SPREAD OF FAKE NEWS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES LEADING TO POTENTIAL RADICALISATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE CASE OF TELEGRAM.EE

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the proliferation of fake news and conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to potential radicalisation of (vulnerable) people. Upsurge in both fake news and conspiracy theories can lead to a loss of trust in the government and public/governmental institutions, as well as pose a threat to democracy and the fabric of society. Radicalisation can be viewed as the shifting of a citizen's loyalty away from the established governing authorities of their country. This process has escalated globally during the pandemic, as many people, in the state of fear and uncertainty, experience moral outrage due to social isolation and economic grievances, choosing to believe simple solutions and discourses of blame offered by conspiracy theories. Estonia is part of the global information space, and COVID-19-related fake news, together with conspiracy theories proliferating around the world, quickly find their way into the Estonian context. One of the channels covering and supporting them in Estonia is the website Telegram.ee. Critical discourse analysis of Telegram texts indicates that Telegram constructs the Estonian government as deeply autocratic and as the absolute enemy of the Estonian people and makes indirect calls for the people to defy it. This can contribute to the possible radicalisation of people, shifting their loyalty away from the Estonian state.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to analyse the links between fake news, conspiracy theories, and radicalisation, the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories in Estonia during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as their influence on the beliefs and behaviour of the people of Estonia, focusing on signs of potential radicalisation (escalated hate speech against public figures, disrespectful treatment of law enforcement officers, damage to property, etc). In this article, radicalisation, or "the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs", is viewed in Powers's (2014, p. 234) terms as a "struggle between strategic actors to radicalise communities against the established bodies and apparatuses of a given society". In the empirical part, texts from the *Telegram.ee* website[1] (hereinafter the *Telegram*), which disseminates fake news and conspiracy theories in Estonia, is analysed using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2015), showcasing their extreme anti-government propaganda and (in)direct calls to act against the government. The objective of the empirical analysis is to examine how texts on Telegram seek to shift the loyalty of the Estonian people away from the government and other authorities established in the Estonian society, such as law enforcement, the Health Board, or the Scientific Advisory Board formed at the Government Committee.

According to the United Nations Department of Global Communications (hereinafter *the UNDGC*), together with the COVID-19 pandemic perpetuated an **infodemic**, in which **fake news** about the coronavirus spread faster than the virus itself. The rise of the infodemic can be seen as a consequence of the fact that the digital space and social media of the modern era constitute the most efficient global communication tool. Additionally, during the outbreak of the pandemic, the lack of public data on the new virus caused instability and uncertainty, which led to an acute vulnerability and extraordinary increase in information consumption. This situation also gave unprecedented rise to multiple conspiracy theories on the virus, which influenced people's beliefs and behaviour. For instance, according to the European Commission (2021), a survey in 28

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[1]   *Telegram.ee* website is distinct from the Telegram app widely used for encrypted messaging.

countries showed that, in March 2020, more than 3 in 10 people believed that a foreign power or some other force were intentionally causing the spread of coronavirus. Proliferation of infodemics can be (and proved to be) a hindrance to an effective public health response and result in confusion and distrust among people (the UNDGC, 2020). This distrust of public authorities, confusion, isolation due to the requirements of social distancing, more time spent in the digital environment, as well as economic problems due to the pandemic have created a fertile breeding ground for radicalisation.

An infodemic can be defined as an overabundance of health information, misinformation, and disinformation online and offline which hampers the implementation of best public health policies amid a public health crisis, such as COVID-19 (Pool, *et al.*, 2021). Misinformation is defined as false information created without the intention of causing harm, while disinformation is defined as false information that is intentionally created to harm a person, social group, organisation, or country (Gradoń, 2020, p. 136). According to Giusti and Piras (2020, p. 3), misinformation is an "incomplete, vague, misleading, or ambiguous piece of information", while fake news can be understood as an advanced and technological type of misinformation, or purposefully manipulated information which appears on the Internet and especially on the social media. This definition of fake news does not deem it to be intentionally harmful. In contrast, Elisa Pieri (2021, p. 63) defines an infodemic as "the uncontrollable spread of huge amounts of information and misinformation about an ongoing infection, and the transmission of dangerous myths about measures that citizens can take". In Pieri's terms, while disinformation may be unintended, misinformation means intentional dissemination of false content, which is presented as being truthful. Pieri views fake news as "hoaxes of and malicious attempts at circulating and diffusing false unverifiable information, which is passed as truthful, authoritative and verified". (Pieri, 2021, p. 65) The latter definition of fake news considers it to be intentionally harmful. As a result, it can be argued that an infodemic entails abundant mis- and disinformation, while fake news can be viewed as a mixture of both.

According to the WHO (2020), "disinformation is polarising public debate on topics related to COVID-19; amplifying hate speech; heightening the risk of conflict, violence and human rights violations; and

threatening long-term prospects for advancing democracy, human rights and social cohesion." Notably, according to Europol, an increase in hate speech and threats, for instance, against public figures, as well as fake news on social media, may cause "people who are mentally unstable or easily influenced to commit acts of ideologically motivated violence that could be characterised as terrorism" (Europol TE-SAT, 2020, p. 36). During the pandemic, hate speech and threats, together with fake news about healthcare professionals and supposedly empty corona wards in hospitals, proliferated worldwide, resulting in incursions into hospitals; for instance, in the UK (Quinn & Campbell, 2021).

The World Economic Forum named major digital misinformation as one of the most serious threats to the current society (Olaru & Ştefan, 2018, p. 393). Other consequences of spread of misinformation and fake news entail "undermining trust in the government and, at the same time, reinforcing non-state actors' extremist narratives and recruitment strategies" (UNICRI, 2021, p. 10). Protests against governmental measures to contain the pandemic have taken place worldwide, where the people blame governments for being oppressive (e.g., BBC Euronews, 2020; BBC News, 2020; Dettmer, 2021). Anti-government sentiments are also actively propagated through abundant conspiracy theories, ranging from anti-mask, anti-vaccine, and anti-establishment to anti-minority and anti-Semitism. Some of these theories are constructed and spread online by known violent extremists and terrorist groups, while others have no link to existing extremist ideologies. Still, the far-right, far-left, and Islamists are quick to incorporate these conspiracy theories into their ideological discourses and target new recruits, dissatisfied with the status quo. (EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, 2020, p. 11; Commission for Countering Extremism, hereafter *the CCE*, 2020, p. 6).

Spread of fake news and conspiracy theories is also regarded as a frequent tool in hybrid warfare, which largely relies on non-military armed force and instruments, including the use of information and disinformation (Renz, 2016). According to Gradoń (2020, p. 134),

> one of the impacts the COVID-19 fallout has on the society, is the rise in cyber-enabled crime, terrorism, and information warfare including – but not limited to – disinformation campaigns and fake news propagation, that are undermining social fabric, causing civil

unrest, and increasing the emotional consequences: fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. This translates directly to the increased challenges for the law-enforcement agencies and institutions responsible for public security and safety.

There can be various actors behind disinformation campaigns: nation-states aiming to influence the situation abroad; rogue governments seeking to destabilise foreign populations; a group or entity seeking economic or political gain; non-state actors who organise online trolling campaigns with the aim of spreading chaos and confusion. For example, there is evidence that Russia initiated an extensive disinformation campaign about the coronavirus "to cause panic and worsen the impact of the outbreak on European countries." (Gradoń, 2020, p. 137)

1. LINKS BETWEEN FAKE NEWS, CONSPIRACY THEORIES, AND RADICALISATION

Since technology and social media form an inseparable part of the life of a modern person, the age in which we are living today is often called the era of Digimodernism, meaning the interactive relationships that people have with communication technology, becoming "simultaneously authors, consumers, and gatekeepers of information" (Sam, 2019, p. 333). Digimodernism empowers individual narratives that can affect public policy more than empirical research does; for instance, "fake news shared on social media sites influenced the decisions of many people, and evidence to the contrary failed to disrupt their commitment to the false narrative" (Sam, 2019, p. 334). In Digimodernism, the structure of metanarratives (or unifying grand narratives that incorporate events in order to allow people to make sense of history and society) has weakened; so, stories within the metanarrative are competing with each other in order to be the most *true* by being the most exciting and sharable (ibid.). This has led to the abundance of fake news on social media and elsewhere, attracting their audience with sensational and sharable content, at the same time competing with other information on the same topic for being considered the truest.

Fake news is one of the main themes on public agenda in recent years. In this article, fake news is defined as "false or biased narratives and omissions of parts of truth, deliberately created and targeting the sensational and extreme components which generate emotional involvement or the strengthening of prejudices". (Olaru & Ştefan, 2018, p. 391) The increasing use of fake content and alternative facts, coupled with the dynamics of social networks, has a high potential for affecting social systems and democracy as a whole (ibid.). For instance, the extremely extensive reach of social media can potentially turn any message 'viral'. Also, social media platforms and instant messaging apps went far beyond their initial functions as platforms for recreation and socialisation, and acquired a strategic political role by greatly amplifying fake news (Giusti & Piras, 2020, p. 3). The objectives of fake news can be different, ranging from the political (e.g., propaganda) and business, to being part of hybrid warfare. Studies notably show that people are open to fake news, especially if they

are based on prejudices in which people are strongly invested (Olaru & Ştefan, 2018, p. 393). Notably, according to Giusti and Piras (2020, p. 4),

> the combination of fake news and social media is particularly fit for producing subliminal effects that can reach the deepest and most emotional strata of people's minds, with higher chances of persistence and persuasion compared to disinformation spread through other means.

Fake news is often based on conspiracy theories (Kelland, 2020). In this article, **conspiracy theories** are defined as "the belief that certain events or situations are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces with negative intent" (European Commission, 2021). In the age of Digimodernism, owing to the plurality of information, weakening of metanarratives, and devaluation of truth, search for conspiracist connections between events and stories has increased (Uibu, 2016). Part of the appeal of conspiracy theories lies within their ability to offer simple explanations for complex issues and control in a chaotic world (Dulaney, 2020). Conspiracist thinking allows people to sense their capacity to think critically and make connections between different phenomena (Sobak, 2020). However, the conspiracy culture is characterised by radicalisation of independent critical thinking, as it is believed that, instead of specific individuals being deceitful, all politicians, journalists, public space professionals, etc. are jointly complicit in lying to the people (Uibu, 2016).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous conspiracy theories sprouted about the virus being invented by the Jews, the Chinese, the U.S., and so on for economic, social, political, and other purposes. ISIS and Al Qaeda constructed the virus as the Soldier of Allah, who punishes crusader nations (Meek, 2020). Additionally, in Europe, the uncertainty and anxiety caused by the coronavirus pandemic has the potential to cause "the emergence of new forms of violent activism or even terrorism, linked to conspiracy theories, apprehension about perceived governmental overreach, and technophobia. These forms of violence are often encouraged by right-wing and left-wing extremists" (EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, 2020, p. 2). Currently, messages are posted on the Internet in the context of general conspiracy theories, which are predominantly anti-government rather than typical slogans specific to the far-right or the far-left (Cepol, 2020). "While extremist discourse already relies heavily on conspiracy theories, the uncertainty associated with the corona crisis

will be easy to incorporate in existing narratives" (EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, 2020, p. 1).

Supporters of conspiracy theories can also conduct attacks; for instance, the vandalising of 17 mobile telephone towers in New Zealand based on a 5G conspiracy theory (Pasley, 2020), which can be viewed in the terms of technophobia mentioned above. Apart from other acts resulting in violence, a striking example is the QAnon conspiracy theory in the U.S., which contributed significantly to the U.S. Capitol attacks. QAnon followers believe that Donald Trump is in a fight against a cabal of criminals led by Democratic party representatives like Hillary Clinton as well as the Hollywood elite who are believed to be engaged in Satanic child sex trafficking and blood sacrifice (Zadrozny & Collins, 2018; Collins, 2018). QAnon followers had been waiting for "The Storm", a day on which these elites would be exposed and punished (Collins, 2018). 6 January 2021, when the U.S. Capitol riot took place, was deemed by QAnon supporters as the day of the Storm, galvanising many of them to advocate participation in and took part in the attack (Beckett & Ho, 2021; Orleans, 2021). The pandemic increased the number of QAnon supporters (and other conspiracy theorists), as the conspiracy theory provided a sense of belonging that people sought in isolation. Moreover, creators of QAnon were skilful in pushing the theory into bigger platforms, which served as the key to QAnon's spread (Zadrozny & Collins, 2018).

Conspiracy theories urge people to do their own research and distrust experts and facts. People who believe in conspiracy theories may be exploited, or they may come together to carry out anti-state activities. In general, "throughout the pandemic, we've seen how easily and quickly an online conspiracy can result in acts, sometimes violent, in the real world" (Mollie Saltskog, cited in Hay, 2021). The above examples showcase the possibility that both fake news and conspiracy theories have the potential to fuel **radicalisation**. A striking example is hospital incursions in the UK by conspiracy theorists and their supporters who believed that COVID-19 did not exist: "It is incredibly worrying that individuals radicalised on social media using misinformation and conspiracy theories are now being mobilised to take actions that directly put lives at risk and target medical professionals" (Imran Ahmed, CEO of the Center for Countering Digital Hate, cited in Quinn & Campbell, 2021). This can serve as an instance of conspiracy theory extremism (Romm, *et al*, 2021). The term

conspiracy theory extremists was introduced recently and presupposes that conspiracy theorists and their supporters cannot be dismissed simply as people who believe in something irrational.

It can be argued that fake news and conspiracy theories constitute the unsanctioned (often foreign) information flows that make it possible, in Powers's (2014, p. 234) terms, to shift a citizen's loyalty away from the established governing authorities of their home country. Given the above-described sensational nature of fake news and conspiracy theories, their significant impact on people's emotions, as well as high resilience to official denouncements in the era of Digimodernism, it can be said that such information flows, amounting to an uncontrollable infodemic, have a great potential to profoundly influence people's loyalty, especially in the situation of uncertainty and instability, or even panic, caused by the pandemic. According to Powers (2014), individuals who distrust the government and the police, experience a conflict between their ethnic and national identity, or have been victims of discrimination or harassment are particularly vulnerable to radicalisation. Additionally, grievance is typically central to the radicalisation process (Powers, 2014, p. 234). For instance, to increase the number of supporters, violent extremists use people's insecurities, vulnerabilities, and grievances, producing a simple narrative to explain problems by blaming outsiders. (EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, 2020, p. 4). The Internet also features in almost all routes of radicalisation (Powers, 2014, p. 234). The process during which ideologies and beliefs in complete opposition to those of one's country are developed and activated is often referred to as "homegrown radicalisation" (Powers, 2014, p. 235).

There are also other definitions of radicalisation, including the one by Feddes *et al.* (2020, p. 20):

radicalisation is a non-linear process in which people adopt an increasingly extreme set of ideas, often accompanied by an increased support for the use of violence by others and/or intention to use violent means themselves against perceived threatening out-groups in order to achieve political and/ or societal changes.

Based on the analysis of the existing models of radicalisation, Feddes *et al.* (2020) propose their model of radicalisation, consisting of three

stages: vulnerability phase (an individual has one dominating need (e.g., for justice, identity, significance, or sensation), which is exacerbated by traumatic events, like death of a loved one or discrimination); group phase (joining a group that can satisfy a vulnerable person's dominant need and obtaining emotional rewards while cutting ties with those outside the radical group); and action phase (committing violent acts on behalf of the group) (Feddes, *et al.*, 2020, pp. 60–62). It can be said that fake news and conspiracy theories contribute to the vulnerability phase of the described model, since their discussion on open web-based platforms can offer people, seeking significance, identity, or justice, alternative forums where their viewpoints can resonate with those of others. Notably, many people lost their loved ones because of COVID-19, while conspiracy theories escalated the discrimination of people and groups constructed as the carriers of the virus. In contrast, if we consider radicalisation in terms of Marc Sageman's (2008) four-stage process model – moral outrage (stage 1), specific interpretation of the world (stage 2), resonance with personal experience (stage 3), and mobilisation through networks (stage 4) – then fake news and conspiracy theories can contribute to people's moral outrage towards the status quo and to the development of a specific interpretation of the world.

2. SPREAD OF FAKE NEWS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN ESTONIA DURING COVID-19

In spring 2020, misinformation began to spread on social media that Tallinn was about to be locked down and its borders were to be guarded by the Estonian Defence Forces. This misinformation campaign was so extensive that its message reached thousands or even tens of thousands of Estonians and the government needed to rebut it officially on social media (Laine, *et al*., 2020b). Additionally, when hospital incursions occurred in the UK, false information about empty corona wards in Estonian hospitals started to appear in various sources (e.g., Proos, 2021), culminating in the corresponding title in a major Estonian newspaper *Postimees*, which needed to be further refuted by the management of the West Tallinn Central Hospital (Delfi, 2021).

Furthermore, according to Expert R of the Estonian Police and Border Guard Board (hereafter *the PBGB*), conspiracy theorists who had been active in Estonia for decades, emerged during the pandemic as new actors, who began to unite (propagating anti-vax, anti-mask, anti-5G, COVID denial, etc. agenda) and mobilise their followers, increasing their numbers remarkably (to about 19,000 in total). Expert R maintains that:

What is interesting about these conspiracy theorists is that they are apolitical, that is, they do not fit into traditional political currents. These people are, in principle, deniers of the state structure, but they are not anarchists. We are talking about people who are deniers of the democratic world order, which is closely linked to global economy, for example. However, they do not adhere to any political agenda or any party.

Notably, these conspiracy theorists received support from a lawyer who initiated a pro bono plan to defend anti-maskers. COVID-19 accelerated the activity of the sovereign citizen movement in Estonia. Sovereign citizens obey common law (in their own interpretation) and believe that they need not obey law enforcement, judges, elected officials or pay taxes; in extreme cases, sovereign citizens recur to deadly violence against government officials (Southern Poverty Law Center, s. a.). One of the movement propagators in Estonia called upon people in her group on Facebook to

register on the site of the Common Law Court as sovereign citizens, so that the Estonian state and legislation would lose all rights whatsoever in relation to these people, including the right to ask them and their families to vaccinate. Additionally, there were calls to destroy 5G masts (absent in Estonia at that time) and organise meetings despite COVID-related restrictions (Laine, *et al.*, 2020a). While Estonian conspiracy theorists otherwise cite their foreign colleagues, there are some local conspiracy theories; for example, that Irja Lutsar, professor of virology at the University of Tartu and head of the Scientific Advisory Board formed at the Government Committee, participates in an international conspiracy led by China and is affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party (Kalev, 2020). On 27 January 2021, lawyer Andrei Vesterinen uploaded a telephone conversation with Irja Lutsar on the Facebook page of his law firm. In the conversation, Vesterinen was aggressively asking questions about the virus and ultimately called Lutsar a liar. As a result, Lutsar was insulted and bullied via her social media account and telephone, admitting that "it is really crazy what has happened in the Estonian society" (Raudsik & Lind, 2021). Vesterinen, in turn, published a self-justifying comment on the Telegram website, explaining why he was allowed to refer to Irja Lutsar in this way and why it was neither an insult nor bullying (Vesterinen, 2021).

There were also protests against governmental pandemic response measures in Estonia on 3 February 2021 (with 300 attendees) and also during April 2021, beginning on 31 March 2021 (with between 70 to 200 attendees). Daily protests were organised against amendments to the Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control Act (hereinafter *the NETS*), according to which the police now have the right to fine people for violating the restrictions set to prevent the spread of infectious diseases, which was formerly done only by the Health Board (Nael, 2021). People interpreted the content of this amendment as an infringement of their rights and expansion of police powers. At the protests, people had slogans that compared the Estonian police with OMON and Gestapo, which target their own people. Apart from protests and the bullying of Irja Lutsar, Expert R admits that, in Estonia, the statue of Bill Gates was also vandalised (which is apparently connected with the conspiracy theory that Bill Gates funded and planned the virus to eventually sell vaccines (Reuters, 2021)), damage to property was committed by sovereign citizens, and the overall number of videos mocking the police on

social media and extremist online materials translated into Estonian has increased unprecedentedly. According to Expert L of the Health Board, crisis situations like the COVID pandemic create different opportunities for those seeking to exploit them:

Unfortunately, my experience shows that conspirators of all kinds often find themselves in the midst of reactions where the leaders are in fact extremists. The examples of the Netherlands, the United States, and other countries suggest that extremists take advantage of the situation where conspirators express themselves and are used for political reasons by extremists, and this violent side is caused by extremists. Radicalisation and the exploitation of conspiracy theorists may intensify in Estonia in the near future.

Although there has been no evidence of any violence in Estonia that could be directly linked with the hate towards the government, law enforcement, and healthcare professionals that escalated during the pandemic, the attack against the chief physician of the North Estonia Medical Centre on 3 February 2021 (where urine was thrown in his face and a tyre of his car was punctured) occurred, which made the prime minister of Estonian consider establishing better protection for members of the Scientific Advisory Board (Mäekivi, 2021).

3. TELEGRAM

One of the main channels supporting and disseminating conspiracy theories and fake news in Estonia is Telegram. Telegram began its operations on 29 January 2013, publishing news "primarily on socially critical, conspiracy theoretical, and (new) spiritual topics" (Uibu, 2016).

The authors on Telegram position themselves in opposition to the mainstream media, accusing the latter of lies, insufficient reporting of events, and manipulation (Joonas, 2021b; Martinson. 2021; Telegram, 2021b). When the pandemic began, Telegram operators applied for participation in governmental press conferences; however, they were not granted access, and Telegram filed a lawsuit against the State Chancellery (Tõnumaa, 2021). On Telegram, there is a section called "Banned!", which consist of a collection of videos and articles that have been removed from YouTube or Facebook due to censorship. This section contains 41 texts. Furthermore, Telegram in Russian (RusTelegram) is declared to have been reopened after seven years on hiatus (Joonas, 2021a). Publications include Telegram's new magazine *Corona Crisis 2: Is Asking Questions Allowed in a Free Society?*, which only contains questions about the pandemic that, in the opinion of the authors, the mainstream media attending press conferences have failed to ask (Tõnumaa, 2021).

Professor of virology Irja Lutsar accepted Telegram's invitation to answer those questions, and the first part of that interview (40 minutes) is available on Telegram for free while the second half is only for subscribers. Hence, there is a clear profit motive behind Telegram inviting a professional to participate in what they call public debate on a crucial issue and then selling the answers to their subscribers. According to the Estonian mainstream news outlet *Eesti Ekspress*, the advertisements found on Telegram are sponsored by the German gold millionaire Herbert Heinz Jungwirth, who is called the "gray cardinal of conspiracy theorists" and the "super-distributor of false information in Estonia" (Laine, *et al.*, 2020). The Telegram team wrote the preface to Jungwirth's sponsored Reval Buch's book *Corona, False Alarm*. According to *Eesti Ekspress*, Estonian bookshops sell several books published by Reval Buch that discuss, for example, alternative approaches to Adolf Hitler and the crimes of Nazi

Germany; a book stating that all journalists are, in fact, part of a special CIA operation; a book about the evil of the philanthropist George Soros. Two books by the former journalist Udo Ulfkotte have appeared in Estonia, *Bought Journalists* and *Mass Immigration and Sex Crime*, which presents refugees as rapists (Laine, *et al.*, 2020). Currently, Reval Buch's *Health Dictatorship* is being promoted. Among other things, this can be regarded as an example of foreign information flows attempting to shift popular loyalties.

4. METHODOLOGY

The aim of the empirical analysis in this article is to see how texts on Telegram seek to shift the loyalty of the Estonian people from the government and other established bodies and apparatuses of the society, like law enforcement, Health Board, or the Scientific Advisory Board formed at the Government Committee. For this purpose, critical discourse analysis is employed, which follows Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional model: firstly, the social context is described in which articles are produced (social practices; in the case of the present article, the above-described processes of discursive struggling for the loyalty of the Estonian people during the pandemic); secondly, reception and interpretation of texts (discursive practices); thirdly, analysis of textual properties of Telegram's texts. It is this interconnection between the three levels of analysis that makes Fairclough's three-dimensional approach to critical discourse analysis especially fruitful in retrieving a full picture of the influence of Telegram in the Estonian society in the context of COVID-19 pandemic.

One essential tenet of critical discourse analysis is that text and social reality are mutually constitutive: language does not only reflect reality, but is also the means of (re)producing the world as we experience it (Fairclough, 2003; Vaara, 2015). CDA detects tacit assumptions, which often pass unnoticed on social, societal, political, and economic issues and phenomena and analyses power relations between different discourses and actors. Importantly, in CDA, discourses and texts are seen as inherently ideological, lacking neutrality in terms of their content (Fairclough, 2003, 2015; Vaara, 2015).

One way to analyse the reception of Telegram in the Estonian society is to look at website traffic statistics. One effective resource for this is Similarweb (similarweb.com), where it is possible to see, among other things, the number of total visits to the site being analysed, average visit duration, bounce rate (the statistics of very short visits, made also by social bots to boost the traffic statistics), and major social media platforms that are sending traffic to the site. To better showcase the results, Telegram is analysed along with the prominent Estonian news outlets ERR (Estonian

Public Broadcasting) and *Postimees*. As of 17 June 2021, the results of comparison on Similarweb are as follows (provided for May 2021):

	ERR	*Postimees*	Telegram
Total visits	9,430,000	18,650,000	290,040
Average visit duration	00:05:29	00:05:35	00:04:24
Bounce rate	46.68%	39.41%	54.61%
Major social media platforms sending traffic to the website	Facebook (83.88%)	Facebook (93.95%)	Facebook (95.83%)

As evident from the above table, although Telegram has a very modest number of visitors when compared to ERR and *Postimees*, both Telegram's average visit duration and bounce rate do not differ significantly from that of ERR and *Postimees*. The latter has the best bounce rate, meaning that the number of short-term visits is smaller than in the case of ERR and Telegram. Telegram's bounce rate is merely 7.93% bigger than that of ERR. Therefore, it can be concluded that Telegram has its own readership in the Estonian society, even if it is much smaller than that of ERR and *Postimees*. It should be noted that, since spring 2020, Telegram subscription has introduced a fee and costs €5.99 per month, €50 per year, while the premium package costs €100 per month.

Sobak (2020, p. 89) has conducted a survey of Telegram readers in her MA thesis and concluded that Telegram readers criticise mainstream news media for covering events rather superficially based on similar sources. Some Telegram readers believe that mainstream media is biased and serves the purposes of specific interest groups. Some interviewees indicated displeasure after reading mainstream media – its tone is considered didactic, and it is overly negative and intentionally frightening in times of the corona crisis. Telegram, on the other hand, is considered as an alternative to traditional journalism, an eye-opening and independent news outlet (Sobak, 2020, p. 89–90):

The diversity was considered far more important than thorough fact-checking. /…/ Respondents also considered Telegram to be objective, as they are free to believe as little or as much of its content as they see fit. /…/ The interviewees stated that they read and trust Telegram, as they

get confirmation to their previous understandings. Many interviewees consider themselves more media critical and insightful than people who avoid alternative media.

Thus, although the interviewees still reference to mainstream news media for quick, up-to-date information, they welcome the fact that conspiracy theories and alternative information are given voice on Telegram. They like the fact Telegram is more reassuring than the mainstream media in times of the corona crisis, offering different accounts on the causes, treatment, and prevention of the virus (Sobak, 2021, p. 90).

5. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF TELEGRAM ARTICLES

This article conducts an empirical analysis of the properties of Telegram's texts, using the tool called *assumptions*. The specific value of this approach lies in its capacity to uncover the slightest nuances of meaning-making that largely go unnoticed and are taken for granted. In Fairclough's (2003) methodology, the term *assumptions* refers to the implicit processes of meaning-making in texts. Fairclough distinguishes between existential (assumptions about what exists), propositional (assumptions about what is or can be the case), and value assumptions (about what is good or desirable). Most assumptions are implicit, but some are also triggered or made visible by linguistic features in a text. Assumptions are a tool for an interpreter to detect the value systems on which a text is based. The focus of the analysis in this article was on the anti-establishment, with searched keywords being *government*, *police*, and members of the Scientific Advisory Board formed at the Government Committee. Close reading of Telegram's texts was conducted between December 2020 and July 2021. Representative extracts were selected for detailed empirical analysis. The extracts were translated into English by the author while the original texts in Estonian are provided in the footnotes.

On 15 May, a global protest took place on Freedom Square in Tallinn regarding the COVID restrictions that contradicted scientific research. All speakers were balanced and thorough, and the greatest emphasis was put on the fact that we have lost our freedom. Looking at the immediate plans of the government, everyone should be frustrated: it is clear that a return to normalcy was never even planned, but the desire of those in power is to create a new normalcy where obedience to power is paramount. (Martinson, 2021)[2]

"COVID restrictions that contradicted scientific research" triggers the propositional assumption that COVID restrictions have been imposed without any scientific basis and that scientific research supports the absence of such restrictions. "Global protest" triggers the propositional

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[2]   15. mail toimus Tallinnas Vabaduse väljakul ülemaailmne protest teaduslike uuringutega vastuolus olevate koroonapiirangute osas. Kõik sõnavõtjad olid tasakaalukad ja põhjalikud ja kõige jõulisemalt jäi kõlama asjaolu, et me oleme kaotanud vabaduse. Vaadates valitsuse lähiaja plaane, peaks igaüks olema nördinud: selge on see, et tagasiminekut normaalsusesse ei ole kunagi plaanitudki, vaid võimulolijate soov on luua uut normaalsust, kus võimule kuuletumine on esmatähtis. (Martinson, 2021)

assumption that it is not only in Estonia where it is believed that COVID restrictions contradict scientific research. The fact that it is emphasised that "all speakers were balanced and thorough" triggers the propositional assumption that protesters otherwise lack self-control, cannot thoroughly explain what they stand for, and are not taken seriously. COVID protest is thus constructed as a serious event through such an implicit comparison. "The greatest emphasis" triggers the propositional assumption that there were also other concerns (possibly including scientific research), but the loss of freedom is constructed as the primary concern of the protesters. "We" is inclusive of all people of Estonia and even those in other countries. Freedom and normalcy are constructed in relation to COVID restrictions: existence of COVID restrictions means absence of people's freedom and also absence of normalcy. "Immediate plans of the government" are constructed as frustrating for everybody, the value assumption being that such plans are undesirable. "It is clear that a return to normalcy was never even planned" triggers the propositional assumption that a return to normalcy is a crucial step of the plan while the government continues with restrictions. Another propositional assumption is that the reason for such governmental plans only and most importantly (triggered by "paramount") lies in the government's desire to permanently (triggered by "a new normalcy") increase people's subordination to power. No other reasons are considered. Notably, "immediate plans" triggers the propositional assumption that such plans do not reflect any long-term strategy, based on which one could judge upon the appearance of a new normalcy.

For me, there is one very interesting conflict in Estonia that is constantly being dragged into political games: Estonians versus Russians. /… / At present, the media and politicians are very cunningly directing us to disparage each other to ensure a gap in communication. The emphasis is on pro-Kremlin views whenever Russian-speakers are encountered among the protesters. (Martinson, 2021)[3]

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[3]   Eestis on üks minu jaoks väga huvitav vastandumine, mida kogu aeg poliitilistesse mängudesse sisse tõmmatakse: eestlased versus venelased. /…/ Praegu suunavad meedia ja poliitikud meid väga kavalalt üksteist halvustama, et kindlustada suhtlemises lõhe. Rõhutakse Kremli-meelsusele, kui kohatakse vene keelt kõnelevaid isikuid meeleavaldajate seas. (Martinson, 2021)

Here, the existential assumption is that, in Estonia, the conflict exists between Estonians and Russians. "Constantly /…/ dragged into political games" triggers the propositional assumption that the conflict is significant, since it is constantly on the political agenda, and the value assumption that such a situation is undesirable, since "dragged into political games" implies that, as a result of such exploitation, the conflict either remains unsettled or is escalating. In "the media and politicians are very cunningly directing us to disparage each other to ensure a gap in communication", the propositional assumptions are that media and politicians are pursuing the same goal of polarising the Estonian society; there is no gap in communication between Estonians and Russians in Estonia, and both are constructed as "we"; a gap in communication appears as a result of reproach between the two ethnic groups; in order for Estonians and Russians to disparage each other, a very cunning provocation by the politicians and media is needed. Hence, the conflict between Russians and Estonians is constructed as an internal Estonian issue. Notably, in this utterance, the unity and smooth communication between Russians and Estonians is constructed through their joint participation in the protests against COVID restrictions and against the amendments to the NETS. Here, the Russians v. Estonians issue is used for the promotion of a specific agenda. Additionally, in "the emphasis is on pro-Kremlin views whenever Russian-speakers are encountered among the protesters", the propositional assumptions are that the authorities should ask things from Russian-speaking protesters other than pro-Kremlin views; there should be no emphasis on pro-Kremlin views or the Kremlin; Estonian-speaking protesters are not suspected of pro-Kremlin views; the authorities differentiate between Russian- and Estonian-speaking protesters based on pro-Kremlin views. However, the propositional assumptions here are also that Russian-speaking protesters may not have pro-Kremlin views; the authorities suspect the Kremlin of having links in the protests. Accordingly, what the authorities are assumed to be concerned with is not the internal issue of the ethnic conflict between Estonians and Russians in Estonia, but the potential meddling of the Kremlin in the Estonian internal affairs through Russian-speakers with pro-Kremlin views.

I gave an interview to Maaleht several years ago and to Postimees in 2018, where I said that orders and guidelines are again coming from somewhere

else. This time it is not the hand of the Kremlin, but that of Brussels. (Joonas, 2021b)[4]

This excerpt cites an interview with the famous Estonian musician and actor Tõnis Mägi. The propositional assumptions in the cited utterance are that Estonia does not make independent decisions and merely follows the orders given to it. The existential assumption here is that the hand of the Kremlin exists, in addition to the hand of Brussels existing, while the propositional assumptions are that these are two mutually exclusive hands giving Estonia their orders and guidelines: it is either the Kremlin or Brussels. Furthermore, the value assumption is that both hands are equally undesirable for Estonia and do not benefit the country. The propositional assumption is that Tõnis Mägi expressed this in his interviews with Estonian media outlets and he now wants to express this to Telegram, thus equating it with *Maaleht* and *Postimees*. "Again coming from somewhere else" triggers the propositional assumption that, at some point in time before 2018, the Kremlin's control over Estonia has ended and exactly the same control over Estonia began on behalf of Brussels. Both the Kremlin and Brussels are implicitly constructed as depriving Estonia of its freedom. Notably, Brussels (and the EU in general) is implicitly constructed as guilty for the present situation in Estonia, while the Kremlin is constructed as neutral and not influencing Estonia for as long as three or more years. Hence, this utterance contains a strong anti-EU sentiment.

Telegram has repeatedly stated that all political parties ultimately represent exactly the same worldview. When the attention of gullible people is diverted to such pseudo-problems as racism, family laws, etc., then, by the end of the day, all coalition and theatrical opposition parties still go along with the plan of the New World Order (NWO), which, today, is to collapse

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[4]   Andsin mitmed aastad tagasi intervjuu Maalehele ja 2018. a. Postimehele, kus rääkisin, et taaskord tulevad käsud ja suunised mujalt. Seekord pole tegemist Kremli käega, vaid Brüsseliga. (Joonas, 2021b)

the world economy, restrict human rights, compulsory vaccination, complete surveillance of the people, etc. (Tõnumaa, 2021a)[5]

In "has repeatedly stated", the propositional assumption is that Telegram's claims were not heard or taken seriously, and the public believes that Estonian parties represent different worldviews. Further propositional assumptions here are that the issues of racism, family laws, and the like should not be dealt with ("pseudo-problems" triggers the value assumption that it is undesirable to deal with them) and they are inferior to the issues of economy, restrictions of human rights, compulsory vaccination, complete surveillance of people, and the like. It is therefore assumed that racism and current family laws do not entail any restrictions on human rights. Additionally, it is only stances on racism and family laws that make the worldviews of Estonian political parties differ. "Pseudo" also triggers the propositional assumption that these issues are imaginary or non-existent in Estonia and people are made to discuss these issues only because they are gullible. However, the implication here is that people are not as gullible as to believe the New World Order and its consequences that Telegram needs to repeatedly explain. "Still go along with the plan of the New World Order" triggers the propositional assumption that all political parties in Estonia ("theatrical opposition" implying that the opposition does not exist in Estonia) have been jointly following the course of the NWO for some time already. "The attention of gullible people is diverted to" triggers the propositional assumption that people can actually stop the government from turning them into slaves (with restricted human rights, compulsory vaccination, and complete surveillance); so, their attention is necessary to be diverted. Here, indirect calls against the actions of all parties of the government are present. The government is constructed as the enemy of the people.

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[5] Telegram on korduvalt kajastanud, et kõik erakonnad esindavad lõppkokkuvõttes täpselt ühesugust maailmavaadet. Kui kergemeelsete inimeste tähelepanu suunatakse kõrvale pseudoprobleemidega nagu rassism, perekonnaseadused jne, siis päeva lõpuks lähevad ikkagi kõik koalitsiooni ja teatraalse opositsiooni parteid kaasa uue maailma korra (New World Order, NWO) kavaga, milleks täna on maailma majanduse kokku kukutamine, inimõiguste piiramine, kohustuslik vaktsineerimine, rahva täielik jälgimine jne. (Tõnumaa, 2021a)

COVID terrorism and virocracy have been cultivated for more than a year, and the people have been very patient, hoping that this nonsense would end. /…/

Unconstitutional human experimentation by Big Pharma is under way to impose the requirement to wear a mask that is harmful to health and so-called vaccines that are still in development, in the course of which all people (both healthy and sick) have been labelled as dangerous, some even as potential murderers. This is dictatorship: COVID terrorism and medical tyranny, the local agents of which are virocrats Irja Lutsar, Üllar Lanno, Jüri Ratas, Kaja Kallas, Arkadi Popov, Tanel Kiik, Martin Kadai, etc., who must be subjected to criminal investigation together with the Health Board. (Tõnumaa, 2021c)[6]

Here, the existential assumption is made that COVID terrorism and virocracy exist in Estonia, and the value assumption is that COVID terrorism and virocracy are undesirable. "Virocracy" is assumed to be the power of the virus, meaning that, in Estonia, the virus is in power, not the people (as in the case of democracy). "Have been cultivated for more than a year" triggers the propositional assumption that COVID terrorism and virocracy have been intentionally created by the government. In "the people have been very patient, hoping that this nonsense would end", the propositional assumption is that people regard the situation as nonsense and are very patient with the government creating the nonsensical situation without any valid reason. The implicit assumption here is that there is no democracy in Estonia where the people would express their concerns to the government. Another implicit assumption here is that people should stop being patient and defy the government.

Here, COVID terrorism and virocracy are equated to nonsense and people are constructed as waiting for this to end rather than being afraid and devastated. In "unconstitutional human experimentation by Big Pharma

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[6]   Koroonaterrorismi ja virokraatiat on viljeletud enam kui aasta, rahvas on olnud väga kannatlik, lootuses, et see jama lõppeb. /…/ Käimas on Big Pharma põhiseadusevastased inimkatsed tervist kahjustavate maskikandmisnõude ja alles arendusetapis olevate "vaktsiinide" pealesurumisega, mille käigus on kõik inimesed (nii terved kui ka haiged) ristitud ohtlikeks, mõned lausa potentsiaalseteks mõrvariteks. See on diktatuur – koroonaterrorism ja meditsiinitürannia, mille kohalikud agendid, virokraadid Irja Lutsar, Üllar Lanno, Jüri Ratas, Kaja Kallas, Arkadi Popov, Tanel Kiik, Martin Kadai jt tuleb koos Terviseametiga saata kriminaaluurimise alla. (Tõnumaa, 2021c)

is under way", the existential assumption is that such experimentation actually exists (in the form of COVID vaccination), and the propositional assumption is that the global pharmaceutical industry (Big Pharma) is performing unconstitutional actions in Estonia against the public good. These actions are to "impose the requirement to wear a mask that is harmful to health and so-called vaccines that are still in development" – the propositional assumptions here are that wearing a mask cannot be voluntary and needs to be imposed, it cannot help in staying healthy, while vaccines which are in development cannot be effective. In "in the course of which all people (both healthy and sick) have been labelled as dangerous, some even as potential murderers", the propositional assumption is that the requirement to wear a mask and vaccinate is predicated on the danger to catch the virus from either a sick or a healthy person, while people not fulfilling the requirements can kill others by infecting them. The implicit assumption here is that COVID prevention measures are, in fact, helping to stop the virus. "This is dictatorship: COVID terrorism and medical tyranny", implies that COVID prevention measures that are constructed as imposed and health-damaging and, therefore, as a dictatorship and medical tyranny, are instead effective, while COVID terrorism, constructed as intentionally labelling people as dangerous, appears to be a matter of common sense, since the fear of infection is commonplace even if nobody is talking about it. In this utterance, Estonian people are constructed as having no fear of the virus. Furthermore, in "the local agents of which are virocrats Irja Lutsar, Üllar Lanno, Jüri Ratas, Kaja Kallas, Arkadi Popov, Tanel Kiik, Martin Kadai", the specified representatives of the government, members of the Scientific Advisory Board formed at the Government Committee, and the Health Board are constructed as dictators, tyrants, and terrorists who "must be subjected to criminal investigation together with the Health Board", while, at the level of implied assumptions, there are no grounds to accuse them, since they provide effective measures for people who are afraid of infection. So many accusations and use of ideologically loaded words like *terrorists*, *dictators*, and *tyrants* may imply that it is hard to convince the public of this stance.

In order for us all to obediently do some kind of actions that those who are currently forcing us to wear masks are waiting from us. What kind of actions? So that we all obediently start vaccinating. You see, if such a system of fear of being infected with a coronavirus infection is being created now,

then violent forcing of people to wear masks is an act of terrorism. It is directly about spreading this fear. This is an act of terrorism (Tõnumaa, 2021e)[7]

The propositional assumptions here are that "we all" (people of Estonia) are not wearing masks voluntarily and do it only because "they" (the government) force "us" to do so; forcing people to do something gives the government the basis to expect further obedience from the people. The underlying assumption here is that the government treats people inhumanely, and there is an acute polarisation between "us" and "them". "So that we all obediently start vaccinating" triggers the propositional assumption that vaccination is an act of obedience on behalf of all Estonian people, not an act of choice. However, it is further assumed that what people are afraid of is, in actuality, being infected with a coronavirus, not the oppressive government: "if such a system of fear of being infected with a coronavirus infection is being created now". The propositional assumption here is that, by making people wear masks and providing vaccination, the government intentionally creates in people the fear of being infected with coronavirus, while "being infected" triggers the value assumption that this is strongly undesirable, and people are in general afraid of being infected. "Then violent forcing of people to wear masks is an act of terrorism" triggers the propositional assumption that violent forcing of people to wear masks actually occurs; such violent forcing implies that the police, for instance, puts a mask on somebody's face, which is highly improbable. It is through this element of violence (rather questionable) and fear (considered as imposed by the government and excluding the possibility that people are naturally afraid of being infected) that the actions of the government are defined as an act of terrorism. The constructed "act of terrorism" is emphasised two times in a row, which may be regarded as an indirect call for the people to defy the government, since the value assumption in "terrorism" is that it should be stopped.

Corona terrorism is not limited to testing fraud. In Spain, for example, a new order has been adopted that requires to wear a mask even on the beach.

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[7] Selleks, et hiljem kõik me kuulekalt teeksime mingeid tegusid, mida meilt ootavad need, kes praegu meid maske kandma sunnivad. Milliseid tegusid? Et me kõik kuulekalt hakkaksime vaktsineerima. Vaadake, kui praegu luuakse selline hirmu süsteem koroonaviiruse infektsiooniga nakatumise suhtes, siis inimeste vägivaldne sundimine maskide kandmiseks on terroriakt. Tegemist on otsesõnu selle hirmu levitamisega. See on terroriakt. (Tõnumaa, 2021e)

While, in the past, masks were mandatory only in public indoor areas, the system has now turned up the heat, never mind that wearing a mask has basically no effect on preventing the spread of the virus. This nonsense can only last as long as the people go along with it. (Tõnumaa, 2021f)[8]

"Corona terrorism" is constructed in relation to "testing fraud". "Fraud" triggers the propositional assumption that corona testing is an intentional crime of cheating. Additionally, "corona terrorism" is constructed in relation to the tightening of COVID restrictions (wearing a mask on the beach in Spain). Constructing a mask as unable to prevent the virus, "a new order" adopted in Spain is thereby constructed as baseless and merely the desire of the system to turn up the heat. The propositional assumption is that "corona terrorism" boils down to the intent of the government to cheat people with corona testing and restrict their freedom without any basis in order to achieve more subordination. In "this nonsense can only last as long as the people go along with it", the propositional assumption is that people do not oppose the measures taken by the government and even agree with these measures. It appears that the author is using precisely such loaded words as "terrorism" because it is hard to otherwise convince people that the government is acting wrongfully (in the author's terms, nonsensically). Still, the author is doing this and even indirectly calling people to take action, making the propositional assumption that it is the people who can stop the government from doing what they are doing (triggered by "this nonsense can only last as long as /…/").

I have not attended these protests because I do not live in Tallinn, but I might not take part in them even if I lived there, because the prospect of being bossed (by threats to otherwise take me by force) into a police bus for some absurd reason, where one is ordered (under the pretext of a search) to peel off their clothes, does not have a captivating effect. I try to avoid such situations. However, I would definitely recommend such an experience to all those very, very witty, well-civilized, and intelligent

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[8] Koroonaterrorism ei piirdu kõigest testimispettusega. Näiteks Hispaanias on vastu võetud uus kord, mis kohustab kandma maski isegi rannas. Kui varem olid maskid kohustuslikud ainult üldkasutatavates siseruumides, siis nüüd on süsteem vinti juurde keeranud, mis sest, et maskide kandmisel pole põhimõtteliselt mitte mingit mõju viiruse leviku takistamiseks. See jama saab kesta ainult senikaua, kuni rahvas sellega kaasa läheb. (Tõnumaa, 2021f)

people who have been ironic about those who are afraid of Estonia becoming a police state. You really deserve it. (Laiapea, 2021)[9]

In "I have not attended these protests because I do not live in Tallinn", the propositional assumption is that protests against the amendments to the NETS in Estonia only take place in Tallinn. In Tallinn, protests are constructed as a free reign for the police, where, for an "absurd reason" (which nevertheless triggers the propositional assumption that the police explain to people the grounds for their actions), people are "bossed into a police bus" ("by threats to otherwise take me by force" triggers the propositional assumption that the police warn people about the use of force and do not rely on force immediately), where they are "ordered to peel off their clothes" ("under the pretext of a search" triggers the propositional assumption that the police explains their actions and do not act violently). Although the aim here seems to be to construct the police as violent and disrespectful of people and their rights, at the level of propositional assumptions, it turns out that the police do their work professionally and follow the rules. Notably, "does not have a captivating effect" triggers the propositional assumption that the author is not actually afraid of the police: if the police were indeed unreasonably cruel, then he might have been more fearful and concerned. "I try to avoid such situations" triggers the propositional assumption that the police have not mistreated him. Still, the author considers himself to belong among those "who are afraid of Estonia becoming a police state", whereas, to those sceptical about this, he would "definitely recommend such an experience", which, at the level of propositional assumptions, means that the police is explaining each of their actions to every person with whom they are dealing.

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[9] Mina ei ole nendel meeleavaldustel käinud, sest ma ei ela Tallinnas, aga ei võtaks neist osa võib-olla isegi siis, kui seal elaksin, sest väljavaade saada kamandatud (ähvardades viia mind vastasel korral vägisi) mingil absurdsel põhjusel politseibussi, kus kästakse (tuues ettekäändeks läbiotsimise) riided seljast koorida, ei mõju kütkestavalt. Üritan selliseid olukordi vältida. Kindlasti soovitan sellist kogemust aga kõigile neile väga-väga vaimukatele, hästi tsiviliseeritud ja intelligentsetele inimestele, kes on ironiseerinud nüüd nende üle, kes kardavad Eesti muutumist politseiriigiks. Te ju tõesti väärite seda! (Laiapea, 2021)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article focused on the situation in which the spread of COVID-19-related fake news and conspiracy theories escalated the uncertainty, fear, and distrust of the government and public bodies and apparatuses (e.g., the police and the Health Board) in the Estonian society, thereby leading to potential radicalisation. Apart from the propaganda on social media against the governmental measures to stop the pandemic, on several occasions, acts were committed that had indications of radicalisation, such as the bullying of Irja Lutsar, disrespectful treatment of police officers, vandalising the statue of Bill Gates, and instances of damage to property by the adherents of sovereign citizens' movement. Fake news and conspiracy theories proliferating around the world find an easy way to take root in the Estonian context, and one of the channels of their dissemination and reproduction in the Estonian context is Telegram.

Critical discourse analysis of Telegram's texts showed that they often contain both fake news and conspiracy theories; for instance, the participation of all Estonian political parties in the New World Order conspiracy or the Estonian people being victims of the Big Pharma conspiracy, which is supposedly conducting unconstitutional human experimentation here in the form of vaccination. In Telegram's texts, the government is constructed as absolutely authoritarian (also totalitarian and tyrannical), while democracy is assumed to be absent in Estonia. The government is constructed as an absolute and irreconcilable enemy of the people, treating them inhumanely, seeking to turn them into slaves and increase their subordination to power with each consequent measure directed at the containment of the pandemic. The government is constructed as not planning to return to the pre-pandemic state and restore what freedom there was before COVID-related restrictions, intentionally mongering COVID terrorism and virocracy through deceitful corona testing and allowing the police to act violently for absurd reasons. Additionally, media and politicians are pursuing the same goal of polarising the Estonian society, which is otherwise united. Hence, deep polarisation between the people and the government is constructed at the level of assumptions, which has the potential to radicalise the people against the government.

Furthermore, Estonia is constructed as dependent on, and politically controlled by, either the Kremlin or Brussels. Notably, Brussels (and the EU in

general) is implicitly constructed as responsible for the present situation in Estonia, while the Kremlin is constructed as neutral and not exerting influence over Estonia in the turmoil of the pandemic. It is also assumed that racism and current family laws do not entail any restrictions on human rights and should not be dealt with, as these problems are either non-existent in Estonia or are less important than the ones related to the economic crisis and the deepening oppressiveness of the government. Notably, in Telegram's texts, the Estonian people are constructed as unafraid of the virus and not willing to wear a mask or vaccinate voluntarily, and the fear is constructed as mongered by the government alone, which is thus committing terrorism. The Estonian people are consistently constructed as gullible, very patient, and obedient, lacking any initiative and not expressing their opinions and concerns to the government while being dissatisfied with all of its actions. Telegram thus indirectly calls people to act. At the level of assumptions, it is emphasised that people can actually stop the government from turning them into slaves and that people should stop being patient with the government's nonsense. The constructed "acts of terrorism" on behalf of the government are steadily emphasised, which may be regarded as an indirect call for the people to resist the government, as the value assumption in "terrorism" is that it should be stopped.

Nevertheless, at the level of assumptions, it also implicitly shows that governmental measures against the pandemic actually work, and that people are not afraid of the government and its supposed "terrorism" (which is equated to nonsense at the level of assumptions). Numerous accusations and use of ideologically loaded words like *terrorists*, *dictators*, and *tyrants* may imply that it is hard to convince the public of this perspective on the government and its representatives. At the level of assumptions, it is evident that the Estonian people are not gullible and do not believe everything that they are told. What is more, at the level of assumptions, it turns out that the police do their work professionally and follow the rules and people are not afraid of the police. Proceeding from the analysis of assumptions, Telegram appears to have a strong anarchist inclination, constructing the Estonian government (all current political parties) as deeply authoritarian, and seeks to oppose the government. Telegram also appears to have a far-right stance, calling for dismissal of the issues of racism and family laws in the Estonian society or not seeing human rights violations in these issues. Telegram also has clearly anti-EU sentiments and a neutral attitude towards the Kremlin.

As of 16 June 2021, Telegram has a considerable number of readers, and the website's bounce rate is comparable to that of prominent mainstream media outlets in Estonia, indicating that Telegram readers are not social bots that are merely boosting the site's traffic statistics. This indicates that Telegram has a certain impact on the Estonian society. People can read Telegram texts directly on the website or on social media and share them. Although Telegram does not appear to be as dangerous in terms of radicalisation as social media, it nevertheless contributes to the escalated situation in Estonia during the pandemic through its toxic anti-government language. It can be said that Telegram makes an attempt at the radicalisation of the Estonian people, persuading them to shift their loyalty away from the established bodies and apparatuses of the Estonian society. It has also been established that Telegram channels foreign information flows coming from its Germany-based sponsor. It is also possible that Telegram spreads disinformation and is intentionally or unintentionally party to disinformation campaigns (including those organised by Russia).

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