the EU's borders. It mentions that the threat posed by Russian propaganda for European elections' integrity is the key reason for stepping up EU StratCom policies³⁵⁷ and cites a French report building on 'the repeated interferences that have occurred since 2014'³⁵⁸. The Action Plan puts in place a 'Rapid Alert System' facilitating information sharing between states and a 'Code of Practice' aiming to boost online platforms' accountability, now revised and complemented by the Digital Services Act.

The ESTF and representatives who lobbied for its creation and growth have had a major influence on the development of EU StratCom policies. Security scholars have called the ESTF 'a major milestone' and its impact 'commendable'³⁵⁹. The European Court of Auditors also applauded the ESTF but questioned its independence, deplored insufficient resources, and called for enhanced coordination³⁶⁰. At the time of writing, the team still had a broader budget and larger activities than newer units focused on other regions³⁶¹, a testament to Latvia's long-lasting influence. In fact, for over two years, only the ESTF had a mandate from the European Council to monitor and debunk disinformation. The European Court of Auditors stated: 'The StratCom task forces' mandate is a political one, which does not specifically spell out their

³⁵⁵ Interviews #12, #20; Lidegaard et al. 2015.

³⁵⁶ European Council 2018b; European Council 2018c.

³⁵⁷ European Commission and HRVP 2018, 3.

³⁵⁸ Jeangène Vilmer et al. 2018, 7.

³⁵⁹ de Jong et al. 2017, 16–17.

³⁶⁰ ECA 2021.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 20.

policy objectives and is not underpinned by a firm legal foundation.³⁶² Finally, Hedling demonstrated that the ESTF contributed to a transformation of diplomatic practices in the EEAS because it challenged its traditional conduct and agency³⁶³.

Conclusion

This article recounts how Latvia, a small European state, influenced the development of EU counter-disinformation policies. In the aftermath of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, Latvia led a coalition of like-minded countries to persuade other EU Member States of the security threat posed by pro-Kremlin disinformation in a context of political division. Within six months, Latvia saw its proposals discussed, approved, and implemented. It promoted policies which suited its interests and made a long-lasting impact in the strategic communication department of the EEAS with the creation of the ESTF in 2015. Within two years, the team obtained €1.1 million from the European Parliament. Today, EU StratCom activities are still skewed towards the ESTF. Four factors were essential in this process: establishing credibility, gaining support from big states, seizing opportunities for compromise, and adopting a solution which allowed it to retain some control over policy implementation.

Several strategic manoeuvres explain how a small state like Latvia could achieve this. First, Latvia utilised the NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence it had opened in Riga to bolster its credibility among EU Member States, a clear case of inter-organisational legitimation. Second, Latvia used the Presidency of the Council to steer the agenda and spur compromise, gaining fundamental support from big states. Its status of small state helped it steer the agenda while remaining seen as an honest broker. Third, it jumped on a public momentum surrounding disinformation to push for measures, in coordination with representatives from its coalition in the Council, European Parliament, and ESTF itself. The close relationships between civil servants of small states proved advantageous. These efforts led the team to obtain its first line of EU funding from the European Parliament, a compelling case of inter-institutional coordination. Lastly, Latvia remained flexible and accepted early compromises which were based on voluntary contributions: the ESTF was to be staffed with national civil servants and without EU budget. Initially a setback, this allowed Latvia and its partners to influence the team's composition and activities, which later proved to be major success factors and solidified its influence on EU StratCom policies.

The Latvian case makes several contributions to the literature on small states, specifically as to how they can make up for their limited capacity to exercise influence in the EU. First, it proves that utilising the Council Presidency can be a fruitful strategy if small states can get big ones on board. This case shows that inter-organisational legitimation and inter-institutional coordination are effective means to achieve this, and that smallness can be a great advantage. In addition, proposals were adapted to fit recent events, progressively convincing more EU

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Hedling 2021.

Member States. This paper therefore supports the arguments that relations with great powers are crucial for small state influence in the EU and that focusing on novel themes during the Council Presidency is conducive to greater impact. Second, it confirms the important role played by the media in bolstering EU external action, and hence the increasing public dimension of EU foreign and security policy-making. Getting the European Parliament to provide funding would not have been possible without the growing public awareness of pro-Kremlin disinformation and pressure to act. Latvia used public momentum to its advantage, seizing it as an opportunity to push for its proposals and then gain more support. This brings more clarity to the question as to how external factors such as crises come into play for small state influence.

Overall, EU counter-disinformation policies developed the way they did because of Latvia's influence. How Latvia took on the role of prime mover and secured a long-lasting influence through the ESTF is remarkable, given its limited capacity. Just like Estonia established itself as a European front-runner in cyber-security, Latvia positioned itself as a pioneer in counter-disinformation. It is undeniable that the policies it lobbied for at a crucial time in Europe's history have been decisive for EU strategic communications and public awareness of propaganda. It is unclear whether, without the lobbying efforts led by Latvia, the EU would have had such a comprehensive counter-disinformation policy by the time Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. However, further research is needed to explore the consequences of its framing for peace and democracy on the old continent.

