BECID

YEAR 1 REPORT

December 2022 - 2023

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Introduction

The Baltic Engagement Centre for Combating Information Disorders,

Also known as BECID, it was launched in December 2022 under the coordination of the Institute of Social Studies at the University of Tartu. The main objective? To enhance societal resilience and help democratic societies resist the debilitating effects of information disorders and informational influencing in the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

BECID connects four universities (the ***University of Tartu*** and ***Tallinn University*** in Estonia, ***Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences*** in Latvia, and ***Vytautas Magnus University*** in Lithuania), four independent IFCN-approved fact-checkers (***Delfi EE, LV*** and ***LT***, and ***Re:Baltica***), and ***the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence***, which consolidates third-sector media literacy organisations. ***Vidzeme TV*** in Latvia is also engaged as a supporting partner without budget participation.
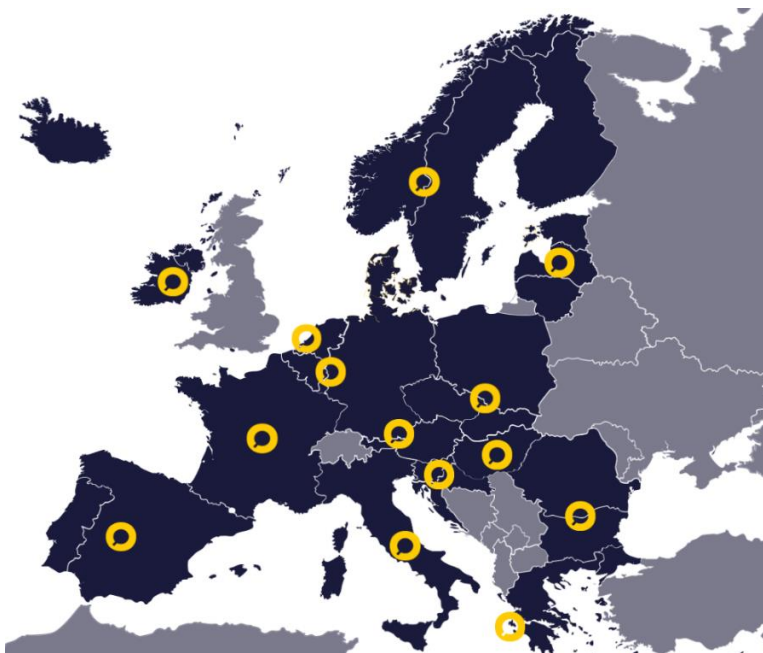
Figure 1. Map of EDMO hubs as of December 2023, source edmo.eu

As a regional hub, **BECID is one of the** *14 EDMO hubs* **covering the European Union's (EU) 27 Member States**. The hubs, EDMO EUI, DG Connect, and national authorities cooperate to tackle information disorders as a united front. This has already brought about meaningful change.

For example, as the hubs are funded in a call with a financing rate of 50%, the co-financing in Estonia (grant ID 101084073) by the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Education and Research and the Government Office has effectively turned out to be the country's most prominent investment to date into international cooperation as a tool to combat disinformation. The aligned strategic goals and a concrete action plan for two and a half years support enhancing societal resilience against information disorders through the evidence-based work of researchers, fact-checkers, and media literacy experts. Harmful information does not stop at state borders – so why should we not rely on cross-border cooperation in our work?

1. PROJECT MANAGEMENT, DISSEMINATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

WP1 Overview

The main objectives of the first work package are to establish an efficient management structure and coordinate BECID's project, financial, data and risk management. Six different tasks were developed for this purpose.

For the centre's first year, the most important was establishing the management structure, workflows, and internal communication (**T1.1**) and providing direction and guidance for future work. Initially piloting a decentralised management strategy where different individuals were responsible for each task for six months, we then decided to assign one person from each organisation as a responsible party and point information for each WP and the management committee.

The change of initial plans in project management was difficult to agree upon because, as of December 2023, **BECID has 66 members across the Baltics**, almost twice the initially planned composition of 38. (Most employees in the three countries, of course, do not work full-time.) Communication channels were selected according to members' preferences and outlined in the data management plan, ensuring quality assurance, evaluation, and monitoring processes (**T1.2**).

The University of Tartu coordinates expenditure, activities, financial management, and time sheets (**T1.3**), but the **centre's decision-making processes have been established overtly and as democratic**. For example, in November 2023, involving Ukrainian organisations in the next funding round became a possible topic at the monthly meetings. (The European Commission announced its support of involving Ukrainian organisations in the Digital Europe Programme and Digital Innovation Hubs _in September 2022_.) Since immediate consensus was not reached among the members, we surveyed all hub members – administrative and otherwise – and, based on the survey results, held a separate meeting to discuss the matter until everyone was on board. We are not the only hub searching for an identity within the ecosystem of combatting information disorder.

> _The question of long-term strategy for all of the EDMO hubs is:_
> _Are we a regional hub serving stakeholders and vulnerable audiences in_
> _our region, or are we hubs in an international network,_
> _serving the network and the international community?_

For our first year, we have aimed to get name recognition in the region – not just for ourselves but for BECID as a whole and as a team. The dissemination of the project's activities and

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results through content creation and event organisation (**T1.4**) has been remarkably successful: for example, as of the end of November, we have appeared in Estonian media 34 times, organised at least one webinar every month, and participated in 88 other events organised by relevant stakeholders.

The temporary website, based on the University of Tartu's server, was unveiled in the project's first month and then replaced in August 2023 with the fresh website *becid.eu*, which also serves as a backstage area for project partners to exchange information, in addition to serving the public. Since BECID is one of 14 regional EDMO centres, we inform our international colleagues and partners in the EDMO network of our activities through the TrulyMedia platform, designed for European information resilience experts.

However, BECID's role in the more comprehensive EDMO network is not limited to sharing knowledge and incubating new collaborative projects: we also actively collaborate with the European Commission's DG Connect and our national authorities and governmental institutions (**T1.5**). Our primary role in 2023 was related to informal consultations regarding the implementation of the Digital Services Act (DSA) and monitoring transparency reports submitted by platforms. For instance, in August 2023, *NORDIS*, BECID's Nordic counterpart, visited the Estonian Government Office to meet with BECID, the Estonian Consumer Protection and Technical Regulatory Authority, the Government Office and the Ministry of Culture representatives to discuss upcoming challenges in implementing legislative changes and to connect the two countries' data regulators. We also continued with closed seminars for Estonian government agencies, introducing BECID's activities and the network's work, with an open seminar in English planned for 2024.

Part of creating BECID's independence and sustainability strategy (**T1.6**) also involved seeking future funding to ensure the centre's continuation irrespective of specific EDMO funding rounds from the European Commission. In a year, we have managed to write new successful funding proposals for scaling up two activities piloted within the BECID project (creating a curriculum to fight disinformation and developing digital skills based on a counselling model for youth and seniors), which have received funding, and spin-off projects are already underway. We have also received negative responses to two similar applications, but activities in that direction will continue as per BECID's Independence and Sustainability Strategy. The *one-year English MA program Disinformation and Societal Resilience* will launch its first course at the University of Tartu in February 2024.

1.1. Administrative and Financial Coordination

During the first year (Months 1-12 or December 2022-2023) of the BECID project, the University of Tartu has managed the administrative and financial coordination tasks as effectively as possible. From the beginning, the University of Tartu assigned project and financial managers responsible for overseeing critical aspects of the project, focusing on

ensuring smooth operation and compliance with funder guidelines. The key activities in this period regarding financial coordination included, but were not limited to:

- Ensuring regular compliance with communication. The University Of Tartu regularly communicates with the back offices of all consortium partners to ensure that spending is done in compliance with funder rules and regulations.
- Providing financial advisory support. The team at the University Of Tartu provided essential guidance to partners on managing budgets and preparing timesheets, among other financial matters.
- Monitoring project progress and deliverables. A significant focus was placed on monitoring the project's progress. This involved ensuring that all project deliverables were completed on time and that critical milestones were achieved as planned.

Our initial Quality Assurance and Data Management plan also included the management and decision-making structure for BECID, which was proven – by an open discussion with all hub members and the Management Committee – to be dysfunctional. The management structure was designed to share decision-making responsibilities to diffuse power and ensure fair access to exciting work for all hub members. To that end, the hub was led by the **Principal Investigator** (PI), Prof. Andra Siibak, who works closely with the **Project Management Team** (PMT), responsible for the daily execution of the project and supervising all project activities to ensure the effective and efficient implementation of all aspects of BECID.

According to that initial plan, the PMT consists of PI Prof. Andra Siibak, **Project Manager** (PM) Maia Klaassen, **Communication Officer**s (CO) Inger Klesment and Gretel Juhansoo, and **Financial Manager** (FM) Regina Lapp. The **Work Package Leads** (WPL) are set by the organisation in the Grant Agreement, but we also added **Task Leads** (TL) to ensure there is always someone to report back to. Additionally to the operational team, we also set up a **Management Committee** (MC) consisting of one representative with decision-making power from each hub and an **Advisory Board** (AB) of stakeholders that would convene several times a year—a solid plan in theory.

Here lies the problem: theory does not go into practice as smoothly as a duck slides into the water. First, a shared responsibility model only works with a few team members, all equally motivated and putting in the same amount of work. With 66 people in an international hub, this cannot be guaranteed. Second, the project call was published – and BECID's two and a half years outlined in our proposal – before *EDMO EUI* was created, the central coordinating hub for the other 14 hubs. That means there was no predicting how many hours the cooperation with EDMO and other hubs would take. Not that we did not try; the speculations of the hubs created in the first round whom we sought out, such as *CEDMO* and *IDMO*, turned out to be incorrect, as they had no experience with how the network of observatories will work in unison either. Those extra hours and the communication loads turned out to be unacceptable for a full-tenure professor, such as Prof. Andra Siibak, and more hours were also demanded from the management team.

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Instead of coordinating one project, one must link one's project's objectives, milestones and deliverables with 15 other projects, all written separately. Furthermore, still engage with all local stakeholders first and foremost, as per the Grant Agreement.

The above has proven challenging, but we in the EDMO network have gladly accepted it. Why? Because none of the work we have done in 2023 and outlined in this report would have been done without this grant and the EDMO initiative.

We needed to adapt. Therefore, the initial structure had to be redesigned to be an active and contributing member of the EDMO network and help maintain an effective and efficient line of communication within and about BECID. The coordinator, the University of Tartu, also hired a new person to the management team, leaving the final management structure as follows.

- **PI Prof. Andra Siibak** is responsible for research coordination, auditing the (scientific) performance in the context of progress and quality for the project outputs, analysing risks and preparing a contingency plan.
- **PC Maia Klaassen**, the Project Coordinator, is responsible for smooth coworking conditions between the hub with the BECID AB, MC, and the other hubs and EDMO EUI. PC works with the Project Manager to prepare project reports and represents the hub at national and international events.
- **PM Lilian Ariva** is the new Project Manager responsible for the technical side of project progression, monitoring deadlines, risks and mitigation techniques, quality and impact. She is accountable for effectiveness and efficiency.
- **FM Regina Lapp** continues as the Financial Manager, as with nine partners; not all have in-house project management or book-keeping departments; financial coordination requires a separate position.
- **CO Inger Klesment** was joined by another Communication Officer, Gretel Juhansoo, to continue facilitating effective communication so that both of them could also spend half of their time with BECID as Media Literacy Experts for Work Package 4 (and therefore disseminate usable and sustainable materials instead of hollow press releases).
- **MC** or the Management Committee remains the main collective decision-making body of the project, responsible for managing administrative issues, the research program and scholarly impact, and overseeing legal, contractual, and administrative decisions at the consortium level.
- **AB** or Advisory Board was meant to be called several times per year. Still, as no real wages are budgeted for this, we decided to convene only the AB after every annual report (such as this one) to get feedback and discuss future goals and performance indicators, which will be followed up on in the next annual report.
- The role of Task Lead as an individual was scrapped, replaced by Lead Organisation.

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For specialised expertise regarding financial management, research ethics, data management, and communication, the consortium will rely on the PMT in respective tasks and the support structures of the University of Tartu, acting as BECID's coordinating partner. Overall, the BECID consortium has established a management structure that allows for effective coordination and management of the project's scientific and societal goals. We will remain flexible to change should the network's evolvement deem change necessary.

1.2. Quality Assurance and Data Management

The monitoring and quality assurance of project processes follows several aspects, including those set out for data management in T1.2 and in BECID's Quality Assurance and Data Management Plan. The latter is operational and primarily concerns managing internal data due to the nature of BECID activities. We store our data on a shared **Sharepoint** workspace and share operational information via **Slack**, **Zoom** meetings and **e-mail**s. Additionally, we disseminate project results to and between stakeholders outside of BECID, which makes our data management procedures and security even more critical (see Figure 2).

The minor issues experienced include providing appropriate access rights to people joining new roles and properly maintaining restrictions on data that involve people whose tasks in the project have been fulfilled. While there have been no significant disruptions concerning compliance with the data management plan, minor issues with data access have been resolved promptly. These little problems have mainly concerned the data management environment and system-side access issues for particular project members, which have been resolved with the help of the IT support of the University of Tartu where
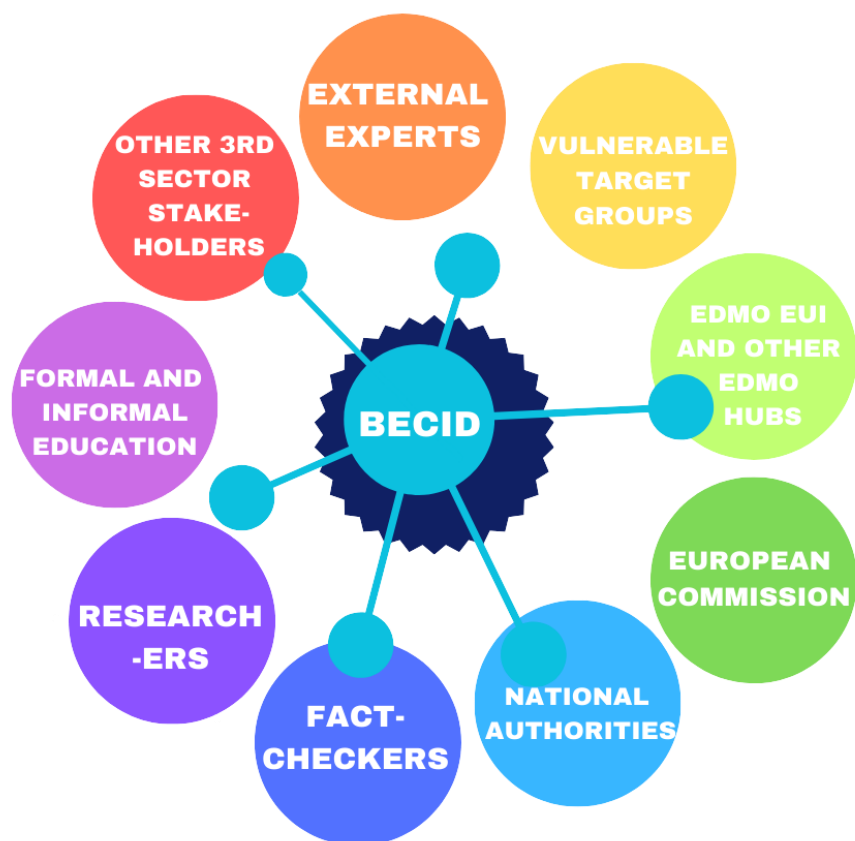

Figure 2. BECID's bilateral dissemination, cooperation and communication partners.

necessary. There have been no known disruptions with the data management on TrulyMedia nor BECID's website, which is stored on Delfi LT servers.

Broader monitoring and quality assurance priorities include the timely and successful completion of project obligations, i.e., tasks and subtasks. Although reported in more depth above, ensuring all project participants are up to date on essential project-related information and requirements has seen minor adjustments to the flow of communications, including some ongoing ones. These adjustments comprise the format and frequency of project-wide communications and ensure that all project participants adhere to set deadlines for task delivery or promptly notify the project management team of any emerging issues.

Since the project's monitoring and quality assurance processes evolve as the project progresses, the project management team has regularly been in contact with other EDMO hubs regarding best practices in terms of both the dissemination of project deliverables and managing the internal processes of such projects. As our role in the EDMO network constantly evolves, our flexibility in managing the hub is paramount.

1.3. Dissemination of Project Activities and Results

Dissemination strategies were developed and modified throughout the first year of the project. Striving to find the best balance between collaboration and addressing residents in the three Baltic countries with different national languages, it was ultimately decided to use existing channels with a large following to communicate with the target audience. Therefore, the main communication channels used were the social media channels of partner organisations and official websites.

The initial BECID website was launched in January 2023, and a permanent website was established by the tenth month (*www.becid.eu*). The official BECID website allows communication with the target groups in all Baltic national languages, as well as in English and Russian, for an international audience. The website featured all materials created during the project, promoted events, and published blog posts and research results.

To deliver messages directly to target groups who were not followers of our partner organisations' channels, such as youth, older adults, teachers, and others, we used local media literacy networks in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, local libraries, schools, government agencies, and web pages that supported our goals, such as *Targalt Internetis* in Estonia.

In addition, the entire BECID media literacy team has spoken out on digital and media literacy topics from their accounts on various social media platforms. They have recommended learning and reading materials, informed about events, highlighted key findings from studies, translated for their network of acquaintances, drawn attention to issues, and intervened in situations.

Furthermore, representatives of BECID members actively participated in numerous seminars, organised training sessions and events, and presented at national and international research conferences (see a complete list in the following chapter). As a result of this work, it can be confidently stated that the importance of media literacy in all segments of society was clearly emphasised in the Baltic countries and received significant attention.

1.3.1. Conference, Seminar and Workshop Facilitation and Participation by BECID

A foundation of our principles for disseminating results from BECID and others in the EDMO network is to **involve BECID in small ways in all of our expert work**, even if only by using our branded PowerPoint. Consistently talking about our work together and why it has been beneficial is not simply to pat each other on the back; it helps avoid the doom and gloom MIL interventions sometimes tend to carry

As members of the BECID hub, it is our duty not only to speak about risks involved with information disorders or bring examples of worse-case scenarios but also to introduce what is being done nationally and internationally to combat disinformation. Significantly, when facilitating media literacy trainings that rely heavily on individual responsibility to learn new things or form new habits, this helps avoid feeling overwhelmed, which could, in turn, lead to idleness.

December (2022)

The design, planning, and execution of the TikTok house, an offline intervention against online threats. Little does the team know that this will become a repetitive intervention and lead to a direct link with the platform's outreach team (by Gretel Juhansoo and Inger Klesment).

Photo 1. TikTok House at the Christmas market in Tartu; December, 2022.

January (2023)

- Lecture on information disorders and combating their harmful spreading with media literacies as part of the Senior University or Väärikate Ülikool series in Estonia (by Maia Klaassen).
- Lecture for mothers in Tartu Toy Museum's baby club about toddlers and digital devices (by Inger Klesment).

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- Presentation at the SpotIt international project conference in Pärnu on information disorders and developing resistance to misinformation in Estonia (by Maia Klaassen).
- Seminar for employees of the Stebby company - "Social Media as a Supportive/Destructive Force in Our Well-being" (by Maria Murumaa-Mengel).
- Presentation at an IREX network webinar - "How to Invigorate Students via MIL Micro Interventions – Examples from Our Courses" (by Maria Murumaa-Mengel).
- Presentation of "Information Resilience as the Cornerstone of Comprehensive National Defense" to medical misinformation-focused digital activists (NGO Vox Rationis) during their winter days (by Maia Klaassen).
- Webinar titled "Media Literacy in the Baltics" on the psychological aspects of media literacy. A presentation titled "Invigorating Students Through Media Literacy Micro Interventions" (by Maria Murumaa-Mengel).

February (2023)

- Lecture on information disorders and combating them with media literacy, part of the "University for the Elderly" series in Elva (by Maia Klaassen).
- Online lecture on playful media and information literacy approaches for Estonian youth workers (by Maria Murumaa-Mengel and Inger Klesment).
- Presentation titled "The Value of Social Media" for participants of the Narva International Student Empowerment Conference (by Maria Murumaa-Mengel).

March (2023)

- Presenting the newly launched BECID activities at the EDMO hub meeting in Rome, Luiss University (by Maia Klaassen).
- Seminar day in Tallinn on playful media and information literacy (MIL) approaches for Estonian youth workers (by Maria Murumaa-Mengel and Inger Klesment).
- Appearance on Teeviit 5 LIVE discussing the career path of a media literacy specialist and choices in the educational landscape (by Maia Klaassen).
- Presentation titled "Bottom-up Approach to Interventions" at the monthly meeting of the Radical Awareness Network (by Maia Klaassen).
- Presentation at the TeeviitTalk conference, titled "Crash Course in Media and Information Literacy" (by Maia Klaassen).
- Webinar "From Disinformation to Information Resilience" featuring Junior Research Fellow in Media Literacy Maia Klaassen, Inga Springe from Re:Baltica, and MA students from the University of Tartu's Information Resilience micro-degree program, focusing on the societal impact of disinformation and strategies for enhancing resilience.

April (2023)

- Auksė Balčytienė, Kristina Juraitė, Maria Murumaa-Mengel, Inger Klesment, Gretel Juhansoo, and Rimgailė Kasparaitė participated in the final event of the IREX-inspired

project "MIL in the Baltics" in Riga, April 2023. Discussions included BECID activities-related partnerships and experiences in media literacy.

- EDMO hub Media literacy meeting – MIL at the national and regional level (Maia Klaassen)
- Presentation "Children's Internet Safety and New Methods for Creating a Safer Future" at the Tartu City Library (by Inger Klesment).
- Participation as a media literacy evaluator in the Locked Shields exercise (by Maia Klaassen).
- Panel discussion on the importance of media literacy across all societal groups at the Postimees Journalism School's final event (by Maia Klaassen).
- Presentation and panel discussion participation at a teachers' training day, "When Artificial Intelligence Enters Schools..." organised by The National Library of Estonia (by Diana Poudel).

May (2023)

- Training program "What Young People Do Online" for youth workers, focusing on developing digital competencies (by Diana Poudel).
- Seminar titled "Online Cancel Culture and Digital Literacies" for The Society of International Relations at the University of Tartu, held in Tartu (by Maria Murumaa-Mengel).
- Two workshops "Digital privacy and profiling - what is the value of our data?"; "Information disorder - from strategic lies to human errors" (for participants of MILProjectLab2023 in Tallinn (Maria Murumaa-Mengel).
- Participation in the EDMO 2023 Annual Conference:
  – Evita Puriņa from Re:Baltica's fact-checking team joined a panel on disinformation and the European Parliament elections, sharing experiences from recent parliamentary elections in Latvia.
  – BECID Project Manager Maia Klaassen contributed to the "Identifying Media Literacy Interventions That Work" panel discussion.

June (2023)

- Maia Klaassen participated in a panel discussion on media literacy at the Centre for European Perspective's networking event "Strengthening Societal Resilience and Countering Foreign Perpetrated Disinformation in 6 Western Balkans Countries" in Portorož, Slovenia.
- Auksė Balčytienė and Darius Remeika conducted presentations at the discussion about the role of libraries and the academic community in developing public awareness and critical thinking at the Lithuanian and Ukrainian library forum "The Role of Libraries in Strengthening the Democratic Society".
- BECID's research was represented at a separate panel at the Conference of Baltic Studies in Europe (CBSE) in Kaunas:

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- – Auksė Balčytienė presented "Learning about Passive and Active Resilience Outcomes and Prospects in a Small State".
  - – Marju Himma-Kadakas participated with „Comparative analysis of fact-checking practices and genres" (representing the whole team working on the article: Maia Klaassen, Sten Torpan, Jānis Buholcs, Rimgailė Kasparaitė, Kristina Berksun, Aukse Balčytienė).
  - – Maia Klaassen presented "Microinterventions: Testing Information Activism as a Media and Information Literacy Tool".
  - – Agnese Dāvidsone presented her work on media literacies with "Libraries as promoters of societal resilience towards disinformation"
  - – Ignas Kalpokas introduced "Digital Disinformation and Structural Resilience: Lithuania in a Regional Context"
- Workshop for Estonian librarians titled "Microinterventions and MIL in Libraries" in Tartu (by Maria Murumaa-Mengel).
- Auksė Balčytienė participated in the 14th CEECOM conference in Brno, June 27-29, 2023, with a presentation „Baltic democracies amidst manifold inforuptions: Reflecting on 20 years of media's role as the bearer of democratic culture and means of resilience in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia."
- Webinar "Building Effective Media Literacy Repositories within the EDMO Hubs" with a presentation of the SALTO Participation Resource Pool (by Maia Klaassen).
- Maria Murumaa-Mengel's presentation at the international CEECOM conference in Brno, Czech Republic, titled "How Do You Imagine Information Disorder? Exploration of Online Focus Groups and Creative Tasks for Concretizing Imaginaries".

July (2023)

- Training titled "Self-Protection in the Information Environment" for new Women's Voluntary Defence Organisation members or Naiskodukaitse (by Diana Poudel).
- Organisation and moderation of the panel discussion "Why are these young people always on their phones?" at the Prejudice Festival in Viljandi, Estonia (by Inger Klesment).
- Workshop for the Estonian Association of Editors titled "Ten Terrible Communication Terrors" (by Maria Murumaa-Mengel).

August (2023)

- Presentation "Wellbeing and Digital Life - Media and Information Literacies as the Foundation of Life Skills" for the delegation of Japan parliament members in Tartu (by Maria Murumaa-Mengel).
- Lecture-seminar "Media and Information Literacy for Societal Resilience" for students of Victoria University's youth work program (by Maia Klaassen).
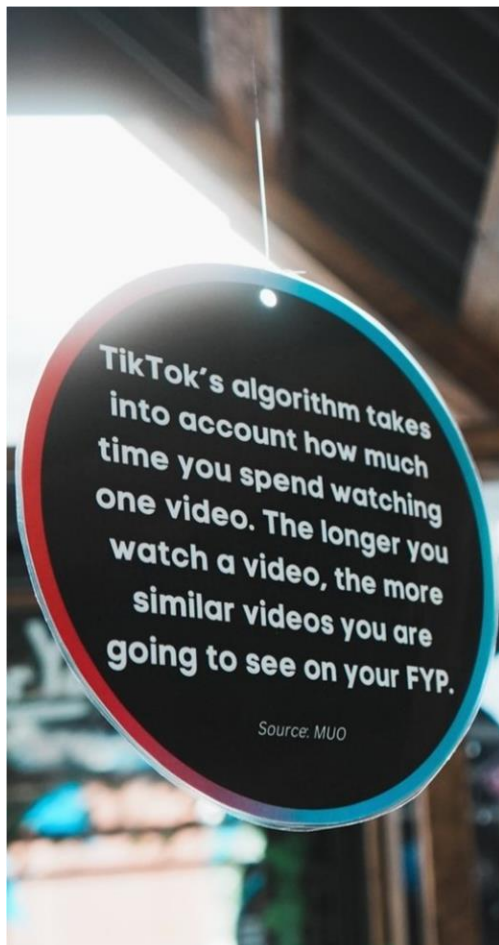
Photo 2. TikTok House at the Opinion Festival in Paide; August, 2023.

- Workshop "Young People and the Digital World" for social pedagogues (by Maria Murumaa-Mengel and Inger Klesment).
- Workshop "Body Image and Social Media" at the annual Opinion Festival in Paide, Estonia (by Maria Murumaa-Mengel).
- Workshop "Hacker's Battle" for developing digital competencies of youth (by Diana Poudel at the Opinion Festival).
- Media literacy intervention "TikTok House" at the Opinion Festival in Paide (by Gretel Juhansoo and Inger Klesment).
- Workshop "How to Manage Your Information Space" at Telia's Digitarkuse area (by Diana Poudel).
- Digital Safety Games for Children at the Opinion Festival (by Inger Klesment).
- Seminar "Teachers and Students on Social Media - Communication Norms and MILs" for Estonian art teachers (by Maria Murumaa-Mengel).
- Workshop "Uhhuu - Intervening to Conspiracy Theories and Esoterical Communities" for the Health Councils of Estonia (by Maria Murumaa-Mengel).
- Workshop "Porn Literacies as Part of Media and Information Literacies" for youth workers of Estonia (by Maria Murumaa-Mengel).

- Keynote speech "AI, Education and the Ethics of it All" and practical closed AI workshop for the Estonian communication team at the HARNO-organized conference for all Baltic states' Erasmus+ agencies (by Maia Klaassen).
- Crisis training on misinformation for teachers of Läänemaa during the exercise "ÄKK" (by Maia Klaassen).
- Participation and discussions in the "Būtent" Discussions' Festival by Auksė Balčytienė, who also gave several radio interviews, and Darius Remeika, who presented critical thinking training.

September (2023)

- Ieva Ivanauskaitė, representing Delfi Lithuania, participated in the 32nd Economic Forum and presented BECID and its activities.
- Maria Murumaa-Mengel presented at the ECREA Audience and Reception Studies Section Conference in Porto, Portugal, "How Do You Imagine Information Disorder? Exploration of Online Focus Groups and Creative Tasks for Concretizing Imaginaries".

- Maria Murumaa-Mengel gave a short lecture on "Uhhuu - Conspiracy Theories and How to Fight Them" at the University of Tartu's Institute of Social Studies conference.
- VMU representatives, including Ignas Kalpokas and Rimgailė Kasparaitė, attended the Romas Sakadolskis Journalism Forum in Vilnius, sharing insights on future problems and challenges in the media sphere.
- Diana Poudel conducted training for information resilience trainers for members of the Women's Voluntary Defence Organisation (or Naiskodukaitse).
- Maia Klaassen presented BECID's media literacy development activities at the EDMO hubs conference in Dubrovnik, Croatia.
- Andra Siibak, BECID's principal investigator, conducted a seminar on "Covid-19 Pandemic as a Credible Social Context for Social Engineering Scams" for Urbino University, Italy doctoral students.
- Gunta Sloga, BCME's Director, met with Moldovan StratCom experts to discuss their work within the EDMO framework and with representatives from the Estonian Ministry of Culture, focusing on introducing media literacy to vulnerable groups.
- Sten Torpan from the University of Tartu was invited as an expert consultant for the misinformation cluster at the Deutsch-Baltische Zukunftsstiftung conference in Tartu, "The German-Baltic Conference: Freedom as a Shared European Value". He delivered a lecture on Russian propaganda narratives and Baltic countermeasures to the conference's youth ambassadors.
- Auksė Balčytienė attended the "16th Dubrovnik Media Days" on September 29–30th and presented at the International Scientific Conference "Disinformation Research: Current Trends and Perspectives".

October (2023)

- Maia Klaassen's conference presentation "AI in Practice" at the Pärnumaa Youth Inspiration Day.
- Inger Klesment's introduction of media literacy teaching methods through movement games for 5-10-year-olds at the "Liikuma Kutsuv Kool" Autumn Seminar.
- University of Tartu's Institute of Social Studies Conference "Challenges in Society from a Scientist's Perspective" with presentations by
  – Inger Klesment ("How to Develop Children's Digital and Media Literacies without Technology?") and
  – Maria Murumaa-Mengel ("What Helps Against the Spread of 'Uhhuu' and Information Chaos?").
- Diana Poudel's training "How to Conduct a Safe Internet Guest Lesson for Grades 1-5" for Women's Home Defence members.
- Maria Murumaa-Mengel and Maia Klaassen representing the University of Tartu in the final round of the teaching award at the ENLIGHT network's annual conference - "Pracademic Studies - Be Bold and Change the World".
- Media literacy workshop by Inger Klesment for teachers at the Rapid Response Exercise (ÄKK) in Rapla.

- Diana Poudel's training "Media and Influence" for subject teachers on "Social Media and Algorithms" (Estonian Debating Society training project).
- Journalist networking event at Luiss School of Journalism with Maia Klaassen and Marju Himma-Kadakas.
- Diana Poudel's short lecture at the Chancellor of Justice's office on "The Power of Information".
- Maria Murumaa-Mengel's training for Tartu school leaders in response to a bomb spam wave - "Difficult Topics in School – A Media (Psychology) Centered View and Recommendations".
- Miniconference "Strengthening Societal Resilience & Countering Foreign Perpetrated Disinformation in the Western Balkans: Bosnia and Herzegovina Whole of Society" in Sarajevo, panel "Disinformation and the Money Problem of Media and CSOs" (Maia Klaassen).
- BECID was represented at the Tartu Education Festival with a
    - Media education gamification workshop (by Inger Klesment).
    - Workshop "How Do Students Fall into Social Media Rabbit Holes?" (by Gretel Juhansoo).
    - Workshop "Uhhuu - Who, What, Where?" (by Maria Murumaa-Mengel).
- We also contributed to organising the national Estonian Media Literacy Annual Conference and facilitated the following:
    - The panel discussion moderation on "Who Should Help Children Become Media-Savvy?" (Maria Murumaa-Mengel).
    - The street art tour with Sirla "What Do the Streets Talk About and How Does It Relate to Media?" (Maria Murumaa-Mengel).
    - A media education gamification workshop with Catlyn Kirna (Inger Klesment).
    - A workshop on conspiracy theories in social media with Oksana Belova-Dalton (Gretel Juhansoo).
    - The workshop "How to Analyze Content Created by Influencers?" at the Media Literacy Conference (Maria Murumaa-Mengel).
- Lecture on media literacy, information resilience, and security for the Academy of Internal Affairs students (Maia Klaassen).
- Participation in the "Media Literacy as a Vaccine Against Propaganda" panel discussion at the Psychological Defense Course (Maria Murumaa-Mengel).

November (2023)

- Inger Klesment conducted a game-based digital and media literacy training for librarians at the Estonian National Library, focused on primary education.
- Diana Poudel led a training session titled "How to Conduct a Safe Internet Guest Lesson?" via Zoom, attended by approximately 120 participants, including parents, teachers, and youth workers.
- Maria Murumaa-Mengel delivered a lecture on "Behavior in Social Media" for students at Hugo Treffner Gymnasium.

- Inger Klesment provided game-based digital and media literacy training for teachers at Tallinn Technical Gymnasium, focusing on primary education.
- Maria Murumaa-Mengel and Maia Klaassen conducted training for Tartu school leaders on "How 'Uhhuu' Creeps into Schools and Kindergartens - And Then What?"
- Diana Poudel presented at the Science Communication Conference on "The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on the Information Space".
- Inger Klesment presented at the BCME Digimentors' opening event, sharing results of the Estonian Digimentors pilot project and the current collaboration between Telia, the University of Tartu Institute of Social Studies, and OÜ Digihelp (or Digiabi).
- Maria Murumaa-Mengel led a training session for the Eastern Prefecture on "The Spread of Conspiracy Theories and Media Literacy".
- Maia Klaassen introduced BECID activities at the EMIF+EDMO conference "Community Building Against Disinformation" in Florence, Italy.
- Inger Klesment provided game-based digital and media literacy training for teachers at Konguta School, focusing on primary education.
- Maia Klaassen participated in a panel discussion and presentation at the "III Ukrainian National Information Resilience Cluster", focusing on "Cooperation Over Competition: Benefits of Cross-Border Cooperation within the EDMO Network Based on BECID's Experience".
- The third BaltsTeachMIL Zoominar titled "Helping Children Navigate the Tsunami of Misinformation" was organised by the entire BECID WP4 team.
- Maria Murumaa-Mengel led a webinar for Estonian female leaders on "Social Media and Internal Communication, Organisational Information Resilience".
- Prof. Auksė Balčytienė participated in an international conference, "Populism in National and Global Media", on the 24th of November, with the presentation on "Can Media Literacy Reduce Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories?".
- On 29th to 30th November VMU representatives (DIGIRES) Darius Remeika, Auksė Balčytienė, Patricija Naujanytė, Rimgailė Kasparaitė delivered two-day media literacy trainings to the staff of Kaunas Public library.
- BCME executive director Gunta Sloga took part in Global Education Week events organised in Latvia by The Latvian Platform for Development Cooperation, sharing her experiences on resilience and media literacy in Latvia.
- Re:Baltica team members Evita Puriņa and Sanita Jemberga delivered lectures on fact-checking and investigative journalism at Riga Stradiņš University and participated in various conferences.
- On November 13–15, Re:Baltica team member Evita Puriņa participated in the Conference "Fact-checking and Beyond Building Resilience for the 2024 European Elections" in Brussels.
- On November 16, BCME launched the "Digitally Together" project, which focused on intergenerational cooperation to improve the digital competence and media literacy of young people and the elderly. The project included youth training (24 and 25 November) and an international forum in Riga on 14 December.

1.3.2. Dissemination Through News Media

As previously stated, our communication plan and dissemination principles rely on reaching specific and focused audiences rather than posting "Did you know we had a nice event?" notices that have become obsolete. So, we aim our communication with news media carefully: we have a series ongoing in the Estonian cultural newspaper Sirp as a monthly column, but we are also frequent authors at **Õpetajate Leht** – the only news publication in Estonia directed at teachers.

Additionally, all four of our fact-checking partners publish their fact-checks not only on *BECID's website* and *EDMO's repository* but also on their respective websites, which garner more traffic than the project website ever could. BECID's fact-checkers reach, and other KPIs can be measured at the project's close, whilst the following list is mostly of publications outside of our control and, therefore, has a measurable impact—simply giving back to society.

1. Aasavelt, K-L. (2023). Meediapädevuse nooremteadur Maia Klassen: tuleb aru saada, et telefon on tööriist meie jaoks, mitte vastupidiselt. *Teeviit.*
2. DIGIRES. (2023). Press release on Delfi.lt about a seminar for teachers. *Delfi.*
3. Juhansoo, G. (2023). Estonian political parties see TikTok as a gateway to youth. *BECID blog.*
4. Juhansoo, G. (2023). Koolid ei saa ainsana vastutada laste meediateadmiste eest. *Sakala.*
5. Juhansoo, G. (2023). Kuidas levivad vandenõuteooriad TikTokis? *Sirp.*
6. Kirna, C., Klesment, I. (2023). Kas teate, millega tegelevad teie lapsed nutitelefonis tegelikult? *Telia Suurim Julgus podcast.*
7. Klesment, I. (2023). Digiohutuse mängud lasteaiale ja koolile. *Õpetajate Leht.*
8. Klesment, I. (2023). Inger Klesment - Kuidas internetis mitte petta saada? *Tre Raadio.*
9. Klesment, I. (2023). Interneti piiramise asemel tuleb lastega nutiohtudest rääkida. Seda aitavad teha põnevad mängud. *Maaleht.*
10. Klesment, I. (2023). Kas võitlus valeinfoga on meie ühine vastutus või kellegi teise kohustus? *Sirp.*
11. Klesment, I. (2023). Meediaõpetus peab olema kontaktis lapse reaalsusega. *Sirp.*
12. Klesment, I. (2023). Nädalavahetuse hommik. Meediapädevuse spetsialist Inger Klesment. *Raadio 2.*
13. Klesment, I., Juhansoo, G. (2023). Mitmekülgne infokeskkond nõrgestab kremlimeelse propaganda mõju. *Sirp.*
14. Klesment, I., Kirna, C. (2023). Küberpädevus algab lasteaiast. *Õpetajate Leht.*
15. Ludvig, L. (2023). Mida võtta, mida jätta ja kuidas? Meediauurijad klaarivad vohavat infokaost. *Tartu Postimees.*
16. Malts, K. ja Vunš, M. (2023). EKSPERIMENT | Hakkasime TikTokis jälgima Eesti valeinfo levitajaid. 30 minutit hiljem vallutas meie uudisvoo Putin. *Eesti Ekspress.*

Mar 2023, version 2.0.

17. Malts, K. ja Vunš, M. (2023). KUULA | Kes võitleb sotsiaalmeedias valeinfo levitajate, mõjutustegevuse ja räuskajate vastu? *„Valeinfo: paljastatud" podcast.*

18. Murumaa-Mengel, M. (2023). *Bikeshedding: A Cognitive Bias That Draws Our Attention to the Trivial.* Salto Participation and Information Pool.

19. Murumaa-Mengel, M. (2023). *Frequency Illusion: A Cognitive Bias That Lurks Everywhere and Follows You Around.* Salto Participation and Information Pool.

20. Murumaa-Mengel, M. (2023). *Ikea Effect: A Cognitive Bias Born From Labour of Love.* Salto Participation and Information Pool.

21. Murumaa-Mengel, M. (2023). *Just World Hypothesis: A Cognitive Bias That Makes Us Believe in Clear-cut Good and Evil.* Salto Participation and Information Pool.

22. Murumaa-Mengel, M. (2023). Osa 9: kuidas elada infokorratuses? (Maia Klaassen). *Dialoogia podcast.*

23. Murumaa-Mengel, M. (2023). *Ostrich Effect: A Cognitive Bias That Makes Us Ignore the Facts.* Salto Participation and Information Pool.

24. Murumaa-Mengel, M. (2023). The golden tasks of MIL rely on discovery, lived experiences, and reflection. *BECID blog.*

25. Murumaa-Mengel, M. (2023). Turbulent histories have made the Balts more resilient to propaganda, but we are not magically immune to disinformation. *BECID blog.*

26. Murumaa-Mengel, M. (2023). Turbulent histories have made the Balts more resilient to propaganda, but we are not magically immune to disinformation. *BECID blog.*

27. Murumaa-Mengel, M., Klesment, I. (2023). Lapsevanemad ei pea nutiseadmeid kartma. *Vikerraadio.*

28. Poudel, D. (2023). Eesti avaliku elu tegelaste libaartiklid ja digipädevus. *Vikerraadio.*

29. Poudel, D. (2023). Kuidas kaitsta ennast inforuumis? *Õpetajate leht.*

30. Poudel, D. (2023). Tasakaalus inforuum. Huvitaja. *Vikerraadio.*

31. Rannaväli, M. (2023). Mitmekülgsete oskustega Maia Klaassen väljakutseid ei pelga. *Teeviit.*

32. RE:BALTICA. (2023). Article about Re:Baltica review. *Delfi.lt.*

33. Sägi, S. (2023). KUULA I Valeuudistega võitlemine, krooniline rahutus ja koostöö Palestiina naistega. Teisisõnu - Maia Klaassen. *Delfi Forte.*

34. Vunš, M. (2023). TOP valed valimiste kohta: kustutatavad pastakad, salajased topelthääled ja IKEA kastid. *Eesti Päevalehe Faktikontroll.*

35. Vunš, M. (2023). VALEINFO: PALJASTATUD | Propaganda, valeinfo ja tehisaru: mida uskuda ja mida mitte. *Eesti Päevalehe Faktikontrolli podcast.*

Mar 2023, version 2.0.

![Baltic Engagement Centre for Combating Information Disorders logo] Baltic Engagement Centre for Combating Information Disorders

becid.eu

36.   DELFI LV: (2023) Series of articles in the BCME project "Digitally Together".

Figure 3. The Baltics, as generated by ChatGPT5.

1.4. Cooperation with National Authorities

It is not easy to describe the impact of BECID's first year for experts in the fields of journalism, communication, information verification, or media (in the broadest sense of the word) about our National Authorities (NA) because the baseline was not the same in the three countries. Additionally (and unfortunately for project performance evaluation), communication is complex to measure in quantity, and the impact of discussions is not immediate.

Let it be clear: none of the Baltic states had a well-formed and definitive strategy on how to combat disinformation or coordinate (national) media literacy. Still, it has not stopped any of us from teaching MIL in schools, be it mandatory or as an elective.

Nevertheless, we will try to quantify our cooperation during the 2023 reporting period country by country and then conclude this subchapter with a subjective assessment of the status of cooperation with NAs.

In **Lithuania,** significant interactions have occurred with **entities focused on digital resilience and countering misinformation**. These engagements have included the Ministry of Culture and the Special Investigation Service, an anti-corruption law enforcement body in Lithuania, which also leads educational initiatives in corruption prevention and Media and Information Literacy (MIL). On May 19, 2023, Lithuania saw discussions led by Auksė Balčytienė, Ieva Ivanauskaitė, and Brigita Sabaliauskaitė on BECID activities and the development of collaborative partnerships. These discussions at the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania involved Minister Simonas Kairys and Vice Minister Vygantas Gasparavičius.

As for **Latvia**, Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences' project-related information has been communicated to the Ministry of Education and Science, The National Electronic Mass Media Council, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Defence, Embassies of the USA and UK in Latvia, European Parliament deputies from Latvia, Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Since Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences has been active in media literacy education (for example, it has been hosting the *Media Literacy Initiative*) their work is already well-known in the country.

Our second partner in Latvia, *BCME or the Baltic Centre of Media Excellence* or BCME, is already working with media regulators: BCME partners with **media regulators** to promote high standards of journalism and ethical practices. They also collaborate on initiatives to ensure equitable access to media platforms. As for national media councils, BCME collaborates with them to address media bias and ensure fair and accurate reporting. Moreover, of course, engaging with ministries responsible for media and communication to advocate for policies that support a diverse, independent, and accountable media sector is also a part of BCME's work: BCME connects various, both private and public, big and small entities working on media literacy and therefore needs to advocate accordingly.

In **Estonia**, the Institute of Social Studies team at the University of Tartu hosted an informative meeting on March 1, 2023, to discuss BECID's initiatives. This meeting saw participation from critical sectors of the government, including the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education and Research, the Consumer Protection and Technical Regulatory Authority, and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, along with several BECID delegates. This event highlighted the importance of collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches in the project.

Moreover, on October 3rd, the BECID team from the University of Tartu met with Stella Saarts, a media literacy specialist at the State Chancellery, and Priit Talv, an advisor at the Strategic Communications Department. The meeting focused on strategic development in media literacy and potential avenues for cooperation and funding. A meeting on similar topics was

held again with the Government Office with the Ministry of Education and Research on the 23rd of November, and there have been several more informal and less crowded meetings, calls, and e-mails in between.

Of course, as stated in the introduction, the Estonian hub was co-financed by five governmental organisations, all of whom had one small part of the hub's planned activities in their strategic documents. The sheer effort of wanting to support this initiative shows that the networking between experts and government officials was already sufficient before the project started.

So – rather than counting all the meetings (and phone calls, e-mails, and other unplanned forms of asking each other for advice), we asked BECID consortium members how they *felt:* Is the dialogue with their respective NAs open? Are they being involved as a stakeholder? And – lastly – has the situation always been so?

To that end, we can confidently say that, after the first year of BECID, we *feel* the cooperation with our NA-s is more productive, frequent and fruitful. The hub's team will report on this at the project's close with a more extended report.

1.5. Cooperation with EDMO

As stated in Chapter 1.1, the collaboration with the European Digital Media Observatory (or EDMO EUI) and the other hubs can be challenging at times for one simple systemic reason: we all have our projects, tasks, objectives and outcomes to fulfil, out of which cooperation with the network only forms a tiny part. It also comes with great benefits; for example, sharing ideas can lead to writing new, scale-up projects for ideas accumulated whilst conducting research. Nevertheless, all hubs face the same question: how do we align cooperation within the network with our main line of (regionally relevant) work?

That is why our members are **actively engaged in various working groups and task forces** within the EDMO network, each dedicated to a distinct area of our joint efforts and facilitated with the support of EDMO EUI. A valuable tool in ensuring long-term virtual cooperation, the meetings and collective working papers have proven an inspiration in over-achieving in the research (WP3) and media literacy (WP4) work packages.

Here is an overview of the diffusion of BECID experts between the working groups:

1. **Policy Research and Analysis** – three BECID members. Jānis Buholcs from Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, Signe Ivask from the University of Tartu and Andres Kõnno from Tallinn University.
2. **EU Elections** – two BECID members. Andra Siibak from the University of Tartu and Kaili Malts from Delfi EST.

3. **Research** – four BECID members. Auksė Balčytienė from Vytautas Magnus University, Jānis Buholcs from Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, Signe Ivask from the University of Tartu and Andres Kõnno from Tallinn University.

4. **Digital Media Literacy** – twelve BECID members. Andra Siibak, Inger Klesment, Maria Murumaa-Mengel, Maia Klaassen, and Regina Lapp from the University of Tartu; Andres Kõnno and Katrin Sigijane from Tallinn University; Agnese Dāvidsone and Jānis Buholcs from Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences; Auksė Balčytienė and Kristina Juraitė from Vytautas Magnus University; Gunta Sloga from the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence.

5. **Media Literacy Standards and Best Practices WG** – one BECID member. Maia Klaassen from the University of Tartu.

6. **GenAI and Disinformation** – five BECID members. Maia Klaassen and Sten Torpan from the University of Tartu; Vanessa Vorteil and Andres Kõnno from Tallinn University; Jānis Buholcs from Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences.

7. **Communication Liaisons Task Force** – two BECID members. Inger Klesment from the University of Tartu and Kristina Berksun from Vytautas Magnus University.

If you are interested in quantifiable and subjective feelings on EDMO and the network, visit our website for the full report. You can also *visit the Collaboration section of our website* now.

To close this subchapter, let it be said that there is only one (sub-)working group within the EDMO network in which BECID members are not participating. We are considering joining in 2024.

1.6. BECID's Sustainability and Independence

In-depth work on BECID's independence and sustainability strategy will start in February 2024, with Task 1.6 beginning. The Sustainability and Independence Strategy for BECID, finished by the close of the project in May 2025, will focus on the preservation of the independence of the hub from public/private sector influence and the development of augmented services and activities (such as built-in solutions for MIL or FC interventions) to spread knowledge to key target groups, both based on the experience gained during the 30 months of this project.

The PMT have made a Draft Sustainability Strategy for the year 2023. It relies on our vision and our mission.

> *BECID aims to advance the local cause of debunking false information, inoculating against information disorders with media literacy and working towards more connectivity and long-term sustainability in the field.*

To that end, BECID's mission is to 1) **build bridges** by providing support, resources, and guidance to a network of Baltic organisations working towards a more information-resilient society while maintaining their independence and autonomy; 2) **improve media literacy knowledge accessibility** by providing relevant materials and fact-checks to different target groups all over the Baltics and ensuring more accessible trustworthy sources and 3) **combat information disorders** and **empower** Baltic civilians to do the same by conducting deep-dive analyses of fact-checking strategies used in the region's media history and disseminate the results in memorable ways.

The fundamental principles for the independence and sustainability of BECID we established for the first year (which will remain until new plans have been agreed upon in the AB or MC), i.e. in 2023, were as follows.

- BECID needs to build a reputation to become experts in the field who are visible in the region and all over the European Union. Individually, the ten organisations in BECID already have a strong reputation. Therefore, the strategy for the coming years is to build a strong reputation for producing high-quality, unbiased research and analysis in unison. As well-known as our organisations are in the region individually, the cooperation before BECID has been inconsistent, not between all key stakeholders in the field but a select few and under-funded. That has also contributed to a competitive rather than cooperative environment. The only way to sustain the cooperation beyond this project's scope is to look for funding and future projects to ensure the work done to bring together this consortium has not been in vain.

- We actively seek new financing sources to not depend on one specific measure. Resource-related issues with sustainability will be the focus of our sustainability-related work in 2024. Whilst working on a final list of possible donors for the future, the partners will continue to exchange information on who is going for which proposal, as well as join forces in new project proposals to put the knowledge from the research, events, meetings and collaboration of BECID into use more than only once, for one project.
- We establish management structures that prioritise transparency, accountability, and responsibility. (*After the first year, we would add that we need to have a willingness to solve any possible issues with the structure*.)
- We treat all partners in the hub with equal respect. We will establish work processes that support the motivation of the individuals and continue with optimal cooperation within the hub and with external stakeholders. (*To this, 2023 has taught us to add and to accept that with editing outputs, the complete consensus of 66 people cannot be reached; therefore, veto powers should be used when this causes issues with timeliness*.)
- BECID adapts to changes in the emerging field of combatting disinformation by creating agile strategies, plans and processes.
- Members of the BECID consortium are trusted partners to facilitate the exchange of best practices between national and regional stakeholders and the pan-European network.

Except for a few tweaks, these principles still hold and will carry us into 2024. However, our main activity regarding sustainability in 2023 has been working on a very logical problem stemming from our demographic composition. As per Statista, the population of the three Baltic states combined was just under 5,9 million people. Any expert field is bound to be small; with combatting disinformation being an emerging field, we especially need to involve the next generation in our work in a meaningful way. Supervising student work on topics the EDMO network deals with and trusting the next generation to help with our tasks are the central topics in the next two subchapters. Chapter 5 of this report is also dedicated to it.

1.6.1. Offering Quality Interdisciplinary Education in the Region

With the Grant Agreement, we set the task of finding ways to design a program that would teach regional expertise to an international student body as a part of our sustainability strategy. We wrote: "Other sustainability actions will include the development of specialised curricula, including a masters' program 'Resilience to Information Disorders.'"

This is not simply an ambition born out of thin air. As the problem with the spread of misinformation and hostile information operations that threaten the stability and functioning of democratic societies has become increasingly acute in recent years, the public, state institutions and the labour market have come to expect universities to provide the academic teaching needed to deal with it.

Photo 3. A virtual postcard from the MA program's design inspiration day, in Tartu, June 2023

As promised in the T1.6 description in the Grant Agreement ("*We will also develop a sustainability strategy that will identify national and international funding sources that could be tapped to support BECID going forward. Multiple funding proposals will be submitted throughout the project as part of this effort.*"), we also looked for additional funding and found a call for proposals to support the design of novel higher education programs and foster cooperation between Central Asian and European countries.

We got the grant, and the first course of the MA program will start their studies in the second week of February 2024. BECID provided the human resources, time and objective to figure out a way to design a new program; the actual development and launch of the program is a separate project, co-funded by the University of Tartu, the US State Department's Development Cooperation Partnership and the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Estonia.

The **1-year-long master's program**, which ended up being called *Disinformation and Societal Resilience*, is aimed at specialists who draw on expertise in communication, law, psychology, sociology, data science, and regional studies. This program will equip up to 20 students to combat disinformation effectively, training them in strategic communication, societal analysis, vulnerable audiences, polarisation, the role of news and social media, policy-making and analysis, international relations and security policy.

The academically rigorous curriculum has been designed to strengthen democratic resilience in Europe, Eurasia and Central Asia. After the programme, 20 selected students can **implement their knowledge in their respective communities** by utilising their studies, including their final MA project, **to carry out micro, mezzo** and **macro interventions**. The program aims to provide professionals with vital and adaptable knowledge in communication,

sociology, data sciences, regional studies, law, and psychology to manage the analysis of information processes and make policy suggestions to combat disinformation and, therefore, contribute to strengthening societal resilience.

Graduates will receive a **Master of Arts in Social Sciences** and be recruited in the public and third sectors, i.e. in public institutions and agencies as well as NGO-s, working in the fields of strategic communication, policy analysis, impact assessment, cyber security, media and information literacy via formal or nonformal education etc. Strengthening democracies against disinformation is an emerging field that offers new career paths every year; some we might not be able to imagine yet. Think of influencers or trusted flaggers – who would have guessed that would be a paying job two years ago?

It is important to note that the MA program is effective for our sustainability by producing "fresh experts" in the field and inviting students to seek internship opportunities in BECID and try out the work in an international and virtual environment. Furthermore, we can share the public lectures of interdisciplinary experts with all members of BECID and other universities in the EDMO network. Ideally, this should produce an opportunity to pilot – and re-design – intern and student researcher involvement paths in BECID and share the model of doing so with other hubs. For pragmatic reasons and sustainability, it would be beneficial to consider using **virtual interns;** the outline of their possible involvement in a hub's activities is below.

1.6.2. Paths for Involving Virtual Interns in Our Work

Interns in the EDMO network will benefit from putting theoretical ideas about career paths into daily practice and learning harsh realities. Students will learn the basics of (academic) organisation culture, understand the routine of online work, and acquire various practical skills by trying on multiple roles as a virtual intern.

The role of an intern depends on the student's needs, the mentor's interests (a must, regardless of the path you choose) and the project timeline lining up with possible internship timelines. The internship should be supervised jointly by the university supervisors and the partner organisation. Each student needs individual attention but will also benefit significantly from group supervision among the students training in the same partner organisation.

Learning outcomes

Upon the successful completion of the internship, the student:

- knows how to apply theoretical and analytical knowledge regarding information disorders, strategic communication and societal resilience acquired during the studies;
- is able to solve problems encountered in practical work;
- applies the regulations, high ethical standards and best practices in the field when solving practical problems.

Media and Information Literacy or WP4 Path

This path is meant for creative, independent personalities who get excited by possibly tricking people into accidentally learning something new. (It is no secret that MILs are most needed by those confident enough to say they know it all.)

- Interns can **assist in organising seminars**, workshops, and other events, or they can…
  - Do the pre- and post-event **communication**.
  - Be the moderator for the day, calling people on stage and sending them off.
- Interns can help us involve more Russian-speaking people or other distinct vulnerable audiences like older adults in our activities. For instance, interns can **connect with leaders** in these communities to spread the word about the importance of understanding media and **help start or scale up local projects** focused on media, information and digital literacies.
- Interns can help **plan and create media literacy content** in local media, the project's website or social media accounts.
- Interns can assist in **designing and conducting media literacy workshops** for students as peer-to-peer training and write blog posts about the results of these workshops.
- Interns **can organise meetings with student unions**, promote our activities among students, and write blog posts about these meetings.

Fact-checking or WP2 Path

Most likely, the interns interested in this path also like journalism and fact-checking and consider being in the limelight something to enjoy. If this is not the case, a warning is necessary; the attacks on fact-checkers have been well-documented worldwide. This path is for those with thick skin and those interested in writing or communication. Their tasks could include, but not be limited to:

- Interns can **monitor the fact-checking process** and **write blog posts** or reports about it, which would help analyse the process's steps, lessons, and results for themselves and readers.
- Interns can **learn fact-checking from practice**, **put together training materials** and **do peer-to-peer training** in their school on tips and tricks learnt.
- Being a **behind-the-scenes analyst** is a forgotten job. Still, in the fact-checking team of EDMO hubs, that could be an intern's job: to dig up information, process it for the reporter, and relay that to other fact-checkers in other countries.

Research or WP3 Path

For an intern to enjoy working in a research group, the topic of the research being of interest to the intern is the first point of concern. The role might include data management or sorting,

fieldwork, transcribing, writing summaries or blog posts, or it could contribute to an ongoing study.

A writing test could be conducted to establish the intern's skills that cannot be solved with large language models and pretend play. This is not to see an individual style, as anything can be edited out, but to ensure the intern understands the research methods used in the project. It is unfair for a worker in the project to not know the basics of their job. If the intern is suitable, then…

- Interns could **try to help to search for necessary literature** in publications.
- Conducting **literature reviews**, especially with the help and constant mentoring of a supervisor, is well in the skillset of an intern.
- Organising **research notes, data, transcriptions and Zotero collections** to be re-usable by the public would be an excellent (and sustainability-creating) task for an intern.

Project Management or WP1 Path

Communication Officers are doing hard work in projects that operate primarily virtually and have no events where *all* 66 members should be expected to be in one room simultaneously. Mix communication and PR tasks with some administrative project management - with *only* routine management and bureaucracy, one's excitability towards EU projects might lessen. Interns could…

- Assist in **drafting policy recommendations**, **organising meetings** with policymakers, and **compiling memos** with overviews of these meetings.
- IT enthusiast interns can help **develop web platform features** and **propose updates based on user testing** and feedback.
- Lead BECID's blog **content creation**, which we can translate into any language.
- Share **experiences from their home countries** and thoughts on the best practices that could be used in the Baltics, too.
- **Create short videos, AI-generated visuals, flowcharts, and infographics** for new training materials or research publications.
- Be involved in **planning events** and **working on online events' post-comms**.

Virtual mentorship requires more time and attention, so this model is not for everyone. However, involving students in the hubs' work is integral to the future of the field and for the sustainability of the EDMO network as a whole.

2. FACT-CHECKING

WP2 Overview

The main objectives of work package two are to **strengthen Baltic fact-checking** by conducting regular and high-quality fact-checks (**T2.1**; as of December 2023, 227 Baltic fact-checks have been published in the EDMO Repository and **271 fact-checks** have been published all up) and to establish a functioning, multidirectional information exchange ecosystem between fact-checkers and academic institutions in the Baltic States to conduct regular using jointly developed principles and methodology (**T2.2**).

Collaborating with researchers, we regularly assessed fact-checking in the Baltic States and sought to promote standards and best practices among fact-checkers (**T2.2**). For example, the research team from T3.2 represented and tested the preliminary results of the practices and tools of Baltic fact-checkers on September 8th, 2023, at a collaboration meeting with fact-checkers. That is not all the benefits fact-checkers receive from this collaboration: for example, University of Tartu researcher Signe Ivask is also involved (and acts as a middle-man) in the *European Fact-Checking Standards Network Project.*

In terms of communication, it is crucial **to integrate fact-checks and case studies of disinformation into existing radio and video series**, like Delfi's Falsehoods Exposed! Section. Delfi publishes fact-checks on its platform, reaching a much larger audience than a website created for a single project could.

In 2023, we aimed to synthesise and understand the main trends of disinformation in the Baltic States, including from Russia and Belarus. Propaganda spread on various social media platforms, especially regarding political, geopolitical, environmental, and health-related misinformation (**T2.3, T2.4, T2.5, T2.6**), and we also responded to numerous international crises. Analyses and fact-checks from Estonia are now reaching a global audience through *EDMO's bi-monthly Fact-Checking Briefs* (for example, cited by BECID's coordinator in consultations with DG Connect in Brussels), and our fact-checkers engage in working groups with fact-checkers from other countries (**T2.7**), which is particularly beneficial during crises that transcend borders, such as the war sparked by Hamas' attack on Israel. In October 2023, Estonian fact-checkers also joined the EU2024 election task force to expedite combating rapidly spreading false narratives through data exchange and collaboration.

As part of our commitments under the BECID project, we published regular fact-checks within media outlets, assessments of Baltic fact-checking, bi-weekly multimedia shows focusing on fact-checks and disinformation, analysis of propaganda and disinformation from Russia and Belarus, synthesis of Baltic disinformation trends, analysis of disinformation trends on social media platforms, and responding to requests for fact-checking information and joint research activities as directed by the EDMO Governance Body.

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Here follows a summary of what we have achieved in these areas in the first year, partner by partner, with a report or case study as an example of their 2023 work.

2.1. Delfi Lithuania

DELFI UAB, *a Lithuanian online news outlet,* is a certified partner of Facebook's third-party fact-checking program. **Delfi UAB is the most popular news outlet in the country**, which makes the content distribution of Delfi UAB's fact-checking team efficient, and the reach is organically higher per story than BECID's website gets in a month.

Their fact-checking project, **The Lie Detector** (Melo Detektorius), published over 500 articles in 2021 debunking various claims and myths. Take a look at their *Instagram*, *TikTok* and *Facebook*, too.

Another project, **Debunk** (Demaskuok), launched in 2018 with funding from Google DNI Fund and Delfi UAB, uses an AI tool developed by DELFI UAB to detect disinformation campaigns within 2 minutes of their publication. This project focuses on debunking Kremlin-related disinformation campaigns. Information about DELFI UAB's operations, fact-checking department, methodology, and funding sources is publicly available.

In BECID's team, Delfi UAB is responsible for the website design, hosting and upkeep, as well as fact-checking in textual, visual and audiovisual formats. Looking back at 2023, their key achievements were as follows.

- **Published 129 fact-checks**, available *on their website* and *the EDMO Fact-Check Repository.*
- Produced weekly reviews on disinformation trends for the Lithuanian audience, debunking false information through visual content.
- Broadcasted over 40 fact-checking episodes on the '*Delfi Diena'* TV program on Delfi TV since the beginning of the year.
- Produced over 20 podcast/video series concentrating on fact-checks, debunking exercises, case studies, and the spread of disinformation.
- Established the *BECID Collaboration Platform*.
- Expanded visual fact-checking efforts across social media platforms, including TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram, using tailored short videos to debunk false claims on current topics.
- Organised a mutual training workshop on September 8th, which involved discussing the state of fact-checking in the Baltic countries (T2.2). Participants included representatives from universities (University of Tartu, Tallinn University, Vytautas Magnus University, Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences) and professional fact-checkers (Delfi UAB, Ekspress Meedia AS, AS Delfi, Re:Baltica).

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2.2. Re:Baltica

Re:Baltica is **a non-profit working in investigative journalism** focused on the Baltic region but extending to Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and other ex-USSR countries. Since 2012, they have been at the forefront of disinformation analysis in the Baltic region, focusing on super-spreaders and disinformation coming from Russia, especially before elections. Operating in various formats, including print and online investigations, documentaries about the Kremlin's propaganda methods in Europe, and regular fact-checking, Re:Baltica puts forth fact-checks and disinformation analysis for BECID in textual format and via documentaries.

In 2019, they established a fact-checking unit, "Re:Check", which publishes 10-20 fact-checks per month in Latvian and Russian, and in 2020, "Re:Baltica" became IFCN certified fact-checkers and partnered with Facebook as third-party fact-checkers to combat Covid-19 disinformation. Even though "Re:Check" is part of Re:Baltica, it operates independently and has its own mission statement, editorial principles, and financing information, all of which are publicly available.

Re:Baltica allows free republishing of their work, which remains accessible without any paywall in Latvian, Russian, and English, all available on their website. Within the scope of work done for BECID in 2023, Re:Baltica's key achievements were as follows.

- **Published 55 fact-checks**, available *on their website* and *the EDMO Fact-Check Repository.*
- Presented the results of the first Re:Baltica report (*webinar "From Disinformation to Information Resilience"* in March 2023; 70 participants).
- Addressed frequent misinformation on various critical issues, including Russia's war in Ukraine, climate change, gender equality, and food safety.
- Published *four quarterly reports* identifying disinformation trends in the Baltics, covering specific themes such as the political influence of TikTok, Kremlin's disinformation on Telegram, disinformation narratives in the first half of 2023, and misinformation concerning climate change.
- Contributed disinformation reviews to the video series *Atmaskots* produced by Delfi.lv.

2.3. Delfi Latvia

AS Delfi is the leading news portal in Latvia, with a monthly readership of 833 thousand as of January 2022. It has the most extensive online audience and is Latvia's leading social media source. Having won the Most Influential Media Source on Social Media award three times and voted the favourite media brand in Latvia twice, its Facebook page has the highest number of followers for a Latvian-language media source (160,891 followers). AS Delfi employs 81 editors and journalists who create content in Latvian and Russian, and the publication launched AS Delfi Plus, a subscription-based service offering extended content, which was founded in 2019. It has 12,100 active subscribers as of January 2022.

As a member of the Latvian Media Ethics Council, Delfi stands for the highest quality standards, and several of its journalists are members of the Latvian Association of Journalists. Since 2020, AS Delfi has published fact-checking materials and other content that fights disinformation under the particular category "Atmaskots" (Debunked), and they became IFCN-certified fact-checkers in late 2021. As for their work with the fact-checkers in BECID in 2023, the highlights of AS Delfi were as follows.

- **Published 45 fact-checks**, available *on their website* and *the EDMO Fact-Check Repository.*
- Participated in the annual conversation festival "Lampa", offering a quiz – true or false article? (A media literacy intervention by fact-checkers and journalists.)
- Regularly incorporate fact-check articles and trends in the bi-weekly Delfi. tv show "*Komandcentrs*".
- Published *two quarterly reports* on disinformation trends from Russia (in cooperation with the *Centre for East European Policy Studies*).

2.4. Delfi Estonia

AS Delfi Meedia's investigative and fact-checking unit, Eesti Päevalehe Faktikontroll (which runs the podcast *Valeinfo! Paljastatud*), is an accredited member of the *IFCN* and adheres to its code of conduct. As a politically neutral publication, AS Delfi Meedia fact-checks claims from across the political spectrum. The team consisted of five members prior to BECID but has six members now: two dedicated fact-checkers (up from one in 2022), two members working on investigations and disinformation topics, and two focused solely on investigations. Frequently collaborating with the NGO Estonian Debate Society enables AS Delfi to also contribute to training the next generation of fact-checkers.

Delfi is the most visited online news site in Estonia, and the fact-checking unit benefits from it greatly. Even though the rest of the media corporation's publications use paywalls for revenue, Delfi Meedia's **fact-checks are continuously published without a paywall.** This allows the fact-checking unit to fund its activities with third-party grants or agreements, provided they maintain editorial independence. We at BECID believe that fact-checks should be accessible to all.

On average, AS Delfi Meedia's team publishes ten fact-checks a month not including translations, along with a bi-monthly podcast series and a freshly launched grant (funded by the IPI Newsspectrum) to amp up efforts in Russian language fact-checking. They are also partners in Facebook's third-party fact-checking program. In the scope of BECID's work in 2023, AS Delfi Meedia's highlights were as follows.

- **Published 86 fact-checks in Estonian**, available *on their website* and *the EDMO Fact-Check Repository.*

- Made *bi-weekly podcast episodes* to go deeper into current and topical disinformation topics, which ranged from networks to spreaders to disinformation consequences. Most episodes included experts as guests.
- Published ten in-depth disinformation analysis stories in the national newspaper. The team investigated and published stories about Russian influence and disinformation on Instagram and Facebook scams, among others.
- Composed and conducted *a public fact-checking workshop* in October 2023, open for the public but aimed at teachers, youth workers and other MIL education facilitators.
- Participated in conferences held during the European Media Literacy Week, such as the National Media Literacy Conference of Estonia, as speakers and trainers.
- Held guest lectures in different universities, schools, and institutions to share our tools and knowledge in fact-checking.
- Contributed to cross-Baltic investigations with our fact-checking partners from Latvia and Lithuania.

2.5. Is TikTok a Gateway to Politics in the Baltics? For Now, Only in Latvia

By Inga Spriņģe, Aistė Meidutė and Kaili Malts

Latvia is the first of the Baltic states where a TikTok party has been elected to parliament. Before the elections, their star was an unemployed young woman with a high-school diploma, but her videos had received millions of likes. Even though the number of TikTok users is pretty similar in all Baltic states, in Latvia, the platform is used by populist politicians spreading Kremlin-friendly messages. It does not play a role in politics in Estonia and Lithuania yet.

On the day that Re:Baltica is at the parliament building to speak to MP Glorija Grevcova, the TikTok celebrity does not have time to talk. With 100 thousand followers, she is way ahead of the most popular parliamentary deputies in Lithuania and Estonia who use the platform. Wearing a black dress complimented by a bright pink nail polish, Grevcova addresses the sitting three times on COVID-19 restrictions, immigration, and the language requirements for Russian-speaking educators. Similar subjects—the struggle for the rights of the simple people and the Russian-speaking population—made Grevcova, previously unknown, popular on TikTok. She shares her opinions on the platform daily yet hides from journalists. Re:Baltica is no exception—we are told to send our questions in writing. We do so but still get no answers.

The election of Grevcova's party For Stability! (Stabilitātei!) in parliament is an example of how TikTok has transformed in the last few years. From a platform where young people exchange funny videos, it has become a land of opportunity for populist politicians and conspiracy theorists.

Before the parliamentary elections in October 2022, there was no real political party to speak of—For Stability! was a list of a few popular social media personalities followed by names nobody had ever heard of. However, there was a responsive electorate that had previously been attracted to the Russian-speaking party Harmony (Saskaņa), which lost a part of its voters when the party condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine. And there were divisions in society that—after the fights over COVID-19 restrictions—have been further aggravated by Russia's war in Ukraine and a rapid increase in the cost of living.

For Stability! had a successful campaign on TikTok and in the micro districts of Rīga. As a result, the party gained 11 from 100 parliamentary seats, mainly thanks to the Russian-speaking voters in Rīga and Latgale.

The leader of the party, Aleksejs Rosļikovs, formerly of Harmony, used to be called the "mini-me" of Nils Ušakovs, the previous mayor of Riga. Before the election, Rosļikovs was regularly posting phone videos where he was criticising the current restrictions of the "regime", the growing costs of living and the destruction of Soviet-era monuments. He has not condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Grevcova is six times more popular on TikTok than Rosļikovs, and she is especially favoured in the Russian world of TikTok. She has not denounced the invasion either.

In a hand-held video, Grevcova sits on a couch and shares her confusion about why Europe should stop buying gas from Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. "Do you understand what that means for us? Yes, war, that is bad. But we are the ones who are going to suffer. And for what?" In a different video she is telling the president and prime minister of Latvia to "f**k off", and in another one she is enthusiastically talking about the fact that the State Security Service (VDD) has asked her to come in for questioning.

For the populists, an invitation from the VDD for questioning is like a medal to show off. The VDD has not made the content of the conversations public, but it is known that both Grevcova and Rosļikovs were warned by the service about giving interviews to the Belorussian and Russian propaganda media.

Grevcova has two ongoing criminal proceedings against her. Both were initiated after she was elected to parliament—one for providing false information on election documents, another one for a denial of the occupation of Latvia. "We looked at everything exhibited and understood—oh, how we are being fooled! If I used to think that there is propaganda here, but then going through this museum you understand what real propaganda is," she said after visiting the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia.

Where did she talk about this? On TikTok, of course.

How is TikTok used in the Baltics?

In the last few years, the number of users on the Chinese-owned social media platform has increased four times and it is used by every fifth inhabitant, Kantar Emor data shows. There is a similar number of users in Lithuania and Estonia, but the platform is hardly used for political purposes, and if it is, then by the liberal parties.

For comparison, Grevcova's TikTok content has three million "likes", while Tomas Vytautas Raskevičius, the most popular MP on TikTok in Lithuania, has 108 thousand likes, and in Estonia—Andres Sutt has 4,3 thousand likes.

Number of TikTok users in the Baltic States in certain age group
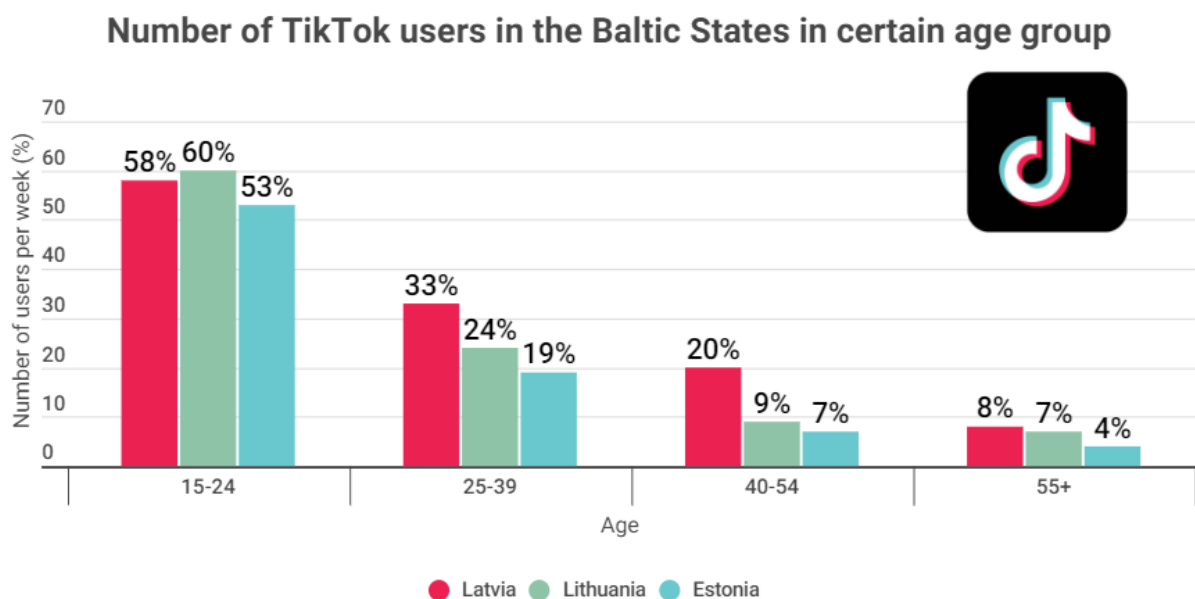
The research surveyed citizens of the Baltic States who have reached the age of 15. Source: Eurobarometer

Figure 4. Infogram snapshot from Re:Baltica. Data Source: Eurobarometer

In Latvia, unlike in its neighbour countries, TikTok is also intensively used by middle aged people, which makes up around 20% of its users in the certain age group, while in Lithuania and Estonia the number is half, as shown by the Eurobarometer survey on Figure 4. Facebook is still the most popular platform to reach the electorate in the Baltics.

Only the liberals in Lithuania

In Lithuania, only 8 of 141 parliamentarians have TikTok accounts with more than a hundred followers. The top three accounts are run by deputies from Freedom Party —a political movement with liberal values, which is also the youngest in regard to the average age of its MPs. The most popular TikTokers are MP Raskevičius (108.4K likes), Aušrinė Armonaitė (107.9K likes)—the founder of the party and Minister of Economy and Innovation, and MP Morgana Danielė (49.8K likes).

All three share very similar content: mostly political ads, excerpts from conferences and parliamentary speeches. For example, Raskevičius posted 12 videos in 2022 highlighting the agenda and values of the party: passing the civil union law, the campaign against bullying and hate speech, the decriminalisation of small amounts of cannabis. The most popular video of Raskevičius shows him on the parliamentary podium explaining how to pronounce the word for drug addiction in Lithuanian—a response to another MP saying it wrong.

Armonaitė has been even less active on the platform. She has posted eight videos about her governmental work and to show her support for Ukraine. Her most popular video (18.7K views) is of her standing next to Kira Rudik, chairwoman of Ukraine's Holos Party, and expressing support of Ukraine joining the European Union.

The third most popular politician on TikTok in Lithuania is Danielė who posted 15 times during 2022. Her most popular video has 227.3K views. There she speaks against banning flavoured e-cigarettes arguing that it would lead to additional health risks (the parliament did end up banning them and the ban was implemented on July 1, 2022).

Public relations specialist Liutauras Ulevičius says the trend is not surprising: "Their voters are TikTok users and they want to reach them (..) Politicians do not really use TikTok to reach the older or elderly voters, because it means putting in more effort than you can get out of it." The TikTok format—short videos with little text—is meant for emotional outbursts, not for serious discussions, says Ulevičius.

Rugilė Andrejevskytė, a mentor at the youth-founded policy monitoring network I Know What I am Choosing shares this view. "On the one hand, it is difficult for politicians to communicate via TikTok because their content does not easily get a large number of views (..) On top of that, there is the TikTok format itself, which is harder to use than just creating a post on Facebook. You must hit a trend or create it. The [investment] of time and resources to create an engaging video is too high for the number of views gained. In addition, many still feel that the platform is cringe."

Barely anyone in Estonia

In Estonia, only two of the 101 MPs promote themselves on TikTok. None of them have a large follower-base and they do not work on it actively. One of the Estonian politicians on TikTok is Andres Sutt from the liberal Reformierakond, the liberal party which is currently in the government. He has published 30 videos that explain current political events or why the opposition is wrong. He thinks TikTok is a better app to reach the youth than the other social platforms. "Video is also more memorable than text, and it is quite fun to make short videos yourself," he added. In upcoming parliamentary elections, statistics show that his main electorate is in the capital, Tallinn. "I also think that my personal election messages, which talk about the state of the economy, cyber security, the business environment and green reform, will speak to young voters. I guess we will see the actual results on election day," Sutt said.

Nevertheless, the former Minister of Business and Information Technology stresses that he does not use TikTok on his work devices: "Cyber security is very important to me when using TikTok".

There is also the politician Martin Repinski who used to represent the previous opposition party. He has published only four videos and the last one was about a year ago. Only one of the videos addresses politics. The rest seem to be just for entertainment.

The liberal party Eesti200 is the most active one on TikTok: their official party account has received 23K likes. Eesti200 are not represented in the parliament but recent opinion polls show they might actually take seats in the upcoming elections in March. Can this be thanks to TikTok? "One of our focuses has been to reach young people. Being on the platforms that are popular and that are used by them is one of the ways to do that," says Johanna Veeremaa, a Eesti200 party member who runs their TikTok account. "We went into it thinking that it is fun and trendy, not like a tool to get the popular vote."

TikTok users in the Baltics

🇱🇹 LITHUANIA	23%	
🇱🇻 LATVIA	23%	
🇪🇪 ESTONIA	17%	

Source: KANTAR Latvia Digital, Spring 2022
Weekly total of internet users aged 16-74 on TikTok.

re:baltica
THE BALTIC CENTER FOR INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

Figure 5. Infogram snapshot from Re:Baltica. Data Source: KANTAR Latvia.

Others are catching up, too. EKRE, the biggest conservative party in the country, posted its first TikTok last May. In it, the leader of the party put his signature black fedora on a hanger and announced that they had now joined TikTok. The video had over 80 thousand views, but the next ones were not nearly as popular (on average, 2000-3000 views per post).

By contrast, when their main competitor, Reformierakond, shared their first video in October, it got only a little over 4000 views. The video was of their most popular politicians getting ready for an electoral photoshoot. Nevertheless, their *second video* shows the prime minister in front of the parliament giving one of the opposition leaders a firm answer to a tax-related question and that got a total of 230 thousand views. So far, the party has made three videos in total.

3. RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

WP3 Overview

In the third work package, the BECID team works on evidence-based improvements in combating misinformation and developing media literacy in Estonia, the BECID network, the Baltics, and other EDMOs. Collaboration among researchers has been more fruitful than expected: the initial plan for 2023 was to publish one report by year-end based on a systematic literature review of fact-checking epistemology and methods (**T3.1**); research Baltic fact-checking practices, processes, a comparative study of tools used (**T3.2**); commence research on vulnerable target groups' reactions and understandings of various fact-checking forms (**T3.3**); and analyse different media and platform regulations and policies concerning the combating of misinformation in the Baltic countries (**T3.4**).

We have surpassed the initial planned amount of outputs from this work package: the initial two reports and two publications in scientific journals should, now that primary research activities have been carried out, lead to at least **six reports** and **four publications** in scientific journals. In addition to the initial research goals, the team has also conducted sandbox research with researchers and MIL facilitators within becid, leading to another publication; a manuscript on using micro-interventions in education as a tool to develop media literacy is already completed (under review). The results have been introduced in news media, four conferences and four training sessions to civil society organisations, supporting grassroots initiatives combatting misinformation, like those seen in comment sections or social media posts (some examples include #NAFO and #minasiin), led by the NGO Vox Rationis. We left room for **sandbox research between researchers and fact-checkers** but had not written the project with sandbox research between researchers and MIL facilitators in mind – the output came from progressing with the rest of the project, nevertheless and adding another (surprise) publication to the list. This possibility is something that we shall keep in mind in 2024, too.

A standard methodology for analysing fact-checking's response to misinformation's impact on relevant target groups will be developed in 2024. A proposal for guidelines for BECID's fact-checkers will also be presented.

In 2023, however, the BECID team sought to improve fact-checking methods within the BECID network, in the Baltics, and EDMO fact-checking hubs, making it more efficient and effective in reaching and counteracting disinformation with vulnerable audiences. To do so, the BECID project set forth a range of research objectives: reviewing academic literature and automated tools, producing comparative articles on fact-checking practices, and generating reports on various aspects of fact-checking, including regulatory measures and audience responses to information disorder interventions. None of it would have happened without the cooperation between our research partners: the University of Tartu, Tallinn University, Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences and Vytautas Magnus University.

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3.1. Four Universities That Work Together

The four universities have similar skills and resources but also different strengths to share to complement each other. This enables the consortium to work with expertise in various relevant fields such as communication, social and political sciences, law, economics, network science, and data and computer sciences. Each task in the research package is led by a different university.

Tallinn University (TLU) is one of the three largest Estonian universities. It is an integrated research and development, creative, educational and cultural institution and is particularly strong in the areas of educational innovation, digital and media culture, cultural competencies, healthy and sustainable lifestyle, and society and culture. Work within BECID will be carried out by the Baltic Film, Media and Arts School, which serves as a competence centre for communication and audio-visual knowledge and expertise but is also known for innovative approaches.

Therefore, it is no surprise that TLU is in charge of **T3.1**: Evaluating existing knowledge and tools: a systematic review of scientific literature, assessment of existing tools for fact-checking and multimodal information verification tools. One of the critical elements in the research has been trying out new tools to conduct systematic literature reviews. Hence, it will also provide methodological support for other colleagues in the EDMO network. In addition to leading their research task, TLU has participated in all research tasks in WP3. For T3.2, they have helped with research design and editing and will continue to support the analysis with their reflection.

The University of Tartu (UTARTU) is a leading university in Estonia, particularly strong in media and communication research. It belongs to the top 1% of the world's most-cited universities and research institutions. The work within BECID will be carried out by the Institute of Social Studies (ISS), an esteemed centre of competence in communication and information sciences, social work and policy. QS University Rankings by Subject has placed our media and communication research among the world's best fields 150-200 for six consecutive years. Therefore, it is no surprise that UTARTU and our PI, Prof. Andra Siibak, are responsible for the research quality of BECID's research team.

UTARTU participated in the literature review team on fact-checking research (**T3.1**) to outline the topics studied and research gaps in the fact-checking research field. For **T3.2**, the task UTARTU is in charge of, the team conducted interviews with Estonian fact-checkers (N=11). The interviews included all organisations conducting fact-checks in Estonia. Based on that, UTARTU analysed the interviews of all Baltic states and synthesised preliminary results. Based on the study protocol for all three countries, the interviews cover fact-checkers' backgrounds, work practices, use of tools, regulative aspects of the trade, and their field assessment. The results will be published in a scientific journal in 2024. These results were presented at the Conference on Baltic Studies in Europe (CBSE) "Turning Points: Values and

Conflicting Futures in the Baltics", from 15-17 June 2023 (by Marju Himma-Kadakas and Maia Klaassen). The results were also rewritten into an Estonian article for the yearbook of the Estonian Academic Journalism Society titled "Faktikontrolli artiklitest Eesti praktikas" ("On the practice of fact-checking articles in Estonia"). The article gives an overview of previous research on fact-checking and a general overview of fact-checking in Estonia (also by Marju Himma-Kadakas and Maia Klaassen). We also represented and tested the preliminary results of the interviews at a meeting with BECID fact-checkers on September 8th, 2023, in line with our promises for **T2.2**: Regular assessment of Baltic fact-checkers work and sharing of best practices.

In addition to taking part in all research in WP3, including **T3.3** and **T3.4**, UTARTU also led the analysis of pre-existing data into a new research paper; this is the bonus manuscript also mentioned in the previous Chapter. **T3.5** (if we choose to call it so) aims to advance scientific knowledge on MILs, and an article manuscript, "Social Media Microinterventions: Testing Information Activism as a Media and Information Literacy Tool", is in review and awaiting publication.

Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) is a well-known journalism and media/communications education and research centre. VMU has always been open to expanding its know-how through international, national and regional cooperation, responding to the most pressing issues of the functioning (political, economic, socio-cultural) environment. The Department of Public Communications at the Faculty of Political Science and Diplomacy is responsible for the implementation of the BECID project, which is well known as an advanced journalism and media/communications education and research centre not only in the Baltic States, the Central and Eastern Europe but also internationally. Therefore, it should be no surprise that VMU is responsible for **T3.3**: Conceptual framework based on the study of audiences' reception of fact-checking genres and formats. VMU and the partners' team were working on the development of the conceptual model for digital vulnerability identification and drafting schemes for survey questions to identify public responses to fact-checking operations. The model is presented as a research report, "Mitigating (dis)information vulnerability with risk awareness and human-centred approaches".

Of course, VMU also takes part in all research activities. For **T3.1**, they have participated in three of the four literature reviews conducted, engaging in all workflows significantly. As for **T3.2**, VMU was responsible for Lithuania's data, interviewed local fact-checkers for the analysis, and will participate in publishing the results. The researchers of VMU also participate in **T3.4** and are to be patted on the back for involving PhD students in a meaningful way. In 2024, VMU's focus will be on researching national ethical codes for journalists.

Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences (ViA) is a public university, an internationally recognised micro-university with a strong focus on fundamental and applied research and international cooperation. The mission of ViA is to promote the sustainable development of knowledge society on regional, national, and international levels, providing the private and public sectors with high-level professionals and conducting research to address societal

challenges. ViA remains focused on the fact-checking (and information verification) regulation in the Baltic States and collaborates with EDMO's Policy Research and Analysis Working Group, which addresses crucial policy research topics in the fight against disinformation.

Since ViA is a strong player in strategic communication, disinformation, media and information literacy, and civic participation fields, they are responsible for **T3.4**: Analysis of regulative aspects of fact-checking, including implementation of Code of Practice on Disinformation by Baltic media actors. The initial gathering of information about the regulatory elements of fact-checking, which include laws, policies, and self-regulatory mechanisms, has been completed. This has enabled the research team to get acquainted with the previous assessments of the implementation of the Code of Practice on Disinformation and to share information with other members of BECID. The report resulting from this will be published in May 2024.

ViA also participated in **T3.1**'s literature review on the state of the art of fact-checking research and tools. For **T3.2**, ViA conducted and analysed eight interviews with fact-checkers, including journalists and those who study disinformation on behalf of an NGO. The interviews cover the majority of fact-checking organisations in Latvia, and in these, information about fact-checkers backgrounds, work practices, use of tools, regulative aspects of the trade, and their assessment of the field was gathered. For **T3.3**, Via participated in developing a research instrument to study the media use and media literacy levels of vulnerable groups.

Additionally, ViA has contributed to **T4.1.** by helping in the preparation of online seminars for Baltic teachers, as well as to **T4.3** by assisting with the organisation of intergenerational media literacy activities.

As a general overview of the research organisations' role in the collaboration has been given, next we present the summarised initial results of the literature reviews conducted for **T3.1**.

3.2. The Evaluation and Analysis of Existing Knowledge and Tools

The following is an overview of Task 3.1.

The aim of **T3.1** in the BECID framework is to provide information about all the relevant academic research literature available in the field related to fact-checking epistemologies and practices and reception and intervention studies pertaining to fact-checking and information disorders. However, the original plans have been exceeded multiple times. In addition to one report promised as the output of this task, we will prepare three additional reports and attempt to publish them all in scientific journals, too – the research gaps detected provide valuable insight for our colleagues around the EDMO network. This was one of the objectives of our research work package: to engage in collaboration that has identified existing knowledge gaps, positioning us as experts on the international stage.

Additionally, there will be a review of tools usable by professionals and individuals seeking to verify content. Apart from the study on vulnerable target groups, a relevant report will be released to disseminate results swiftly to those requiring them. Moreover, aside from the report, an article is expected based on analysing aspects regulating fact-checking.

To achieve this goal, the members of the consortium carried out a systematic literature review focusing on specific subsections of the EDMO BECID project that are of higher importance:

1. The BECID hub studies societal resilience, vulnerability and risk awareness topics. In particular, how to evaluate and measure such developments within the society. Considering the above, a research group in WP 3.1. set out to explore how this topic has been covered in relevant research literature. An answer to the following research question: "What research methodologies allow us to describe this distinct area of research?"

2. Presumably, all three Baltic countries already have cultures of resilience, as the societal pressure to cope with disinformation has been there since the late 2000s. There is a lack of systematic knowledge of what has been done in this respect among BECID stakeholders (i.e. all three Baltic countries). Therefore, a separate group of researchers is working on WP 3.1. they have delved into what has already been published in academic literature and various national documents (reports, policy documents) compiled by different public institutions.

3. There seems to be a general lack of knowledge concerning the important topics studied in fact-checking research areas. What are the criteria of categorisation that describe this field of research? Also – what recommendations can be made based on the thematic/topical and research categorisation criteria to improve the research in fact-checking?
   Concerning the previous point, there is an angle worth paying attention to separately: what kind of audience-aimed interventions are there in addressing information disorders? To what extent did the audience members attribute agency in setting the agenda for the intervention? And what kind of audience-aimed interventions are considered successful? If yes, what makes an intervention successful?

4. Clearly, teaching media literacy in school is an interdisciplinary objective. Therefore, it seems essential to address the scientific argumentation for teaching media literacy from a multidisciplinary perspective, including different focuses on methodologies. Also, there appears to be a vital sub-task to map other use cases for teaching ML from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Fact-checking and information verification are significant components of media literacy. Teaching media literacy in school is an interdisciplinary objective. Therefore, addressing the

scientific argumentation for teaching media literacy from a multidisciplinary perspective is crucial, including different focuses on methodologies. Also, it is essential to map other use cases for teaching MILs from an interdisciplinary perspective.

While the output of this work will be reports describing the current research in the focus areas identified through the questions, the participants also agreed to continue the work on publishing the results in an academic literature review format. This will allow the results of our project to be presented to a broader audience.

All the reporting in the framework of **T3.1** is done via systematically revising internationally recognised academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCO, and Google Scholar. As a principle, we did not rule out knowledge published outside the formal academic channels and formats that may include working papers, policy documents, expert reports, etc. However, in most cases, the queries were made with an academic focus, and we were most interested in peer-reviewed studies. What follows is a conceptual overview of the most important findings of the areas of inquiry listed above.

3.2.1. Balancing Resilience, Vulnerability and Situational Risk Awareness: Mitigating Communicative Inequalities in the Baltic Countries

By Auksė Balčytienė, Andra Siibak, Signe Ivask

Numerous scholarly attempts have been made to clarify the fuzziness of the phenomenon of disinformation and the effectiveness of responses to combat it – spanning from structural and legal protection systems on a governmental level to fact-checking and media literacy efforts by various organisations, including news media outlets, research institutions, creative industries, and NGOs. Still, a considerable number of unresolved inquiries persist.

One of the challenges is the realisation that establishing a resilient society hinges on the nuances of strategies formulated within distinct political and cultural contexts. This observation calls for greater attention toward "context-centered factors", including trust in institutions and fellow citizens. By delving into culturally and contextually focused analysis, the pertinent question is not only how the anti-disinformation system with counteracting measures operates in a concrete national setting (in practice), but it is also essential to understand the attitudinal perceptions and thinking patterns of different stakeholders (political and media elites on the one hand, news media and educators as well as ordinary citizens on the other) who play a role in everyday opinion-making and communication (see *here*, for example).

This finding draws attention to context-specific resilience features, determining varying resilience cultures among the studied countries. This should be the basis for implementing any policy or other measures, such as regulatory, journalistic, and media educational interventions focussed on combating online disinformation.

As revealed by the experience from collaborative partnerships among BECID partners in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, the most significant concerns in efficient policymaking in the three Baltic countries revolve around the imperative transition from responsive and reactionary to a more proactive stance in enhancing the levels of "risk awareness" among different groups of stakeholders.

Several factors must be considered here. What is evident, therefore, is an indication that "digital resilience" capacities on strategic (macro), organisational (mezzo), and individual (micro) levels must evolve to align with the complexities of digital communication environments and changing news ecosystems (see *State-of-the-art report here*, for example). The Baltic countries provide an example demonstrating a high level of risk awareness in political strategic thinking when designing systems of structural resilience, accompanied by implementing practices at both macro and organisational levels. On the citizen level, this suggests that, aside from advocating for "critical thinking" strategies (a common theme in all media literacy policies), it is necessary to enhance and cultivate an understanding of "effective communication" practices. This should be coupled with a culture that embraces the inclusion of "vulnerable groups" and the promotion of "situational awareness" and "dialogic ethics" in communication.

Identifying "digital vulnerabilities" is selective in all societies, yet it is unlikely any polity could free itself of vulnerabilities. In traditional terms, vulnerability is often connected to socially underprivileged groups: non-citizens, people with disabilities, older adults, people experiencing poverty and so on, whereas information-related vulnerabilities pertain to digital exploitation and "communicative inequalities". Information-based exploitations might take on different forms, such as promotions of conspiratorial thinking, which can result in the deprivation of specific quality information resources or fundamental rights among groups.

This, in turn, illuminates research gaps in the region. If an analysis of the documents shows how media literacy tends to be a "grey area" in different ways, then who funds media literacy training, and how do these institutions collaborate? How are the fundings strategised?

Who is in charge of the topic "media literacy"? How do the institutions divide it? The data analysis shows that it can be considered a security issue, as well as an educational and cultural one. More research should focus on combatting disinformation from the perspective of communicative inequalities, especially in the Baltic region.

3.2.2. Conceptual And Methodological Approaches in Societal Resilience Research

By Kristina Juraitė, Dmytro Iarovyi, Sten Torpan, Ragne Kõuts-Klemm

The systematic literature review aimed at public response and capacities to cope with increasing information challenges and risks stemming from disinformation and other media-related disorders is based on 150 articles that have been published since 2010. Conceptually,

the studies define societal resilience against disinformation mainly as social capacities, competencies, and resources available for individuals and different groups of society to discern and resist the harmful effects of disinformation.

Research shows that societal resilience and capacity to cope with disinformation is country-specific and highly dependent on the socio-political and information environment. Based on the structural conditions (networks, institutions, and discourses) on one hand and social actors' (individual capacities and agency) approach on the other, these studies illuminate a variety of factors, including the sociocultural (values, knowledge, trust and practice) and the contextual ones (social, political, and economic conditions, institutional settings, and power relations).

Research and policy studies included in the literature review illustrate all three levels of analysis: macro, mezzo, and micro, providing evidence on the inter/national, institutional, and both collective and individual awareness of the risks, including the ways and measures to cope with these.

Piloting the literature review underscored the importance of societal resilience and capacities in coping with the increasing challenges and risks posed by disinformation and other media-related disorders. The studies define this resilience as the social capacities, competencies, and resources available to individuals and societal groups to discern and resist the harmful effects of disinformation. As we move forward, continuing this multi-level analysis and developing effective measures to enhance societal resilience against disinformation across different contexts is crucial.

A full report on this shall be published on BECID's website in 2024.

3.2.3. Teaching Media Literacy at School as an Interdisciplinary Objective

By Andres Kõnno, Külli-Riin Tigasson

Teaching media literacy in schools is an interdisciplinary task and a meta-level issue. This is because media literacy goes beyond simply consuming information. It involves critical thinking, understanding biases, evaluating sources, and discerning facts and opinions. An interdisciplinary approach is essential because media is multifaceted, and teaching this at school requires the efforts of all teaching staff, not just the efforts of a few, leading some particular area of life (literature, languages, philosophy or anything else).

Our retrospective on this area of research goes back to 2010, and there are around 200 articles that match those criteria. Of course, various solutions for teaching media literacy from the interdisciplinary perspective are culture-specific. But it is still worth mentioning that besides defining media literacy as a multidisciplinary task, many elaborations on the subject enlarge our initial take on interdisciplinarity. Discovering all these aspects is a complex task,

and it seems to not be that common among ML scholars. The reviewed studies rather often elaborate separately on several angles of media literacy, and there appears to be a lack of shared understanding of a complex and unified approach that could serve equally in various countries and cultures.

The preliminary list of the several aspects that should be considered in teaching media literacy from an interdisciplinary perspective includes the following:

1. Technological impact: examining the role of technology in media dissemination and its societal implications;
2. Critical thinking: developing skills to analyse media content critically and discern reliable information;
3. Multimodal learning: recognising that media literacy encompasses various forms of media (visual, textual, auditory, etc.) and utilising diverse approaches to address them
4. Digital literacy: developing skills to navigate the digital landscape, including assessing online sources and understanding algorithms;
5. Misinformation and disinformation: exploring the spread of false information and strategies to counter it
6. Bias and stereotypes: investigating how the media perpetuates biases and stereotypes related to gender, race, and more;
7. Algorithms: understanding how algorithms shape content delivery and influence information consumption
8. Cultural identity and representation: Analysing how media shapes cultural identities and representations in society
9. Ethical media practices: addressing ethical content creation, consumption, and sharing concerns.

In conclusion, teaching media literacy in schools is a complex, interdisciplinary task that requires a comprehensive approach and a lot of teacher support. Our initial literature review reveals a lack of a unified approach that could be universally applied across different countries and cultures. However, it also highlights the importance of considering various aspects such as technological impact, critical thinking, multimodal learning, digital literacy, misinformation and disinformation, bias and stereotypes, algorithms, cultural identity and representation, and ethical media practices. These aspects are integral to developing a robust media literacy curriculum. As we move forward, it is crucial to continue exploring these aspects and strive for a shared understanding and approach to teaching media literacy that can be adapted to various cultural contexts. This will ensure that our students are well-equipped to navigate the multifaceted media landscape of the 21st century.

A full report on this shall be published on BECID's website in 2024.

4. ESTABLISHMENT AND EXECUTION OF MIL ACTIVITIES

WP4 Overview

In the fourth work package, BECID's Media and Information Literacy (MIL) team has done comprehensive work in 2023 to raise awareness and skills in the Baltics. The team's activities have targeted various groups, including children, teachers, youth, policymakers, and the general public. In the context of formal education, our focus has been on offering updated training programs for teachers to enhance their media literacy (**T4.1**).

Although media literacy is mandatory as a 35-hour module in the 11th grade in Estonia, some teachers do not consider themselves competent enough, resulting in the topic being overlooked. In Latvia and Lithuania, where MIL is not mandatory, and the teaching of it in formal education, therefore, depends on the educator, it is even more critical to provide ready-to-go materials. Thus, in 2023, we developed **MIL training programs for current and future teachers** as a part of **T4.1**. In 2024, we will release a recommended curriculum, written materials, and lesson plans accessible in BECID and EDMO repositories and to the broader public.

BECID developed a method and materials and trained the following trainers for intergenerational digital skills training for youth and elders (**T4.3**). As the BECID team, we see our mission not as elevating ourselves, EDMO or our organisation but as developing resilience by supporting existing organisations in achieving sustainable funding models. We therefore also proposed an additional project funding to support activities of high school students with their first entrepreneurial efforts (now registered under Alesper OÜ) teaching digital skills in elderly care centres in collaboration with Estonia's biggest telecommunications operator, Telia. Sharing the results of **T4.3** with another entity (without any personal gain) enables us to ensure that the activities of this task continue after BECID's project has ended. While BECID's role was in project design and ensuring material adherence to research, Telia's outstanding work on a Christmas campaign reached numerous Estonian households (statistics will be shared in BECID's final report with partners' consent).

One of our main principles has been integrating teaching MILs with every event, communication activity, and participation in working groups. The previously listed events and media coverages have gained input, momentum, and knowledge from the fourth work package. As a result, MIL researchers have been able to share the outcomes of their work with society more rapidly compared to the pace of traditional scientific publishing.

Not all the work we do in WP4 has been formulated as a task. For example, we have also actively engaged in advocacy within Estonia's MIL network and international networks. For instance, the BECID PC was recently invited to co-chair the UNESCO MIL Alliance's North American and European working group. Next year will see the continuation of the work

initiated in the summer of 2023 on developing standards and quality assessments for MIL interventions in collaboration with other EDMO experts. The completed tool will immediately be applied to evaluate Estonia's MIL action plan and the performance of its operators.

In 2023, BECID's MIL team also met representatives from TikTok, Meta, and Google, along with the State Chancellery, to explore their plans for funding MIL activities (Code of Practice on Disinformation, Commitment 17), resulting in another new project proposal funding for media literacy activities for the Estonian Debating Society. (Argumentation and critical thinking are undoubtedly fundamental to media literacy.)

VMU and partners' team has been working on the preparation of training materials to be used in digital information verification trainings (**T4.2**). The experience and materials from the pilot project DIGIRES *"Media literacy without myths: How to recognize truth and resist lies"* (have been adapted to be used in new learning situations, specifically aimed at teaching responsible information use to identified groups with varying (dis)information vulnerabilities. The materials – 5 extended examples – are being re-designed to accommodate contextual/country specificities, translated into English language and presented to project artners. In the next months in Spring 2024, targeted trainings will take place in each country. Achievements from T4.2 include: scientific publications on informed information use (submitted to OBS: Observatorio and EKOME edited journals, UNESCO MILID edited book), conference presentations (CBSE in Kaunas, DMD in Dubrovnik), and source verification trainings with teachers and librarians.

In addition, we will seek to increase information resilience and encourage civic activism among Russian-speaking Baltic residents via co-created media literacy campaigns (**T4.4**). As we prepare for the beginning of the design of co-creating effective MIL Hackathons for the Baltic youth (**T4.5**), we are also planning on writing a scale-up project to make sure we can motivate student participants with prizes (the Grant Agreement does not allow us to reward exemplary results with stipends). But first, more on work done in 2023 by our MIL team.

4.1. Work done by BECID members on MIL in 2023

The fourth work package is run by **the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence** (BCME), a non-profit NGO that operates as a society with 13 founding members (Baltic public broadcasters, media associations, universities, and others). From its inception as a grassroots initiative of the Baltic journalistic community, BCME has evolved into a powerful hub. It promotes professional growth, media intelligence, and critical thinking, striving for positive change in the communities it serves.

BCME has been actively enhancing digital and media literacy through various initiatives in 2023, which has also been helpful input for BECID tasks and outcomes. First, they *conducted youth training sessions* on November 24th and 25th to prepare younger participants to support their older family or community members. Second, *their "Resilient Baltics" project*

aims to strengthen media and information literacy, particularly in regions vulnerable to disinformation, by developing a detailed methodology, educating local activists, conducting "Train the Trainer" courses across the Baltic states, and establishing media clubs as ongoing resources for communities. Third, *in collaboration with TechSoup and the Civic Resilience Initiative,* BCME is mapping Baltic NGOs' challenges related to disinformation and digital security to enhance their resistance to these threats. Furthermore, BCME focuses on Latvia with their ongoing project *"Media literacy sector evaluation, policy recommendations, and ML integration in the educational system"*. The latter involves creating educational materials, conducting seminars for secondary school teachers, offering input on Latvia's Media Policy draft, and organising practical workshops for teachers.

One of BCME's focus areas is media development, aimed at achieving long-lasting results, thereby making media more resilient and capable of combating disinformation and other threats to freedom of speech. Therefore, a significant portion of the training provided by BCME includes media literacy, debunking, and fact-checking, with activities tailored to different audience segments. That is also reflected in their work for BECID.

BCME initiated the official commencement of the Digimentor task (**T4.3**) on November 16th to introduce its overarching concept and diverse activities. First, they invited all relevant stakeholders to participate in that event, and second, they made a specific request for the University of Tartu team to present their collaborative plan with Telia Estonia. Expanding the task's (**T1.3**) horizon, BCME organised a dedicated event in Riga in mid-December. A highlight awaited attendees: the firsthand account from Digimentors, whose experiences enriched BECID's collective understanding and inspired continued efforts in this domain.

Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) oversees **T4.2**: Training fact-checkers and social media activists on how fact-checking works, building on the experience from the EU-funded project DIGIRES. VMU and the partners' team have been working on the preparation of training materials to be used in digital information verification training. The experience and materials from the pilot project DIGIRES "Media literacy without myths: How to recognise truth and resist lies" (https://digires.lt/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Metodologinis_leidinys.pdf) have been adapted to be used in new learning situations, aimed explicitly at teaching responsible information use to identified groups with varying (dis)information vulnerabilities. The materials – 5 extended examples – are being re-designed to accommodate contextual/country specificities, translated into English language and presented to project partners. In the following months in Spring 2024, targeted trainings will take place in each country.

As for **Tallinn University** (TLU), they are responsible for **T4.1** and are also the national institution responsible for teacher training. In March 2023, preparations commenced for the MIL course program, a 28-hour pilot program tailored for school teachers in Estonia. The course includes sessions on designing MIL lessons and subsequent student testing. The pilot, spanning April 13-14 and May 2, hosted 25 registered teachers, with 19 completing the program and earning certification. Continuing the initiative, on September 18-19, 24 teachers

commenced the second edited iteration of the 3-day, 28-hour MIL program in Estonia. Tallinn University has also initiated its second revised course for the *teacher's MIL program.*

Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences (ViA) also participates in all MIL initiatives of BECID, having contributed to **T4.1** by compiling data on past MIL endeavours within the institution, evaluating their suitability for teacher incorporation into a toolkit, and collaborating with other WP members. ViA assessed existing media literacy resources and identified teachers' requirements. Additionally, they co-hosted an online seminar in English for Baltic educators, focusing on media literacy. For **T4.3**, ViA contributed to planning an intergenerational media literacy training program.

As for the **University of Tartu** (UTARTU), their input for Digimentors (**T4.3**) has been of utmost importance, as their experience with a previous pilot project is the source of the design of the intervention in BECID, too. UTARTU launched post-preparation activities **T4.3** in October 2023 to pair tech-savvy youth with older adults seeking digital literacy support. While the BECID project primarily focuses on updating learning materials, UTARTU actively leads efforts to establish the national Digimentors network, enabling youth participation across Estonia systematically and sustainably. In this effort, Inger Klesment from UTARTU facilitated the collaboration between former student company Digiabi's young members from Luunja School and Telia. Supported by Telia's funding, they teach seniors computer skills in day centres countrywide.

Additionally, UTARTU created the segment on teaching digital skills to seniors, featured on Telia's "*Help*" page as part of the 2023 Christmas campaign, "Skill is a Gift." Furthering the commitment, on December 11, in partnership with the Back to School e-lessons team, UTARTU produced an educational video on the topic. In 2024, UTARTU plans to proactively expand the Digimentor (**T4.3**) network through engagement with schools, youth centres, and the Estonian Employment Office. Initial discussions with relevant stakeholders have already taken place, and the project might be scaled up on a national level as a My First Job initiative.

To enhance the reach of the results of **T4.1,** UTARTU, alongside the whole WP4 team, has organised three *BaltsTeachMIL seminars* to advance Baltic education workers' media literacy knowledge in an accessible and bitesize manner. The Zoominars have tackled core issues such as search skills and available materials, fact-checking, and problematic content on social media. Additionally, UTARTU created *a shared space for universities* to showcase their syllabi and share the best tasks and materials with other active work, which will resume in 2024.

As a campaign created out of sandbox cooperation within the hub, UTARTU also led the creation of practical interventions that intertwine the web and physical world, often done with students. For example, Gretel Juhansoo coordinated a media literacy-themed physical intervention called "TikTok House" at the end of 2022, focusing on the platform's algorithm. The intervention occurred in Tartu's Light Village from November 27, 2022, to January 8, 2023, where a glass pavilion was allocated. The project was created as a group work within

Maria Murumaa-Mengel's course "Media in the Era of Disinformation." About 80 thousand people visited the TikTok House. Verbal feedback indicated that the knowledge gained from the house was new and exciting.

Additionally, the intervention was linked to the Republic of Estonia Government Office TikTok contest, which encouraged participants to showcase knowledge obtained from the intervention in their TikTok video submissions. Nearly 70 videos were submitted to the contest, and as of November 2023, around 1.2 million views have been accumulated on the 40 publicly available videos.

Another TikTok House was set up at the Paide Opinion Festival on August 11–12, where it received positive feedback. The project has been praised by TikTok's Trust and Safety team, with whom Gretel Juhansoo is in contact and is developing potential future cooperation. See recommendations on how to replicate this project in the following Chapter.

4.2. Putting Tiktok Inside A House: An Offline MIL Intervention About Our Online Lives

By Gretel Juhansoo, Project Manager of the TikTok House and a candidate for a bachelor's degree in Journalism and Communication program at the University of Tartu[1]

A TikTok house is a physical space media literacy intervention. It is a space where TikTok comes to life in a relatively small, cosy room. Visitors can quickly learn about the TikTok algorithm, how it works and what data it collects. The main goal of the intervention is to show people that the TikTok algorithm reflects the users themselves and what risks a user takes just by using TikTok. By now, the TikTok house has been built in two different seasons and cities in Estonia for two completely different events. This shows that the intervention can be adapted to any format and time, depending on what is relative and needed.

As the terms "physical space" and "TikTok house" suggest, you need a house to start. We were lucky with the first TikTok house, as we came up with the idea just before Christmas time when, in our hometown, Tartu, small (2x4m) glasshouses were built for the Christmas village on the Town hall square. The latest TikTok house was constructed at the Estonian

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[1] Note from authors: the following will explain how to build the TikTok house. You can adapt and modify these steps or use the house elements in any physical space. All relevant links and pictures are included; you only need a few extra ideas, a printer, a pair of scissors, some glue, and a laminator machine (arguably the best purchase you'll ever make).

Opinion festival, almost two hours from Tartu. This is where the importance of networking and seeking collaboration between education providers comes in. We contacted the local vocational education centre to see if they would like to build a house for us. Thanks to an enthusiastic bunch of people, we got our dream house. So we suggest seeing if any events/projects with spaces could be used as a TikTok house or contact people who could build you a house!

Once the giant elephant (house) in the room, aka the exterior, is out of the way, it is time to think about the interior. The process is divided into two: research and design. Let us discuss (not at all tedious) research. The main idea of the TikTok house is to take people on an adventure. One is where they can explore what an algorithm is, get more information on the TikTok algorithm, and then get tips on how to influence their TikTok For You Page. The information hangs down from the ceiling on round information bubbles in the previous order. That way, it is easy to read and noticeable, as more than less likely, someone will walk into the papers. We have collected seven different facts about the TikTok algorithm. Any time there is a change or news, you can modify the facts or add a new information bubble. (*Download information bubbles and fun facts here*).

Winter edition

We have also added some extra information in both TikTok houses we have built, depending on what kind of event the house has been made for, who our audience would be or what is relevant. As the first TikTok house was built for an Estonian Christmas village, you can only imagine that temperatures were cold, not to say freezing. In addition, we had to consider that many different age groups would visit the house over the span of almost two months.
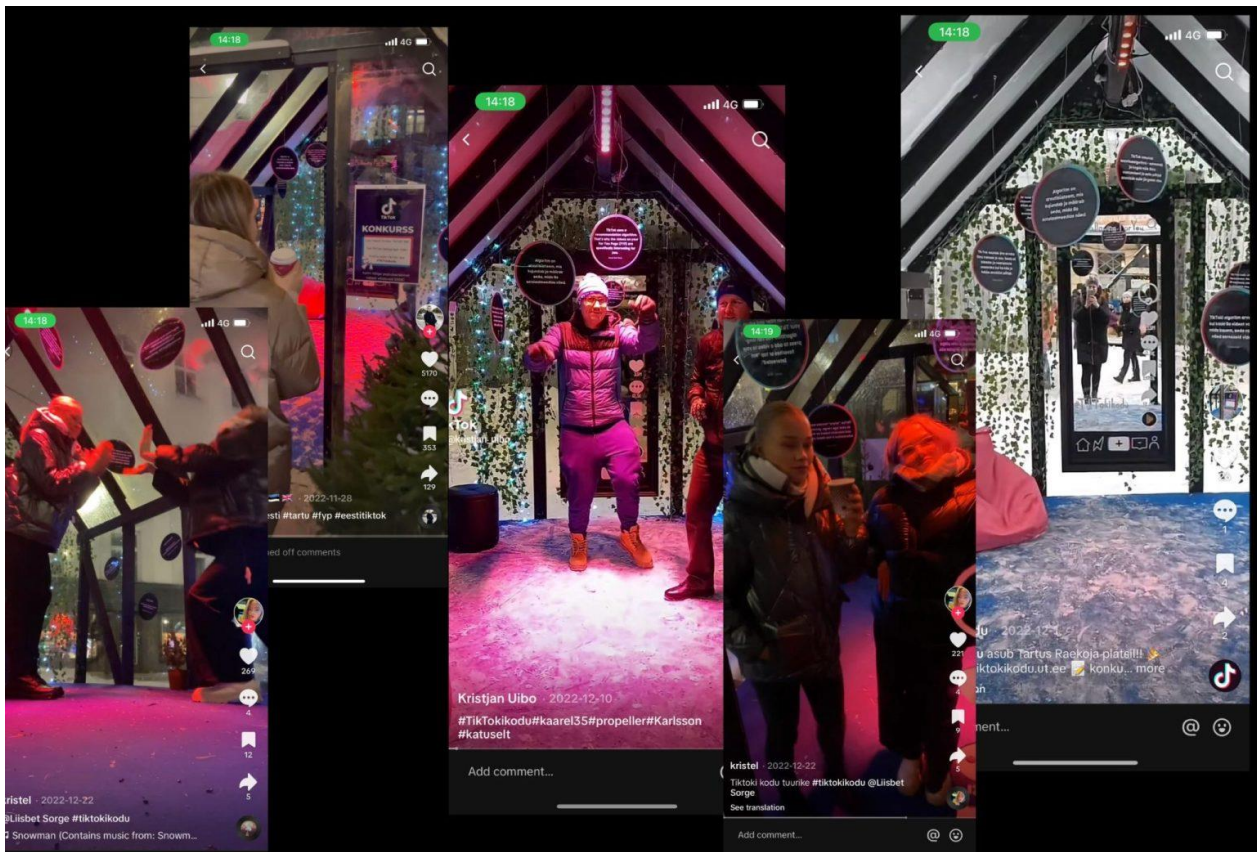

Figure 6. Collage of screenshots from TikTok house visitors' videos, December, 2023.

We decided to stick "fun facts" on the house's walls. We knew that the extreme temperatures would not harm the laminated paper and that it would be challenging to damage them by anyone who visited the house. With a physical space intervention, you have to think through everything from the weather to who your visitors are.

Summer edition

The second TikTok house was built during summer and only for two days so that we could experiment more. As many people were talking about sneaky ways of advertisements manifesting themselves on social media, we decided to add examples precisely about that. With a media literacy intervention, you must be close to the topic to keep it relevant, no matter when the information is presented. It is essential to use the youth's perspective, especially

Mar 2023, version 2.0.

when talking about TikTok, to understand what they see on the platform. There is no point in mentioning details about something people do not care about/do not know about!

We added information to actual physical items representing the examples to make it more relevant and interactive. With every example, we made sure to add screenshots or any elements that would be familiar to Estonian TikTok users.

- Companies make TikToks seem like real people.

We had seen this phenomenon circulating on TikTok, so we knew we had to bring everyone's attention. We focused the example on the fact that even though the TikToks are lighthearted, it is still a promotional move.

- Lives

In Estonia, many TikTokkers sell lottery tickets to users. With this example, we just wanted people to think about why they are willing to buy the tickets and also remind them of how they can avoid falling for online fraud. The colourful propeller hat and notebook are both things you can see in the Estonian TikTok lives, making the example much more familiar.

- Beige homes and romanticising live

Scrolling on TikTok has shown us many beige homes and tips on loving the little things in life. Many people, including us, only sometimes see that the influencers promoting such lifestyles could get money from it by making beige clothes or promoting something in romanticisation videos.

- Dupes

A prevalent trend on TikTok is people searching for cheaper alternatives for expensive products. We wanted to remind people that you only sometimes need the product, even if every TikToker talks about it.

Let us design a house!

Because we assume that you want people to see the house and step in it, we also believe you are ready for the house to scream TIKTOK! from far away. Every detail in the space is thought out – from only using black, blue, pink and white (the colours of the TikTok logo) to hanging up some fake plants that are stereotypical for a Gen-Z TikTok creator's room. The house has to be inviting and, without any explanation, make people feel like TikTok has exploded in it.

The most important part of the house, if we do say so ourselves, is a mirror, painted like the TikTok For You Page, on the dominant wall of the house. We have seen hundreds of people go into the TikTok house to take a quick look in the mirror or take a selfie but stay for much

longer, thanks to the information surrounding them everywhere. A mirror is also a perfect way to invite people to use a hashtag of your choice and post pictures of themselves in the house. It is familiar, intriguing and (as we all have a small quantity of Narcissus in ourselves) inviting.

You can access all the designs (in Estonian) on *this* Canva link. You can adapt these, print them out, use scissors and a laminator machine, and there you go!

So buy a considerable mirror and start painting it to look like the TikTok For You Page! More importantly, have fun; that way, the intervention is even better.

4.3. Digital Media Literacy in the Baltics

This is an interview, a part of the "Digital Media Literacy in EDMO Round Table" series published monthly to highlight the work of the 14 EDMO hubs. Read about EDMO and the work on MIL of the other hubs on Media & Learning's website.

WHO ARE THE LEADING PLAYERS IN THE BALTIC REGION (LITHUANIA, LATVIA AND ESTONIA) IN PROMOTING MEDIA LITERACY?

In the Baltic Region, promoting media literacy is a collective endeavour involving a wide range of participants. Governmental ministries and agencies are at the forefront of this initiative. They have established extensive networks that include various government institutions and representatives from the European Commission.

Universities, schools, kindergartens, and youth centres contribute to those networks. Universities offer in-depth knowledge and engage in practical initiatives, while schools and youth centres provide media literacy education through mandatory courses and digital literacy programs. Journalistic and media organisations also play a crucial role, collaborating with educational institutions to create and share educational content with a strong emphasis on fact-checking and misinformation awareness.

Smaller NGOs, especially those familiar with the Russian-speaking communities, often have a more significant impact on promoting media literacy than more extensive networks and corporations. Their specialised understanding and cultural insights enable them to address the unique needs of these communities effectively. International telecommunication companies are also crucial in promoting basic internet safety to a broad audience. Their reach and resources make them ideal partners for initiatives aimed at educating large, diverse groups on fundamental aspects of internet safety.

DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEAS AS TO HOW MEDIA-LITERATE PEOPLE IN THIS REGION ARE GENERALLY? ARE THERE ANY TYPES OF MEASURES THAT CAN BE USED TO ASSESS THIS OVER TIME?

Turbulent histories have made the Balts more resilient to propaganda, but we are not magically immune to disinformation. In the context of information resilience and developing

resilience to disinformation narratives, we, of course, have many similarities. But you can already see, even from our demographic composition, that there will be some differences. For example, Estonia and Latvia have quite a high number of Russian-speaking locals, but it is less than 5% in Lithuania. Nevertheless, history binds us – anyone who has been part of the USSR looks at propaganda, censorship, and keeping information from the people in a very different way. It is directly connected to our freedom. Turbulent times in history, for example, have probably made our journalists, security forces, defence experts, and anyone really more resilient. But the Baltics are definitely not magically immune to disinformation.

We have reasons to pat ourselves on the back when looking at global indicators. Estonia is 4th in the 2023 Media Literacy Index (with Latvia 18th and Lithuania 20th). Latvia has climbed the ranks of the Media Freedom Index since 2016, where Lithuania presently ranks 7th, the highest of the three Baltics (with Estonia 8th and Latvia 16th in 2023). As a highly digitalised state, MILs (Media & Information Literacy skills) are necessary in Estonia in order to communicate and acquire services from the state, so our daily lives do not allow us to relax into our seats and treat MIL as a nice-to-have feature. We need MILs to survive.

But it is crucial not to bask in the glory of self-congratulations, as the information sphere is rapidly changing at a pace where not even the most dedicated of facilitators could not realistically keep producing new materials. We face the issue all EU countries do: after decades of worthwhile projects, how can we build sustainable repositories of materials that teachers could use in a formal or informal setting without much planning effort? How could we shorten the chain from evidence-based design and research to daily use by MIL facilitators?

We need constant boosters, sustainable projects and regular inoculation against information disorders. Here, we also have our governments to thank: societal resilience to disinformation and manipulative foreign narratives should not remain a topic reserved for the fields of education and research only. MILs of individuals and organisations are also a matter of national security, and we, as MIL facilitators, should be bolder in stating so. No matter the terminology, be it psychological defence, (information) resilience or talks of a cohesive society with high digital competencies, the idea remains: our security forces' task in a broad open security concept is to educate the public on possible harmful narratives and perpetrators. Our task is to research, design, pilot, and prepare materials and plans to make sure our societies have the necessary skills to withstand informational manipulation or at least know where to check for the accuracy of information. Inoculation against disinformation works very much like inoculation against viruses with vaccines: you might get the best MIL training in high school, but you will need an update relatively soon as the resistance wears off as new strains (or narratives, in this metaphor) appear.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES YOU FACE IN PROMOTING MEDIA LITERACY IN THESE THREE COUNTRIES?

Promoting media literacy in the Baltic region faces several key challenges. A primary issue is the lack of permanent funding, leading to inconsistent outcomes and resource strain due to a reliance on project-based approaches. The region's ongoing information war, intensified by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, further complicates efforts, emphasising the need for effective media literacy programs.

Addressing misinformation narratives from Russia is another critical challenge. While these narratives often span Baltic countries, adapting learning materials to local cultural and linguistic differences is essential, as one-size-fits-all approaches are ineffective. A significant hurdle is engaging the Russian-speaking population, who are more susceptible to Russian misinformation due to linguistic and cultural ties. Tailoring initiatives to this demographic is crucial for countering misinformation.

Establishing effective media literacy networks, such as BECID, is a critical step in this direction. While BECID demonstrates the potential of collaborative efforts among universities, media houses, and non-profits in the Baltics, working with stable funding towards well-defined goals, the creation and launch of BECID have significantly advocated for media literacy and have been broadly integrated with the State's strategic communication team at the Government Office and various ministries (e.g., MH, MoC, MoI, MoE, and MoF) that have highlighted the development of media literacy in their strategic plans.

WHAT VALUE DO YOU THINK EDMO AND THE NETWORK OF EDMO HUBS, IN PARTICULAR, BRING TO THE CHALLENGE OF FIGHTING DISINFORMATION AND PROMOTING MEDIA LITERACY IN LITHUANIA, LATVIA AND ESTONIA?

BECID has given the opportunity to connect the media literacy promotion efforts in the Baltic countries. BECID has shown us why working together matters. Harmful narratives do not stick to one place – they spread across borders. During events like Russia's actions in Ukraine, similar false stories popped up in different countries, showing they were aimed at our whole region. This calls for teamwork. When we collaborate, we share ideas and strategies, making the fight against these narratives easier for everyone involved. Thanks to partnerships with the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) and other like-minded hubs across the European Union, BECID contributes to sharing media literacy materials, research, and fact-checks all over Europe. In doing so, BECID aims to advance the local cause of media literacy and work towards more excellent connectivity and long-term sustainability in the field.

WHAT TYPES OF MEDIA LITERACY ACTIVITIES HAVE BEEN ORGANISED BY BECID SINCE IT WAS SET UP?

We have organised a range of events and online seminars across the Baltics. For instance, in Latvia, we explored the intersection of media literacy and AI, and in Lithuania, we focused on democratic resilience. Our "BaltsTeachMil" Zoominars have been particularly well-received because we have been focusing on addressing pressing issues in media literacy

across the Baltics, offering insights into helping children navigate misinformation in the classroom and conducting a fact-checking masterclass.

One of our unique projects is the "TikTok House," aimed at understanding the platform's algorithm and addressing the spread of disinformation. This involved installations at two different Estonian national events, attracting over 80,000 visitors collectively. The intervention integrated into the State Chancellery's TikTok competition and garnered around 1.2 million views. (You can read more about it in Chapter 5.1).

In the educational sphere, we have proactively developed media literacy training programs for teachers at the University of Tartu and Tallinn University. These programs empower teachers with media literacy and design thinking skills, enabling them to craft and test their own media literacy lessons. Furthermore, our Digimentors project, which bridges tech-savvy youth with seniors, aims to enhance digital literacy across generations in Estonia. To nurture media literacy from a young age, we have launched an initiative involving science-based role-playing and movement games for children aged five and above. These activities, designed to develop digital, information, and media literacy, have engaged over 5,000 children since 2022.

WHAT PLANS DO YOU HAVE ABOUT MEDIA LITERACY FOR THE NEXT 12 MONTHS FOR BECID?

In BECID, we aim to broaden the Digimentors network across various sectors like schools, youth centres all over the Baltics, and the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund. Plans also include launching a "Playful Development of Media Literacy" course, targeting students in teacher education and youth work and fostering foundational media literacy skills among professionals working with young children. BECID's involvement in the University of Tartu master's program in Disinformation and Societal Resilience, launching in February 2024, is a pivotal step toward international collaboration and deepening cooperation with other universities focusing on media literacy. Organised events like DigiÄKK for preschool groups emphasise digital and media literacy through playful activities. Further, student-led initiatives, like "Social Media Comes Alive" and ongoing training programs for school teachers, continually evolve based on feedback, aiming to expand to broader target groups, including preschool teachers, youth workers, parents, and older adults.

4.4. A Selection Of Materials and Interventions Created In 2023 By BECID's MIL Team

- *Games Developing Digital and Media Literacy for 5-8-Year-Olds.* Practical game instructions and printable materials for children aged 5-8. These resources help teach them about digital footprints, cyberbullying, and misinformation through games.
- *Games Developing Digital and Media Literacy for 9-10-Year-Olds*. A similar practical and gamified approach, but for older children.

- *A Guide for Teachers and Youth Workers on Analyzing Influencer Content*. An educational guide focused on understanding and critically analysing social media influencers in an academic setting. It includes a detailed article, a lesson plan for discussing influencers, and 73 questions for analysing influencer videos. Available in *EE*, *LV*, *LT*, and *RUS*.
- *A Teacher's Helper - Materials for Deconstructing Scam Schemes*. An essential resource for teachers that addresses the growing concern in Baltic countries about spamming incidents and the broader issue of information disorder. The material outlines various forms of misleading information: misinformation, disinformation, and misinformation, and emphasises the importance of enhancing information literacy among students and teachers.
- *Information War and Information Disorder - A Learning Object*. This resource is aimed at those whose interest in disinformation and information disorders has recently been ignited by an international conflict.
- *A Large Slide Collection on Digital, Media, and Information Literacy for Teachers*. At the beginning of the BECID project, we initiated a review of our materials and resources, which resulted in this mammoth resource-heavy slide deck for Estonian MIL teachers above.
- *Media Literacy and Street Art.* An inspiring case study about how you can use street art in any city, combined with physical activity, to discuss with students the impact of media, interpretation of messages, awareness, and much more.
- *Media Literacy in Chemistry Class*. Practical tasks developed by a famous chemistry teacher in Estonia are used in chemistry classes with students. Yes, media literacy can be connected to chemistry lessons, too!

5. STUDENT RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS OF 2023

This Chapter highlights the annual stars of student research and work. All full texts are available (in their original languages) upon request from BECID's Project Management Team.

5.1. Estonian Teachers' Media Literacies in Their Own Estimation and a Tool for Measuring It

By Anna-Liisa Blaubrük, a graduate of the master's degree program in Journalism and Communication at the University of Tartu

The current master's thesis explores the possibilities and challenges associated with media literacy, encompassing media-related skills, knowledge, and attitudes within the context of teachers' knowledge and work.

The goal of this master's thesis was to find out about Estonian teachers' media literacy in their estimation. The secondary goal of this study was to develop an updated and valid media literacy test that focuses on measuring a specific aspect of media literacy known as news literacy. These sub-skills and knowledge closely align with the curriculum requirements and are integral to teachers' instructional responsibilities.

To accomplish the goals, the following tasks were undertaken: 1) examining the teachers' operational framework within the context of the curriculum; 2) investigating the teachers' media literacy in their estimation; 3) based on the findings of this research, a tool in the form of a test developed by German scientists was proposed, which had been translated and adapted into Estonian. This tool serves the dual purpose of assessing the skills and knowledge related to a specific area of media and information literacy (MIL) and functioning as an instructional aid in the classroom. Due to the national curricula, these are essentially the same sub-skills teachers must address due to the curriculum requirements.

The German test is used to map out the news literacy of the adult population, so an adapted test could be used for all other adults, not just teachers or their work. Furthermore, it would test the literacies in line with the high school course "Media and Influence" goals, which develop teachers and students and, if necessary, collect data that can be compared internationally.

The new National Curriculum of Estonia (2023) offers the teacher even more freedom to create the learning content in the "Media and Influence" course, which also increases the teacher's responsibility in reaching the learning outcomes described in the curriculum. However, the number of learning outcomes in the syllabuses has increased notably compared with the course's allocated time, and the taxonomic levels add even more unattainable goals. Therefore, we need even more learning tools to support the teacher and

simultaneously fulfil several curriculum goals. It is evident that through the learning outcomes of the new curriculum, the responsibility of "saving the world" is placed on the teacher in several areas to the maximum extent and at a minimum volume.

In this master's thesis, it was discovered that Estonia's primary school and secondary school curricula share the same learning results for media literacy. This objective is reflected in the overarching themes of the curriculum as well as in the language and literature curricula. While upper secondary schools include mandatory courses dedicated to developing media literacy, primary and basic schools incorporate media literacy through elective subjects, curriculum-supporting activities, and events.

Before the study, there had been no previous attempts to assess the media literacies of teachers in Estonia. Therefore, it was necessary to generate interest in the subject among teachers and gather information about their self-assessment of their own literacies and areas for improvement. This information was crucial for considering the teachers' needs in developing future assessment and teaching tools.

In 2020, a digital news and information literacy test for adults was conducted in Germany (Meßmer, Sängerlaub, & Schulz, 2021). Based on the categories of this test, a self-administered questionnaire with rating scales was conducted among teachers as part of this research—the questionnaire aimed to assess their knowledge in five areas of news literacy. The test was adapted to accommodate the Estonian context and distributed to teachers for evaluation. Self-regulated sampling and anonymous web-based questionnaires were utilised.

Teachers generally rated their media literacy as relatively good. On average, their knowledge in different categories received a score of 6.89 out of 10. The news and information literacy test results showed an average of 63% correct answers (an average of 43 out of 68 points), with most respondents (32 out of 39) scoring between 50 and 79% correct answers. Although it is unclear to what extent these results reflect the actual level of knowledge, they provide valuable insights into the test's difficulty level and the test takers' knowledge.

Teachers exhibited higher ratings of knowledge when assessing the reliability of media channels and sources in various media texts. They also displayed higher performance or were more sceptical when evaluating source reliability. While their knowledge in recognising commercial texts, false information, news, and opinions expressed high results, the test did not yield consistently outstanding results. Challenges were encountered regarding confusion caused by titles and images and in recognising labelling strategies identified as areas of low self-assessed knowledge. However, inconsistencies in the lowest and highest ratings within the categories indicated potential difficulty in grasping specific media terms and uncertainties in evaluating media-related knowledge. Addressing these issues is crucial, given society's expectations of teachers' actions.

The most significant practical findings were related to open-ended questions, which revealed the topics where teachers require additional knowledge and training the most. Popular topics

included using social media, algorithms, targeted media usage, and understanding security and privacy. These topics can serve as a starting point for supporting teachers in implementing the new curriculum and advanced training.

In addition, it has been great to listen to the experiences of the teachers while taking the test: (1) how, after a few minutes of completing the test, teachers thought that the test was obviously too long (although the usual tests for the students last ten times longer), (2) taking a test and checking knowledge was unfamiliar to the teachers, and they surprisingly perceived the difficulty of this activity, (3) there is a great fear instilled in teachers to fail with the performance, instead of taking it as an enriching experience. But that is how it is with students, too?

The complete study can be found in the University of Tartu student work database.

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New National Curriculum for Higher Education (2023). Riigi Teataja. https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/123042021011?leiaKehtiv

5.2. Broad-Based Media Education Must Be an Integral Part of the Curriculum

By Tiina Nõmm, a graduate of the master's degree program in Journalism and Communication at the University of Tartu

In today's media-saturated society, it can be said that from the point of view of both the individual and society, the question is no longer whether the development of media and information literacies should also take place through formal education, but to what extent schools can do this and what kind of support they need.

This is just one of the conclusions I came to in my Master's thesis "Mapping the current situation of media and information literacies promotion in Estonian general education schools and development opportunities", which I defended this spring. With my thesis, I wanted to find out how many Estonian schools and how they develop media and information literacies of students in addition to what is provided for in the national curricula, who are the media teachers and teachers of extracurricular activities from their professional background, what the concept of media and information literacies means to them and what concerns them in their work. I also wanted to find out how media and information literacies are addressed in key framework documents, theories and existing educational strategies.

Media and information literacies among Estonian students are developed most through the 11th-grade mother tongue course "Media and Influence" and the cross-curricular national subject "Information Environment and Media Use". As the analysis has shown, media and information literacies are considered essential human competencies, including the ability to critically analyse media content and develop social awareness, tolerance, and active citizenship. In this context, analysing both received and generated media content is essential.

To map the development of media and information literacies in Estonian schools, I analysed public information on school websites, coded the information that interested me, and then analysed the results. As it turned out, less than half (42%) of Estonian general education schools are developing media and information literacies for their pupils in addition to the national curriculum. This is done either through the relevant subject module, elective, free or optional subject, extracurricular activity, or school media. The school magazine continues to be popular in Estonian schools. The analysis showed that many schools focus on developing audiovisual and multimedia skills through elective subjects in photography and multimedia and through school media. Two focus group surveys with media teachers and teachers of extracurricular activities to corroborate the data collected showed that teachers and instructors pay much attention to critical analysis of media in their teaching and that pupils are given practical tasks to develop their self-expression skills. They say that broad-based media and information literacies help students cope in today's media-rich and information-saturated world.

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The development of media and information literacy skills is usually carried out by educators from the same or another school. Many have a professional background in audiovisuals (e.g., photography), media, communication, or marketing (e.g., working or being a former journalist). Interviews with teachers and tutors revealed that what they miss most is the opportunity to meet together to gather ideas, share their experiences, and thereby strengthen their identity as media educators. It would also be beneficial for teachers and facilitators to have a blueprint on which to build their curriculum. Lack of time was also mentioned as a concern, as the work of a media teacher is mainly done on the side of the primary job, the number of electives and elective courses is relatively small, and students do not always have time to go to extracurricular activities.

As a result of the Master's thesis, it can be said that the first significant steps have been taken to develop media and information literacies. Still, its development in Estonian schools is very uneven. The main recommendation is to start developing media and information literacy from the first school year, as media surrounds us from early childhood. It is also necessary to clearly define the starting point - what to teach, to whom, and how - to ensure quality media education. Thirdly, the critical role of media teachers and facilitators in media education must be highlighted. Often, this work is done on the sidelines of their primary job, and many do not have a teaching background. It is, therefore, essential to support and encourage them and, where necessary, to develop their own media and information skills. Joint meetings and an agreed curriculum are crucial steps in this process. Attention must also be paid to preparing future Estonian language teachers for media teaching, as they are usually the ones who will be involved in developing pupils' media and information literacies at school.

Such an overview of the development of media and information literacies in Estonian general education schools is unique. However, as national regulations and school curricula change, the data collected needs to be continuously updated, and new ways of analysing it need to be found. Recent years have been marked by crises that pose a real threat to our lives and health. This has demonstrated the importance of identifying and critically analysing information from the media (and, where necessary, to create it). Quality media education is the foundation for this.

The complete study can be found in the University of Tartu student work database.

What To Expect In 2024

In conclusion to our report on BECID's activities in 2023, we look towards 2024 and the new tasks they will bring. Naturally, in 2024, BECID partners will continue to work on all four work packages. In Work Package 1, the partners will continue to develop and publish a final version of a sustainability and independence strategy for BECID (**T1.6**), which will include an overview of possible funders and donors for the future. Launching **the one-year English MA program** *Disinformation and Societal Resilience* (**T1.6**) in February 2024 at the University of Tartu will be another highlight to look forward to. BECID's team will try to involve virtual interns according to the model outlined in this report and keep writing new proposals to keep the consortium working together for a more extended time.

After publishing our first yearly report, we will plan an **open seminar in English in 2024 for all Baltic stakeholders** to whom our work might be relevant (**T1.5**). We will continue with closed seminars and informal consultations with our government agencies and authorities, introducing BECID's activities and the network's work and providing expertise when needed, just as we did in 2023. As per the experience described in Chapter 1 of this report, management structure changes have been piloted at the end of 2023, and remaining agile in making changes where necessary will remain the focus of the Project Management Team (**T1.3**).

In the fact-checking work package, the partners will develop a standard methodology for analysing fact-checking's response to misinformation's impact on relevant target groups. They will also present a proposal for guidelines for BECID's fact-checkers (**MS6**). In cooperation with the research work package, procedures for analysing disinformation will also be published in 2024 (**MS9**).

As for research in 2024, all research activities planned in the Grant Agreement will be completed by February 2024. Full reports on all four literature reviews, including the one designed and the three born out of successful collaboration, will be published (**T3.1**) – this is TLU's main focus regarding research in 2024.

UTARTU will lead the publishing of the results of the interviews with Baltic fact-checkers (**T3.2**) and keep working on sandbox research as the consortium coordinator. New collaboration in research projects in BECID can be born out of the cooperation between

1. Researchers from different universities,
2. fact-checkers and researchers and
3. researchers and MIL facilitators.

Making sure there are enough human and time resources for this as the project progresses and cooperation with EDMO and the other hubs deepens is of utmost importance, as it will

allow us to react to the rapidly changing field of information disorders with less individual effort.

VMU will focus on researching national ethical codes for journalists and audience reception of fact-checking genres (**T3.3**). ViA will lead the analysis of the regulative aspects of fact-checking, including the implementation of the Code of Practice on Disinformation by Baltic media actors (**T3.4**).

The partners will develop and publish the MIL curriculum for teacher training with materials and lesson plans in 2024 (**T4.1**). The team will start training Baltic social media influencers on fact-checking methods and tools so they can educate young social media activists and their followers on how fact-checking works (**T4.2**). We will continue working with the intragenerational MIL training model Digimentor (**T4.3**) and scale up the project in institutions and organisations outside of BECID. The partners will co-create media literacy campaigns to increase information resilience and encourage civic activism among Russian-speaking Baltic residents (**T4.4**). The piloting of co-creating a MIL Hackathon series in cooperation with the youth will kickstart the Autumn of 2024.

None of these plans are regarding cooperation with the EDMO network or EDMO EUI, which we consider more of an underlying tone of our work. To find out how well we managed the unplanned or planned activities of the Baltic hub combatting information disorders with colleagues from Europe, we invite you to read our **following annual report**, set to be published in **December 2024**.