



POLICY PAPER

FORGOTTEN AND POTENTIALLY VULNERABLE WHY THE ONLINE ACTIVITY OF MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN MATTERS DURING GLOBAL INFORMATION WARFARE

| ALONA SHESTOPALOVA |

APRIL 2022

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RAHVUSVAHELINE KAITSEUURINGUTE KESKUS
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND SECURITY
EESTI • ESTONIA

Title: Forgotten and Potentially Vulnerable: Why the Online Activity of Middle-Aged Women Matters During Global Information Warfare

Author: Shestopalova, Alona

Publication date: April 2022

Category: Policy Paper

Cover page photo: imago images/Sven Simon/Scanpix.

Keywords: disinformation, social media, gender roles, middle-aged women, Russian-speaking minority, Estonia

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ISSN 2228-2068

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INTRODUCTION

Analysts the world over use expressions such as ‘mind hacking’¹ when referring to the ongoing global information battles, and agree that the transformation of controlled information operations into digital disinformation has initiated a new phase of global information warfare.² This paper offers its readers a closer look at one particular aspect of information confrontation – the variable vulnerability of different demographic groups to digital disinformation.

Middle-aged women are frequent recipients of disinformation messages

In particular, this study looks into the online behaviour of middle-aged women (those aged between 45 and 65 years), who are frequent recipients of disinformation messages. The conducted pilot research identifies several concrete reasons why this segment of society is more vulnerable to disinformation messages and more likely to unknowingly assist in spreading those messages.

The overall idea of the paper is rooted in a combination of, on the one hand, everyday observations by the author of this paper of how middle-aged women consume politically relevant information, with, on the other hand,

an understanding of the lack of scholarly and political attention to online experiences of this group in the context of information security.

It is important to underline that men, including middle-aged men, can also become targets of disinformation; however, there are several reasons for deciding to focus on the online behaviour of middle-aged women. First, women use social media more often than men (and digital disinformation is now predominately spread through social media). Second, men are more likely to frequently watch TV and consume politically relevant information through other traditional types of media than women, an area that has been covered by earlier studies. Third, gender inequality, still a problem throughout the world, is to a large extent fuelled by women’s understanding that politics is not of interest to them. More attention to the ways women consume politically relevant information could help those communicating politics to make quality politically relevant information interesting and accessible to women.

The goals of this paper are to flag the vulnerability of middle-aged women to online disinformation; to fill the knowledge gap regarding this vulnerability that has a potential to significantly change politically relevant attitudes and behaviour of the studied group; and to raise awareness among the main stakeholders and to suggest ways of addressing such a challenging issue.

The paper begins with a brief section consisting of four arguments explaining why policymakers should care about the online activities of middle-aged women. Further, the author presents an overview of the existing theoretical knowledge about recent changes in global information warfare and informs the reader about the basic peculiarities of female news consumption and the ways those peculiarities diminish women’s resilience to disinformation. The theoretical overview ends with the identification of the gaps in the existing knowledge, which are addressed in more detail in the following empirical sections. The sections of findings, main conclusions, and recommendations are based on 24 interviews with Russian-speaking middle-aged women residing in the Tallinn metropolitan area.

¹ Fabio Rugge, “[Mind hacking’: Information warfare in the cyber age](#),” Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), Analysis no. 319 (January 2018).

² Yevgeniy Golovchenko, Mareike Hartmann and Rebecca Adler-Nissen, “[State, Media and Civil Society in the Information Warfare over Ukraine: Citizen Curators of Digital Disinformation](#),” *International Affairs* 94, no. 5 (1 September, 2018): 975–94.

Obviously, it is not just the Russian-speaking segment of the Estonian population that can become a target of destructive information influence; this influence has a much broader scope. This is reinforced, for example, by the conclusions of another survey relating to a sample of people of different geographical places of residency inside Estonia, of different levels of education, of different political allegiances, and so on, who were asked whether they believe in various conspiracy theories, toxic narratives, etc. Beliefs in a variety of misconceptions were found in various groups of Estonian society, not just among Russian speakers.³ This is also true when it comes to the movements of anti-vaccinators and to people protesting against COVID-19 restrictions: people of various ethnic and social backgrounds tend to join those movements.⁴

People from Russian-speaking minority groups are of special interest in the context of information security in Estonia, not least because of the significance of Russian information influence on Estonia

But people from Russian-speaking minority groups are of special interest in the context of information security in Estonia, not least because of the significance of Russian information influence on Estonia combined with knowledge from earlier studies revealing that ‘Russian information operations in the Baltic States are directed mainly at Russian-speaking minority communities’.⁵ As a result, some nuanced findings of the study will be of special value for those working in the field of Estonian (information) security. The general insights of the paper will be of relevance for researchers, journalists and policymakers both inside and outside of Estonia.

³ Dmitri Teperik, “[Democracy, ‘Alternative Reality’, and Estonia’s Resilience](#),” International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), October 2020.

⁴ “[Interview with Philipp Schmid on Science Denialism, Misinformation & the Importance of Public Confidence in the Safety & Effectiveness of the Covid-19 Vaccine](#),” interview by Sophia Ignatidou, European Science-Media Hub, 7 January 2021.

⁵ Aleksander Król, “[Russian Information Warfare in the Baltic States Resources and Aims](#),” Warsaw Institute, 20 July 2017.

1. WHY POLICYMAKERS SHOULD CARE?

First, for many of the interviewed women, recent contacts with politically relevant information via social media and messengers are among the first frequent contacts with this kind of information in their lives. The current study shows that social media and messengers are the perfect (and often the only) platform where the attention of the interviewed group might be gained. Nowadays, autocratic political actors are deeply involved in the battle for online attention, including that of middle-aged women. Thus, the fight for their hearts and minds has just begun and is already very intense.

Second, unlike trustworthy and reliable sources of information, disinformation is often well funded and heavily promoted in social media and messenger applications.⁶ Many of the interviewed women do not consume politically relevant information anywhere else except on Facebook News Feed or YouTube. Policymakers should therefore note that there are no other sources of information that would balance the information that these women incidentally consume online.

Third, nowadays, most of all controlled information operations are conducted in social media with the help of microtargeting.⁷ One

There are no other sources of information that would balance the information that these women incidentally consume online. Middle-aged women do not look for information but follow recommendations given by algorithms

of the findings of the current study reveals that middle-aged women do not look for information but follow recommendations given by algorithms. Thus, due to their receptiveness, middle-aged women are the perfect targets for purposeful information influence.

⁶ James Meese and Edward Hurcombe, “[Regulating Misinformation: Policy Brief](#),” RMIT University, 12 November 2020.

⁷ Oscar Jonsson, “[The Effect of Russian Information Operations](#),” European Liberal Forum, November 2021.

The initiative EUvsDisinfo recently shared: ‘The EUvsDisinfo database contains over 450 examples of pro-Kremlin disinformation claims in the German language [...]. Our analysis shows that the articles in which these disinformation claims appeared have been liked, shared and commented on social media more than 100 000 times.’⁸ The corresponding figures for Russian-language disinformation claims that are spread among Russian-speaking middle-aged women are difficult to estimate. But it is evident that if the middle-aged women interviewed for this study see such information in their newsfeeds, they will likely share it among their friends and family members and discuss it with colleagues.

Russian-speaking women living in Estonia are often more positively predisposed to the Estonian government than their Russian-speaking husbands

Fourth, Russian-speaking women living in Estonia are often more positively predisposed to the Estonian government than their Russian-speaking husbands. Controlled information influence on these women via social media and messengers might challenge this. The coronavirus pandemic and women’s keen interest in topics relating to the health of their loved ones offer opportunities to interested political actors. The cases of Russian state-controlled services that support European anti-vaccinators illustrate how this topic might help to undermine the public support of national governments.

2. WHAT IS NEW ON THE INFORMATION FRONT?

The landscape of sources for politically relevant information has changed dramatically since the new information and communication technologies became available to the general public. As a result of those changes, many new media types started to significantly undermine the political influence of TV – a well-structured and easily controlled communication tool. The routines of consuming information also

⁸ “Figure of the Week: 100 000,” *EUvsDisinfo*, 20 September 2021.

changed: instead of sitting in front of a TV set and waiting for the evening news, nowadays people more often turn to their smartphones to look for politically relevant information or simply scroll a social media newsfeed and so consume this kind of information incidentally. Due to the low entry costs, interested people can create or share existing content with their friends and subscribers.

The unprecedented levels of pluralism and diversity of opinions offered by the Internet have given hope to the democratising potential of new media, and, thus, of its ability to fight state-controlled information influence even in autocratic political systems. Numerous recent studies have shown that autocratic states themselves (for example, Russia and China) have become powerful players in the online information arena: they protect internal public discourse from democratising influences and, simultaneously, use the most up-to-date strategies of disinformation to shift public debates at home and abroad in the desired direction.^{9, 10, 11}

Until recently, public diplomacy was the main tool that helped states in their global fight for

Autocratic states protect internal public discourse from democratising influences and use the most up-to-date strategies of disinformation to shift public debates at home and abroad

hearts and minds. Often, this fight happened through international radio or TV broadcasts. It is not surprising that after technological changes, political actors followed the former

⁹ Carme Colomina, Héctor Sanchez Margalef and Richard Youngs, [The Impact of Disinformation on Democratic Processes and Human Rights in the World](#) (Brussels: European Union, April 2021).

¹⁰ David M. Beskow and Kathleen M. Carley, “Characterization and Comparison of Russian and Chinese Disinformation Campaigns,” in *Disinformation, Misinformation, and Fake News in Social Media*, Lecture Notes in Social Networks, eds. Kai Shu, Suhang Wang, Dongwon Lee and Huan Liu (Cham: Springer, 2020), 63–81.

¹¹ Miroslava Pavlíková, Barbora Šenkýřová and Jakub Drmola, “Propaganda and Disinformation Go Online,” in *Challenging Online Propaganda and Disinformation in the 21st Century*, Political Campaigning and Communication, eds. Miloš Gregor and Petra Mlejnková (Cham: Springer, 2021), 43–74.

radio and TV audiences to the World Wide Web and turned it into a new battlefield of global information warfare. Today, the political aspirations of interested actors (both state and non-state) are supplemented by the power of the new media. Analysts point out that this situation has shifted the focus from public diplomacy to more targeted forms of information influence – a so-called

The focus has shifted from public diplomacy to more targeted forms of information influence

‘personalized diplomacy’.¹²

In particular, the flexibility of formats and genres, and the precise-targeting technologies, now allow for individual disinformation strategies to be aimed at the different segments of the audience with separate interests and preferences.¹³ In a recent policy paper, Oskar Jonsson emphasises that most controlled information operations are not conducted just ‘somewhere’ online; they happen on social media platforms with the precise help of microtargeting.¹⁴ Targeted jihadist propaganda on Twitter is just one of the well-known illustrations of this phenomenon.¹⁵ ¹⁶ In addition, social media and messengers offer their users more flexible and convenient formats for consuming information. This has also helped actors of political communication to expand their pool of recipients by accessing those social groups that were hard to reach with universal messages transmitted through traditional media.

3. ‘WOMEN ARE NOT INTERESTED IN POLITICS’: IS THIS STILL THE CASE?

It was a hard task for political actors to reach middle-aged women with politically relevant information spread through traditional media

such as TV, or at least it was much harder to inform middle-aged women than to inform men of the same age. Such a status quo is explained by the

concept of a ‘gender gap in news consumption’. Simply put, this concept deals with the worldwide popular opinion that ‘news is for men’.¹⁷

As a result of gender inequality, the different socialisation of boys and girls, stereotyped gender roles, and similar factors, women all around the world are said to be less interested in politics than men.¹⁸ Interestingly, according to studies conducted in Northern America and Western Europe, the gender gap in news consumption is not directly influenced by the level of education or income of a woman but by the amount of household work that she is doing.¹⁹

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In the Soviet Union, the stereotyped understanding of gender roles had its distinctive features, some of which were inherited by the former Soviet republics when they gained their independence. The most relevant of them for this study is the widespread understanding that women should both work and take care of the family. Marre Karu and Katre Pall argue

¹² Ilan Manor, “[The Rise of Personalized Diplomacy](#),” University of Southern California, Center on Public Diplomacy, 29 November 2017.

¹³ Katerina Sedova et al., “[AI and the Future of Disinformation Campaigns](#),” Center for Security and Emerging Technology, December 2021.

¹⁴ Jonsson, “Information Operations.”

¹⁵ Ahmed Al-Rawi and Jacob Groshek, “[Jihadist Propaganda on Social Media: An Examination of ISIS Related Content on Twitter](#),” *International Journal of Cyber Warfare and Terrorism* 8, no. 4 (October 2018): 1–15.

¹⁶ Nico Prucha and Ali Fisher, “[Tweeting for the Caliphate: Twitter as the New Frontier for Jihadist Propaganda](#),” *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 6 (June 2013): 1922.

¹⁷ Benjamin Toff and Ruth A. Palmer, “[Explaining the Gender Gap in News Avoidance: ‘News-Is-for-Men’ Perceptions and the Burdens of Caretaking](#),” *Journalism Studies* 20, no. 11 (October 2018): 1563.

¹⁸ Macau K. F. Mak, “[Explaining the Gender Gap in News Access Across Thirty Countries: Resources, Gender-Bias Signals, and Societal Development](#),” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* (19 October 2021): 1–25.

¹⁹ Christine Benesch, “[An Empirical Analysis of the Gender Gap in News Consumption](#),” *Journal of Media Economics* 25, no. 3 (July 2012): 147–67.

that such dual responsibilities of women were not rooted in families' traditional lifestyles but introduced and then supported by the regime: '[Under the Soviet regime,] equality and participation of women in the labour market were not to be achieved by greater involvement of men in housework and childcare or any other changes in men's behaviour'.²⁰ In this respect, the situation in all countries occupied by the USSR, as pointed out by Edgar Kaskla, was quite similar: 'The dual role of women in Soviet Estonia did not differ significantly from the role women played in other parts of the Soviet Union. They worked, then returned home with the expectation that they care for the family while the husband sat and watched'.²¹

As a result, if a woman works for a whole day and then does most of the household work, she will not have much time and energy left to follow the news and learn about political issues. Such routines survive in many families and still influence lives and patterns of news consumption of millions of people even 30 years after the collapse of the USSR. The tendency is especially strong among people whose most active socialisation, including acquiring gender roles widespread in society, happened during Soviet times – that is, among today's middle-aged or elderly people.

Traditional gender roles caused a gap in the interests of women and men. Internet access and some extra time have not helped to fight this gap. Men are typically more interested in political news, and consequently use the Internet more often than women to gain this

Women use the Internet 'for social interactions to maintain friendships' more often than men

kind of information; in their turn, women use the Internet 'for social interactions to maintain friendships' more often than men.²²

²⁰ Marre Karu and Katre Pall, "Estonia: Halfway from the Soviet Union to the Nordic Countries," in *The Politics of Parental Leave Policies: Children, Parenting, Gender and the Labour Market*, eds. Sheila Kamerman and Peter Moss (Portland: Bristol University Press, Policy Press, 2009), 72.

²¹ Edgar Kaskla, "The National Woman: Constructing Gender Roles in Estonia," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 34, no. 3 (September 2003): 305.

²² Macau, "Explaining the Gender Gap," 4.

That might have been the end of the story regarding the relevance of experiences of middle-aged women in the context of information security, but the story does not end here; its settings were dramatically changed by social media and messengers, where personal news of friends might be mixed with politically relevant information, including all sorts of disinformation, conspiracy theories, etc. Even if this kind of information is consumed unknowingly and unconsciously, it affects the politically relevant attitudes and behaviour of its recipients. Moreover, research shows that women are in general more socially active than men and more frequently communicate with others, including online.²³ Therefore,

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middle-aged women may also assist interested political actors in spreading disinformation messages within their social circle, e.g. among their neighbours, colleagues, friends and family members.

The situation changed even further when easy-to-use and always-at-hand smartphones became available for the general public. Not much effort is needed to occasionally scroll the newsfeed on Facebook or check some group chat in Viber – it can be done anywhere at any time. Algorithms and targeting technologies can find out what is interesting for a particular person to keep this person engaged.

Regular monitoring of media use in Estonia offers valuable details that help to look at the issue more precisely. Data shows that the importance of online sources of information (in general) is constantly growing, especially among young and middle-aged people.²⁴ In

²³ Amanda M. Kimbrough et al., "Gender Differences in Mediated Communication: Women Connect More than Do Men," *Computers in Human Behavior* 29, no. 3 (May 2013): 896–900.

²⁴ Külliki Seppel, "Meedia ja infoväli [Media and information field]," in *Eesti ühiskonna lõimumismonitooring 2020 [Monitoring the Integration of Estonian Society 2020]* (Tallinn: Kultuuriministeerium, 2020), 72.

particular, the share of non-Estonians considering social media to be an important source of information increased from 39% in 2014 to 54% in 2020.²⁵ Trust in information transmitted through social media has also grown noticeably among non-Estonians in recent years: from 26% of recipients from this segment of Estonian society trusting in

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information from social media in 2017 to 33% in 2020.²⁶ Importantly, it is underlined in the monitoring studies that statistics about the importance of different types of media and trust in them is inevitably based on quite abstract questions where recipients are asked about their subjective perception of those issues; at the same time, the real media use of recipients may differ.²⁷ Statistics reveal that in cases where there are differences between the subjective perceptions and real use, they highlight an even bigger role of social media compared to traditional media. For example, more concrete questions about the use of social media platforms showed that in Estonia the share of Facebook users increased from 39% in 2017 to 63% in 2020.²⁸ Those numbers become even more crucial when one pays attention not just to particular figures but also to the general trend, clearly indicating the increasing role of social

Algorithms help interested political actors to find out which information is interesting for different segments of the desired audience

media in the media diets of the general population, including middle-aged women. Due to their lack of time and interest, women were out of reach of political messages for decades. This is not the case anymore: as mentioned, nowadays, algorithms help

interested political actors to find out which information is interesting for different segments of the desired audience.²⁹ Those political actors are making use of the new possibilities and are finally getting the time and attention of middle-aged women.

Coming back to gender gaps in news consumption, while some scholars show that women are less interested in politics than men, others claim that due to traditional gender roles, women might appear even more interested than men in those aspects of politics that have a 'direct effect upon their own and their family's lives.'³⁰ In social media and messengers, those aspects are often represented through emotionally charged content that influences the recipients even more deeply than other types of media texts.

Middle-aged women are more conservative than younger women and more likely to use smartphones frequently compared to senior women

Women who are younger than the mid-forties rarely tend to share conservative understandings of gender roles and division of responsibilities in families; women older than the mid-sixties, in their turn, are less likely to frequently use smartphones. In this context, middle-aged women are a special group falling in between and combining features of young and senior women: middle-aged women are more conservative than younger women and more likely to use smartphones frequently compared to senior women. From this point of view, the experiences of middle-aged women in social media and messengers appear to be an interesting phenomenon highly relevant for information security, at least due to its consequences for public opinion and political participation.

²⁵ Ibid., 75.

²⁶ Ibid., 77.

²⁷ Ibid., 81.

²⁸ Ibid., 79.

²⁹ Dmitri Teperik et al., *Virtual Russian World in the Baltics. Psycholinguistic Analysis of Online Behaviour and Ideological Content among Russian-Speaking Social Media Users in the Baltic States* (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2017).

³⁰ Rosie Campbell and Kristi Winters, "Understanding Men's and Women's Political Interests: Evidence from a Study of Gendered Political Attitudes," *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 18, no. 1 (February 2008): 55.

4. WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN SOCIAL MEDIA AND MESSENGERS: ESTONIAN PERSPECTIVE

For this pilot study, the author of this study talked to 24 Estonia-based women whose native language is Russian. The gender roles of Estonian-speaking middle-aged women are often similar to those of Russian-speaking middle-aged women and therefore the online experiences of the former are also highly important. However, Russian-speaking women are more frequently exposed to Russian state-controlled information influence and, thus, are even more interesting to study in the context of information security.

Russian-speaking minorities in neighbouring states are seen by the Russian regime as the neighbours' Achilles' heel

As mentioned, the Russian-speaking minorities in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia are the targets of most of the information operations conducted by Russia in those countries.³¹ One of the reasons for such a situation is that Russian-speaking minorities in neighbouring states are seen by the Russian regime as the neighbours' Achilles' heel. Thus, minorities might be used by the Kremlin to destabilise countries that it sees as rivals or at least as subjects of its geopolitical influence. This nuance has already attracted the attention of Estonian policymakers, especially in 2007, during the Bronze Soldier Crisis, and in 2014, during the annexation of the Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula by Russia, and after the beginning of the Russian aggression on Donbas under the pretext of protecting Russians and Russian-speakers.³²

However, the fact that the representatives of Russian-speaking minorities based in Estonia are of particular interest for Russian disinformation efforts is not the only fact that makes the case of Russian-speaking middle-aged women special. Another point is that

³¹ Król, "Russian Information."

³² Kalev Stoicescu, "The Evolution of Russian Hybrid Warfare: Estonia," The Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), 29 January 2021.

due to the segregation of the Estonian labour market, Russian-speaking women 'tend to be concentrated in low paying and undervalued economic sectors and jobs'.³³ Moreover, Russian-speaking women in Estonia are often married to Russian-speaking men, who are the most conservative segment of Estonian society when it comes to understanding gender roles.³⁴

Russian-speaking middle-aged women living in Estonia are the most underprivileged part of the society

These three aspects make Russian-speaking middle-aged women living in Estonia the most underprivileged part of society and make all the features limiting women's interest in politics even more pronounced. That is the reason these women were recruited for this study. (For more details about the place of residence, social background and other characteristics of the interviewees, as well as for the details about the procedure of conducting interviews, please see the Annex.) In short, interviewees of different social backgrounds were asked a series of questions about their personal experience regarding three main topics: family/gender roles, interest in politics, and patterns of their online behaviour.

To give the reader a better understanding of the discourse on particular topics, the findings of the study on those topics are clustered together with the relevant collected data and quotes voiced by interviewed women. After the section of findings, this paper offers some general interpretations of the collected data in the context of information security. In particular, the findings resulted in a list of features of the status quo that potentially make the studied demographic group vulnerable to politically relevant disinformation spread through social media and messengers.

³³ Leeni Hansson and Kadri Aavik, "The Effect of Gender and Ethnicity and Their Intersection on Work Satisfaction and Earnings in Estonia, 1993-2008," *Studies of Transition States and Societies* 4, no. 2 (2012): 13.

³⁴ Niina Derman et al., *Soolise võrdõiguslikkuse monitoring 2005 [Monitoring Gender Equality 2005]* (Tallinn: Tallinna Ülikooli Rahvusvaheliste ja Sotsiaaluuringute Instituut, Sotsiaalministeerium, 2006), 134.

4.1. FAMILY LIFE AND POLITICS AMONG RUSSIAN-SPEAKERS IN ESTONIA

In general, the gender roles of Russian-speaking middle-aged Estonian women are in line with the above-mentioned findings from earlier studies: even though there are some families where both the wife and the husband are involved in household work, in most cases the division of responsibilities and tasks between interviewed women and their husbands is based on a conservative understanding of gender roles.

'Sure, we split responsibilities: the whole household was my responsibility, my husband worked, of course, and gave me his salary.' (Olga, 57)

'My husband earns money, he works. It is his main responsibility. As I currently do not work, my tasks are to cook food for the whole family and take care of the children [...] but it was like this when I worked as well.' (Natalia, 54)

In most cases the division of responsibilities and tasks between interviewed women and their husbands is based on a conservative understanding of gender roles

The interviewed women's gender roles mostly correspond to the findings of the earlier studies, and their levels of political interest are also predictable: in general, it is quite low, unlike the political interest of their husbands. Such a situation is widespread even in those families where husbands are/were somehow involved in household work. In this aspect, the current study differs from the studies conducted in the United States or Western Europe, where women who share household responsibilities with their husbands tend to be more interested in politics than those women who do most of the household work themselves.

'My husband is definitely more interested in politics than I am. If I need to ask who is who, or what, let's say, some Macron, Jacques Chirac or Napoleon did, I ask him. He knows everything.' (Larisa, 61)

Still, interviewed women mostly explained why they are not interested in politics, referring to lack of time.

'I think that we – women – have other things to care about, basic ones like doing laundry, cooking, making sure that everything is okay at home. I'm not saying that they [men] are not doing anything, but possibly they have more time to do things other than housekeeping.' (Inna, 52)

'[I was not interested in political news.] When I was nineteen, I gave birth to my oldest child. Obviously, I was too busy for news.' (Marina, 45)

'You know, I was not interested because I had plenty of other things to do. My husband had brought his old father to our place; he lived with us for eight years. He was blind and weak... I did not have time to watch TV, I was torn between my young, dependent children, father-in-law and work, but my husband watched TV, yes.' (Tatiana, 66)

In case such a status quo is widespread, it is indicative of Russian-speaking women still being less informed about politics than men, despite living in a country with high levels of press freedom and full access to balanced and impartial TV coverage of political issues.³⁵ This, in its turn, lowers the women's chances for successful political participation (as policymakers) and keeps cementing stereotyped gender roles. Surprisingly, in state-controlled media environments (such as Belarusian, Russian, Turkish, Chinese, etc.³⁶),

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³⁵ In 2021, Estonia ranked 15th in the world according to the World Press Freedom Index compiled by the Reporters Without Borders. See ["2021 World Press Freedom Index," Reporters Without Borders](#), last accessed 7 March 2022.

³⁶ Ibid.

or in cases where people voluntarily consume one-sided news coverage, such a status quo might even have some advantages for women: due to stereotyped gender roles, they would be less involved in the orchestrated media discourse. This is the case with some of the interviewed Russian-speaking women living in Estonia who do not follow Russian state-controlled news coverage as intensively as their husbands.

'My husband had very pro-Russian attitudes. He watched [political talk shows and news]. I did not take part in it although I also have Russian citizenship [...] I did not have time. I worked and took care of the family.' (Ekaterina, 65)

4.2. SMARTPHONES AND SOCIAL MEDIA: A GAME-CHANGING COMBINATION

The above findings might suggest that most of the interviewed women are not interested in politics. This certainly is how most of them reflect on the situation. However, this also gives some of the recipients the impression that it makes them resilient to manipulations.

'It is not easy [to manipulate my opinion] because I'm quite far removed from politics. I'm not joining any discussions and conversations on these topics. I'm simply not interested in it.' (Rita, 56)

'I'm indifferent to politics. It is very hard to manipulate an opinion when there is no opinion.' (Zhanna, 59)

But in recent years, the status quo has changed. It has happened so gradually that many have not even noticed it. Only one interviewee said that she is more interested in politics than her husband. However, this interest did not result in watching TV; in fact, no one in her family watches TV. All politically relevant information that she gets comes from the Internet, mostly from social media.

'I think I'm more interested in politics. Why? Because of the current situation in the world. Earlier, I did not differentiate between political parties. [...] By the current situation I mean the pandemic, as a result of which, the constitutional rights of people

have been violated all around the world, but the politicians pretend that everything is fine. Nobody protects people's rights. It became interesting to me.' (Julia, 43)

As mentioned, this case is unusual (women mostly say that they are less interested in politics than their husbands), but the respondent shows vectors of change and helps to detect tendencies that are more typical for middle-aged women. Below are some details on the patterns of this interviewee's news consumption, followed by insights of online experiences of other interviewed women.

'Since the beginning of the pandemic, I now watch YouTube 200% more than before. [...] YouTube gives you different opinions, you can compare and explore them. [...] You watch about those topics that are personally interesting to you. It is more convenient and efficient. I can listen to YouTube when I'm doing something, for example, household tasks like cleaning, or when I go somewhere [...]' (Julia, 43)

Even those interviewees that are 10 to 20 years older than Julia and have other opinions on COVID-19 related issues have many things in common with her: they frequently use social media and messengers to stay informed. For most of them, this experience began or severely intensified in recent years, after they started using smartphones. Interestingly, several interviewed women admitted that they did not even buy their smartphones themselves but received them as a gift from children or other relatives.

'I did not buy my smartphone, my daughter gave it to me.' (Olga, 54)

'I had a simple Nokia with buttons. Everything was perfect and calm: no networks, no Internet, nothing, and then they decided to give me one as a gift. [...] I now like it more than my laptop. [...] It is always at hand, just like a handkerchief.' (Maria, 66)

Currently, social media accessed via smartphones is the main source of news for most of the interviewed women. Some of them also watch Aktualnaya Kamera³⁷ or news

³⁷ News programme broadcast by ETV+, a Russian-language TV channel operated by Estonian Public Broadcasting.

programmes on Russian state-controlled TV channels, but this is rather the exception, while the trend to consume news in social media prevails and is getting even stronger with time.

Social media accessed via smartphones is the main source of news for most of the interviewed women

'My phone is always at hand, and the Internet is always at hand. Information is obviously coming to me from social media. My TV is rarely turned on at home, but when it is working, it is exclusively for background noise.' (Anastasia, 48)

'I scroll my newsfeed before falling asleep, but also when I rest. There are a lot of interesting posts there.' (Natalia, 52)

Some of the interviewees even say that they feel a kind of addiction when it comes to smartphones and social media.

'At first I found it difficult to learn how to use my smartphone [...] but then we somehow became friends [...] To be honest, I now have an addiction to it, especially to social media.' (Anna, 46)

'Facebook? Oh, whenever I have a free minute, as if I'm tied to Facebook.' (Tamara, 56)

They mostly consume information without paying attention to the sources. Most of the interviewed women do not search for information but consume whatever is offered to them by algorithms

Moreover, interviewees report that they mostly consume information without paying attention to the sources. Most of the interviewed women do not search for information but consume whatever is offered to them by algorithms.

Some of the interviewees said that sometimes they read Russian-language versions of ERR, Postimees or Delfi,³⁸ but the clarifying

³⁸ Eesti Rahvusringhääling (ERR) – Estonian Public Broadcaster; Postimees – one of the most popular Estonian daily newspapers; Delfi – multilanguage online news outlet popular in Baltic states, including Estonia.

questions revealed that they mostly do not visit the websites of those media sources. Instead, they occasionally see advertising posts from those sources in their newsfeeds on Facebook

and then read what is written in those posts. But the general pattern is to incidentally consume information from unknown sources. Often interviewees see videos with funny animals, cooking recipes, greetings with all sorts of public holidays or memes with wise phrases, but not exclusively.

'I'm watching what affects me, what is exciting, such as [recent] events on the Belarus-Polish border,³⁹ some opinions on this matter. [...] Do you look for this information? No, they are just showing it to me, this information is in the newsfeed. I press on whatever is interesting to me and start watching it.' (Maria, 66)

'I came across a couple of [...] "shares" of an interview with Mihhail Kõlvart, mayor of Tallinn.' (Tamara, 56)

'I open YouTube and everything is already there. You just have to read and listen to what they say: that somebody was involved in a car accident or got COVID.' (Valentina, 61)

There were no questions in the interview guide about the emotionality of news but several interviewees touched upon this topic. They explained that they are not watching the news on TV because TV news about tragic events causes them anxiety.

'My husband is more interested in politics. [...] I have to limit how much bad news I watch because it affects me. [...] It affects me emotionally. He, as a man, is fine when he watches it, but I do not like it, I worry too much.' (Natalia, 54)

'The current situation gets on my nerves. I begin to worry that something might happen in the world. That is why I do not like to watch politics.' (Larisa, 63)

³⁹ Interviews for the project were conducted during the escalated phase of the Belarus-Poland border crisis when thousands of migrants attempted to illegally cross the EU border from the Belarus side.

Ironically, information that the interviewed women incidentally consume in social media or receive in messengers is also often emotionally charged, but they still consume it because such information with ‘catchy negative slogans’

Information with ‘catchy negative slogans’ often appears unexpectedly and attracts attention

often appears unexpectedly and attracts attention. One of the women who said that she worries when she watches bad news on TV recalls which information is typical for her newsfeed on Facebook:

‘I read about [...] some tragic events, information about people having difficulties [...] that somebody baked a cake. [...] I do not look for this information, it simply pops up. [...] If an item of information interests me, I look through it.’ (Natalia, 54)

Another woman recalls the impact emotionally charged politically relevant information once had on her female friend:

‘There are all those posts on the Internet saying “someone saw something”. When a person starts reading those posts, she can become emotionally involved [...] My female friend, she was ready to give up her children and go to Donbas to rescue those children.’ (Anna, 45)

4.3. WHEN DOES POLITICS GET INTERESTING FOR MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN?

The in-depth conversations with interviewees about their interests revealed that the interviewed women are not indifferent to all politically relevant topics but to those where politics appears to be ‘a horse race’⁴⁰ – topics about highly competitive issues such as elections, international conflicts, etc.

Interviews conducted in this pilot study are not enough to fully confirm the assumption that women are even more interested than

men in those politically relevant issues that have a direct impact on their everyday life. More studies, primarily quantitative ones, are needed to show this statement to be true in the Estonian context. Still, even the fragmented findings of the current study clearly indicate that all the interviewed women were able to choose some politically relevant topics that would be more interesting to them than their husbands (and other men of the same age). (For more details about the procedure for collecting preferences about topics, see the Annex.)

In general, the interviewed women preferred politically relevant topics (e.g. about governmental reforms) connected to health issues, the well-being of the family, children, some local news, etc. The interviewees described those topics as ‘down-to-earth’. Thus, it was easier to catch the attention of the interviewed middle-aged women on topics with a local, everyday human element. As one

The interviewed women preferred politically relevant topic connected to health issues, the well-being of the family, children, some local news

of the interviewed women put it: ‘I’m worried about my family, while he [her husband] worries about the whole world’ (Tamara, 56). Therefore, if the information from social media or messengers has some relevance for the everyday life of middle-aged women, they are likely to pay attention to it.

‘Currently, it is more interesting [to my female friends] that the price of heating will be increased from the 1st of December. Politics is something and somewhere. Here the problem is how to survive.’ (Elena, 61)

‘I ask my husband: did you see what they added [to the newsfeed.] three minutes ago? There was a car accident, do not drive on that street.’ (Anna, 46)

Most of the interviewed women also said that they use social media and messengers more often than their husbands and that this habit is widespread among their female friends and their husbands. Surprisingly, the responses of

⁴⁰ Campbell and Winters, “Understanding Men’s and Women’s Political Interests,” 55.

the interviewees about this aspect were very similar regardless of their age.

‘Men have things to do. They do not want to share something with somebody [...] it is easier for them to watch the news on Russia 24.’⁴¹ (Valentina, 47)

‘Men watch TV, just give them a TV remote and they will click there, not phones. [...] I know this is the case from observing my husband and friends. It is easier for them to watch TV.’ (Svetlana, 52)

‘There are girls, I mean women, in my close circle that like to post or share things, but there are no such men.’ (Tatiana, 66)

‘It is in women’s nature. Women like sharing information. When they send something to each other on social media, it is like chatting for them.’ (Marina, 45)

Interviewees said that as a result of their increased interest in social media, they also consumed more COVID-19 related information via social media than their husbands. Women’s interest in health-related topics and topics that are relevant for the well-being of their families, made the COVID-19 pandemic a noticeable

Women’s interest in health-related topics, made the COVID-19 pandemic a noticeable catalyser of changes in women’s news consumption

catalyser of all the above-mentioned changes in women’s news consumption. The paper shall now focus on this matter in more detail.

4.4. INFODEMIC IN SOCIAL MEDIA AND MESSENGERS

Scientists argue that one noticeable by-product of the COVID-19 pandemic is the infodemic⁴² of disinformation relating to this virus circulating in social media and messengers. While scholars warn that ‘Social media platforms [...] may amplify rumours and questionable

information’,⁴³ the findings from this study show that middle-aged women are at bigger risk of being misinformed about COVID-19 through social media platforms than men of the same age.

Middle-aged women are at bigger risk of being misinformed about COVID-19 through social media platforms than men of the same age

One of the interviewed women shares her experience of disinformation on Facebook:

‘It is terrible what people can repost about COVID. There were many posts on Facebook about how COVID is spread. It was said that some unknown chemicals are sprayed from planes [...], it was written there: “Look how they poison us.” Fifteen of my friends reposted it.’ (Tamara, 56)

When it comes to consuming information about COVID-19, all the above-mentioned patterns of news consumption of middle-aged women on social media and messengers are still prevalent. For example, when it comes to information about COVID-19, the interviewed women often consumed information incidentally; they simply read what pops up in a newsfeed.

‘I didn’t look for it [COVID-related information] at all. You don’t have to, it will find you.’ (Anastasia, 48)

‘I’m subscribed to a Facebook group, I read there [about COVID]. [...] this group popped up, it was an advertisement saying something like: subscribe and you will know what is going on. So, I subscribed. [...] For example, there were posts there that said that coronavirus is just nonsense, it is not an illness.’ (Inna, 52)

Before the beginning of the pandemic, some of the interviewed women and their female friends exchanged information about emotionally charged events they received in the form of private messages. After the beginning of the pandemic, many of the interviewed women received information about coronavirus itself

⁴¹ Russia 24 is one of the Russian state-controlled TV channels.

⁴² John Zarocostas, “How to Fight an Infodemic,” *The Lancet* 395, no. 10225 (February 2020): 676.

⁴³ Matteo Cinelli et al., “The COVID-19 Social Media Infodemic,” *Scientific Reports* 10, no. 1 (December 2020): 1.

or about vaccination against coronavirus in the same form.

'In personal messengers, they even sent me videos of some famous medical doctors saying that vaccination is harmful and that I do not have to get vaccinated because it is life-threatening.' (Maria, 66)

Many of the interviewed women received information about coronavirus itself or about vaccination against coronavirus in the form of private messages

Additionally, interviewees said that their female friends often repost information about COVID-19 on social media. Information viewed there regularly becomes a topic for in-person discussion with female friends, relatives, and colleagues. Those discussions sometimes serve as the main way to verify received information. As for the other ways of verification, some interviewees rarely check the information they consume, some never do so; they simply scroll/read/watch further, even if the topic is interesting but the information seems dubious.

Some interviewees rarely check the information they consume, some never do so; they simply scroll/read/watch further, even if the topic is interesting but the information seems dubious

Even though most of the interviewed women had been vaccinated against coronavirus by the time the interviews were conducted, some were worried about dangerous side effects and felt that they had been forced to get vaccinated to keep their jobs. Despite the negative social and financial consequences of staying unvaccinated, some of the interviewed women had preferred to refuse vaccination or even to promote this idea among their close circle; they saw it as protecting their relatives and friends.

5. CONCLUSIONS: ROOTS AND FRUITS OF VULNERABILITY

This pilot study revealed both the very general patterns of how middle-aged women consume politically relevant information and the particular features of their experiences in using social media and messengers. Many of the interviewed women said that they never thought about the topics discussed during the interviews and were never asked about them. Some even said that before the interview, they thought that they were not interested in politics, but after the interview, such an understanding was challenged:

'I thought I'm a neutral person [...] but it turned out that I'm following the news, even political news.' (Inna, 52)

The absence of active political or scholarly attention to the topic implies that politicians and scholars might share the interviewees' understanding and think that women's patterns of news consumption are not relevant for a country's information security. But the findings of this study show that it is not how this issue should be assessed.

In short, the gender roles of middle-aged women cause specific patterns of news consumption among the representatives of this demographic group. In turn, those patterns impact the vulnerability of this group to politically relevant disinformation spread through social media and messengers.

Among the reasons for this, are:

- Today's middle-aged women did not watch political news on TV when they were younger, or, at least, did so much less than their husbands. Many of those women simply did not have time to follow the news and be educated about politics due to the gender roles during the Soviet period and thereafter. Nowadays, most of the interviewed women do not have an interest in political topics because they see politics as something distant and not relevant for them. As a result, middle-aged women as a whole are still much less informed and experienced when it comes to politically relevant information compared with men of the same age.

They are often attracted to emotionally charged content that is capable of changing issue-related attitudes and behaviour much more so than other types of content

- In recent years, the interviewed women have bought smartphones or received them as a gift. It has dramatically changed the amount of information they consume as well as the way they do it. In particular, they started to incidentally consume politically relevant information from unknown sources without paying attention to it.
- Most of the interviewed women share quite a narrow understanding of politics; they often view it as something connected to elections and international relations. Thus, when they consume some politically relevant information via social media and messengers, they do not do it critically. They believe that no one is interested in manipulating their opinion about what they call 'down-to-earth' issues.

They believe that no one is interested in manipulating their opinion about what they call 'down-to-earth' issues

- Unlike middle-aged men, the interviewed women and their female friends are active in social media and messengers where politically relevant information is mixed with content that lacks political relevance (e.g. cooking recipes or cute animals). Thus, it is not possible to be focused and look at information critically.

- Many of the interviewees do not look for information but consume what is offered to them by algorithms. This might also be the case for other demographic groups, but the interviewed middle-aged women report that they are more likely to choose what to read or watch if it touches them emotionally. Thus, they are often attracted to emotionally charged content that is capable of changing issue-related attitudes and behaviour much more so than other types of content.

- Middle-aged women say that they are quite socially active and like sharing information with others. Some of the interviewed women sent politically relevant information via messengers or received this kind of information from their female friends. Some of the respondents said that they discuss politically relevant information which they see on social media and messengers with their friends, relatives, colleagues. Thus, middle-aged women might assist in spreading disinformation if they find its topic interesting and relevant for them and their social circle.

The new status quo is challenging for the information security of countries where middle-aged women show the above-mentioned patterns of news consumption. It creates a hidden information environment where no standards of balance, objectivity or reliability apply, and provides perfect conditions for successful advertising. In social media and messengers, advertising strategies can be applied not just to goods and services but also to political ideas, values, particular framings of relevant political issues, etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Some of the recommendations that might be given in the current situation are quite general and abstract, others are more practical and concrete. The recommendations given below refer to different stakeholders capable of making a positive impact on the status quo.

For policymakers:

- Work on gender equality to help reduce the differences between the patterns of news consumption of men and women. Higher levels of gender equality will attract women to politics and, in general, will make women better educated about political issues.
- Work on the media literacy of different segments of society, including the most underprivileged ones. Inform the public about the dangers of disinformation being spread via social media and messengers, and educate the public about some practical tools to help them become more resilient.
- Encourage politicians at all levels to be active in social media. It will help to keep local Russian-speaking middle-aged women within the Estonian political context.

For trustworthy and reliable actors of political communication (including mass media):

- Go beyond framing politics as national or international 'horse racing'. Make middle-aged women aware that politics is not just about elections and international conflicts. When they realise that information they consume is connected to political issues, they will consume it more critically and carefully.
- Pay more attention to down-to-earth aspects of political life and make politics appear less abstract. It might encourage middle-aged women to read about political issues.
- Invest more in promoting reliable sources of information in social media. It is the way to engage with middle-aged women.

- Promote the applications of reliable sources of information among middle-aged women (an interviewee was told that there was some kind of lottery for people who use an app of one of the Estonian mass media companies; she installed that app and recommended it to her friends, and currently they all use it). Consider adding a notification function to those applications.
- Make the YouTube channel of ETV+⁴⁴ more active and enticing, regularly publishing fragments on topics that might be appealing to middle-aged women.
- Inform middle-aged women about widespread conspiracy theories and disinformation messages that are regularly posted on social media.

For researchers:

- Detail collected statistical data about social media use by gender-specific data; consider adding questions about messenger use (Viber, Telegram, etc.) in the questionnaires, e.g. as sources for politically relevant information.
- Perform further research about the news consumption of middle-aged women. The current study's main limitations were the geographical concentration of interviewees and the small sample. Interested researchers can address these issues and improve the reliability of the results by going beyond the geographical scope of this study, as well as by conducting quantitative studies, including those based on tracing data. It will also help to check the general findings of this pilot study on a national level, including non-Russian-speaking middle-aged women of Estonia.
- As the identified patterns of news consumption among middle-aged women are also likely to exist outside of Estonia (especially in countries formerly occupied by the Soviet Union, due to the above-mentioned features of gender roles promoted by the Soviet regime), further research elsewhere could be fruitful and informative.

⁴⁴ ETV+ is the Estonian TV channel in Russian language operated by Estonian Public Broadcaster.

- In general, as modern technologies allow interested political actors to work with different demographic groups separately and target them with different types of content, it is worth looking at the patterns of online behaviour of people from other demographic groups (e.g. middle-aged men). This would be useful for the sake of comparison and would help to give a more comprehensive picture of the vulnerability of society to online disinformation.

For ordinary readers of this paper:

- Ask your middle-aged female relatives and friends about their patterns of consuming information via social media and messengers.
- Discover what is interesting for your middle-aged female relatives and friends, find reliable YouTube channels, Facebook groups, Telegram and Viber chats on those topics and recommend subscribing to them.

ANNEX

SAMPLING AND METHODOLOGY

Target group. The target group of the study is Russian-speaking middle-aged women residing in Estonia. The participants' ages ranged between 43 and 66 years (i.e. with a few participants being slightly outside the commonly defined age bracket of 45-65 years for 'middle-age'), and the average age of the interviewees was 55.17 years, SD = 7.26.

Recruited interviewees are from various social and professional backgrounds and levels of education (one of the interviewees is a journalist, one is an accountant, some are housewives, a couple of interviewees work in a kindergarten or school, some are cleaning ladies, others are nurses, etc.). To ensure the anonymity of interviewees, all their names were changed in the process of writing the paper, unlike their age, as this information might be relevant to some of the findings.

Place of residence of the interviewed women.

As in some other countries formerly occupied by the Soviet Union, most of the ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking people currently living in Estonia are not 'a historic minority, but the result of the labour migration policy of the former Soviet regime'.⁴⁵

In order to expand the study beyond any particular wave of immigration, it was decided to interview Russian-speaking middle-aged women of different backgrounds, i.e. those women who themselves or whose parents or grandparents came to Estonia in different periods of the 20th century. The rationale behind this decision was that people coming to Estonia within different waves of migration, as well as their children and grandchildren, are at different levels of integration within modern Estonian society, which in turn, influences their lifestyles.

Statistical data from 2021 shows that almost 80% of ethnic Russians residing in Estonia live in Ida-Viru County and in Tallinn.⁴⁶ In general, the

ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking people of Estonia have been 'relatively immobile within the last decades and therefore, their residential patterns are largely similar to those developed in the Soviet period'.⁴⁷ So Russian-speaking women who currently live in districts and towns developed in a particular period of the 20th century most likely moved there as part of the respective wave of migration into Estonia and did not relocate from other parts of Estonia or from other Tallinn city districts.

The interviewed women live in the various districts of Tallinn that became home for thousands of Russian-speaking people in different periods of Soviet occupation, in particular in Põhja-Tallinn, Mustamäe, and Lasnamäe. In addition to those three districts of Tallinn, women living in Maardu – one of the industrial towns in the Tallinn metropolitan area – were also interviewed. Six participants from each district/town were interviewed.

Procedure. All the interviewed women were asked a series of questions on three main topics:

- **Family. Gender roles**

For example: Please tell me about you and your husband's typical evening routine at the period when your children were small.

- **Politics. Interest in politically relevant information**

For example: Who do you think is more into politics, you or your husband, your female friends or their husbands? Why do you think this is so?

- **Patterns of online activity**

For example: Which social media and messengers do you use, what do you usually do there?

These open-ended questions helped to learn about the experiences of middle-aged women in the three domains listed above and to discover how the interviewees reflect on those experiences. In addition to several open-ended questions aimed at collecting qualitative data, the interviewees were also asked to answer

⁴⁵ Hansson and Aavik, "The Effect of Gender and Ethnicity," 4.

⁴⁶ Statistics Estonia, "Population by sex, ethnic nationality and country, 1 January 2021. Administrative division as at 01.01.2018," Statistical Database, last accessed 11 March 2022.

⁴⁷ Kadi Mägi, "Ethnic Residential Segregation and Integration of the Russian-Speaking Population in Estonia, 2018," *Dissertationes Geographicae Universitatis Tartuensiensis* 69 (PhD diss., University of Tartu, 2018), 39.

one multiple choice question. The procedure of collecting replies for this question went as follows: the interviewees heard ten artificially created news topics and said which of those topics would be more interesting for them and which, in their opinion, would be more interesting for their husbands. The fragmented quantitative data generated by this type of question helped to discover that there were politically relevant topics that most of the interviewed women marked as more interesting for them than for their husbands (and other men of similar age).

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ISSN 2228-2068