MASTER'S THESIS / FINAL RES. PROJ. IMP

Does Putin's propaganda crumble support for European integration?

A comparative case study of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania

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ABSTRACT

The Western liberal world order is in danger. Since the appointment of Russian President Putin in 2000, Russia has grown in power and influence to create an illiberal alternative to the Western world order. Russia's foreign policy initiatives are aimed at expanding its sphere of influence over post-Soviet republics like Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, by for example making use of pro-Kremlin propaganda in (social) media.

In this thesis, I will focus on media and propaganda as influence tools. This thesis tries to establish whether Russian media influences have a positive impact on the popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration. In order to test this, a cross-sectional comparative case study will be conducted of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

I find that the Russian-speaking population in the countries is particularly vulnerable to Russian disinformation and propaganda efforts. Also, the amount of Russian disinformation and propaganda has increased since the annexation of Crimea. There are differences in patterns with regards to the popularity of pro-Russian parties opposing European integration. In Estonia, there were no pro-Russian parties within the time frame 2004-2021. In Latvia, the popularity of pro-Russian political parties was relatively significant and stable over time, while in Lithuania, the popularity of pro-Russian parties drastically decreased within the period. However, considering these findings, I cannot support the argument that a higher population exposure to Russian propaganda and disinformation leads to a higher popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration. At least, the effect is not as strong as hypothesized.

PREFACE

Dear all,

All my blood, sweat, and tears are poured into this thesis, but finally (or sadly), the process of writing this IMP master's thesis has finally come to an end. First of all, I would like to thank prof. M. Onderco for being the best thesis supervisor that I could have imagined. Because of his clear, direct, and constructive feedback, extremely fast email replies, clear suggestions, but most of all: patience. This definitely brought the quality of my thesis to a significantly higher level.

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Finally, I would like to say thank you to the IMP programme as a whole. Although I actually have a business background since I came from the BSc Business Administration, I still have been able to keep up with everything. This programme has given me sufficient knowledge and skills to start a work career in this field. Thanks to the programme, and particularly this thesis, I finally found out where my true passions are.

Have fun reading the thesis!

Aart Christianen

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CHES   Chapel Hill Expert Survey

CIS   Common-wealth of Independent States

CSTO   Collective Security Treaty Organization

DRI   Disinformation Resilience Index

EU   European Union

FDI   Foreign Direct Investment

GDP   Gross Domestic Product

NATO   North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NGO   Non-Governmental Organization

NSS   National Security Strategy

US   United States of America

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The Western liberal world order, led by the United States (US), is in danger (Nuruzzaman, 2020; Lehti, Pennanen & Joukhi, 2020; Parsi, 2021; Sussex, 2017; Cooley & Nexon, 2020; Ziegler, 2017). Since the appointment of Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2000, Russia has grown in power and influence to create an illiberal alternative to the Western liberal world order (Lehti et al., 2020; Parsi, 2021; Sussex, 2017; Cooley & Nexon, 2020; Sherr, 2017; Tolstrup, 2009). The behavior of Putin's Russia is aimed at expanding its sphere of influence by the use of modernized military means on land, sea, and in the air (Parsi, 2021; Götz & MacFarlane, 2019). This is primarily done to send the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) a clear message that "Russia is back", even with greater military power than the former Soviet Union. Therefore, Russia is able to counterbalance against the West (Parsi, 2021, p. 86; Götz & MacFarlane, 2019). According to Putin, Russia is "a coil, ready to snap back" (Cooley & Nexon, 2020, p. 97). In this sense, Russia primarily aims to diminish American leadership by targeting the US-led international infrastructure, by constructing its own alternatives (Cooley & Nexon, 2020). This resulted in an increasingly dense network of non-Western IGOs, which directly challenge Western liberal norms, "to promote the multi-polarization of the world and the establishment of a new international order" (Cooley & Nexon, 2020, p. 80).

The actions by Russia to strengthen its position in its neighborhood and to change the Western liberal world order according to its own geopolitical interests are manifested in a long list of events. One event of great importance is the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, which can be considered as a turning point in Russia's relationship with the West (Cooley & Nexon, 2020; Giles, 2017). Another important example of a "rule-changing act" is the Russian military intervention in the Syrian civil war, which happened outside Russia's immediate neighborhood (Cooley & Nexon, 2020). Russian actions in Ukraine and Syria are great attempts to challenge the liberal international order and to expand Russia's strategic power. Other examples of Russia's actions to destabilize the Western world order are Russia's military support to the separatist republics Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine, an attempted coup in Montenegro in 2016, investment in the Arctic region to claim maritime sovereignty over there, and military intervention in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia (Götz & MacFarlane, 2019; Parsi, 2021, p. 97). Furthermore, Russia conducted political influence activities during the 2016 US presidential elections, 2017 French presidential elections, and 2017 German Bundestag elections in order to call the legitimacy of Western

democratic institutions into question and to promote a more "Russia-friendly" winning (Götz & MacFarlane, 2019; Ziegler, 2017). Finally, the recent military interventions and invasion of Russia in Ukraine in 2022 only show that this topic is so timely, and therefore really relevant to study.

1.1 Focus and scope of the study

This study is primarily aimed at the effects of Russian political influences. More specifically, this thesis tries to establish whether the Russian media influences have a positive impact on the degree of public popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration. In order to test this, a cross-sectional comparative case study will be conducted. The geographical area that I will focus on is the Baltic region: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The time period that the study covers is 2004-2021. Thus, the focus and scope of the research are about whether Russian media influence activities have a positive impact on the popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration.

1.2 Academic and societal relevance

This thesis is academically relevant because, according to Karlsen (2019), there has not been much intensive in-depth research done on specific European countries or regions about the effects of Russian political influence activities on, for example, European integration. In-depth analyses and case studies on the Baltic region, and the countries Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania individually are still lacking. However, this is particularly relevant, because countries and regions are historically, geographically, and demographically different, and therefore have a different relation and history with Russia (Karlsen, 2019). This study, therefore, does contribute to the existing body of academic literature by bringing in new perspectives focused on a specific geographical area. This thesis will increase our understanding of the effects of Russian soft power influence activities on European integration in the countries Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and then addresses and fills this particular gap in the literature.

Also, this study is societally relevant since it does affect people's everyday life to a great extent, consciously or unconsciously. The rise of Russian disinformation campaigns in (social) media, and its influences on political parties and democratic elections abroad, is directly undermining the political and democratic discourse. According to Karlsen (2019), the Russian political influence activities consequently lead to the destruction of Western,

democratic norms and values, which will have negative implications for countries' economic growth, stability and welfare, people's well-being, and human rights. Furthermore, according to Polyakova et al. (2017), the West would have been better at responding to the Russian influence activities, if the US and Europe would have paid more attention to Russia's influence efforts. Studying the Russian influences, and establishing its effects, can lead to the elimination or minimization of its presence and its effects (Polyakova, 2017).

More concretely, the impact of the previously mentioned examples of Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk in Ukraine, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, but also Transnistria in Moldova and the recent events in Ukraine and the Donbas region in 2022 is more than enough to stress why this topic is so relevant to study. Thus, it is of great need to have a better understanding of the effects of Russian political influence activities.

1.3 Research question and objectives of the study

Since in-depth analyses on specific countries and regions about the effects of Russian influences are still lacking, this study will primarily focus on this. The research aims to study whether there is a relationship between Russian political influence activities and European integration. To specify this relationship more, the objective of this study is to investigate whether especially Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns lead to a higher degree of public popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration.

This results in the following research question: *"What is the impact of Russian political influence activities on support for European integration in the Baltic region?"*.

1.4 Outline of the thesis

This thesis starts with a literature review in which I try to explore what has already been found on the topic of Russian influence and its effects. After, in the theoretical framework, the dependent and independent variables will be determined and further defined. Then, the methodological approach will be described in detail before I will conduct the study. After collecting the data in the results, I will interpret the results. These findings will be described in the discussion section. From these findings, I will give a final answer to the research question in the conclusion.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

A very important component for Russia to challenge the Western-led liberal international order, is through the use of political influence activities (Karlsen, 2019; Ziegler, 2017; Galeotti, 2017; Mankoff 2020; Polyakova et al., 2016, 2017 and 2018). Therefore, the contestation of the Western liberal world order is directly linked to the use of political influence activities by Russia. These political influences are central in this thesis. In this section, I will discuss the existing body of academic literature on Russian foreign policy campaigns and Russian political influence activities to challenge the liberal international order. Afterwards, I will identify the gap in the literature, which will determine the remainder of this thesis.

2.1 Goals and objectives of Russia's foreign policy initiatives in Europe

A great number of authors has concluded that there is an increased willingness and legitimacy of Russia to make use of military and political forces in order to challenge the US-led liberal international order, and thus to back against NATO (Giles, 2017; Shevel, 2015; Sherr, 2017; Tolstrup, 2009; Wilson, 2016; Barrington, Herron & Silver, 2003; Karlsen, 2019; Galeotti, 2017; Conley, Stefanov, Mina & Vladimirov, 2016). Therefore, the main goal of Russia's foreign policy campaigns is to undermine and weaken the power and solidarity of NATO and the European Union (EU) and, thus, the bonds between Europe and the US (Parsi, 2021; Karlsen, 2019). As Radin, Demus & Marcinek (2020) argue, the Kremlin believes that opposing EU and NATO expansion is essential to Russia's security. Putin wants to return to the pre-Cold War world and, consequently, aims to strengthen Russia's position in its immediate neighborhood and beyond with the use of its assertive foreign policy initiatives (Parsi, 2021, p. 98; Giles, 2017), to create a geopolitical buffer zone with a new political and economic architecture in the former Soviet area (Sussex, 2017). Therefore, according to Czyz (2021), Russia's foreign policy direction is mostly focused on the post-Soviet area, and thus Russia wants to keep its sphere of influence in these regions. Moreover, the Kremlin wants to cooperate with and encourage autocratic governments in the former Soviet area. It aims to oppose democratic progress and to reverse the color revolutions in former Soviet countries (Sussex, 2017). According to Radin et al. (2020), the primary goal of Russia's foreign policy is to defend its territory and regime. Thereby, it maintains influence in its neighborhood to seek recognition as a great power and to ensure its economic prosperity (Radin et al., 2020). Furthermore, Karlsen (2019, p. 1) categorizes the Russian foreign policy objectives in three

classifications: regime security, predominance in Russia's near abroad, and world-power status for Russia. Olech & Pińczak (2021) add other objectives of Russia's foreign policy to the list: to deepening cooperation with CIS member states, developing strategic cooperation with China and India, counteracting attempts to falsify history, working to stabilize crisis situations in countries bordering Russia, and strenghtening international peace to prevent the outbreak of a global war (Olech & Pińczak, 2021, p. 6).

According to Sussex (2017), Russia's foreign policy campaign in Europe is a form of a "rebound strategy" to acquire more power and status rapidly and to retain its grip on the post-Soviet area. As Sussex (2017) states, the military and security policy meets the following requirements of a rebound strategy: "(1) a strategic (re-)emphasis on territory and hard power, (2) the construction of alternative networks of influence via institutions, and (3) active efforts to undermine existing normative and legal orthodoxies" (Sussex, 2017, p. 499). Furthermore, he argues that Russia has accomplished this rebound because of its military modernisation: "its ability to deepen control over the former Soviet space with traditional balance-of-power instruments and its challenge to the Western liberal order using both skilful diplomatic narratives and information operations have consolidated Russia's position in global politics" (Sussex, 2017, p. 509).

2.2 Different Russian foreign policy initiatives

Since Russia's independence in 1991, the country has issued a large number of official foreign policy documents: the Foreign Policy Concepts (1993, 2000, 2008 and 2013), Military Doctrines (1993, 2000, 2014) and Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation in 2013 (Light, 2015; Czyz, 2021). Those different types of foreign policy initiatives that Russia has introduced are primarily focused against the West. According to Welch Larson & Shevchenko (2014), Russia's foreign behavior has become much more assertive and volatile toward the West over the period in which different documents are published, often rejecting US diplomatic initiatives (Welch Larson & Shevchenko, 2014, p. 269). Other scholars, like Nitoiu (2016) and Oliker et al. (2009), agree with the notion that since 2000 Russia's foreign policy has evolved towards assertiveness, to regain Russia's world power status. Giles (2017) argues that Russian threat perceptions have remained constant over time, while Russia's capabilities to address them have changed drastically. Russia legitimizes its military actions by presenting itself as being challenged by NATO and that it must mobilize itself militarily to confront NATO (Giles, 2017). The foreign policy of

Russian President Putin is therefore primarily focused on defending Russian interests, developing Russia as a global superpower and restoring Russia's damaged pride (Shevel, 2015). In line with this, Keating & Kaczmarska (2017) stress that Russia's foreign policy is focused on anti-Americanism and sovereignty, which has led "to grant legitimacy and moral authority" to its foreign policy. Several far-right, but also far-left political parties across the whole West have not condemned Russian military influence activities in Crimea and Syria (Keating & Kaczmarska, 2017). Oliker et al. (2009) also states that Russia's foreign policy is focused on "bolstering Russia's prestige, supporting economic recovery and growth and more effectively demonstrating power to keep Russia secure and able to pursue its policy goals" (Oliker, Crane, Schwartz & Yusupov, 2009, p. 14). Russia's leaders believe that "Russia must build and retain its prestige now to ensure that it can defend its interests into the future" (Oliker et al. 2009, p. 14).

Moreover, one part of Russia's foreign policy, in which it tries to regain its grip on the former Soviet Union area with more assertiveness, is called "Near Abroad" (Tolstrup, 2009; Wilson, 2016; Shevel, 2015; Oliker et al., 2009; Secrieru, 2006). Tolstrup (2009) states that Russia tries to weaken the liberal performance of the post-Soviet republics. Therefore, it can be regarded as an influential negative external factor, which "strengthens Russia's coercive state capacity and destabilizes democratizing states in the region" (Tolstrup, 2009, p. 940). Secrieru (2006) agrees that the "Near Abroad" foreign policy aims to reestablish Russia's greatness assuring the state's sovereignty. The "Near Abroad" foreign policy campaign of Russia is thus primarily focused on influencing the external relations of its neighbors: Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and other ex-Soviet countries (Wilson, 2016; Secrieru, 2006). According to Barrington et al. (2003), this foreign policy initiative is successful, finding that "Russians in neighboring countries feel a strong identification with Russia as a homeland" (Barrington et al., 2003, p. 310). It has even led to the fact that millions of Russians migrated from the neighboring countries to Russia. Barrington et al. (2003) draw the following conclusion: "Russians who remained in the neighboring countries seven years after the end of the Soviet Union are more likely to be committed to the state of residence than those who left for Russia" (Barrington et al., p. 311).

Other examples of Russian foreign policy initiatives are the "National Security Strategy (NSS)" and the "Military Doctrine". According to McDermott (2016), Russia accuses the Western world, and thus NATO, of the spread of Islamic terrorism and the destabilization of the international security environment in the NSS 2015. Russia also blames the Western world for the Ukrainian crisis and the "color revolutions" in Russia's near

neighborhood. Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine stands out from all the previous ones because it primarily emphasizes domestic threats to national security, like political destabilization by outside political influence on the Russian population aimed at "undermining spiritual and patriotic traditions" (Sinovets & Renz, 2015, p. 2). Therefore, the 2014 Military Doctrine really stresses the importance of counterbalancing Western influences in Russia's domestic affairs, and its near neighborhood (Sinovets & Renz, 2015). As Sinovets & Renz (2015) state, "the main theme of the doctrine is rivalry with the West" and "the 2014 doctrine gives an impression of déjà-vu, and harks back to the great power doctrines of the past" (Sinovets & Renz, 2015, p. 11). Moreover, the article by Dryblak (2017) analyzes several Russian doctrinal documents from 2000 (since the appointment of current Russian President Putin) to 2016 and found in the use and formulation of the documents the continuity of Soviet and Russian military thought. This illustrates the offensive character of the Kremlin's actions to defend the Russian identity (Dryblak, 2017).

Taking a deeper look at an update of the NSS in 2021, according to Trenin (n.d.), the update is "a remarkable document". The document not only contains national security issues, but also about the return to traditional Russian values. The document concludes that the Western hegemony is in decline. The central focus of the strategy is on Russia itself and also on the moral and ethical aspect of national security. The document contains a long list of traditional Russian values which are under attack because of "Westernization" (Trenin, n.d.). The strategy, therefore, states that Russia's cultural sovereignty is threatened by the West which falsifies Russian and world history (Buchanan, 2021). Furthermore, Putin's foreign policy puts the quality of life and well-being of the Russian population on top (Buchanan, 2021). The Defense Plan for 2021-2025 concentrates on several pillars, among one is very important: to lay out ways to undermine the efficacy of NATO forces operating near Russia's borders (Sukhankin, 2020). Thereby, the Plan also puts an emphasis on actions along Russia's southwestern flank (Belarus, Moldova) and the South Caucasus (Sukhankin, 2020).

2.3 Russian political influence activities in the West

In terms of political influence, Russia is the foreign state that tries to influence European politics and decision-making the most (Karlsen, 2019, p. 1). Russia is targeting the West through a "divide and rule approach" to increase its influence (Karlsen, 2019, p. 1). In order to exert influence, Russia makes considerable use of several political influence instruments: media and social media, cyberattacks, manipulation of elections, espionage, diplomacy,

political communication, interference in business and energy sector, sympathizing of political parties and organizations, and their military forces. Thereby, it also uses highly professional, well-resourced and very active cyber activities and agents, and human intelligence to an increasing extent (Karlsen, 2019). Ziegler (2017) agrees that Russia has "aggressively utilized modern communication technologies to further undermine confidence in Western liberal democratic institutions" (Ziegler, 2017, p. 558). Galeotti (2017) agrees with the notion that the use of cyber attacks by Russia to exert political influence has increased.

In this regard, Karlsen (2019) identifies ten lessons about Russian political influence activities as the following: "(1) Russia is the main threat (read: for EU and NATO), (2) Russia conducts political influence activities, and the main purpose is to weaken the EU and NATO, (3) Russia is targeting populations; their approach is divide and rule, (4) Russia uses minorities, refugees, and extremists to further its divide and rule approach, (5) human intelligence is an important covert tool of influence, (6) cyber operations are another important covert tool of influence, (7) the energy sector, business and corruption are used as venues for influence, (8) there is an extensive use of allies and front organizations, (9) Russia is reconstructing reality and rewriting history to legitimize itself and undermine others and (10) military force is the ultimate tool of influence" (Karlsen, 2019, p. 2).

The chapter '*Exit from Above*' by Cooley & Nexon (2020) discusses that Russia is increasingly practicing "sharp power": informational practices that "limit expression" and "weaken the health and credibility of democratic regimes" (Cooley & Nexon, 2020, p. 94). These include targeting formal democratic processes, and the broader "spheres of culture, academia, media, and publishing—sectors that are crucial in determining how citizens of democracies understand the world around them" (Cooley & Nexon, 2020, p. 94). These authors, thus, show that Russia uses a variety of different means, methods and tools to weaken NATO, the EU and its near neighborhood. Next to "sharp power" tools, Russia also makes multiple use of soft power tools, which includes a long list of cultural closeness, knowledge of Russia, interpersonal contact, access to Russian media, and contacts with the Orthodox churches (Czyz, 2021, p. 156). Leonard & Popescu (2008) enlarges the list with financing of NGOs, economic growth, visa-free movement, open labor market, authoritarian capitalism, supporting authoritarian regime, exporting "sovereign democracy", Russian citizenship and pensions, and military training in Russia's near neighborhood (Leonard & Popescu, 2008, p. 89)

Another example of Russian soft power influence activities are the Russian influences on political party programmes and ideologies, with the goal to make the ideals of those

parties similar to those of Putin (Onderco, 2019; Gressel, 2017). Especially political parties in France and Italy are particularly interesting for Moscow (Gressel, 2017). According to the article by Onderco (2019), there is temporal variation in how European parties have seen Russia since the end of the Cold War. Political parties were more positive towards Russia prior to the annexation of Crimea (Onderco, 2019, p. 526). However, the factors geography and party ideology were not so important in explaining the party positions towards Russia (Onderco, 2019, p. 526). In line with this, several studies show that there are many European radical right and left parties that have an intellectual and ideological fascination with Russia, promoted by the Kremlin (Braghiroli & Makarychev, 2016 in Snegovaya, 2021, p. 410; Political Capital, 2014 in Snegovaya, 2021, p. 410; Keating & Kaczmarska, 2017). Thus, party ideology in itself does not play a role. Snegovaya (2021) presents a database with all political parties that can be considered as pro-Russian in the EU. Snegovaya (2021) finds that pro-Russian parties, regardless of their ideological stance, tend to have a more Eurosceptic attitude than not pro-Russian parties. Furthermore, they tend to be more culturally conservative than not pro-Russian parties (Snegovaya, 2021, p. 410). However, according to Gressel (2017), it is not only the extreme-wing parties that "share elements of the Kremlin's world view", but also parties that can be considered as "mainstream" (Gressel, 2017, p. 1). Yet, Gressel (2017) agrees with the notion that pro-Russian parties are much more "hardcore" in their Euroscepticism.

Moreover, according to Meister (2016), Russian influence happens a lot through media channels, such as RT and Sputnik, but also by the "targeted expansion of informal financial networks, and funding and support for left- and right-wing populist political parties and organizations" (Meister, 2016, p. 2). Furthermore, Meister (2016) states that Europe is particularly vulnerable to Russian influence because of their open societies. In Europe, "Russia tries to fuel European self-doubt in increasingly fragile and fragmented Western societies" (Meister, 2016, p. 2). Moreover, Russia "encourages destabilization, corruption, and weak states in order to maintain relationships of dependency" (Meister, 2016, p. 2).

Conley et al. (2016) find that the Russian political influence activities follow two main tracks: "one aimed at manipulating a country by dominating strategic sectors of its economy to abuse capitalism and exploit the weaknesses in its economic governance systems" and another that "seeks to corrode democracy from within by deepening political divides and cultivating relationships with aspiring autocrats, political parties (...), and Russian sympathizers" (Conley et al., 2016, p. 11). Moreover, they find that the extent of political influence by Russia in the country depends on Russia's economic footprint in that country.

The bigger the economic footprint of Russia in a country, the more vulnerable the country is to Russian influences (Conley et al., 2016).

The article by Keating & Kaczmarska (2017) has made great significance in the existing body of literature with the focus on the effects of Russian political influences and foreign policy campaigns. According to Keating & Kaczmarska (2017), Russia makes plenty of use of soft power tools, which can be categorized in the following capabilities: moral conservatism, illiberal governance, and strong leadership. Here, moral conservatism is based on the "maintenance of a sexual and religious status quo reflected in conservatie Christianity" (Keating & Kaczmarska, 2017, p. 10). Moral conservatism has found its influence in Western Europe and the US, with pro-Russian, pro-Putin, "anti-LGBT" election compaigns. According to Keating & Kaczmarska (2017), "an unrestrained executive, a reduction in the freedoms of civil society groups within the state, and a populist form of government supported by nationalitsa are embodied in the illiberal governance" (Keating & Kaczmarska, 2017, p. 12). This has been very influential in Hungary's Orban government, but also the United Kingdom which welcomed Putin's efforts to restore national pride and dignity (Keating & Kaczmarska, 2017, p. 13). Strong leadership is defined as "Putin himself as a major source of ideological soft power for Russia due to the positive valuation of this authoritative style of rule" (Keating & Kaczmarska, 2017, p. 13). Thereby, it is clear that Putin's leadership styles have been appealing to several groups of Europeans as Serbians, Armenians, and Bulgarians, but also followers of the right-wing Marine Le Pen, left-wing Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of British right-wing UK Independence Party Nigel Farage, and former US President Donald Trump (Keating & Kaczmarska, 2017). Zevelev (2016) agrees with that, particularly since the appointment of Russian President Putin, Russian foreign policy is primarily based on Russian national identity, with the evolution of the concepts of "compatriots abroad" and the "Russkiy Mir" ("Russian World"). Thus, the Russian foreign policy doctrine of today is based on domestic ideas about Russian identity, which include the belief in Russian exceptionalism, denial of the European nature of Russian civilization, portrayal of the West as evil, and the conviction that "Russia has a special civilizational and spiritual mission among the neighboring people of Eurasia" (Zevelev, 2016, p. 16).

According to Czyz (2021), the political, military, economic, and soft power Russian influence activities are all based on the concept of the "Russian world", which promotes the idea of Russia as a civilization center, opposed to the Western culture (Czyz, 2021, p. 155). In terms of political instruments, regional cooperation is used a lot to strengthen and maintain

Russian influence in post-Soviet regions. Examples of regional organizations are the Common-wealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (Czyz, 2021; Secrieru, 2006). Russian economic powers are energy resources exported to the West through the construction of the Nord Stream line I and II which made the West dependent on Russia in terms of energy (Czyz, 2021; Karlsen, 2019).

2.4 Case studies of Russian political influences

The overall majority of academic literature focuses on the Russian interventions in Crimea, Ukraine, in 2014 (Jose & Stefes, 2018; Cumbo, 2015; Tabachnik, 2020; Wilson, 2016; Allison, 2014; Marten, 2015); hence, Russian interventionist policies in Ukraine are extensively studied already. In addition, there have already been conducted several case studies of various other (Western) European countries. Polyakova et al. (2016, 2017 and 2018) examined several comparative case studies of Russian political influences over time. In this series, called '*The Kremlin's Trojan Horses'*, Polyakova et al. (2016, 2017 and 2018) conducted case studies of several northern, western and southern European countries: France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Greece, Italy, Spain, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden (Polyakova et al., 2016; Polyakova et al., 2017; Polyakova et al., 2018; Mankoff, 2020). Moreover, some research has already been done on countries in the Black Sea region, especially Georgia, but also the Caspian Sea region, and Central Asia, for example Kazakhstan (Gressel, 2021; German, 2014; Wang & Zhuraleva, 2015).

2.5 Literature gap

Importantly, it becomes clear that there is a big gap in the literature concerning the influence of Russian political influence activities on European integration of post-Communist countries and regions. Literature on European integration of these states mostly takes European integration as the independent variable and, thus, how European integration benefits economic relations, market performance, and other mostly economic factors (Southall, 2008; Jovanovic, 2001). Furthermore, what is lacking in the existing body of academic literature, according to Karlsen (2019), are in-depth analyses and case studies of specific European countries or regions. This is important because European countries are very different with respect to the relations they have with Russia. All countries have a different history, geography, and demography, and these factors matter for the relations with and perceptions of Russia (Karlsen, 2019). Therefore, specific analyses of different European countries are

needed to a greater extent. Surprisingly, not a lot of scholars have shed light on the Baltic region yet, consisting of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The Baltic region seems to be forgotten, while this region is particularly interesting since Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are all in the near neighborhood of Russia. However, this region has chosen to go in a more pro-Western direction with its accession to the EU and NATO in 2004 (Czyz, 2021).

Besides, Karlsen (2019) acknowledges that it is also of great importance to get a better understanding of the effects of the Russian influence activities since those are not extensively studied either. Radin et al. (2020) agree with this, with the notion that there is significant uncertainty about whether, when and to what extent the Russian subversion is effective. The article by Keating & Kaczmarska (2017) already focuses on the effects of several sources of soft power. Yet, this is just one of the few articles out there in the body of academic literature focusing on the effects. More research on this is therefore of great need.

The existing literature is often sure about what political influence activities Russia conducts. However, scholars do not necessarily know yet extensively what the precise effects are of these activities on, for instance, European integration. Rohrschneider & Whitefield (2006) have already examined how Russian influences have decreased over time, which benefits European integration of the Baltic states. However, this article stems from 2006 and in the meantime, as argued here, Russia's behavior toward its neighborhood has changed drastically. Therefore, more up-to-date research is needed on how Russian political influences have affected European integration after the events in Crimea from 2014 onwards.

CHAPTER III: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the Theoretical Framework chapter, I will identify the dependent and independent variables of the research. Furthermore, different definitions that are given by different scholars in existing work will be discussed, such as the concepts of propaganda and Euroscepticism. I end with formulating a hypothesis that will form the basis of conducting the research.

3.1 Independent and dependent variable

Taking a look at the research question central in this thesis, it becomes clear that the independent variable is called "Russian political influence activities". The dependent variable is called "European integration". This means that the effect of Russian political influence activities on European integration will be studied in this thesis. To specify the research more, Russian political influence activities will be primarily focused on the use of pro-Russian media and propaganda campaigns, and European integration will be mostly focused on its opposite: Euroscepticism.

Many other scholars have already approached the definitions of "Russian political influences" and "European integration". In the following paragraphs, the various definitions used throughout the literature will be outlined. First, I discuss the independent variable "Russian political influences", after I discuss the dependent variable "European integration".

3.2 Political influence activities

The general terms for Russian political influences can be "political influence activities", "political influence" or "political interference"; several synonyms or familiar terminology are used to express the similar phenomenon. Different authors have attached several definitions to these concepts. First of all, it is important to mention that, as Lloyd-Damnjanovic (2018) states, the vocabulary available for characterizing foreign, political influence, and interference activities is limited, because the public debate regarding those issues is just recent (Lloyd-Damnjanovic, 2018, p. 33).

According to Karlsen (2019), the Russian political influence activities can be defined as "long-term efforts to ensure Russian political interests and achievement of the country's objectives" (Karlsen, 2019, p. 5). Those influence activities can cover a wide range of spheres and areas, such as political, security, military, economic, energy, and technological issues, but

also exerting influence on countries with a great number of Russian minorities and speakers on the basis of ethnic, social, and historical issues (Karlsen, 2019, p. 5).

As discussed by Lloyd-Damnjanovic (2018), there is a difference between "interference" on the one hand and "influence" on the other hand. Therefore, it is of great importance to be careful with what to classify as "interference" activities and "influence" activities. In the existing literature, there are discussions around which terminology is better to use in which situations (Lloyd-Damnjanovic, 2018).

Turnbull (2017) even goes further in the distinction between influence and interference and makes a clearer distinction between "legitimate influence" and "unacceptable interference". Here, Turnbull (2017) defines "unacceptable interference" as "covert, coercive, or corrupt" forms of influence. Therefore, Lloyd-Damnjanovic (2018) argues that the concept of "interference" is too narrow since it only focuses on the illegal and unacceptable forms of political influence activities. A lot of political influence activities, however, are not so much illegal, while they can be considered undesirable (Lloyd-Damnjanovic, 2018, p. 35). Moreover, according to Lloyd-Damnjanovic (2018), "interference" is an "imperfect concept to characterize problematic activities because it necessarily implies disruption" (Lloyd-Damnjanovic, 2018, p. 35). "Influence" is seen as a broader concept since it does not only take into account disruptive activities, but also activities that "induce change by impressing, persuading, swaying, biasing, or otherwise incentivizing targets toward a particular course of action" (Lloyd-Damnjanovic, 2018, p. 35). Therefore, Lloyd-Damnjanovic (2018) believes that "influence" is a better term to use since it considers both disruptive and non-disruptive activities. Finally, Lloyd-Damnjanovic (2018) argues that influence is not only exerted by the state or the government, but can also be conducted by non-state actors, such as Orthodox churches, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labor groups, media, and social media, and military and criminal organizations.

According to Arts & Verschuren (1999), political influence is a contested concept that is hard to measure objectively. They furthermore state that most social scientists agree on the general definition of influence, given by Cox & Jacobson (1973): "(...) influence means the modification of one actor's behaviour by that of another". Thus, in the political setting, an individual or a group tries to modify the behaviour of decision-makers in a political arena, resulting in a modified decision (Arts & Verschuren, 1999, p. 412). Intervention in decision-making is then not even needed to modify decisions; the presence or thoughts of the influencer can be sufficient for successful political influence (Arts & Verschuren, 1999). Arts & Verschuren (1999) use the following definition for political influence: "the achievement of

(a part of) an actor's goal in political decision-making, which is either caused by one's own intervention or by the decision-makers' anticipation" (Arts & Verschuren, 1999, p. 413).

In the article by Keating & Kaczmarska (2017), there is a distinction made between "soft power" and "hard power" influence activities. In "soft power" influence activities, there is a focus on the use of attraction to help states get what they want. As Nye & Joseph (2004) calls it: "the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes one wants", with the notion that "seduction is always more effective than coercion". Here, a mix of culture, political values, and foreign policies is used, which can lead to political influence because it "grants legitimacy and moral authority" to foreign policy objectives (Nye & Joseph, 2004 in Keating & Kaczmarska, 2017, p. 3-4). Hard power means the use of carrots or sticks to produce political effects, and thus is much more coercive (Nye & Joseph, 2004 in Keating & Kaczmarska, 2017, p. 3).

The definition of political influence that best fits my research is a broader definition in which the social dimension is included. I believe it is particularly relevant to focus on the soft power influence activities, in which there is a focus on the use of attraction to help states get what they want. Here, culture and political values play a big role and, thus, I believe it is important to include the social dimension. The inclusion of the social dimension is particularly important for measuring Russian influences in political parties and whether that leads to a higher degree of popularity for pro-Russian parties opposing European integration among Baltic citizens.

The definition of political influence that best fits my research is, therefore, the following: "induce change by impressing, persuading, swaying, biasing, or otherwise incentivizing targets toward a particular course of action" (Lloyd-Damnjanovic, 2018, p. 35).

3.2.1 Pro-Kremlin propaganda

Because this thesis will be primarily focused on the effects of pro-Kremlin propaganda as a means of Russian political influence on European integration, it is firstly important to define what is actually meant by this. According to Stanley (2015), propaganda is defined as the "employment of a political ideal against itself" (Stanley, 2015 in Brennan, 2017, p. 37). Stanley (2015) makes a distinction between two different kinds of propaganda: supporting propaganda, which is about promoting an ideal by "emotional, non-rational means", and undermining propaganda, which is the phenomenon Stanley (2015) described (Brennan, 2017, p. 37). Supporting propaganda uses "emotional manipulation, threats or cajoling, or bypasses rational deliberation, in support of ideals" (Brennan, 2017, p. 40). Undermining

propaganda undermines those ideals. However, according to Brennan (2017), the concept of propaganda is so broad that just focusing on values or goals (read: ideals) will give a too narrow definition. Therefore, Brennan (2017) doubts the understanding and usefulness of the concepts described by Stanley (2015).

What I mean by "pro-Kremlin propaganda" (or: pro-Soviet/pro-Russian) is, according to *Collin's English Dictionary* any propaganda that is "in favour of or supporting anything of, characteristic of, or relating to the former Soviet Union (or: Russia), its people or its government" (Collins English Dictionary, n.d.). Now I have explained definitions of relevant concepts regarding the independent variable, the concept of European integration should be defined as well.

3.3 European integration

In this section, I will aim to explain what is meant by European integration. In academia, the concept of European integration is already discussed by many authors. To understand the concept of European integration, it is initially of great importance to understand what is meant by "integration". The working paper by Diez & Wiener (2018) is particularly important here for defining the concept of "European integration theory".

Haas (1958) described integration as a process "whereby political actors in several, distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations, and political activities toward a new centre, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing national states" (Haas, 1958 in Diez & Wiener, 2018 p. 6). This definition includes both the political process, which consists of the construction of new political institutions with a direct stay in at least a part of their member states' affairs and the social process, which embodies the shifting of loyalties (Diez & Wiener, 2018, p. 6). Therefore, according to Diez & Wiener (2018), this is a very broad definition. Other more narrow definitions focus on the creation of political institutions to which member states subscribe, and thus lack the social dimension which can be ascribed to the concept of integration as well (Diez & Wiener, 2018). Another important element, which can also be derived from above, is that integration is generally seen as a process (Diez & Wiener, 2018).

With the definition of integration as a whole in mind, it is possible to create a definition that is more feasible in the setting of the study. In this study, there is stress on "European" integration. European integration theory is therefore important and can be defined as the following: "European integration theory is the field of systematic reflection on

the process of intensifying political cooperation in Europe and the development of common political institutions, as well as on its outcome" (Diez & Wiener, 2018, p. 7). Moreover, it is not only about political institutions. As Haas (1958) claims, it is possible to add a social dimension to European integration. Thus, the definition of European integration theory also includes changing constructions of identities and interests of social actors in the context of this process (Diez & Wiener, 2018, p. 7).

The literature shows us that nationalists are far less likely to support European integration than those who at least partially also identify with Europe (Carey 2002 in Risse, 2005, p. 295). Thus, the degree to which you identify yourself with your nation has an impact on the extent of interest in European integration. Therefore, to reach European integration it is needed to overcome nationalism (Risse, 2005; de Winter & Gomez-Reino Cachafeiro, 2002). According to de Winter & Gomez-Reino Cachafeiro (2002), this means that European integration is essentially aimed at diminishing the sovereignty of the nation state in vital sectors (de Winter & Gomez-Reino Cachafeiro, 2002, p. 488). Moreover, de Winter & Gomez-Reino Cachafeiro (2002) defines European integration as a process of centralization of the decision-making process; the transfer of competencies from the national level to a higher level (de Winter & Gomez-Reino Cachafeiro, 2002, p. 487-488). Thus, European integration creates a "democratic deficit", which means an increase in distance between the decision-makers and the public (de Winter & Gomez-Reino Cachafeiro, 2002).

Because I have decided to focus more on informal, soft power influence, I think it is important to not only focus on the political and institutional dimension but also the social dimension of European integration. This is in line with the definition of political influence. The political dimension is important since the research is aimed at political parties. However, because it is the people that vote for those parties in a democracy, I believe people's identity, interests, and world views play a big role for the popularity of those parties. Therefore, I will not only focus on the process of political cooperation in Europe and the development of common political institutions but also on the changing construction of identities and interests of social actors, translated into their party preferences (Diez & Wiener, 2018).

3.3.1 Euroscepticism

Another important aspect in this thesis is called "Euroscepticism" (Leruth, Startin & Usherwood, 2017). According to Leruth, Startin & Usherwood (2017), defining Euroscepticism is a challenge since there are a lot of competing definitions. Furthermore, according to Guimarães & Aquino (2020), the concept of Euroscepticism is dynamic, which

means it evolves along with the integration process. Secondly, it is not exclusive to a single social actor, but finding acceptance among citizens, political parties, institutions, communication vehicles, and others (Guimarães & Aquino, 2020, p. 20). Finally, it is compatible with different ideologies, from the right to the left of the political spectrum (Guimarães & Aquino, 2020, p. 20). This makes it so hard to get a good comprehension of the concept of Euroscepticism.

However, I will use the most cited definition of Euroscepticism which is the one by Taggart (1998). According to Taggart (1998), Eurosceptisicm can be defined as the "idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration" (Taggart, 1998, p. 336). I believe this definition best fits the purposes of my research.

Moreover, Taggart & Szczerbiak (2002) make a distinction between hard and soft Euroscepticism. Hard Euroscepticism means the "principal rejection of the European Integration as embodied in the EU" (Spiering & Harmsen, 2004, p. 18). Soft Euroscepticism means "qualified opposition or disagreement with one or more EU policies" (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2002, p. 7). I believe both types are relevant to bear in mind while conducting this research.

3.4 Hypothesis

In this research, I will contribute to the existing body of literature by bringing in new evidence by analyzing existing data on the basis of a hypothesis. This hypothesis will form the basis of the remaining part of the thesis.

The hypothesis focuses on the presence and public popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration. Political parties are important since they are a vital part in Russia's influences in the West and the support for European integration. As becomes clear from above, "soft power" political influence activities focuses for a great part on sympathizing political parties, supporting anti-Americanism and anti-Westernism, and pro-Russian policy initiatives (Keating & Kaczmarska, 2017; Karlsen, 2019; Gressel, 2017; Conley et al., 2016). Both far-right and far-left political parties have been exposed to this and have not, for example, condemned Russian military influence activities in Crimea and Syria (Keating & Kaczmarska, 2017; Gressel, 2017). Those Russian influence activities are aimed at eroding democracy and deepening political divides (Conley et al., 2016). Therefore, political parties are a very important target for Russia, which explains why they are included

in the hypothesis. Nowadays, another important soft power tool in Putin's toolbox is the use of Russian disinformation and propaganda in media (Karlsen, 2019). It is interesting to study whether those Russian media influences actually lead to higher public popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration, promoting nationalism, and pro-Russian policy initiatives. So, does the public in the Baltic region become more sympathetic to pro-Russian foreign policy initiatives because of those Russian political influences? Because of the high degree of Russian political influence in the political arena, I expect that this will indeed be the case. Therefore, the hypothesis that is central in this thesis sounds as follows:

H1: The more there is population exposure to pro-Kremlin media, the higher the public popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration in the Baltic states.

We care about the presence of public popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration in the Baltic states because these are one of the main drivers that influences the public perception of European integration. This can consequently lead to slower or negative development of the EU. The people have influence on the power of those political parties through votes, but political parties also shape people's world views (Mullinix, n.d.). Therefore, it is interesting to look at whether the Russian political influence activities actually lead to those parties opposing European integration.

Thus, the remaining part of the thesis will focus on the question whether population's exposure to pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation increases the degree of public popularity of pro-Russian, Eurosceptic parties in the countries Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

CHAPTER IV: METHODOLOGY

In the Methodology section, I will discuss the methodological approach to collect data for this study. After, the specific methods and tools will be explained in more detail. Moreover, I will discuss the case selection, population, and sample. Finally, the variables will be operationalized and the validity and reliability of the research design will be assessed.

4.1 Overall methodological approach

This study will follow the structure of a qualitative research design using quantitative measures. The research is a cross-sectional comparative case study design since I aim to analyze and compare the behaviour of the countries Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in a specific period of time (Blatter & Haverland, 2012). The time frame for this study is 2004-2021. 2004 is the year in which all the Baltic states joined the EU and NATO. I believe this is a good starting point for the research.

Moreover, this study is an example of factor-centric research. I am particularly interested in the question whether the factor "exposure to Russian disinformation and propaganda" does make a difference for the degree of public popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration (Gschwend & Schimmelfenning, 2007). Furthermore, this thesis will follow a deductive approach. A hypothesis is derived from the theory to give an answer to the research question. In the remaining part of the thesis, I will gather and analyze data that will result in findings. From these findings, I plan to test whether the hypothesis must be supported or not, which will form the basis for the answer to the research question (Stoiferman, 2010).

Finally, the research is qualitative while using quantitative measures. A quantitative measure is used to measure whether all political parties within Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania that took part in the elections from 2004-2021 are opposing European integration or not. This analysis consists of 42 political parties from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (n=42, merged parties are counted as one). After, the popularity of the parties is being evaluated quantitatively over the years 2004-2021. To identify whether a party is pro-Russian, other secondary, qualitative data will be used. According to Arts & Verschuren (1999), political influence is a contested concept that is hard to measure objectively. Thus, this part I will measure qualitatively. To conclude, I will try to find a relation between the "Disinformation Resilience Index" (DRI) (Chyzhova, 2018) and the popularity of those parties qualitatively.

In conclusion, the study aims to get a better understanding of the effects of Russian disinformation in the Baltic region by conducting a comparative cross-sectional case study of the countries Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in a qualitative manner using quantitative metrics.

4.2 Case selection

This study focuses on the Baltic region: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In this section, I will argue why it is interesting to focus on the Baltic states.

4.2.1 Why Baltic states?

It is generally known that there are a lot of Russian political influences in the Baltic states (e.g., Karlsen, 2019). It is in Putin's foreign policy goals to restore the power and magnitude of the Soviet Union as it was during the Cold War. In this period, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were all part of the Soviet Union. Now, they are all post-Soviet republics. That is why it is interesting to study whether there has been an increase of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration in the Baltic region and whether there are considerable differences between the countries.

The countries are similar in several respects. All countries joined the EU, NATO, and other Western-oriented institutions simultaneously in 2004 (NATO, 2004; Paulauskas, 2006). Furthermore, since they are all post-Soviet countries they share the same history to a large extent. Besides, the countries are in the same geographical region and all have a considerable amount of Russian speakers and minorities. In Estonia and Latvia, a quarter of the population is a Russian-speaking minority; in Lithuania one in six people (Bathke, 2021; World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, 2018; Grigas, 2014). Also, the countries are in very similar economic situations. In 2020, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania had a GDP per capita of $19,797; $15,584; and $17,214 respectively (The World Bank, n.d.-a). All countries are categorized as high incomes countries (The World Bank, n.d.-b). Moreover, Estonia, Latvia, as well as Lithuania are republics and parliamentary democracies and thus share the same regime types (globalEDGE, 2022a; globalEDGE, 2022b; globalEDGE, 2022c). However, the extent of Russian influence and exposure to pro-Kremlin media may differ between the countries depending on the DRI. See Table 4, Appendix I for an overview.

4.2.2 Population and sample

The Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) is a survey held under political parties in EU member states, and Norway, Switzerland, and Turkey. Therefore, the population of the survey is all political parties in the EU, plus parties in Norway, Switzerland, and Turkey (CHESdata, n.d.). From this list of parties, I select all the parties from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in the time frame 2004-2021. Therefore, the population of this study is all political parties that took part in the parliamentary elections of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania between the years 2004 and 2021 (N=42). In this study, the sample equals the population (n=42).

4.3 Methods and tools

In this research, I will make use of a database, and an index to identify the values of the dependent and independent variables. I will describe them in more detail below.

4.3.1 Database: Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES)

To measure whether a political party is opposing European integration, and to measure the popularity of those parties, data from the CHES datasets (CHESdata, n.d.) will be used.

The CHES aims to get a view on party positioning on European integration, ideology, and policy issues for national parties in European countries. The surveys were conducted in 1999, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014, and 2019 (CHESdata, n.d.). Party positioning gets determined on different dimensions: general, economic, and social left/right, but also focuses on immigration, redistribution, decentralization, and environmental policy (CHESdata, n.d.). General questions are asked about European integration, specific EU policy, ideology and characteristics of the political party, several policy dimensions on deregulation, redistribution, government intervention, multiculturalism, and more, and salience on Russian interference (CHESdata, 2021).

The CHES 2021 combines data from 1999, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014, and 2019. The number of political parties evaluated ranges from 143 to 277 from fourteen to all EU member states. Each EU member state is represented in the data (CHESdata, 2021).

4.3.2 Disinformation Resilience Index (DRI)

In this thesis, information from the "Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe" (Chyzhova, 2018) report on the countries Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania will be used. In this report, the DRI is introduced, which is used to simplify the complexity of the

concept "resilience" (Chyzhova, 2018). Because it is an index, it is a relative measure. This makes it comparable between different countries, and thus allows me to make comparisons between Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (Chyzhova, 2018). The index gives a review of vulnerable groups of the population, the specifics of the media landscape which facilitates the spread of foreign disinformation, the respective institutions, and legal regulations, and other issues related to information security (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 14).

The DRI consists of three indicators. Indicator A measures the population exposure to Kremlin-led media and consists of the following variables: cultural, historical, and other affinities, Russian media popularity, trust ratings of Russian media, popularity of national media transmitting pro-Kremlin narratives, and vulnerable groups (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 16). Thus, it aims to get a view of the country's vulnerability to disinformation and propaganda. The indicator is a 5-point scale, from 0 to 4, in which 0 is the lowest and 4 is the highest; the higher, the more exposure (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 16).

Indicator B is about the quality of systematic responses and here within it measures institutional development, legal regulations, long-term approach, countermeasures in relation to vulnerable groups, civil society response, and media community regulations (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 16). It is, thus, about a country's preparedness to counterbalance disinformation. The indicator is a 5-point scale, from 0 to 4, in which 0 is the lowest and 4 is the highest; the higher, the lower the quality of systemic responses (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 19).

Indicator C refers to vulnerability to digital warfare and more specifically takes into account the popularity of Russian social media, national online platforms spreading pro-Kremlin content, digital legislation, and the presence of debunking initiatives (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 16). This indicator stresses the fact that the Kremlin aims to influence political debates on social media to an increasing extent. The indicator is a 5-point scale, from 0 to 4, in which 0 is the lowest and 4 is the highest; the higher, the higher the country's vulnerability to masked sources of disinformation (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 21).

4.4 Operationalization of the variables

The dependent and independent variables of the hypothesis need to be testable. In this section, I will discuss how I will operationalize the dependent and independent variables.

4.4.1 Exposure to Russian disinformation and propaganda

As becomes clear in this paper, there are a lot of different kinds of Russian political influences. Taking into account all the different kinds is simply too time-consuming and barely possible within the limits of a master's thesis. Therefore, in this thesis, I specifically aim to measure whether the exposure to Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns leads to a higher degree of public popularity of pro-Russian parties opposing European integration. In this respect, the focus should lie on Baltic citizens, and thus, the exposure to Russian-led media and disinformation by the Baltic population.

In the DRI, Indicator A "Population Exposure to Kremlin-led Media" measures this citizens' exposure to Kremlin-led media, and thus the consumption of Kremlin-led media by the country's population. Therefore, I will use this indicator to measure the extent to which citizens are exposed to Russian disinformation and propaganda.

In this indicator, the following questions are asked: "(1.1) Do Russian media exploit the country's (1) economic, (2) historic, (3) societal, (4) ethnolinguistic, and (5) religious context to spread its narratives? If so, how many of these are exploited?, (1.2) What is the general level of Russian media popularity in your country?, (1.3) How high are the trust ratings of Russian media among your country's population?, (1.4) How popular are national media (not affiliated with Russian media) which transmit and spread pro-Kremlin narratives?, and (1.5) How many vulnerable targeted groups are exploited by the Kremlin-backed media?" (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 18-19).

Hence, I expect that: the higher a country scores on this indicator, the higher the exposure to Russian-led disinformation and propaganda by citizens in the country, and thus, as in line with the hypothesis in this study, the higher the public popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration. The scores of the indicator will be compared between Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, to see which country scores the best on the indicator.

4.4.2 Pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration

Pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration are parties that are exposed to Russian influence, and therefore aim to bring policies in line with the interests of Russia, and often against the interests of the US. Furthermore, they oppose the process of European integration. The list of parties that are analyzed, can be found in Table 6, 7, and 8, Appendix II.

In Estonia, the parliamentary elections 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019 are evaluated. In Latvia, the parliamentary elections 2006, 2010, 2011, 2014, and 2018 are evaluated. In Lithuania, the parliamentary elections 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020 are evaluated (Parties and Elections in Europe, 2018, 2019, and 2020).

To identify whether a party is pro-Russian, the table with pro-Russian parties in the EU by Snegovaya (2021) will be used to identify pro-Russian parties in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (Snegovaya, 2021). If the party is on this list, I consider it as pro-Russian.

To identify whether the party is opposing European integration, the variable EU_POSITION is used from CHES. This variable measures the overall orientation on European integration by the party leadership on a 7-point scale in which 1 refers to "strongly opposed" and 7 to "strongly in favor" (CHESdata, 2021). This means that if the party scores <4, it is on the left side of the continuum, opposing European integration (see Table 1). I will identify those parties as opposing European integration.
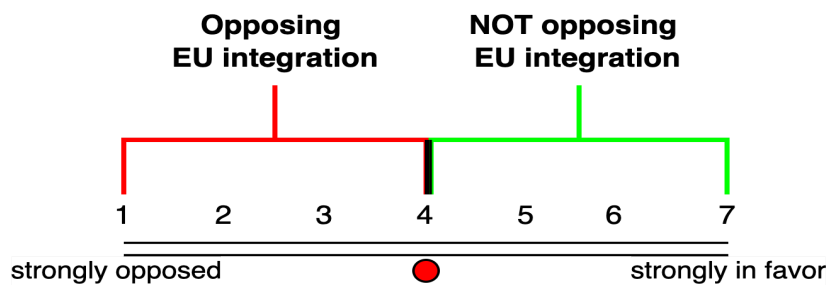
Table 1 - Coding parties opposing European integration

By doing this, I can classify the parties on a 2-by-2 matrix alongside two axes. The first axis is focused on whether a party is pro-Russian (Yes/No), while the other is focused on whether the party is opposing EU integration (Yes/No). This will result in the following matrix:

	Opposing EU integration ⟷	**Not opposing EU integration** ⟶
Pro-Russian ↑	Pro-Russian / Opposing EU integration	Pro-Russian / Not opposing EU integration
Not Pro-Russian ↓	Not Pro-Russian / Opposing EU integration	Not Pro-Russian / Not opposing EU integration

Table 2 - Matrix classifying political parties Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania

Using this matrix will provide us with a better view of the political landscape in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and see how the "pro-Russian/opposing EU integration" field develops over time. For each field, the percentages of votes received by the parties belonging to that field will be added together. In this way, the popularity of each of the fields can be tracked and, thus, it is possible to identify whether the popularity of the "pro-Russian/opposing EU integration" field increases, decreases, or remains stable. And thus, as a conclusion, whether the "pro-Russian political parties opposing EU integration" landscape becomes more popular over time among Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian citizens.

4.4.3 Public popularity

What I mean by public popularity is the vote percentage received by the party, as well as the seat share of the party in the national election. To measure the degree of public popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration, the election results in terms of votes and seats (in %) from the website Parties and Elections in Europe from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania will be used (Parties and Elections in Europe, 2019, 2018, and 2020). I have

decided to not pick the variables VOTE and SEAT from CHES since data on these variables are not complete for all the political parties within the given time frame.

4.5 Alternative explanations

In order to make sure that it is the exposure to Russian disinformation and propaganda that leads to a certain degree of public popularity of pro-Russian parties opposing European integration, it is needed to add alternative explanations. In this way, I can increase the chance that exposure to Russian disinformation and propaganda is the independent variable, and not something else.

4.5.1 Russian speakers and minorities

The degree of popularity of pro-Russian parties opposing European integration can depend on the fact that there are a lot of Russian minorities and speakers in the country, who feel affinity with Russia. Therefore, it is important to keep track of this. However, as becomes clear from Section 4.2, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have a significant share of Russian speakers and minorities in the population (Bathke, 2021; World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, 2018; Grigas, 2014). In this way, I have tried to control for this alternative explanation.

4.5.2 Russia's neighborhood

When a country is in the near neighborhood of Russia, it can be that the population of the country does have more affinity with Russia, which could result in a higher degree of popularity for pro-Russian parties opposing European integration. However, since Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania respectively all fall in the same geographical region, I have tried to control for this alternative explanation.

4.5.3 Post-Soviet states

Similar to the two above, it can be that the population of a country feels more affinity with Russia because they once belonged to the Soviet Union. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are all post-Soviet republics. Therefore, they all have a historical legacy from the Soviet Union, which could result in a higher degree of popularity for pro-Russian parties opposing European integration. However, by taking this into account, I have tried to control for this alternative explanation.

4.5.4 Economic development

Another alternative explanation is that the dependence of a certain country can (but does not necessarily have to be) have a relation with the economic development of a country. When a country has a small GDP, it can be very dependent on Russia (e.g., in terms of FDI). Therefore, it is very important to keep track of this. However, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania all have a very similar GDP, and thus I have tried to control this (The World Bank, n.d.-a). The table with a summary of all the variables and indicators can be found on the next page.

Independent variable	Indicator	Source
Exposure to Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns	DRI: Indicator A 'Population Exposure to Kremlin-led Media'	Chyzhova (2018)
Dependent variable	**Indicator**	**Source**
Public popularity political parties	% votes and seats received by the political party	Parties and Elections in Europe (2019, 2018 and 2020)
Pro-Russian (Yes/No)	List pro-Russian parties in EU	Snegovaya (2021)
Opposing EU integration (Yes/No)	EU_POSITION: overall orientation of party on European integration	CHES database
Alternative explanations	**Indicator**	**Source**
Russian speakers and minorities	# Russian speakers and minorities in the country	World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples (2018); Bathke (2021); Grigas (2014)
Russia's neighborhood	Geographical location of the country	
Post-Soviet states	Soviet legacy of the country	
Economic development	GDP (in %) of the country	The World Bank (n.d.-a)

Table 3 - Summary operationalization variables

4.6 Validity and reliability

To assess the quality of the research design, two terms are relevant that are widely used throughout the literature: validity and reliability. To measure validity, internal and external validity will be discussed.

4.6.1 Internal validity

To increase the internal validity of the study, it is important to pass the four hurdles. Whenever a certain hurdle is not passed, the study's internal validity decreases (Kellstedt & Whitten, 2018).

The first hurdle questions whether there is a credible causal mechanism that connects X and Y (Kellstedt & Whitten, 2018). Based on the literature review of this study, it becomes clear that it is reasonable to assume that there is a relationship between Russian political influence activities and the degree of European integration. Thus, hurdle 1 is passed.

The second hurdle asks whether we can rule out reverse causality so that the cause precedes the effect (Kellstedt & Whitten, 2018). Reverse causality would mean that the degree of public popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration could also have an impact on the extent to which there is exposure to Russian disinformation and propaganda In this case, hurdle 2 is not passed. The authors Rohrschneider & Whitefield (2006) have found that European integration leads to less powerful Russian influences (for example, less powerful Russian propaganda) in the Baltic region. Therefore, I cannot rule out that Y can also lead to X.

The third hurdle questions whether the research design allows me to observe variations in Y if there are also variations in X (Kellstedt & Whitten, 2018)? X varies since the extent to which the population in the country is exposed to Russian propaganda can differ among different states, and I am able to observe that by using the DRI. Moreover, the degree of popularity of different pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration can also differ; one party can be more popular than the other party, thus pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration may receive more votes and another party, and the research design is aimed at observing that.

The fourth hurdle is about adding confounding variables to the study, so the independent variable really leads to changes in the dependent variable, and not something else (Kellstedt & Whitten, 2018). I tried to take into account several alternative explanations that could lead to a certain degree of popularity for pro-Russian parties opposing European

integration: Russian speakers and minorities, the geographical region, the Soviet historical legacies, and economic development. Hence, I try to rule out the possibility that anything else can lead to a certain degree of European integration other than Russian political influences.

Because three of the four hurdles are passed, the internal validity of the study is moderately high.

4.6.2 External validity

Since this study is in the form of a comparative case study of the Baltic states, the external validity of this study is not high. However, I do not believe that this is an issue since I am not interested in generalizing the results of this study to other populations; I aim to go into depth in the Baltic region, not into width. Reaching a high level of generalizability is not the objective of this study.

4.6.3 Reliability

Reliability measures whether someone else has the same findings if s/he conducts the same study on the same thing, with the same sample, same instruments, same research question, and same methods and tools. However, because this is an observational study in which there are a lot of factors that may play a role, it is highly unlikely that the study can be conducted under the exact same circumstances as this study creating the exact same findings. This decreases the reliability of the study, which does not necessarily have to be problematic. Yet, in this study, I tried to construct a clear, easy-to-follow procedure for conducting this study, which will make it easier for future researchers to replicate this study, with the same sample, instruments, methods, and tools. In this way, I tried to overcome the issues with reliability in this research.

Moreover, the reliability of this study is increased since I make use of a well-established international index called CHES to measure the political party's overall stance towards European integration.

CHAPTER V: RESULTS

In this part of the thesis, the study will be conducted and the results that come from it will be presented. The countries Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania will be analyzed separately. In the end, I will discuss the alternative explanations.

First, the dependent variable "Exposure to Russian disinformation and propaganda" will be measured. After, from the list of all parties, there will be a distinction made between pro-Russian and not pro-Russian parties, and parties opposing and not opposing European integration as according to the matrix. Then, I will measure the popularity of each of the fields. The first country in the analysis is Estonia, followed by Latvia and Lithuania.

5.1 Analysis Estonia

In this section, I will present the results from the analysis of Estonia for the dependent and independent variables according to the procedure described in the Methodology chapter.

5.1.1 Exposure to Russian disinformation and propaganda

As explained in the Methodology, for measuring the dependent variable "Exposure to Russian disinformation and propaganda" the Indicator A "Population Exposure to Kremlin-led Media" will be measured. The value of the indicator will be presented and explained. On the Indicator A, Estonia has a score of 2.1.

According to the report by Chyzhova (2018), Estonia has faced soft power influence from Russia to a certain extent because of historical reasons, and in different fields such as the economy, public diplomacy, political life, and culture (Chyzhova, 2018). Kaljurand (2015) agrees on this. Therefore, Russia has used lots of media influences and pro-Russian, anti-Estonian propaganda in Estonia (Kaljurand, 2015). Since a couple of decades, the Russian influence activities against Estonia have been increasingly aimed at undermining the essence of Estonian statehood in order to make it more similar and dependable on Russia (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 119).

The most vulnerable groups to Russian disinformation and propaganda are the Russian-speaking population, but also ethnic Estonians that are "nostalgic about the Soviet past", are socio-economically disadvantaged, or are sensitive to xenophobic rhetoric (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 120; Kaljurand, 2015). As Kaljurand (2015) calls it: "The Achilles heel of society in Estonia is considered to be the Russian-speaking population" (Kaljurand, 2015). Thus, the most vulnerable groups are people that feel affinity with Russia. According to the

report, around fifteen percent of Russian speakers do not have an affiliation with Estonia, but do have it with Russia. This leads to huge polarization in the society between Estonians and Russian speakers, especially after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Chyzhova, 2018). Moreover, Kaljurand (2015) adds to this that ethnic Russians or Russian-speaking people living outside the borders of Russia are the most vulnerable to Russian propaganda, especially since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Kaljurand, 2015). Also, they are the group that has the least trust towards institutions (Kaljurand, 2015). 69 percent of the ethnic Russians in Estonia watch Russian TV channels often (Gallup World Poll, 2014). 81 percent of the ethnic Russians in Estonia tend to trust Russian TV channels, while the percentage of trust in Russian media by non-Russian speakers in Estonia is much lower (Gallup World Poll, 2014). However, the Russian-speaking population is not a homogenous group of people. This makes it particularly difficult to measure how responsive the Russian-speaking population is to the Russian disinformation (Kaljurand, 2015).

Furthermore, because there is Russian media, and thus exposure to Kremlin-led media, Russian speakers are invited to join the "Russian World" (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 122). According to Kaljurand (2015), the Russian information space unites Russian speakers. Among Russians, the most popular TV channels are: PBK (15.9%), RTR Planeta (14.1%), and NTV Mir (11.4%) (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 123). People also watch the Russian-language programmes of CNN and the BBC (Kaljurand, 2015). The most popular radio channels are: Radio 4 (13.5%), Russkoje Radio (12.6%), and Narodnoje Radio (11.5%) (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 123). More than seventy percent of the Russian speakers watch Russian TV channels (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 123; Kaljurand, 2015). However, ethnic Estonians watch different channels such as ETV, Kanal 2, and TV 3, which are not Russian. Thus, ethnic Estonians who do not feel affinity with Russia are not exposed to Kremlin-led media and propaganda to a great extent (Chyzhova, 2018). Thus, the Russian-speaking population lives the most in the Russian information space (Kaljurand, 2015).

5.1.2 Pro-Russian parties

For the dependent variable "Public popularity for pro-Russian political parties opposing EU integration", it is firstly important to identify which parties count as pro-Russian. The political parties that are analyzed in the case of Estonia are listed in Table 6, Appendix III.

Applying the list of political parties in the EU by Snegovaya (2021), no Estonian parties are to be found there. A classification of the parties can be found in Table 9, Appendix IV.

5.1.3 Parties opposing EU integration

In this section, a classification between parties that are opposing and parties that are not opposing European integration will be made. In order to make this distinction, the variable EU_POSITION will be used from CHES for the elections of 2007, 2011, and 2019 (2015 is excluded from the analysis). The values of the variable by the political parties in each election can be found in Table 10, Appendix IV.

In the elections of 2007, none of the parties had a score of lower than 4. Thus, none of the parties can be considered as opposing European integration during the elections of 2007. All are to certain extent more in favour. The same counts for the elections of 2011. Here, again, no party scored lower than 4.

However, there is a change visible in the results since 2015. Since the elections of 2015, there has been a new party that can be considered as a party that is opposing European integration: the Conservative People's Party (EKRE), with a score of 2.08. Therefore, EKRE can be considered as the only party opposing European integration in the elections of 2015 and 2019. All the others are not opposing European integration.

Data on 2015 was missing in the data from CHES. Therefore, I make the assumption that EKRE also was a party opposing European integration in 2015, given the fact that the ideological stance is unlikely to change drastically within one election.

5.1.4 Public popularity

To measure the popularity for each of the parties, data on the percentage of votes and seats received by the political party will be used from the Parties and Elections in Europe website (Parties and Elections in Europe, 2019). I have not chosen to go for the VOTE and SEAT variables from CHES since data is not complete in the case of all countries. Moreover, it is possible that the percentage of votes added together is less than 100 percent. In Estonia, there is a five percent threshold in order to be able to have a seat in the Parliament (Parties and Elections in Europe, 2019). The election results, in terms of percentages of votes and seats received, can be found merged together in Table 11, Appendix IV.

5.1.5 Political landscape development

In this section, the parties will be categorized along the axes pro-Russian/not pro-Russian and opposing EU integration/not opposing EU integration for each of the elections in Estonia. The amount of votes and seats received by each field will be mentioned, to measure whether

the field has become more popular or not. The matrices from the elections of 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019 can be found in the figure below:

	Opposing EU integration	Not opposing EU integration
Pro-Russian	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%
Not Pro-Russian	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%	ER ERL EK SDE EER IRL VOTE: 100% SEAT: 100%

2007

	Opposing EU integration	Not opposing EU integration
Pro-Russian	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%
Not Pro-Russian	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%	ER EVE EK SDE IRL EER VOTE: 100% SEAT: 100%

2011

	Opposing EU integration	Not opposing EU integration
Pro-Russian	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%
Not Pro-Russian	EKRE VOTE: 8.1% SEAT: 6.9%	ER SDE EK EVE IRL VOTE: 91.1% SEAT: 93.1%

2015

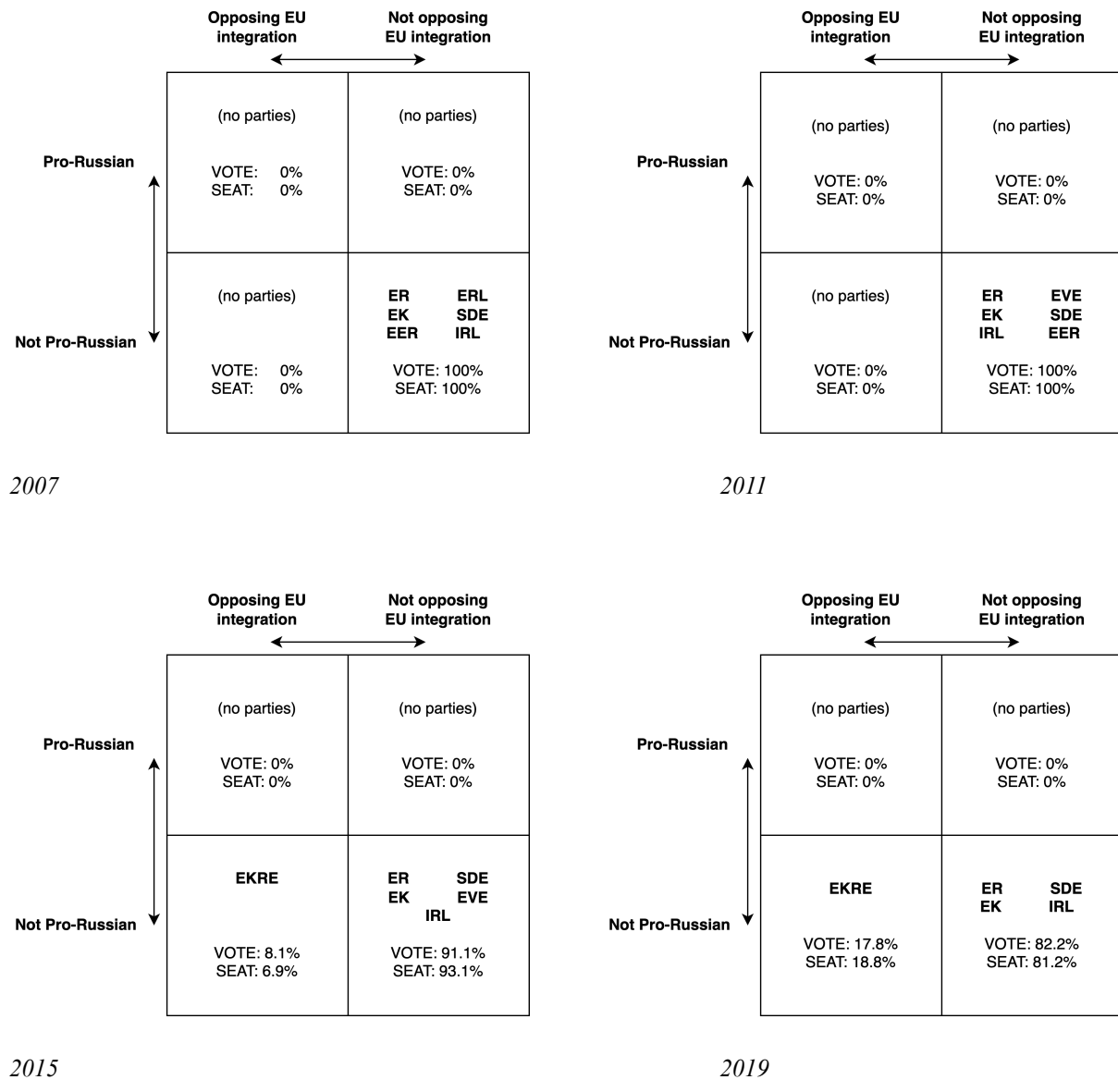|	Opposing EU integration	Not opposing EU integration
Pro-Russian	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%
Not Pro-Russian	EKRE VOTE: 17.8% SEAT: 18.8%	ER SDE EK IRL VOTE: 82.2% SEAT: 81.2%

2019

Figure 1 - Matrices parliamentary elections Estonia 2007-2019 (Parties and Elections in Europe, 2019)

5.2 Analysis Latvia

Now, the second country Latvia will be analyzed according to the same procedure.

5.2.1 Exposure to Russian disinformation and propaganda

On Indicator A "Population Exposure to Kremlin-led Media", Latvia scores a 2.9.

According to the report by Chyzhova (2018), the Russian compatriots' policymakers try to cluster all Russian-speaking people into one (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 173). Russia's information influence policy is not only aimed at the Russian populations in Latvia, but also at Ukrainains, Belarussians, and others (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 173). However, Russians in Latvia are not homogeneous, but have different opinions, especially after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 173). There are European-minded Russian-speakers loyal to Latvia, there are not pro-Kremlin Russians, and there are Russian compatriots that support the idea of a "Russian World" (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 173). According to the report, Russia tries to exaggerate the fact that all the Russians in Latvia support the "Russian World".

Several media and information-security experts state that there is a disproportionately large presence of Russian media in Latvia, which means that Russia's influence is one of the main concerns to information security in Latvia (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 174). 44 percent of the total Latvian population make use of Russian media to a great extent and 69 percent of the Russian-speaking population make use of Russian media often (Gallup World Poll, 2014). Moreover, 37 percent of the Latvian population uses the Russian language at home (Bērzina, 2018). Almost sixty percent of the ones that use Russian language at home admit using Russian media often, whereas only 15.7 percent of those who use the Latvian language at home admit being the audience of Russian media (Bērzina et al. 2016 in Bērzina, 2018).

Russian TV channels, such as RTR Planeta, NTV Mir, PBK, and REN TV Baltija, are well-funded and attractive TV channels. Russian TV channels are much better funded than the Latvian TV channels (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 174). Those channels have already been widely watched by the Russian population for more than ten years (Bērzina, 2018). However, the most watched TV channels in Latvia are still the non-Russian channels TV3 and LTV1 (Bērzina, 2018). Yet, PBK is on number 3 and is almost entirely in Russian and, more importantly, spreads pro-Kremlin propaganda (Chyzhova, 2018). Among the ten most popular TV channels in Russia, four spread Russian propaganda and disinformation (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 175). A very well-known media channel in Latvia is Sputnik News, which is a Russian state-owned news agency that explicitly and implicitly spreads Russian

propaganda and disinformation (Duszyński, 2020). Another popular media channel, which is specifically aimed at the Baltics and financed by Russia, is called Baltnews. These two channels have considerable impact on the information provision in Latvia (Duszyński, 2020). However, in 2016, Sputnik was banned from the Latvian media landscape by the Latvian government, because it has been identified as a Russian propaganda tool. Also, Baltnews is closed in July 2019 (Duszyński, 2020).

Especially since the annexation of Crimea, there has been an increase in the magnitude of Russian propaganda in Latvia, on traditional and social media. On all channels, as for example Facebook, pro-Kremlin opinions and narratives are shared to a great extent (Germanis, 2022).

To conclude, the Latvian population, Russian-speaker or not, lives in the "disinformation and propaganda space" of Russia (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 175). However, according to Kaljurand (2015), it is still mostly the Russian-speaking population that can be considered as the "Achilles heel" of society. Three out of ten most popular radio channels in Latvia are Russian, and the top three most visited websites also publish their news in Russian (Chyzhova, 2018).

5.2.2 Pro-Russian parties

The political parties that are analyzed in the case of Latvia are listed in Table 7, Appendix III. According to the article by Snegovaya (2021), there are two political parties that can be considered pro-Russian within the time frame 2004-2021, which are the Harmony Centre/Social Democratic Party "Harmony" (SC/SDPS) and the For Human Rights in United Latvia/Latvian Russian Union (PCTVL/LKS). A classification of the pro-Russian and not pro-Russian parties can be found in Table 12, Appendix V.

5.2.3 Parties opposing EU integration

Now a classification has to be made between parties that are opposing and parties that are in favour of European integration. The values of the variable by the political parties in each election can be found in Table 13, Appendix V. The political party PLL is excluded from the analysis since data on the variable EU_POSITION is missing for this party. Therefore, it is not possible to identify the stance of the party with regards to European integration.

According to the CHES data of 2006, there is no party that scores lower than 4 on the variable. Thus, none of the parties in the elections of 2006 are opposing European integration. However, in the elections of 2011, there is one party that is opposing European integration,

which is the pro-Russian party Harmony Centre/Social Democratic Party "Harmony" (SC/SDPS). Yet, during the elections of 2014, the SC/SDPS cannot be considered as a party opposing European integration anymore since it scores higher than 4. In these elections, it is the other pro-Russian party For Human Rights in United Latvia/Latvian Russian Union (PCTVL/LKS) that is opposed to European integration. Similar to 2006, there are no parties that can be considered as opposing European integration during the elections of 2018. All were to a certain extent in favour.

Data on the Latvian parliamentary elections of 2010 are missing in CHES. Therefore, based on the data from the other elections, I make the assumption that the political parties SC/SDPS and PCTVL/LKS can be considered as parties opposing European integration in 2010, given the fact that the party's ideological stance is unlikely to change drastically within one election.

5.2.4 Public popularity

For the Latvian parliamentary elections of 2006, 2010, 2011, 2014, and 2018, the results in terms of percentage of votes received and percentage of seats received in the Parliament will be presented here, based on the data from the Parties and Elections in Europe (2018).

Again, I have not chosen to go for the VOTE and SEAT variables from CHES since data is not complete in case of Latvia as well. Moreover, it is also in the case of Latvia possible that the percentage of votes added together is less than 100 percent. In Latvia, similar to Estonia, there is a five percent threshold in order to be able to have a seat in the Parliament (Parties and Elections in Europe, 2018). The election results, in terms of percentages of votes and seats received, can be found all together in Table 14, Appendix V.

5.2.5 Political landscape development

In this section, the parties will be categorized along the axes pro-Russian/not pro-Russian and opposing EU integration/not opposing EU integration for each of the elections in Latvia. The amount of votes and seats received by each field will be mentioned, to measure whether the field has become more popular or not. The matrices of all the elections within the given time frame can be found on the next page.

2006

	Opposing EU integration	Not opposing EU integration
Pro-Russian	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%	PCTVL/LKS SC/SDPS VOTE: 20.5% SEAT: 23.0%
Not Pro-Russian	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%	TP LC JL LPP TB-LNNK/NA ZZS VOTE: 68.2% SEAT: 77.0%

2010

	Opposing EU integration	Not opposing EU integration
Pro-Russian	SC/SDPS PCTVL/LKS VOTE: 27.4% SEAT: 29.0%	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%
Not Pro-Russian	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%	ZZS TB-LNNK/NA V LSDSP VOTE: 59.2% SEAT: 71.0%

2011

	Opposing EU integration	Not opposing EU integration
Pro-Russian	SC/SDPS VOTE: 28.4% SEAT: 31.0%	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%
Not Pro-Russian	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%	ZRP ZZS TB-LNNK/NA V VOTE: 65.7% SEAT: 0%

2014

	Opposing EU integration	Not opposing EU integration
Pro-Russian	PCTVL/LKS VOTE: 1.6% SEAT: 0%	SC/SDPS VOTE: 23.0% SEAT: 24.0%
Not Pro-Russian	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%	NSL LRA V ZZS TB-LNNK/NA VOTE: 71.6% SEAT: 76.0%

2018

	Opposing EU integration	Not opposing EU integration
Pro-Russian	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%	SC/DPS PCTVL/LKS VOTE: 23.1% SEAT: 23.0%
Not Pro-Russian	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%	LRA KPV LV TB-LNNK/NA AP! JKP ZZS V VOTE: 72.1% SEAT: 77.0%

Figure 2 - Matrices parliamentary elections Latvia 2006-2018 (Parties and Elections in Europe, 2018)

5.3 Analysis Lithuania

Finally, the last country Lithuania will be analyzed according to the same procedure.

5.3.1 Exposure to Russian disinformation and propaganda

To measure the exposure to Russian disinformation and propaganda in case of Lithuania, the DRI Indicator A "Exposure to Kremlin-led Media" will be used. On this indicator, Lithuania scores a 2.0. Lithuania is a desirable target for Russian disinformation campaigns (Bouwmeester, 2020). However, according to the report by Chyzhova (2018), the exposure to Kremlin-led media is still moderate.

The group of ethnic Russians in Lithuania is just around 5.8 percent of the total population; there are more ethnic Poles than there are ethnic Russians in the country (Chyzhova, 2018). However, according to Baranauskienē (n.d.), this share is higher: around fifteen percent of the Lithuanian population is a Russian speaker. However, what is sure is that the share of ethnic Russians has decreased a lot since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Chyzhova, 2018). The Russian ethnic minorities are mostly concentrated in specific regions, such as the city Visaginas (Chyzhova, 2018).

The Kremlin's disinformation and propaganda campaigns are one of the main challenges for Lithuania's information security (Chyzhova, 2018). The Kremlin spreads narratives that deny Lithuania's right to exist (Bouwmeester, 2020). Moreover, Kremlin Trolls are used to a great extent on social media platforms, like Facebook, VKontakte, YouTube, and Instagram, to spread pro-Kremlin, anti-Western narratives (Bouwmeester, 2020; Abend, 2022). Even more, since the annexation of Crimea, Lithuania has seen an increase in the campaigns of the Russian authorities, and thus according to Bouwmeester (2020), the Lithuanian population is frequently targeted with Russian disinformation. However, the Russian-speaking population is much more vulnerable to these targets than the Lithuanian society (Chyzhova, 2018). 21 percent of the total Lithuanian population consumes Russian-language media for news (Gallup World Poll, 2014), and just 36 percent of the Russian-speaking population in Lithuania watch Russian channels (Gallup World Poll, 2014). However, the ethnic Russians that do watch Russian TV channels tend to find Russian media more trustworthy than Lithuanian media (Gallup World Poll, 2014).

Yet, the Lithuanian society is well aware of Russian propaganda and disinformation (Chyzhova, 2018). The most vulnerable group to the propaganda are Russian- and Polish-speaking minorities; these are the groups that regularly follow pro-Kremlin media

(Chyzhova, 2018). Andriukatis (2020) agrees with the fact that the propaganda is primarily aimed at Russian-speaking minorities.

26 percent of the respondents from Lithuania think that life in the Soviet Union was better than life now, mostly felt by the older generations, in which almost one in two people believe so (Chyzhova, 2018). Therefore, older people are also more vulnerable to pro-Russian propaganda.

There are four TV media groups in Lithuania: LNK Group (27.4%), MTG Group (20.9%), LRT Group (9.8%), and BMA Group (5.9%) (Chyzhova, 2018). The BMA Group is the only group that actively spreads pro-Kremlin propaganda; the three main channels are NTV Mir Lietuva (2.5%), Pervyj Baltijskij Kanal (2.3%), and REN Lietuva (1.1%) (Chyzhova, 2018). With regards to radio, RUSRADIO LT (10.5%) and Znad Wilii (2.0%) are the most popular pro-Russian channels (Chyzhova, 2018). The most viewed pro-Russian internet websites are Baltnews.lt and Sputniknews.lt. These websites do spread Russian propaganda actively, but they are rather unpopular in Lithuania (Chyzhova, 2018).

However, the notion should be made that although the magnitude of pro-Russian media is not that big in Lithuania, it does not mean that this type of media cannot have a major impact on people's world view. As already stated, the Russian and Polish minorities in Lithuania are particularly vulnerable to the propaganda (Chyzhova, 2018; Gallup World Poll, 2014). Moreover, the information is spread through different kinds of channels (Chyzhova, 2018; Gallup World Poll, 2014).

5.3.2 Pro-Russian parties

The political parties that are analyzed in the case of Lithuania are listed in Table 8, Appendix III. Taking a look at the table by Snegovaya (2021), it becomes clear that there are three pro-Russian parties in Lithuania: Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania - Christian Families Alliance (LLRA-KSS), Order and Justice/Freedom and Justice Party (TT/LT/LDP), and the Labor Party (DP). All the other parties can be labeled as not pro-Russian parties. The classification of pro-Russian and not pro-Russian parties in Lithuania in the time period of 2004-2021 can be found in Table 15, Appendix VI.

5.3.3 Parties opposing EU integration

Now, it is important to see which parties are opposing European integration. In Table 16, Appendix VI the scores on the variable by each political party in each election in the time period 2004-2021 can be found.

During the elections of 2004, none of the parties can be considered as a party opposing European integration because there were no parties that scored lower than 4 on the indicator. All political parties were to a certain extent in favour. The same counts for the 2008 elections. However, in the elections of 2012, there are two political parties that can be considered as parties opposing European integration: Order and Justice/Freedom and Justice Party (TT/LT/LDP) and The Way of Courage (DK). In 2016, the TT/LT/LDP can still be considered as a party opposing European integration, together with the Lithuanian Centre Party (LCP (CPT/AKK)).

For the elections of 2020, there is no CHES data available. Therefore, for classifying the parties in this year, I will use the CHES data from the previous years with the assumption that the ideological stance of the party with the view on European integration is unlikely to change drastically within just one election. Thus, the only party that can be considered as opposing European integration during the elections of 2020 is: Order and Justice/Freedom and Justice Party (TT/LT/LDP).

5.3.4 Public popularity

To analyze the public popularity of all the parties for each of the Lithuanian parliamentary elections of 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020, data on election results from the website Parties and Elections in Europe (2020) is used for the percentage of votes and seats received by each party. Similar to the analysis of Estonia and Latvia, I have not chosen to go for the VOTE and SEAT variables from CHES since data is not complete in case of Lithuania as well. Moreover, in the analysis of Lithuania it is also possible that the percentage of votes added together is less than 100 percent. In Lithuania, similar to Estonia and Latvia, there is a five percent threshold in order to be able to have a seat in the Parliament (Parties and Elections in Europe, 2020). The election results, in terms of percentages of votes and seats received, can be found all together in Table 17, Appendix VI.

Furthermore, it should be mentioned that the total percentages of the seats in the matrices do not equal 100 percent. This is because of the fact that, on the Parties and Elections in Europe website of Lithuania, there is a "Other/Independents" category (Parties and Elections in Europe, 2020). In each of the elections, this category received a specific amount of votes and seats. However, because this category is not further specified, it is not possible to identify which political parties belong to this field. Therefore, it is not possible for this category to classify it as pro-Russian/not pro-Russian, or opposing EU integration/not opposing EU integration.

5.3.5 Political landscape development

In this section, the parties will be categorized along the axes pro-Russian/not pro-Russian and opposing EU integration/not opposing EU integration for each of the elections in Lithuania. The amount of votes and seats received by each field will be mentioned, to measure whether the field has become more popular or not.

The parties LCP, LKT, and LS are excluded from the analysis. For these parties, there is no data on the variable EU_POSITION from CHES. Therefore, it is not possible to analyze whether the party is opposing European integration or not, and thus to which field these parties belong. The matrices of all the elections within the given time frame can be found on the next page.

2004

	Opposing EU integration	Not opposing EU integration
Pro-Russian	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%	**LLRA-KSS DP TT/LT/LDP** VOTE: 43.6% SEAT: 36.2%
Not Pro-Russian	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%	**LSDP LRLS LLS/LiCS LVLS/LVZS/LVP TS/TS-LKD** VOTE: 51.2% SEAT: 59.5%

2004

2008

	Opposing EU integration	Not opposing EU integration
Pro-Russian	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%	**TT/LT/LDP DP LLRA-KSS** VOTE: 26.5% SEAT: 19.8%
Not Pro-Russian	(no parties) VOTE: 0% SEAT: 0%	**LSDP TPP TS/TS-LKD LLS/LiCS NS LRLS LVLS/LVZS/LVP** VOTE: 64.9% SEAT: 77.2%

2008

2012

	Opposing EU integration	Not opposing EU integration
Pro-Russian	**TT/LT/LDP** VOTE: 7.3% SEAT: 7.8%	**DP LLRA-KSS** VOTE: 25.6% SEAT: 26.3%
Not Pro-Russian	**DK** VOTE: 8.0% SEAT: 5.0%	**LSDP LLS-LiCS LVLS/LVZS/LVP TS/TS-LKD LRLS** VOTE: 48.1% SEAT: 58.9%

2012

2016

	Opposing EU integration	Not opposing EU integration
Pro-Russian	**TT/LT/LDP** VOTE: 7.5% SEAT: 5.7%	**LLRA-KSS DP** VOTE: 10.2% SEAT: 7.1%
Not Pro-Russian	**LCP (CPT/AKK)** VOTE: 6.3% SEAT: 0.7%	**LVLS/LVZS/LVP LSDP TS/TS-LKD LRLS LZP** VOTE: 68.6% SEAT: 83.0%

2016

2020

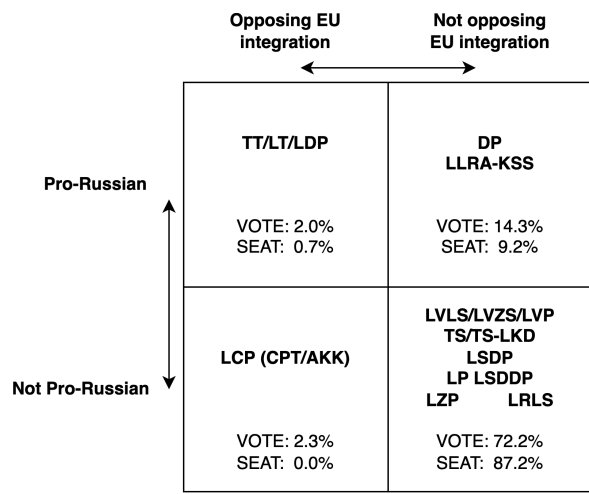|	Opposing EU integration	Not opposing EU integration
Pro-Russian	**TT/LT/LDP** VOTE: 2.0% SEAT: 0.7%	**DP LLRA-KSS** VOTE: 14.3% SEAT: 9.2%
Not Pro-Russian	**LCP (CPT/AKK)** VOTE: 2.3% SEAT: 0.0%	**LVLS/LVZS/LVP TS/TS-LKD LSDP LP LSDDP LZP LRLS** VOTE: 72.2% SEAT: 87.2%

2020

Figure 3 - Matrices parliamentary elections Lithuania 2004-2020 (Parties and Elections in Europe, 2020)

5.4 Alternative explanations

In this section, the results from the alternative explanations are presented, to ensure that there is not something else than the population exposure to Russian disinformation and propaganda that could possibly lead to a higher popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration.

In the given time frame of 2004-2021, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are all post-Soviet republics in the near neighborhood of Russia. In Estonia, 28 percent of the population is a Russian-speaking minority (Trimbach, 2016). In Latvia, this is 29 percent of the population (BBC, 2014). In Lithuania, around fifteen percent of the population is a Russian-speaking minority, although specific numbers and percentages differ across several sources (Baranauskienē, n.d.; Chyzhova, 2018).

Furthermore, it is important to keep track of the economic development of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in the time frame of 2004-2021.
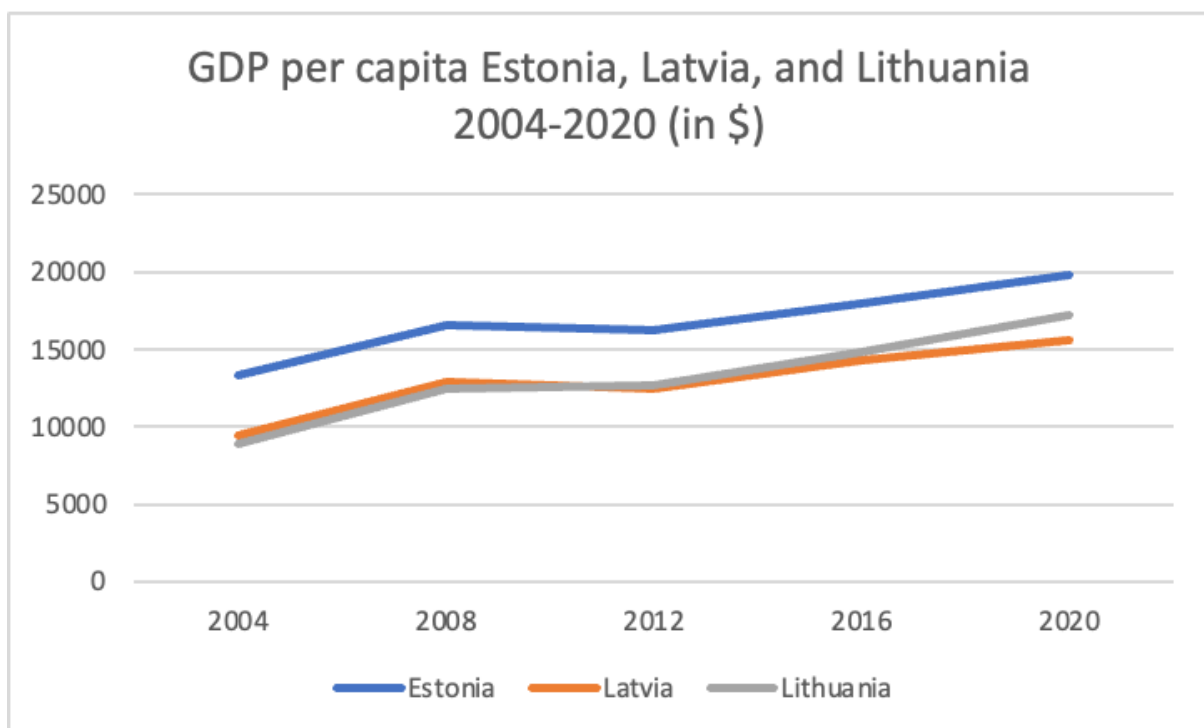
Graph 1 - GDP per capita Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania 2004-2020 (in $) (The World Bank, n.d.-a)

As becomes clear from the graph, although Estonia has a slightly higher GDP per capita, the three countries all show a very similar pattern in economic development. Also, all countries are recognized as High Income Countries by The World Bank (n.d.-b).

CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION

In this part of the thesis, I will interpret the data from the Results chapter and put it into context to see whether the hypothesis can be supported or rejected. Furthermore, the results will be compared to what has already been researched in existing academic works.

6.1 Interpretation of results

In this section, I begin by interpreting the values of the independent variable of each of the countries Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Afterwards, I will do the same for the dependent variable.

6.1.1 Exposure to Russian disinformation and propaganda

To begin with the independent variable "Exposure to Russian disinformation and propaganda" it is needed to interpret the results of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania together on the indicator "Population Exposure to Kremlin-led Media" from the DRI (Chyzhova, 2018).

As becomes clear from the Results part, Latvia (2.9) scores considerably higher on the indicator than Estonia (2.1) and Lithuania (2.0). This means that, in Latvia, there is moderate to high exposure to Russian disinformation and propaganda. In contrast, since Estonia and Lithuania both have a score in the middle of the scale there is just moderate exposure to Kremlin-led media. In Estonia, the Russian-speaking population is very vulnerable to Russian disinformation and propaganda, while ethnic Estonians barely watch Russian TV channels and get exposed to it, let alone that they are vulnerable to it (Chyzhova, 2018). According to the article by Kaljurand (2015), the "Achilles heel" of Estonian society is the Russian-speaking population. The same counts to Lithuania, in which only older generations and Russian and Polish speakers are to some extent sensitive to Russian disinformation provision (Chyzhova, 2018). Lithuania is a desirable target for Russian disinformation campaigns; the Kremlin's disinformation and propaganda campaigns are one of the main challenges to Lithuania's information security, especially after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Bouwmeester, 2020; Chyzhova, 2018). The Russian-speaking population and older generations are much more vulnerable to these targets than the Lithuanian society (Chyzhova, 2018). Yet, the Lithuanian society is well aware of Russian propaganda and disinformation (Chyzhova, 2018).

In Latvia, the story is different. The Latvian population, whether Russian-speaking or not, lives in a constant "disinformation and propaganda space" that is facilitated by the

Kremlin (Chyzhova, 2018). In Latvia, there is a disproportionately large presence of Russian media (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 174). Russian TV channels are much better funded than the Latvian TV channels and have been widely consumed by the Russian population for a period of more than ten years (Chyzhova, 2018, p. 174; Bērzina, 2018). Especially since the annexation of Crimea, there has been an increase in the magnitude of Russian propaganda in Latvia, on traditional and social media (Germanis, 2022). However, similar to Estonia, according to Kaljurand (2015), it is still mostly the Russian-speaking population that can be considered as the "Achilles heel" of society.

Thus, there is differentiation in the independent variable; in Latvia, there is a considerably higher degree of population exposure to Kremlin-led media than in Estonia and Lithuania. This does not necessarily mean that it is low in Estonia and Lithuania since the exposure is still moderate. Yet, because there is differentiation in the dependent variable, it allows for comparing Latvia on the one hand with Estonia and Lithuania on the other hand. Following the reasoning of the hypothesis, I would therefore expect that there is a higher degree of popularity for pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration in Latvia, than there is in Estonia or Lithuania.

6.1.2 Public popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing EU integration

Now the results from the dependent variable "Public popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing EU integration" has to be interpreted to check whether the hypothesis needs to be supported or not. To check this, the field that is most important to analyze is the field "Pro-Russian/Opposing EU integration". I will start with Estonia. In the end, the results will be synthesized.

6.1.2.1 Estonia

To start with Estonia, it becomes clear that there are no pro-Russian parties in all the parliamentary elections within the time frame 2004-2021. The existence of political parties spreading pro-Russian narratives and supporting pro-Russian policy initiatives is therefore nihil in the case of Estonia, in the parliamentary elections of 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019. In the case of political parties opposing European integration, there was a change visible during the elections of 2015 in which EKRE was the only party opposing European integration. Before, in the elections of 2007 and 2011, there was no party opposing European integration. Since 2015, the political party EKRE also has gained more and more popularity; from 8.1 percent of the votes in 2015 to 17.8 percent of the votes in 2019.

Taking a look at the matrix, in the case of Estonia, it means that the field "pro-Russian/opposing EU integration" remains non-existent in the time period 2004-2021. There were no political parties that were pro-Russian and opposing European integration at the same time. However, what does become clear from the matrix is that the popularity of the field "not pro-Russian/opposing EU integration" does increase in terms of votes and seats. Thus, political parties that are opposing European integration have become more popular in the case of Estonia since the elections of 2015. On the other hand, the field "not pro-Russian/not opposing EU integration" has slightly lost some of its popularity to the anti-European integration political parties. However, putting this into perspective, not pro-Russian, pro-European integration parties still received more than eighty percent of the total votes in its "worst year".

6.1.2.2 Latvia

In the case of Latvia, there were two pro-Russian political parties in the time frame 2004-2021: the SC/SDPS and the PCTVL/LKS. In the first and last elections of the analysis (2007 and 2018), there were no parties that were opposing European integration. However, in 2010, there were two parties opposing European integration that were also pro-Russian: the SC/SDPS and PCTVL/LKS. Those parties together received more than a quarter of the votes and seats in the parliamentary elections of 2010. In 2011, it was only the SC/SDPS that was opposing European integration and in 2014 the PCTVL/LKS. What this specifically means is that the only political parties that were opposing European integration in Latvia during the parliamentary elections in the period 2004-2021, were also only parties that were pro-Russian at the same time. Even more, the pro-Russian party SC/SDPS was the biggest political party in terms of votes and seats in the elections of 2011 and 2014, in which the party also actively aimed against European integration in 2011.

However, the other pro-Russian party PCTVL/LKS has never been really popular in Latvia in the time period 2004-2021. Even so, in 2014, the political party did not even achieve to receive a seat in the Parliament, which was also the only year in which it was actively aimed against European integration.

Taken everything together, over time, the field "not pro-Russian/not opposing EU integration" remains relatively stable. In every parliamentary election within the time period 2004-2021, this field received around seventy percent of the votes and seats. However, the same counts for the fields with pro-Russian political parties which have received around twenty percent of the votes and seats in each election, whether it is opposing European

integration or not. The field pro-Russian/opposing European integration was quite popular in the elections of 2010 and 2011. Yet, the field is non-existent in the years 2006 and 2018, and very marginal in 2014. Thus, after 2010 and 2011, its popularity is decreasing drastically. Despite this, it could be said that the popularity of pro-Russian parties is considerably high and stable in the time period in Latvia.

6.1.2.3 Lithuania

Compared to Estonia and Latvia, Lithuania has the biggest number of pro-Russian political parties: the LLRA-KSS, TT/LT/LDP, and DP. In the first two parliamentary elections within the time frame 2004-2021 (2004 and 2008), there were no parties that were opposing European integration. In the years following, there were. In 2012, there were two parties opposing European integration: the TT/LT/LDP and DK. In 2016, the TT/LT/LDP together with the LCP (CPT/AKK) were opposing European integration, while in 2020 it was only the TT/LT/LDP. Therefore, the only pro-Russian political party that is actively opposing European integration is the TT/LT/LDP in the elections of 2012, 2016, and 2020. Since the elections of 2012, the pro-Russian party TT/LT/LDP has lost quite a lot of its popularity: from 12.7 percent of the votes in 2008 to 2.0 percent of the votes in 2020. In the meantime, the party has only lost votes and seats.

The pro-Russian party DP, not opposing European integration, was the biggest political party in terms of votes and seats in 2004 and 2012. In the other elections within the time frame 2004-2021, it did however not get more than ten percent of the votes and seats. However, I could conclude from the results that the DP has received quite some popularity, although it is fluctuating. The other pro-Russian party LLRA-KSS, not opposing European integration, has never been considerably popular in Lithuania; the political party constantly received just around five percent of the votes and seats.

Taking everything together, the pro-Russian fields have considerably lost popularity. In 2004, it received around forty percent of the votes, compared to just around fifteen percent in 2020. More specifically, the field "pro-Russian/opposing EU integration" has never been really popular in Lithuania. The maximum amount of votes that this field received is just around seven percent. If a pro-Russian party in Lithuania had gained some popularity, the party was mostly in favour of European integration.

6.1.3 Synthesized findings

Taking a look at the DRI indicator, it becomes clear that in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania the Russian-speaking population is particularly the most vulnerable to Russian propaganda and disinformation. In general, Russian-speaking people living outside the borders of Russia (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) are the most vulnerable to Russian propaganda (Kaljurand, 2015). What is also common is that the magnitude and degree of Russian propaganda and disinformation has increased since the annexation of Crimea in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (Chyzhova, 2018). However, the Estonian and Lithuanian populations seem to be less vulnerable to it than the Latvian population (Chyzhova, 2018). Also, in Lithuania, there is a smaller share of Russian speakers than in Estonia and Latvia and the percentage of Russians consuming pro-Kremlin media is also lower (Gallup World Poll, 2014).

Taking a look at the dependent variable, in Estonia, there are no pro-Russian parties in general, and thus, also no pro-Russian parties opposing European integration. However, the political parties opposing European integration have become more popular since the parliamentary elections of 2015. In Lithuania, the popularity of pro-Russian parties opposing European integration is existent, but not really high. In 2004 and 2008, it was non-existent. The highest score for the field was in 2012, but it was still less than just ten percent. Moreover, since the elections of 2016 it has decreased more. Thus, the pro-Russian political parties were becoming a lot less popular in Lithuania within the time frame 2004-2021, while "not pro-Russian/pro-EU integration political parties" relatively gained in popularity over time. In Latvia, the percentage of votes and seats received by pro-Russian political parties remains relatively stable at around twenty percent. However, the field of pro-Russian parties that are opposing European integration is only considerable in the elections of 2011.

Thus, does this mean that the more population exposure to pro-Kremlin media, the higher the popularity of pro-Russian parties opposing European integration? Estonia and Lithuania score lower on the DRI indicator than Latvia. In Estonia, there are no pro-Russian political parties, and thus the "pro-Russian/opposing EU integration" field remains non-existent from 2004-2021. In Lithuania, the pro-Russian fields are considerably decreasing in popularity in the given time period and the "pro-Russian/opposing EU integration" fields are only considerable during the parliamentary elections of 2011. In Latvia, the "pro-Russian/opposing EU integration" field is fluctuating, but the pro-Russian fields together are relatively significant and stable from 2004-2021. However, with these findings, I cannot confirm the hypothesis saying that population exposure to Russian

disinformation and propaganda has a positive impact on the popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration. Thus, the impact of population exposure to pro-Kremlin media on the degree of popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration is not as strong as I hypothesized. And thus, I have to reject the hypothesis. According to my research, there is not a significant relation between the two.

6.2 Academic implications

Existing scholarship argues that in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the Russian-speaking population is particularly vulnerable to pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation efforts. Especially Russian-speaking people that live outside the borders of Russia are vulnerable to it. This is in line with the findings of Barrington et al. (2003), who states that particularly "Russians in neighboring countries feel a strong identification with Russia as a homeland" (Barrington et al., 2003, p. 310). Furthermore, Barrington et al. (2003) state that "Russians who remained in the neighboring countries seven years after the end of the Soviet Union are more likely to be committed to the state of residence than those who left for Russia" (Barrington et al., p. 311). This could explain why the Russian-speaking population in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are vulnerable to pro-Kremlin narratives.

Secondly, I found that there were no pro-Russian political parties in Estonia within the time frame 2004-2021. Also, from 2004 to 2012, there were no eurosceptic parties in Estonia. This is in line with the findings by Gressel (2017) that state that there is a euro-friendly political climate within the country. Furthermore, Gressel (2017) states that the political climate in Estonia is particularly skeptical of the possibility of achieving better relations with Russia; the parties can therefore not be considered pro-Russian. These findings are in line with my results.

The fact that the magnitude of Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns has increased since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 could have been impacted by the introduction of the 2014 Military Doctrine by Russia (Sinovets & Renz, 2015). This Military Doctrine stands out from previous ones because it stresses the importance of intensifying influence activities to counterbalance against the West (Sinovets & Renz, 2015). Thus, this is in line with the finding that the disinformation and propaganda campaigns have intensified since the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The work by Snegovaya (2021), but also existing work by Gressel (2017), shows that supporters of pro-Russian parties also show stronger eurosceptic attitudes than the electorates

of mainstream parties (Snegovaya, 2021, p. 409). The work by Onderco (2019) puts it in another way by saying that electorates of eurosceptic parties are more likely to find pro-Russian narratives appealing. The results of this study show a different pattern than is found by Snegovaya (2021). Only the results in Latvia are in line with this, finding that the only Latvian eurosceptic parties were pro-Russian. However, in Estonia and Lithuania, there is not a relationship found between Euroscepticism and pro-Russian political parties. The finding by Onderco (2019) that there is temporal variation in the partisan views towards Russia is to some extent in line with what I found in the case of Lithuania. Here, the popularity of pro-Russian political parties is decreasing considerably within the time frame, and thus differs a lot over time, in contrast to Latvia and Estonia where the views are much more stable. Thus, the fact that I find no relationship between eurosceptic and pro-Russian partisan views does not correspond with previous works by Onderco (2019) and Snegovaya (2021).

CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

With this research, I aimed to contribute to the existing academic literature by examining Russian influences in the Baltic region, by comparing Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In this thesis, I, therefore, tried to give an answer to the research question: "*What is the impact of Russian political influence activities on support for European integration in the Baltic region?*". In order to answer this question, I narrowed my research down to pro-Kremlin media and propaganda initiatives and whether those efforts lead to a higher popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration in the Baltic states.

7.1 Answer to the research question

From these studies, several findings can be formulated. Firstly, there is a higher exposure to Russian disinformation and propaganda by the Latvian population than by the Estonian and Lithuanian populations. Furthermore, the Russian-speaking population is particularly vulnerable to this Russian disinformation and propaganda, and the amount of Russian propaganda efforts has only increased since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In Estonia, I found no pro-Russian political parties within the time frame 2004-2021. What I did find was an increase in popularity for the political party opposing European integration. In Lithuania, there was a significant degree of popularity for pro-Russian political parties, but over time, this popularity drastically decreased. In Latvia, the popularity of pro-Russian political parties is relatively significant and constant over time. Finally, especially in Latvia and Lithuania, the popularity of pro-Russian parties opposing European integration is fluctuating within the given time period, while in Estonia this field remains non-existent.

Thus, does this mean that the higher the population exposure to pro-Kremlin media, the higher the popularity of pro-Russian parties opposing European integration? Estonia and Lithuania score lower on the DRI indicator than Latvia. Thus, following the reasoning of the hypothesis, there would be a lower popularity for pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration in Estonia and Lithuania than in Latvia. However, considering the findings, I believe that the data collected does not show a clear pattern that could support this hypothesis. Evidence between Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania varies, and therefore, I must reject the hypothesis. This means that population exposure to Russian propaganda does not necessarily lead to anti-EU views. At least, the effect is not as strong as hypothesized. What I do see, is that there is some of a change visible in the case of Lithuania, which goes more into

the direction of the hypothesis. However, future research is needed to see whether, in the years coming, more evidence will be supportive to the hypothesis.

7.2 Policy implications

This research shows that the impact of population exposure to Russian propaganda and disinformation on the popularity of pro-Russian parties opposing European integration is not as strong as hypothesized, and thus limited. However, what does become clear is that the Russian-speaking population is vulnerable to pro-Kremlin media in the Baltic region. Therefore, while making policy with regards to information security concerns, it is important to draw specific attention to the Russian speakers and minorities in all countries.

Thus, despite the fact that there is not a strong relationship between population exposure to Russian propaganda and disinformation and popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration, the Russian-speaking population is an important target for Putin to exert political influence in the Baltic region. Hence, based on this finding, I believe it is a good idea for policymakers to implement a ban of Russian news stations in the region to protect the Russian-speaking population against Russian influences. All the countries already implemented such a ban on Russian news stations, such as Sputniknews, and considering this finding I believe it is a good way to counterbalance the Russian propaganda (Duxbury, 2022; EUobserver, 2016; KosovaPress, 2021). However, what should be taken into account is that this may have negative implications for the freedom of press in the countries.

7.3 Limitations of the research

The findings of this study should be approached while keeping in mind some limitations of this study. First of all, data was lacking in the CHES database on the parliamentary elections of Estonia in 2015, Latvia in 2010, and Lithuania in 2020. I have chosen to not exclude them from the analysis to have a complete view of the popularity of all the parties in all the elections within the given time frame in order to possibly see clear trends. Therefore, I had to make assumptions on whether the political party was opposing European integration or not, based on data that was available in the previous years. This might have been based on some bias, which could decrease the quality of the research. Also, the "Other/Independents" category in the case of Lithuania could not be specified. Therefore, I have been unable to

know what political parties were included in this category. However, those parties might also have been interesting to look at.

Furthermore, the secondary data (academic articles and books, newspapers) that I used in the study were mostly Western-oriented since non-Western resources were lacking to a great extent. However, those researchers, including myself, could have a biased view because of the cultural background. Therefore, there could be some of a biased view against "the enemy" Russia in terms of framing, which could have damaged the objectivity of the study to a certain extent.

Thirdly, I have not been able to rule out reverse causality, which decreased the internal validity of the study. I cannot rule out the possibility that European integration precedes Russian influences. The authors Rohrschneider & Whitefield (2006) have found that European integration leads to less powerful Russian influences (for example, less powerful Russian propaganda) in the Baltic region. Therefore, I cannot rule out that Y can also lead to X. Thus, the relationship can work in both ways.

Moreover, the DRI indicator that is used in this thesis consists of just one value. The value that is used for each of the countries stems from 2018. However, in the meantime, a lot has happened with regard to Russia and Europe. Therefore, more research is needed on the DRI indicator for the countries Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in order to get a more updated version of the indicator.

Besides, however, although I have tried to control for a lot of alternative explanations, it is important to mention that in Lithuania, the share of the Russian-speaking population is lower than in Estonia and Latvia. Information on it differs across different sources, but even though the share is significant, it is in any case to some extent lower than in Estonia and Latvia. Controlling for this variable has been hard and thus, this could also have possibly led to the difference in pattern.

Finally, since there is no quantitative multiple regression analysis done in this research, I have been unable to assign a number to the extent to which there was a possible relationship between the two variables. Further quantitative research is needed to realize this.

7.4 Recommendations for future research

As mentioned above, because I have been unable to find a clear relationship between pro-Kremlin media influences and the degree of popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration, quantitative analyses are needed to ensure that there is (or is

not) a relationship between those variables. Moreover, with the use of multiple regression analysis, it is then possible to compute the nature and the extent to which there is a possible relationship between the two.

Moreover, in line with what already has been stated by Karlsen (2019), I believe more case studies of specific countries and/or regions are needed. The most relevant for those case studies is to examine the effects of Russian influence activities, and more specifically pro-Kremlin media influences (Karlsen, 2019). I believe that if we are more aware of the harm that Russian influence activities can possibly do to our Western, liberal values, we will be more willing and ready to counterbalance them.

Finally, the same research should be conducted for the parliamentary elections in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania after the recent events in Ukraine and the world. I decided to exclude data that relates to the events of today since I believe it is too recent to draw any conclusions from it. However, it is interesting to study what those recent events have done with the public popularity of pro-Russian parties opposing European integration. I would suggest this for further research.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: Characteristics Baltic States

Table 4: Characteristics Baltic states

	Estonia	**Latvia**	**Lithuania**
EU membership (Yes/No)	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*
NATO membership (Yes/No)	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*
Post-Soviet republic (Yes/No)	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*
Former Warsaw Pact member (Yes/No)	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*
Share Russian speakers	*1 in 4*	*1 in 4*	*1 in 6*
GDP per capita (in $)	*19,797*	*15,584*	*17,214*
Income level	*High*	*High*	*High*
Regime type	*Parliamentary democracy*	*Parliamentary democracy*	*Parliamentary democracy*

APPENDIX II: Operationalization Dependent Variable 'Public Popularity Pro-Russian Political Parties Opposing European Integration'

Table 5 - Variable to measure public popularity of pro-Russian political parties opposing European integration

Source:

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5975c9bfdb29d6a05c65209b/t/603fbb4ee47d721eed0046a0/1614789457024/1999-2019_CHES_codebook.pdf

Variable name	Variable description
EU_POSITION (to identify how the party looks at European integration)	Overall orientation of the party leadership towards European integration in YEAR [7-point scale] → 1 = strongly opposed; 7 = strongly in favor.

To measure the public popularity of political parties, data is used from the Parties and Elections websites of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

- http://www.parties-and-elections.eu/estonia.html
- http://www.parties-and-elections.eu/latvia.html
- http://www.parties-and-elections.eu/lithuania.html

APPENDIX III: Political Parties Analyzed

Table 6 - Political parties analyzed Estonia

Party abbreviation	Full party name (in English)
ER	Estonian Reform Party
SDE	Social Democratic Party
EK	Estonian Centre Party
EER	Estonian Greens
EKRE	Conservative People's Party
ERL	Estonian People's Union
EVE	Estonian Free Party
IRL	Pro Patria and Res Republic Union

Table 7 - Political parties analyzed Latvia

Party abbreviation	Full party name (in English)
SC/SDPS	Harmony Centre/Social Democratic Party "Harmony"
PCTVL/LKS	For Human Rights in United Latvia/Latvian Russian Union
LRA	Latvian Association of Regions
TP	People's Party
JL	New Era Party
LPP	Latvia's First Party

LSDSP	Latvian Social Democratic Labour Party
LC	Latvia's Way
ZRP	Zatler's Reform Party
NSL	For Latvia from the Heary
AP!	Development/For!
ZZS	Union of Greens and Farmers
V	Unity
KPV LV	Who owns the state?
JKP	New Conservative Party
TB-LNNK/NA	National Alliance "All For Latvia!"/For Fatherland and Freedom

Table 8 - Political parties analyzed Lithuania

Party abbreviation	Full party name (in English)
LLRA-KSS	Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania - Christian Families Alliance
TT/LT/LDP	Order and Justice/Freedom and Justice Party
DP	Labour Party
LSDP	Social Democratic Party of Lithuania
LVLS/LVZS/LVP	Lithuanian Peasant Party/Lithuanian Peasant Popular Union/Lithuanian Peasant and Greens Union/Lithuanian Peasant Union
NS	New Union (Social Liberals)

LLS/LiCS	Liberal Union of Lithuanian/Liberal and Centre Union
LZP	Lithuanian Green Party
TPP	National Resurrection Party
DK	The Way of Courage
LCP (CPT/AKK)	Lithuanian Centre Party
LP	Freedom Party
LSDDP	Social Democratic Labour Party of Lithuania
LRLS	Liberals' Movement of the Republic of Lithuania/Liberal Movement/Liberal movement of the Republic of Lithuania
TS/TS-LKD	Homeland Union - Lithuanian Christian Democrats
LS	List of Lithuania

APPENDIX IV: Analysis Estonia

Table 9 - Classification of pro-Russian / not pro-Russian parties Estonia

Pro-Russian	Not pro-Russian
	ER
	SDE
	EK
	EER
	EKRE
	ERL
	EVE
	IRL

Table 10 - Results EU_POSITION elections 2007, 2011, and 2019 Estonia from CHESdata (n.d.)

Value on the EU_POSITION variable			
Party abbreviation	2007	2011	2019
ER	6.79	6.88	6.58
IRL	6.50	6.50	5.08
EK	5.29	5.00	5.50
EER	5.85	6.00	-
ERL	4.57	-	-
SDE	6.57	6.88	6.58
EVE	-	6.17	-
EKRE	-	-	2.08

Table 11 - Results votes and seats elections 2007, 2011, and 2019 Estonia from Parties and Elections (2019)

Election results 2007-2019 Estonia								
Party abbreviation	**2007**		**2011**		**2015**		**2019**	
Vote/Seat in %	Vote	Seat	Vote	Seat	Vote	Seat	Vote	Seat
ER	*27.8*	*30.7*	*28.6*	*32.7*	*27.7*	*29.7*	*28.8*	*33.7*
IRL	*17.9*	*18.8*	*20.5*	*22.8*	*13.7*	*13.9*	*11.4*	*11.9*
EK	*26.1*	*28.7*	*23.3*	*25.7*	*24.8*	*26.7*	*23.1*	*25.7*
EER	*7.1*	*7.0*	*3.8*	*-*	*0.9*	*-*	*-*	*-*
ERL	*7.1*	*7.0*	*2.1*	*-*	*-*	*-*	*-*	*-*
SDE	*10.6*	*9.9*	*17.1*	*18.8*	*15.2*	*14.9*	*9.8*	*9.9*
EVE	*-*	*-*	*-*	*-*	*8.7*	*7.9*	*1.2*	*-*
EKRE	*-*	*-*	*-*	*-*	*8.1*	*6.9*	*17.8*	*18.8*

APPENDIX V: Analysis Latvia

Table 12 - Classification of pro-Russian / not pro-Russian parties Latvia

Pro-Russian	Not pro-Russian
SC/SDPS	LRA
PCTVL/LKS	TP
	JL
	LPP
	LSDSP
	LC
	ZRP
	NSL
	AP!
	ZZS
	V
	KPV LV
	JKP
	TB-LNNK/NA

Table 13 - Results EU_POSITION elections 2006, 2011, 2014, and 2018 Latvia from
CHESdata (n.d.)

Value on the EU_POSITION variable				
Party abbreviation	**2006**	**2011**	**2014**	**2018**
SC/SDPS	*5.50*	*3.11*	*4.20*	*5.55*
PCTVL/LKS	*4.50*	*-*	*2.89*	*4.30*
LRA	*-*	*-*	*5.13*	*5.33*
TP	*6.50*	*-*	*-*	*-*
JL	*5.75*	*-*	*-*	*-*
LPP	*5.75*	*-*	*-*	*-*
LSDSP	*-*	*-*	*-*	*-*
LC	*7.00*	*-*	*-*	*-*
ZRP	*-*	*6.00*	*-*	*-*
NSL	*-*	*-*	*4.22*	*-*
AP!	*-*	*-*	*-*	*6.64*
ZZS	*5.00*	*4.13*	*5.00*	*4.82*
V	*-*	*6.22*	*6.80*	*6.80*
KPV LV	*-*	*-*	*-*	*5.10*
JKP	*-*	*-*	*-*	*5.73*
TB-LNNK/NA	*4.75*	*4.45*	*5.70*	*4.73*

Table 14 - Results votes and seats elections 2006, 2010, 2011, 2014 and 2018 Latvia from Parties and Elections (2018)

	Election results 2006-2018 Latvia									
Party abbreviation	**2006**		**2010**		**2011**		**2014**		**2018**	
Vote/Seat in %	Vote	Seat	Vote	Seat	Vote	Seat	Vote	Seat	Vote	Seat
TP	*19.6*	*23.0*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
ZZS	*16.7*	*18.0*	*19.7*	*22.0*	*12.2*	*13.0*	*19.5*	*21.0*	*9.9*	*11.0*
JL	*16.4*	*18.0*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
SC/SDPS	*14.4*	*17.0*	*26.0*	*29.0*	*28.4*	*31.0*	*23.0*	*24.0*	*19.8*	*23.0*
LPP/LC	*8.6*	*10.0*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
TB-LNNK/NA	*6.9*	*8.0*	*7.7*	*8.0*	*13.9*	*14.0*	*16.6*	*17.0*	*11.0*	*13.0*
PCTVL/LKS	*6.0*	*6.0*	*1.4*	-	*0.8*	-	*1.6*	-	*3.2*	-
V	-	-	*31.2*	*33.0*	*18.8*	*20.0*	*21.9*	*23.0*	*6.7*	*8.0*
NSL	-	-	-	-	-	-	*6.9*	*7.0*	*0.8*	-
LRA	-	-	-	-	-	-	*6.7*	*8.0*	*4.2*	-
KPV LV	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	*14.3*	*16.0*
JKP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	*13.6*	*16.0*
AP!	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	*12.0*	*13.0*
LSDSP	*3.5*	-	*0.6*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
PLL	-	-	*7.7*	*8.0*	-	-	-	-	-	-
ZRP	-	-	-	-	*20.8*	*22.0*	-	-	-	-

APPENDIX VI: Analysis Lithuania

Table 15 - Classification of pro-Russian / not pro-Russian parties Lithuania

Pro-Russian	Not pro-Russian
LLRA-KSS	LSDP
TT/LT/LDP	LVLS/LVZS/LVP
DP	NS
	LLS/LiCS
	LZP
	TPP
	DK
	LCP (CPT/AKK)
	LP
	LSDDP
	LRLS
	TS/TS-LKD
	LS

Table 16 - Results EU_POSITION elections 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016 Lithuania from CHESdata (n.d.)

Value on the EU_POSITION variable				
Party abbreviation	2004	2008	2012	2016
LLRA-KSS	*5.71*	*5.56*	*4.21*	*4.50*
TT/LT/LDP	*5.71*	*4.62*	*3.20*	*3.64*
DP	*6.14*	*5.54*	*5.13*	*5.10*
LSDP	*7.00*	*6.54*	*6.60*	*6.73*
LVLS/LVZS/LVP	*6.43*	*5.09*	*4.69*	*5.45*
NS	*6.71*	*6.20*	-	-
LLS/LiCS	*6.71*	*6.08*	-	-
LZP	-	-	-	*6.13*
TPP	-	*5.56*	-	-
FRONT	-	-	-	-
DK	-	-	*3.11*	-
LCP (CPT/AKK)	-	-	-	*3.80*
LP	-	-	-	-
LSDDP	-	-	-	-
LRLS	-	*6.38*	*6.53*	*6.64*
TS/TS-LKD	*6.86*	*6.69*	*6.53*	*6.82*
VKM-AMT	-	-	-	*6.80*

Table 17 - Results votes and seats elections 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016 and 2020 Lithuania from Parties and Elections (2020)

Election results 2004-2020 Lithuania										
Party abbreviation	**2004**		**2008**		**2012**		**2016**		**2020**	
Vote/Seat in %	Vote	Seat	Vote	Seat	Vote	Seat	Vote	Seat	Vote	Seat
LLRA-KSS	*3.8*	*1.4*	*4.8*	*2.1*	*5.8*	*5.7*	*5.5*	*5.7*	*4.8*	*2.1*
TT/LT/LDP	*11.4*	*7.1*	*12.7*	*10.6*	*7.3*	*7.8*	*7.5*	*5.7*	*2.0*	*0.7*
DP	*28.4*	*27.7*	*9.0*	*7.1*	*19.8*	*20.6*	*4.7*	*1.4*	*9.5*	*7.1*
LSDP	*20.7*	*22.0*	*11.8*	*18.4*	*18.4*	*27.7*	*14.4*	*12.1*	*9.3*	*9.2*
LVLS/LVZS/ LVP	*6.6*	*7.1*	*3.7*	*2.1*	*3.9*	*0.7*	*21.5*	*38.3*	*17.5*	*22.7*
NS	-	-	*3.7*	*0.7*	-	-	-	-	-	-
LLS/LiCS	*9.2*	*12.8*	*5.3*	*5.7*	*2.1*	-	-	-	-	-
LZP	-	-	-	-	-	-	*2.0*	*0.7*	*1.6*	*0.7*
TPP	-	-	*15.1*	*11.3*	-	-	-	-	-	-
DK	-	-	-	-	*8.0*	*5.0*	-	-	-	-
LCP (CPT/AKK)	*0.5*	-	*0.7*	-	*0.9*	-	*6.3*	*0.7*	*2.3*	*0.0*
LP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	*9.0*	*7.8*
LSDDP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	*3.2*	*2.1*
LRLS	-	-	*5.7*	*7.8*	*8.6*	*7.1*	*9.0*	*9.9*	*6.8*	*9.2*
TS/TS-LKD	*14.7*	*17.7*	*19.6*	*31.2*	*15.1*	*23.4*	*21.7*	*22.0*	*24.8*	*35.5*
LKD	*1.4*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
LS	-	-	-	-	-	-	*1.8*	*0.7*	-	-
"Others"	*3.3*	*4.3*	*7.9*	*2.8*	*10.1*	*2.1*	*5.6*	*2.8*	*9.2*	*2.8*