Policy Paper

Local Russian-Language Journalism in the Baltics

challenges and Perspectives for Building Resilient Communities of Media Professionals

| **Solvita Denisa-Liepniece** | **Dmitri Teperik** |

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Introduction

This paper provides evidence- and research-based analysis in the form of a case study of cross-border interactions between communities of Russian-speaking journalists in informationally vulnerable regions of eastern Estonia and Latvia. The main aim of the analysis is to provide a snap assessment of the current challenges and development perspectives facing Russian-language media actors on the regional level. This would assist national authorities, international donors, regulators, partners and other stakeholders in making decisions and setting priorities regarding the types of supportive or corrective interventions required for strengthening the resilience of local journalistic communities in the Baltics. In several studies on the security and resilience of the Baltic states,[1] these particular regions have been mentioned as socio-politically or informationally vulnerable.

The criteria for such a classification are mostly linked to the significant size of Russian-speaking audiences, whose patterns of media consumption are influenced by various intrusive activities, including malicious disinformation orchestrated from abroad. This analysis explores a set of emerging human-driven vulnerabilities of the media landscapes in Estonia and Latvia to develop an evidence-based policy approach to increase the practical resilience and preparedness of Russian-language newsrooms and local journalists working in those areas and regions of high informational vulnerability. However, we contend that such improvements should not come at the expense of the over-securitisation of the Russian-language media in the Baltic states.[2]

Our analysis is based on extensive desk research, in-depth interviews, four rounds of online surveys among journalists from Latvia and Estonia, and feedback and observations from four training meetings. Among other formats, a crisis simulation event served as a source of insights, and semi-structured focus group discussions were conducted from April to November 2021.[3] This analysis offers an overview of the main findings regarding ongoing cooperation and challenges related to attracting financial resources and maintaining the sustainability of the local Russian-language media in the Baltic states. It also examines some technical aspects of content production, the availability of human resources and media management skills. The authors also present a summary with a set of policy recommendations and suggestions for a training syllabus. While the results of the analysis are useful for exploratory and recommendation purposes, the methodological limitations prevent them from being extrapolated to the whole journalistic community in the Baltics.

1. Local communities of journalists and cross-border interaction

For the media, situation awareness and crisis preparedness start with a common view shared by the authorities, law enforcement agencies and media organisations. During a potential crisis, meaningful engagement of the local independent journalistic communities is essential for bolstering trust-based cooperation between newsrooms in delivering qualitative news and in providing operational guidelines to local audiences in the language(s) those audiences understand. There are several key prerequisites for shaping and maintaining such cooperation: from providing technological support in cases where content distribution is blocked to assisting in information processing and verification. Cross-newsroom cooperation between regional journalists should become crucial not only as routine practices but also

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1   Mike Winnerstig (ed.), *Tools of Destabilization: Russian Soft Power and Non-military Influence in the Baltic States* (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2014); Bartosz Fraszka, *Baltic States Versus Russian Hybrid Threats* (Warsaw: Warsaw Institute, 26 October 2020); Matt Cesare, "Russian Encroachment in the Baltics: The Role of Russian Media and Military," Foreign Policy Research Institute, 14 December 2020; Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, "The Securitization of National Minorities in the Baltic States," *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics* 10, no. 2 (2017): 26-45; Andrew Radin, *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2017).

2   Ivav Lavrentjev, "The Securitization of Russian-speaking Media in Estonia: Case Study of ETV+ Channel" (Master's Thesis, University of Helsinki, 2020).

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> *Meaningful engagement of the local independent journalistic communities is essential for bolstering trust-based cooperation between newsrooms in delivering qualitative news and in providing operational guidelines to local audiences in the language(s) those audiences understand*

for acquiring collective threat assessment.[4] Cooperation between media outlets and individual journalists enhances the level of preparedness to support the building of a resilient community of local journalists within the region. Despite noteworthy efforts going back to 2015, there is still a lack of continuous cooperation between Russian-speaking journalists at the regional, national and pan-Baltic levels. Although the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence has conducted several pan-Baltic activities targeting the Russian-language media, none of these activities was implemented regularly. Ad-hoc visibility-driven projects have limited efficacy on the sustainability of journalistic communities. In the interests of long-term cooperation, it would be beneficial not just for the newsrooms but also for professional communities 1) to have a constant or slightly changing network of journalists and media managers; 2) to increase regional cooperation for content exchange; 3) to establish creativity hubs to be used for developing mutually engaging co-production. At the same time, it should be determined why already existing opportunities for cross-border collaboration, such as the Anne-Marie and Gustaf Ander Centre for Media Studies at SSE Riga,[5] are not widely used by Russian-speaking journalists in Estonian and Latvian regions.

Originally stemming from the cooperation between investigative journalists and adopted by other groups of journalists, cross-border interaction has become a popular way of collaboration for leveraging the resources of newsrooms both large and small without being in strict competition (publishing for different audiences in different countries helps to overcome national bias and also

serves to protect investigative journalists).[6] Collaborative journalistic production is recognised by journalism scholars as a comparatively new practice, which can be difficult due to different political and cultural traditions and ethical standards. These challenges are however not unique to the Russian-language newsrooms in the Baltics but occur more generally on the journalistic landscape.

As communicated by the journalists surveyed in this study, for various reasons, local Russian-speaking journalists from Estonia and Latvia avoid memberships in a professional society or representative organisation in their respective countries. Even though they are aware of such organisations in both countries, the journalists do not see any substantial motivation to engage with them and often characterise them as bureaucratic associations. Membership fees and capital-focused activities are also seen as obstacles to engagement with professional societies. Some local journalists also mentioned that they do not see any particular interest of these associations in attracting the Russian-language media or journalists. At the same time, the World Association of the Russian Press (Всемирная ассоциация русской прессы)[7] is sometimes perceived as a beacon and positive example of a professional media association. It should be noted that the Kremlin has for decades been implementing various formats to engage with the local journalistic communities in the Baltics.[8]

4   Annett Heft and Stephan Baack, "Cross-bordering journalism: How intermediaries of change drive the adoption of new practices," *Journalism* (19 March 2021).

5   Anne-Marie and Gustaf Ander Centre for Media Studies at SSE Riga.

6   Brigitte Alfter, *Cross-Border Collaborative Journalism. A Step-By-Step Guide* (London: Routledge, 2019).

7   This organisation is associated with the Kremlin. Among the last significant ties, the president of the association has just been appointed by Putin to lead the Russian Public TV (*Obshestvennoe Televidenie Rossii*). Previously, Mr Ignatenko had led the state news agency ITAR-TASS.

8   Estonian Internal Security Service, *Annual Review 2020-2021* (Tallinn: Estonian Internal Security Service, 2021); Stefan Meister (ed.), *Understanding Russian Communication Strategy: Case Studies of Serbia and Estonia*. Culture and Foreign Policy (Stuttgart: Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, 2010); Triin Vihalemm and Jānis Juzefovičs, "How Baltic Russian-speaking audiences outmaneuver securitization, essentialization, and polarization in times of crisis?" *Journal of Baltic Studies* (23 November 2021); Todd Helmus et al., *Russian Social Media Influence. Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2018); Jordi Vasquez, et al., "Exposed Outpost Russian Threats to Baltic Security and Transatlantic Responses," University of Chicago, last accessed 14 March 2022; Irina Zeleneva and Vera Ageeva, "Russia's soft power in the Baltics: media, education and Russian world narrative," *Media Education* no. 4 (2017): 181-188; Oliver Kund, "Kremlin media hunting for openings in Estonia," *Postimees*, 14 April 2015.

Before the pandemic, several steps were taken to increase the presence of public service media in the eastern regions of Latvia and Estonia,

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dictated mostly by political decisions to address what was seen as a growing information threat posed by the aggressive actions of Russia.[9]

In Latvia,[10] the Latgale electronic media programme adopted in 2015 included measures for developing an LTV studio in Latgale, which has not happened.[11] In Estonia, a new Russian-language channel, ETV+, was launched by the national broadcaster ERR, and in five years, its popularity and viewership have significantly increased.[12] In addition to state funding, the channel has received financial support from international donors.[13]

ETV+ also plays an important role in providing a platform for the reconciliation of the shared memory and narratives of the majority and minority populations.[14] Some scholars argue that ETV+ has played an important role in diminishing Russia's soft power in Estonia.[15] Another contributing factor ETV+'s success

was, surprisingly, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.[16]

Interestingly, a majority of local journalists has expressed support for the idea of creating a unique association for the Russian-language media in the Baltic countries, which could be a useful opportunity for professional networking focusing on the development needs of these specific media outlets. Such an initiative would be beneficial for increasing a sense of professional belonging within the Baltic context.

For local journalists in Estonia, a problem is perceived competition with the "municipal media", i.e. media outlets supported by local governments. This type of broadcasting

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negatively influences the media landscape and expectations of the audiences. In the country report on Estonia from the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, Andres Kõnno describes the situation as

> the biases of local media (especially municipal media, but not only; this is a problem with no easy solutions, partly for the reason that there is no tradition of having a media ombudsman – or any other type of media regulator that could be compared to various analogous institutions in other European countries).[17]

Although the situation in Latvia differs, and municipalities cannot have publicly funded media outlets since late 2020 (prior to which there were 139 registered municipality-related

9   Tyler McBrien, *Defending the Vote: Estonia Creates a Network to Combat Disinformation, 2016-2020* (Princeton, NJ: Trustees of Princeton University, 2020).

10 "Darbu sāk Latvijas radio studija Rēzekne [The Latvian Radio Studio in Rēzekne starts operating]," Nacionālā elektronisko plašsaziņas līdzekļu padome [The National Electronic Mass Media Council], 13 July 2016.

11 "Lēmums Nr. 52. Par Latgales elektronisko mediju programmas aprsiprināšanu [Decision no. 52. On approval of Latgale electronic media programme]," Nacionālā elektronisko plašsaziņas līdzekļu padome [The National Electronic Mass Media Council], 2 April 2015.

12 "ERR Russian-language channel often outstripping outside stations," *ERR*, 19 April 2021.

13 "Nordic Council of Ministers awards 227 000 euros for support to minority language media in the Baltic states," Nordic Council of Ministers' Office in Estonia, 21 April 2020.

14 Vitalii Parshukov, "Media, memory, and minority: the Russian-language TV channel ETV+ and its role in the long-lasting "war of memories" in Estonia" (Master's thesis, University of Tartu, 2017).

15 Kristian Nielsen and Heiko Pääbo, "How Russian Soft Power Fails in Estonia: or, why the Russophone Minorities Remain Quiescent," *Journal on Baltic Security* 1, no. 2 (2015): 125-157.

16 Gordon F. Sander, "'The pandemic has united us': A media divide fades in the Baltics," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 18 June 2020; Silviu Kondan, Mridvika Sahajpal, David J. Trimbach, "Identifying the Needs of Estonia's Russian-speaking Minority: COVID-19, Data Disaggregation, and Social Determinants of Health," Foreign Policy Research Institute, 11 May 2021.

17 Andres Kõnno, *Monitoring Media Pluralism in the Digital Era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania and Turkey in the years 2018-2019. Country report: Estonia* (Fiesole: European University Institute, July 2020).

media outlets),[18] local journalists from Latvia referred to several municipalities that have managed to find ways of creating their own informational bulletins and local newsletters. Another way in which local governments can still influence the media landscape in Latvia is to hold public procurements for publishing municipality information and advertisements. In this way, some media outlets receive financial income from municipalities and may be inclined to be more positive towards such municipal authorities and related politicians. As mentioned in the country report on Latvia, the lack of transparency of media ownership in Latvia is a high-level risk (82%), while in Estonia it is seen as a medium risk (56%).[19] Among other problems mentioned by journalists are the

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attempts of some media owners to influence the media's agenda and the negative impact of politicians on media development.

2. FINANCIAL RESOURCES AND SUSTAINABILITY

As a result of the shrinking advertising market in media in the Baltic countries,[20] and given the need to change the business model,[21] media outlets report a

lack of resources. Therefore, the question of financial sustainability is one of the more pressing issues on the agenda of media managers in the Baltics, including at the local level. The situation and reach of the Russian-language media in Estonia and Latvia are also challenged by the relatively small size of their natural audiences. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work of local newsrooms has also resulted in significant financial losses.[22] Estonian and Latvian local journalists benefitted from significant assistance provided by international donors and organisations, which used different ways to provide pandemic crisis-related financial support – it allowed the local Russian-language newsrooms to continue working during 2020–21.

Some donors also provided project-based support before the pandemic. External funding sources are among the crucial ones for independent media outlets in local journalism in Estonia and Latvia. For small newsrooms, writing pitches for funding diverts human resources away from everyday activities. Journalists lack skills and experience in preparing grant applications, especially if the support measures are not "customised" for local media in the Baltics. Newly opened opportunities for grant applications require the services of staff specifically trained in proposal writing, monitoring open calls and managing grant projects.

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According to the local journalists from Estonia and Latvia, the Russian-language independent media faces a specific danger in the lack of financial grant opportunities provided by the state.[23] Of course, state-provided support should be part of a systemic programme for supporting actors in building democratic resilience and must not endanger the impartiality and independence of the local newsrooms.

18   Inese Helmane, "Pašvaldības vairs neizdos masu informācijas līdzekļus [Municipalities will not be allowed issuing information media]," *LV portāls*,12 November 2020.

19   Anda Rožukalne, *Monitoring Media Pluralism in the Digital Era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania and Turkey in the years 2018-2019. Country report: Latvia* (Fiesole: European University Institute, August 2020); Kõnno, *Monitoring Media Pluralism*.

20   Džina Donauskaitė et al., *Baltic Media Health Check 2019-2020* (Riga/Tallinn/Vilnius: Anne-Marie and Gustaf Ander Centre for Media Studies at SSE Riga, November 2020).

21   Andrey Mir, *Postjournalism and the death of newspapers. The media after Trump: manufacturing anger and polarization* (Toronto, 2020).

22   Aija Krūtaine, "Baltic media, reinvigorated in their mission, buckle up for tough ride under COVID-19," International Press Institute, 29 October 2020.

23   In case of Latvia, Media Support Fund provides mainly project-based support for producing of media content in the Latvian language.

The financial situation is also critical because local audiences tend to be unwilling to pay for content. This was repeatedly mentioned as a substantial problem for local journalism and noted as having high relevance for the local media market in Estonia and Latvia, with all possible limitations of its size, reach and money-generating capacity. There is an increasing awareness among the local journalists about the changing business model as the distribution of media content via social media prioritises the need for targeted audience analysis and an appropriate approach in practice. It means the in-depth understanding of the audiences, attracting their attention, building trust with the audiences and developing community relations. Within the

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mission of serving their local communities, the Russian-language newsrooms in Estonia and Latvia lack data and a deeper understanding of the peculiarities of the communities. Some foreign donors have already assisted local journalists in conducting research activities related to targeted audience analysis. The next step should be a specific training programme to build hands-on monetisation skills in local Russian-language newsrooms in the Baltics.

Local journalists from Estonia and Latvia understand the relevance of tools and skills to conduct audience analysis and take it to a more sophisticated level. The problems perceived by the journalists can be summed up in the following way: 1) financing of audience research-oriented activities and tools; 2) selecting (targeting) of audiences to be studied; 3) ability to repeat the study (to update the data); 4) the need to invite journalists and other staff to work with the received data (clarification and validation of data received and implementation with changing strategies of content producing and distribution). Commercial products such as Google Analytics are the main tool used for data analysis. Local newsrooms also use tools provided by social media (such as the publishing

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of pre-planned posts on Facebook), but not specifically designed products (like Hootsuite).

At the same time, within the small newsrooms, there are fewer possibilities for setting protective firewalls between editorial staff and creators of native advertising content. Paid content (for instance, pre-ordered articles) is still seen as a problem by many local journalists as they recognise its negative influence on the audience's trust toward the media. A majority of local journalists are involved in one way or another in creating advertorials or pre-ordered media products. Apart from financial issues, this also poses an ethical dilemma. More applied research is needed to understand the interrelations between the perceptions of paid content and the trust of local audiences in the Baltic media context.

While there are several ways to support local journalism (e.g., tax exemptions, competitive grants, direct funding), there is a clear requirement for transparency of ownership and sponsorship. Supporting the implementation of innovative solutions in newsrooms could help

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to optimise financial and human resources. Trends in media development include the use of artificial intelligence tools for monitoring and reporting.[24] Cross-professional networking can support co-operation between the media and academia, including when looking at innovative solutions.

24   Nick Newman, *Journalism, media and technology trend predictions 2021* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, January 2021).

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3. Technical resources and content production

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digitalisation of local media outlets as the lockdowns in the Baltics forced newsrooms to work remotely. As a results of this shift, it became evident that independent newsrooms, especially in the regions, lack the equipment required to work remotely and to cover situations during possible multifaceted crises. As predicted by media managers, a sustainable hybrid in-person/remote model for newsrooms could become a promising option.[25]

The crisis-simulation exercise, conducted with the local journalists as part of the project, highlighted problems with the availability of reliable equipment to cover important events outside the newsroom (for example, to provide stable live-streaming, to transmit data safely, to store data and to ensure the simultaneous postproduction of audio-visual formats for further distribution). Local journalists are poorly equipped for prolonged filming and 24/7 coverage. The newsrooms do not have a "reserve toolset" for film crews i.e. equipment to be used to follow the events from multiple points and perspectives. The lack of working technical equipment increases the risk of dependency of the local media on other sources of audio-visual content. At the same time, audio-visual content is the most promising format and should be prioritised in social media, as it has the potential to become viral and thus engage the audiences during a crisis. Audio-visual format and live streams, including video segments and stories, are perceived by Russian-speaking local journalists as a high-potential way of attracting the attention of the audience. The audio-visual genre has also proven its attractiveness for engaging with the audience and through competition. To cover a crisis professionally, the media staff should be ready to proceed swiftly with the production and postproduction of media content, including the targeted distribution of content online.

Newly introduced security protocols in newsrooms should incorporate the professional evaluation of the cheapest vs the safest options. Due to the poor financial situation in the local newsrooms, there are risks involved in selecting the cheapest options when purchasing equipment or software, which increases the vulnerability of the technical or digital environment (products produced in different countries, unreliable data links etc.). Moreover, mobile phones cannot be seen as the main or only device, as noted by the author of one guide, who argues that "this convenience can also be a liability, as your all-in-one reporting device can also become a single point of failure".[26] This is related to the safety and security of journalists as well as source protection – topics that are relevant to information security culture in journalism.[27] In addition to robust technical equipment and hardware, the reliability of software is equally important for ensuring the efficiency of the work environment in a modern newsroom.

Not only should the newsroom tech platform be based on fully licenced programmes for production and postproduction of audio-visual content, home workstations and portable

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computers should also be convertible into improvised mobile studios. This would enable the use of an on-the-fly surrogate studio in the case of inability to access the newsroom and minimise the risks of storing all equipment in one place. The COVID-19 pandemic has once again highlighted the pressing problems with the equipment used in the work of local journalists on an everyday basis. Significantly, the simulation exercise helped also to identify some human-driven vulnerabilities, suggesting a need for a change in behaviour patterns within the newsrooms, especially as it relates to a thinking-outside-the-box approach to available equipment and content production.

25   Ibid.

26   Susan E. McGregor, *Information Security Essentials: A Guide for Reporters, Editors, and Newsroom Leaders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

27   Masashi Crete-Nishihata et al., "The Information Security Cultures of Journalism," *Digital Journalism* 8, no. 8 (2020): 1068-1091.

4. Human resources and media management

The overall situation in the studied regions of Estonia and Latvia is characterised by a long tradition of municipal media, the linkages of media to local political actors, and various information manipulations due to the lack of truly independent journalism. Yet there are several layers of problems related to human resources in the regions, as changes in media business models and digital information environments make it challenging to find a proper strategy and operationalise it in Russian-language newsrooms in the Baltics.

New jobs and new types of media are emerging, and local Russian-language outlets are not excluded from structural changes whereby a dichotomy between "survivors" and "newcomers" is emerging among newsrooms. Operating in an information-rich environment, journalism is inevitably a part of a new complex news ecosystem. The word "crisis" is frequently used by some media experts to describe ongoing changes within the local journalist corps. Caution is in order, however. For example, Silvio Waisbord notes that the concept of crisis should be used carefully, and "changes are not transitions and transitions are not crises," referring to Gramsci's definition of crises as situations where the old die and the new cannot be born.[28] But the local journalists do not doubt that the changes in the newsrooms' business models represent a crisis, referring to a massive loss of jobs in traditional newsrooms. Local independent newsrooms experience a serious lack of high-quality human resources and are unable to attract new staff equipped with the modern skills needed to implement emerging strategies for the successful digital transition of media outlets. Media managers from Estonia and Latvia referred to a continuing outflow of high-quality staff. The model of media competencies is rapidly

changing due to the complexity of various socio-political, technological and behavioural factors. While young journalists leave to seek new challenges (also in the capitals), experienced local journalists frequently lack foreign-language proficiency, sometimes even lacking fluency in the official state language (e.g. Estonian or Latvian), and are digitally unprepared for the accelerating race in social media. The media managers also pointed to the challenge of meeting salary demands from high-quality journalists, as the payment system in newsrooms is often not based on quality but quantity.

The media managers are the core element to restructure and motivate human resources in a newsroom, to safeguard the implementation of instructions, procedures and protocols, and to redirect human resources in increasing awareness during a potential crisis. Their role also includes making decisions on increasing in-house capacity and/or outsourcing

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1) technology and security related support; 2) legal support; 3) promotion and distribution, social media monitoring; 4) audience analysis and sociological support; and 5) linguistic support (editing, proofreading and translation).

Local communities of journalists need not only financial rewards but also other types of motivation and recognition. The majority of local journalists expect promotion within the newsroom. Local competition and forms of recognition from the journalistic community would also be beneficial. However, these initiatives should avoid dependency on state or municipal finances and should be fully transparent.

Freelance journalists are commonly seen as financially unsecured and frequently are also left out of the newsroom's culture of safety and security. In everyday activities, even outside of potential crises, they lack access to the newsroom infrastructure and thus have

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28   Silvio Waisbord, "Afterwards: Crisis? What Crisis?" in *Rethinking Journalism Against: Societal Role and Public Relevance in a Digital Age*, eds. Chris Peters and Marcel Broersma (London: Routledge, 2016), page 206.

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less protection against threats.[29] It should be explored in depth how freelancers are included in the safety instructions and protocols, how they are protected, and whether they protect

aligned with the overall tendency – a shift in focus from providing a variety of news and opinions to reporting on facts and explaining the consequences.

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the technical equipment and digital accesses issued to them by the newsroom. The functional firewalls of journalism in a small newsroom tend to be invisible and frequently do not exist.

5. Hybrid crisis awareness

Informed citizens in local communities are crucial for protecting democracy in uncertain situations. Proper crisis management is based on trustworthy sources of information to supply

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audiences with reliable news that citizens can act upon. As in many parts of the world, journalism faces a decrease of trust in the Baltics as well, and a search is on for solutions on how to rebuild that trust.[30] There are various opinions among local Russian-speaking journalists from Latvia and Estonia regarding the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the position of local journalists. The perception of the journalist's role in covering a crisis is

At the same time as there is a tendency towards thematic specialisation,[31] small local newsrooms cannot afford to have specialists who only cover issues in their particular areas of specialisation.

Given the unpredictability of crises, there is a need to support efforts to develop a culture of security within newsrooms and growing individual acknowledgement of, leadership in and responsibility for safety. Although a full set of possible incidents, including the cognitive component, cannot be foreseen completely, risk assessment activities could minimise many vulnerabilities.[32] Crisis simulation exercise conducted with local journalists included various learning and feedback components: analysis of threats and critical incidents, forecast of likely consequences, mapping and exploitation of common attitudes, activation of stereotypical roles and mental models, and specification of regional and/or local context. The method was developed by combining resilience-related practice and journalism studies,[33] and demonstrated the local journalists' increased interest in awareness about possible threats.

The crisis simulation exercise, prepared specially for the study group, involved the local journalists in the following learning activities: agenda-setting elements, interviewing techniques, personal security and family awareness, staff management, legal actions, social media related cyber incidents, equipment- and production-related limitations, social media and distribution incidents, data verification, rapid decision-making on collaboration, internal security question, etc.

Perception of the crisis expressed by local journalists included the impossibility to prepare for all possible configurations, the importance of predictive consequences,

29 Lucia Ballon-Becerra, "Safety and security best practices for freelance journalists," *International Journalists' Network*, 30 November 2020.

30 Katherine Fink, "The biggest challenge facing journalism: A lack of trust," *Journalism* 20, no. 1 (19 December 2018): 40-43.

31 Newman, *Journalism, media and technology*.

32 Dean S. Hartley III and Kenneth O. Jobson, *Cognitive Superiority. Information to Power* (Cham: Springer, 2021).

33 Edson C. Tandoc Jr., Joy Jenkins, Ryan J. Thomas, Oscar Westlund (eds.) *Critical Incidents in Journalism: Pivotal Moments Reshaping Journalism around the World* (London: Routledge, 2020).

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> *Proper crisis management is based on trustworthy sources of information to supply audiences with reliable news that citizens can act upon. As in many parts of the world, journalism faces a decrease of trust in the Baltics as well*

reputational responsibility, the accountability of resources, the redirection of efforts in the newsroom, which could be defined as strategic and operational. The desired shift in threat perception and crisis preparedness of local journalists and media managers of the newsrooms should be supported with follow-up activities of risk assessment, conducted in cooperation with the relevant authorities, security experts and law enforcement agencies in Estonia and Latvia.[34] As a practical outcome, guidelines should be developed for verifying the preparedness of current staff and instructing newcomers. Security culture in newsrooms is described by media experts as nascent "for reasons including ongoing financial crises and labour precarity in journalism, both of which can limit the allocation of resources for information security."[35] Joint multisectoral training should be developed and provided for civil servants in the regions. Part of that training should foster engagement with the local journalistic community and including them into disaster emergency management. "Dealing with the media, the public, or partners, effective communication is now accepted as a critical element of emergency management," according to George Haddow.[36]

As Susan McGregor argues in a sidebar entitled "In Security, Size Really Doesn't Matter", "running a small newsroom on a similarly small budget doesn't mean you need to compromise on information security. While you might not be able to hire a security consultant, the tools you have at your disposal are actually no different from those relied upon by the largest organizations."[37] The importance of individual elements for cognitive superiority is described in a recently published book, *Cognitive Superiority: Information to Power*, referring to the need of becoming collectively smarter (including rapid learning).[38] The creation of a rapid learning environment for actors like a small independent newsroom is essential for increasing awareness and nurturing adaptivity, which is one of the core elements of resilience.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Russian-language media landscape in the Baltics has been undergoing a remarkable transformation since 2014, when its stakeholders and actors became more exposed

> *The desired shift in threat perception and crisis preparedness of local journalists and media managers of the newsrooms should be supported with follow-up activities of risk assessment, conducted in cooperation with the relevant authorities, security experts and law enforcement agencies in Estonia and Latvia*

to the combined influence of various factors. Some of these factors are unique to Russian-speaking journalists and local newsrooms, while the rest are rather common for any media outlets affected by the consequences of global digitalisation, the spread of social media platforms, changes in advertisement policies and other contributing issues, including the influence of geopolitics and information warfare on media health in general.

Given the significant financial, organisational and structural support provided internationally and domestically for the revitalisation of the Russian-language newsrooms in Estonia and Latvia, their stakeholders, actors and sometimes even beneficiaries have become important players not only on the traditional

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34 McGregor, *Information Security Essentials.*
35 Jennifer Henrichsen, "The Rise of the Security Champion: Beta-testing Newsroom Security Cultures," *Columbia Journalism Review*, 30 April 2020.
36 George Haddow and Kim Haddow, *Disaster Communications in a Changing Media World* (Waltham, MA: Elsevier, 2014).

37 McGregor, *Information Security Essentials*.
38 Hartley III and Jobson, *Cognitive Superiority.*

media landscape but also in supporting the process of integrating language minorities and contributing to building societal awareness. Since many if not all Russophone local journalists in the Baltics are part of the complex yet limited media ecosystem, their professional and personal resilience is crucial for an effectively and transparently functioning society based on democratic values, human rights and principles of good governance. Therefore, the emerging challenges and development perspectives of the local Russian-language journalistic communities should be analysed and addressed through the prism of resilience characteristics: cooperation (domestic, cross-sectoral, international), communication (internal, interagency, external), cohesion (within a team, society), coping (modern technologies, changing business models, response to hybrid threats), credibility (trust in media, trust in expert knowledge), and creed (independency-driven professional confidence in a better future).

The following policy recommendations can be made as practical actions for building and enhancing the resilience of the local Russian-language media in Estonia and Latvia:

- Regional and pan-Baltic cooperation between local journalists should be prioritised and supported as an effective measure for stimulating professional networking and cross-fertilisation of ideas.

- The engagement of local journalists in professional communities and associations should respect geographical diversity and include non-capital-based activities.

- Public monitoring should improve the regulation of information activities of municipalities (and other quasi-media outlets) to ensure fair media competition.

- Regular non-content-linked funding and competitive grant opportunities tailored for local newsrooms and individual journalists in the regions should be provided to promote the use of innovative solutions to optimise human resources in local newsrooms.

- Cross-sectoral cooperation for advanced solutions for small newsrooms in informationally vulnerable regions should be promoted to stimulate sharing the best practices of differentiative motivation and recognition of newsroom staff.

- Transparent state grants should be introduced to support cross-border cooperation for the creation of media content in Russian (with the possibility to re-publish it in Estonian and Latvian).

- Accessible platforms for informing and assisting local newsrooms with specific target audience analysis should be launched.

- Sustainable funding for equipment and licenced software should be provided in grant budgets and other types of support for local newsrooms.

- Hands-on skills training should be delivered to increase awareness of information security and data protection regarding equipment, software and platforms produced by companies or in countries with hostile policies against democratic societies.

- Professional assistance should be provided in developing work strategies for accelerating the secure digital transition of local newsrooms, including some guidelines for the special protection and safety of freelance journalists.

- A culture of safety and security should be promoted among local journalists and newsrooms to enhance cooperation between the local media, authorities and law enforcement agencies for better crisis preparedness and threat assessment.

- Crisis-related media statements should be created and distributed on local, regional and national levels in the languages understood by local audiences, as this is essential for rapid, effective crisis communication.

- A culture of security should be introduced in newsrooms and a network of trusted contacts maintained based on risk assessment and the principles of crisis communication.

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