

Draft of BECID's Sustainability and Independence Strategy

Deliverable 1.4 for the project with the ID 118471, coordinated by the University of Tartu (UTARTU). Subject to change.

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... in co-creation with the whole hub and its stakeholders.



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the European Union**

The Baltic Engagement Centre for Combating Information Disorders, also known as BECID, was established to support the European Union in tackling disinformation in the three Baltic countries - Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The centre is the Baltic EDMO hub, one of *fourteen* in the pan-European network collaborating to address the region's disinformation issue.

BECID will continuously fact-check textual and audio-visual information, create analytical reports on disinformation trends, develop a standard methodology for analysing them, and research disinformation in Baltic social media spaces. Additionally, the centre will conduct media literacy campaigns targeting vulnerable groups and participate in actions coordinated by EDMO central and other hubs.

Deliverable 1.4 serves as a pre-requisite for Task 1.6 of the project, starting in February 2024, which involves the development of a sustainability and independence strategy for BECID during the second half of the project.

This Live Strategy comprises a mission and vision statement, the fundamental principles on which the final strategy should stand, the steps we have taken so far to increase sustainability in our region in terms of strategically involving the next generation in our work, as well as scenarios for the hub in the future, depending on the funding in the Digital Europe Work Programme as well as alternative financial resources and cooperation strategies.

The Sustainability and Independence Strategy for BECID, finished by the close of the project in May 2025, will focus on three interrelated elements:

- Preservation of the hub's independence from public/private sector influence.
- Development of augmented services and activities to spread knowledge to crucial target groups based on the experience gained during the 30 months of this project.
- Obtaining financial support from diversified sources to carry on activities and ensure independence: an overview of possible donors.

This Live Strategy will be subject to change after Management Committee meetings and Advisory Board meetings and will be open to objections from the consortium members. The final strategy will be a co-creation of the team.

MISSION AND VISION

Vision

For several years, the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) have strived to bolster their digital resilience and advance media literacy education through individual efforts. However, the urgent need for collaboration has become particularly evident in the turbulent information landscape of recent years, most notably following Russia's invasion of Ukraine last spring.

The Baltic Engagement Centre for Combating Information Disorders (BECID), as an independent, non-partisan multidisciplinary hub, has made its aim to foster a more effective, cooperative, enduring, and influential approach to addressing our shared challenges in the multilingual Baltic region. Comprising four universities, four fact-checking organisations and fact-checking units from three neighbouring countries, BECID envisions itself at the centre of developing and managing a long-term evidence-based strategy for advancing media and information literacy in the Baltics.

Thanks to forging partnerships with the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) and other like-minded hubs across the European Union, BECID contributes to repositories of 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.

Mission

BECID connects highly qualified fact-checkers, media researchers and media literacy experts from the Baltics. BECID aims to combat information disorders in the Baltics by ensuring a continuous flow of national fact-checks, executing media literacy campaigns and events, and researching possibilities for more effective ways to counter disinformation in the region. Its goal is to provide specific knowledge of local environments relevant to people from all socioeconomic backgrounds living in the area.

BECID's mission is, therefore, to

- **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.
- **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.
- **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.

INDEPENDENCE AND SUSTAINABILITY PRINCIPLES

The fundamental principles for the independence and sustainability strategy of BECID we have established during the first ten months of our work are as follows.

- Building a reputation to become experts in the field who are visible in the region and all over the European Union.
- Actively seeking new financing sources to not depend on one specific measure.
- Establishing management structures that prioritise transparency, accountability, and responsibility.
- Treating all partners in the hub with equal respect and establishing work processes that support the motivation of the individuals to continue cooperation within the hub and with external stakeholders.
- Adapting to changes in the emerging field of combatting disinformation by creating agile strategies, plans and processes.
- Becoming trusted partners to facilitate the exchange of best practices between national and regional stakeholders and the pan-European network.

Building a Strong Reputation

Individually, the ten organisations in BECID already have a strong reputation.

The **University of Tartu** (UTARTU) is the BECID coordinator and Estonia's leading research institution. UTARTU has earned international recognition, ranking among the top 1.2% of universities globally. The Institute of Social Studies (ISS) at UTARTU specialises in communication and information sciences, social work, and policy, with a strong track record of international research projects. **Tallinn University** (TLU), an Estonian university, focuses on interdisciplinary research in educational innovation, digital and media culture, and societal well-being. The Baltic Film, Media and Arts School at TLU is a communication and audio-visual knowledge hub.

Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences (ViA) is a renowned public (micro-)university with a strong emphasis on research and international collaboration. ViA, a member of the European University Alliance, contributes expertise in areas like strategic communication, disinformation, and media literacy; they even have a specialised MA program on the latter. **Vytautas Magnus University** (VMU) in Lithuania is a comprehensive university formed through a merger, becoming the second largest in the country. VMU's Department of Public Communications is known for its advanced journalism and media education, along with expertise in disinformation analysis, digital resilience, and media literacy (the scholars at VMU were awarded the UNESCO chair for their work). Besides the four universities and research teams, we also have our fact-checkers.

Re:Baltica is a non-profit organisation specialising in investigative journalism across the Baltic region. They have been at the forefront of disinformation analysis since 2012 and are certified fact-checkers by IFCN. Re:Baltica's fact-checking unit, "Re:Check," actively debunks false claims, focusing on local disinformation campaigns.

Then, the Delfis of the three Baltic states, which are all separate entities. DELFI UAB – or **Delfi Lithuania** – operates an online news outlet and is an official media partner of Facebook's third-party fact-checking program. Their fact-checking project, "The Lie Detector," is IFCN-certified and has debunked numerous false claims, especially in Lithuanian and Russian languages. Their speciality, compared to others, is audiovisual fact-checking. AS Delfi Meedia – or **Delfi Estonia** - runs several online news outlets and operates the fact-checking unit "Eesti Päevalehe Faktikontroll," also accredited by IFCN. They maintain editorial independence and focus on fact-checking across the political spectrum. They are also Meta's partners in Estonia, which – together with belonging to IFCN – is a quality marker in fact-checking. AS Delfi – or **Delfi Latvia** – is the leading news portal in Latvia, with a massive online readership of just under 1 million and a strong presence on social media. They have been recognised for their influence and trustworthiness in the Latvian press. AS Delfi also became an IFCN-certified fact-checker in late 2021.

The Baltic Centre for Media Excellence (BCME) is a non-profit organisation with 13 founding member organisations, promoting media resilience and combating disinformation. BCME conducts tailored media literacy activities for various audience segments, including vulnerable groups and Russian-speaking communities. Last but not least, associated partner SIA Vidzemes Televizija (called ReTV) is a central terrestrial TV channel in Latvia known for its extensive regional coverage and a significant online audience. They contribute to dissemination and communication activities within BECID and benefit from the project's results in fact-checking and media literacy.

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 keep looking for funding and future projects to ensure the work done to bring together this consortium has been worthwhile.

Each individual and organisation in the consortium have taken three strategic steps during the first year of operations to ensure sustainability by establishing a solid reputation in the region.

1. **Communicating** our work with the memorable and recognisable BECID and EDMO logos, even when presenting results that are not from the BECID project. Underlying principle: we, as individuals and as independent organisations, are a part of the hub and will benefit from better recognition for the hub, too. Therefore, our other work streams related to BECID's work should still be connected to the hub.
2. **Cooperating** with the consortium partners on other avenues outside of BECID. Underlying principle: The groundwork laid for cross-border cooperation should not simply look at this one specific grant but enable cooperation between already tried and

tested partners in the long term. To that end, we should not only seek co-financing for the next financing phase of EDMO hubs but also foster cooperation beyond this grant and the expiration date of the grant agreement.

3. **Being noticeable** starts with showing up; therefore, BECID is present at the EDMO hub network meetings, active in the working groups and task forces, and invaluable as a network member. Underlying principle: our hub's strength depends on the strength of the whole network, which in turn is strengthened by active participation. We reinforce our future capabilities by doing more than the bare minimum.

Sustainability Goals Regarding the Next Generation

The three Baltic states share just under 6 million population, so a region-specific issue in combating disinformation involves human resources. There are not enough journalists, fact-checkers, media literacy facilitators, and educators who feel comfortable with the topic **in our region** in terms of strategically involving the next generation in our work, and there are not enough measures to carry expertise from our region to others.

As the problem of 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. That is why the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Tartu is opening a 1-year advanced studies Master's programme to train specialists with interdisciplinary expertise in combating disinformation.

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. The opening of this programme in Estonia is supported by our unique geopolitical position and experience in dealing with informational influencing over a long time. Our thin state enables us to introduce critical organisations to the students via guest lecturers and internships. Our institute's team brings the academic knowledge of studies on Kremlin narratives over the last 30 years, vulnerability and conflict risk assessment in society, media in the emergence of information theft, cybercrime, media and information literacy against information disorders, etc. BECID's interdisciplinary expertise enables us to switch the line of international cooperation into the equation. With the help of pan-European networks, we will leverage the latest research in communication, law, psychology, sociology, data science, and regional studies to enhance societal resilience in

Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia. Of course, the Digital Europe Programme is not a measure to support higher education. Therefore, the resources allocated to the development of the program only encompassed frequent virtual meetings within BECID and hours put in co-working on the development of the outline of the program. Developing the subjects, paying lecturers and experts and peer-reviewers, and hiring a programme manager and study coordinator all needed to come from another funding source.

In the T1.6 description of the Grant Agreement, we wrote:

“We will also develop a sustainability strategy to 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.”

To that end, we will keep looking for additional funding to make this program a reality. The general outline was meant to be worked on starting in 2024, but as we kept looking for calls for proposals, we submitted early (knowing it would cause delays in other tasks and taking that risk). We got the grant, submitted the curriculum to the ministry for approval and started the first admissions season. The first course of 7 students will begin studying in the second week of February 2024. To be clear: 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

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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's 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 which shall be published in the BECID Year 1 report and piloted in 2024.

Scenarios for the Hub in the Future

We decided early on, whilst writing the project proposal that BECID will be operating the hub as a community of experts working together despite the project call underway or task at hand, which means the only scenario for the future that we have excluded from the list of possibilities is the option of only functioning until June 2025, when this grant has ended. Moving forward from June 2025, there are several future scenarios for the hub.

Scenario 1. We will continue operating for one more funding round of the EDMO hubs (due to be opened within the Digital Europe Work Programme sometime in 2024) but will seize large-scale cooperations after that.

The EU-24 elections are a stark reminder that nothing is forever, not even the EDMO funding rounds. A time will come when new funding measures will be developed, and EDMO follow-up funding will no longer be an option. As a likely scenario for some hubs, that could mean the end of cooperation.

As once explained in the rationale of our project proposal, the Baltics are highly competitive in combatting disinformation, be it in media, research or the third sector. The resources tend to be project-based, and the demand is much higher than the supply. If organisations in the consortium will no longer benefit from cooperation but would instead benefit from protectionism, then that is what they should and will do.

In that case, all project outcomes will still be reusable and recyclable but no longer maintainable. The website, which houses the results of all our outcomes, will probably be taken off the servers. The communication channels will be closed. The meetings we once got used to will be done and no more sandbox research or communication projects can be designed. We will, however, all still carry on individual work in our organisations, so it is not all bad.

Scenario 2. We will continue operating with all consortium members but will use different funding opportunities outside the scope of Digital Europe.

This is probably the hardest scenario to realise, as all consortium members are organisations with their own agency and can decide to leave, no matter our plans. As something on the CV of BECID's team as a whole, it would be worthwhile: keeping a network together after initial excitement is much more difficult than calling it to life. This scenario would, however, most likely mean we would be ineligible for a future BECID funding round.

It is highly unlikely that we could do the same work with three to four different funders instead of one (the European Union) and still keep our administrative cost % of the project at the required maximum level. The more grant agreements, the more deliverables, and the more work that needs to be done – especially for funding schemes such as these, one must make sure not to duplicate any tasks or activities in different projects.

There are two possibilities for Scenario 2: one is operating with the same consortium, and the other is growing the consortium. In terms of easy work processes or smooth cooperation, onboarding new partners is never a good idea. In terms of empowering regional initiatives other than ourselves, however, it is imperative to keep expanding our circle of experts.

Scenario 3. We will continue operating with some of the consortium members but will use different funding opportunities outside the scope of Digital Europe.

Similarly to Scenario 1, this is an organic solution: those who find working together effortless will continue doing so, and those who do not will not. Keeping the crew together is no longer an objective, so there is no need to look for medium-sized grants such as BECID's, but rather find many small ones, with a grant per task (in the context of this project's volume), for example.

Opting for this scenario would possibly require a negative experience with BECID's project management or execution: something to deter partners from opting for the Digital Europe programme again. Or, elections could have brought on a scrapping of the call altogether, forcing all hubs to look to other funding sources.

To understand these three scenarios better, possible funding options and sums need to be attached to the results of the initial brainstorming. The final Independence and Sustainability strategy, published the last month of the project, will include the realisation of the possible scenarios with examples of funders.