
TWO SMALL EU STATES IN THE FACE OF INFORMATION DISORDER: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RUSSIAN-SPEAKING MEDIA AUDIENCES IN CYPRUS AND ESTONIA

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Abstract

Polarization and mistrust towards authorities arise when the language minority of a country resides in a distinct infosphere impacted by foreign media. During a crisis in EU–Russian relations, it is crucial to focus on enhancing the media literacy of the Russian-speaking minorities in the EU. The study explored the similarities and differences of the attitudes and preferences of Russian-speaking minorities of Cyprus and Estonia regarding the media, and their ability to recognize the information disorder in the Russia-related news. The semi-structured interviews with stimulus materials were conducted in Cyprus (N=24). The results were compared with those of the research in Estonia (N=29). Both audiences had diverse media preferences, a critical eye for the news, could recognize the information disorder, and needed more balanced and quality information. However, Cyprus interviewees had wider media repertoires, expressed deeper distrust towards the media, and only several consumed the country’s public service media.

Keywords: information disorder, fake news, Russian-speaking minority, polarization, distrust

Introduction

Media play a relevant role in the construction of reality (Carter, 2013), constructing understandings of reality in particular ways – promoting certain narratives while silencing or marginalizing others (Hall, 1997; Hajimichael, 2023). Media also reflect diverse and complex audiences, and contexts (Hajimichael, 2023). Consequently, media studies must consider the cultural, economic, political (Hajimichael, 2023), and historical context (Kremez, 2022) in which media make news and consumers receive it, which impacts their frames of reference.

The decisions made by an individual are made through a perspective defined as a frame of reference for these decisions (Grawitch, 2021) or a decision frame (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Tversky and Kahneman (1981, p. 453) describe the decision frame as a “decision-maker’s conception of the acts, outcomes, and contingencies associated with a particular choice”. The construction of that frame (framing) is controlled both by the way the choice problem is presented and by the norms, habits, and expectancies of the decision-maker (Tversky & Kahneman, 1986). In other words, the frame

of reference consists of two elements: 1) the decision context that refers to the specifics of the decision situation; 2) the psychological context that refers to the decision maker's interpretations of the decision situation, influenced by individual's attitudes, beliefs, previous experiences (Grawitch, 2021), and socio-cultural background (Zabihzadeh et al., 2022).

The frame of reference affects the decision-making process of both journalists and audiences depending on their attitudes, beliefs, and experiences, adding subjectivity to their decisions. News generated via the journalist's perspective may contradict the audience's, increasing distrust of the media content and channel.

Information Disorder and Russia's Contribution to It

According to Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), information disorder is a collective term for misinformation ("false information is shared, but no harm is meant", e.g., unintentional mistakes), disinformation ("false information is knowingly shared to cause harm", e.g., fabricated content) and malinformation ("genuine information is shared to cause harm", e.g., publication of the private information). Another related term "fake news", widely used in scholarly articles (Tandoc et al., 2017) covers mostly the cases from misinformation to disinformation – from news satire to completely fabricated news (Wardle, 2020). In the current study, we used both terms fake news and information disorder to cover all possible aspects of the issue.

Information disorder in the coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian war (Bachmann et al., 2023) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Hansson et al., 2021), has become a test for the audiences' attitudes towards the media and their media habits in the EU and beyond (Nielsen et al., 2020; Skarpa et al. 2023). Russia has been actively contributing to information disorder by disseminating disinformation on COVID-19 pandemic (Michlin-Shapir & Khvostunova, 2021; Rodari, 2021) and Russo-Ukrainian War (Geissler et al., 2023; Kahn, 2023) through its state and pro-government media, media in EU countries and beyond, and social media. In the political context of a hybrid war between the Russia and West (Bachmann et al., 2023; Wigglesworth et al., 2022) it is crucial to study the EU's Russian-speaking minorities' attitudes to Russia-related news, and their ability to recognize the information disorder.

Encoding/decoding Model and Selective Exposure

Similar to the research of Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia (Kremez, 2023) we examined Cyprus Russian-speaking audience's perception of the news based on Hall's encoding/decoding model when the news consumer plays an active role in decoding news messages (2006). The news consumer may take the following positions towards the news: a dominant – by accepting the encoder's thoughts; an opposing – by rejecting the encoder's intended content and creating his or her own; and a negotiated – by partially accepting the encoder's thoughts, but also having his or her own views (Hall, 2006). The consumer can understand the literal (denotative) and associative (connotative) meanings of the news messages while decoding them (Hall, 2006). Both levels of meaning should be taken into account when the researcher analyzes the opinions of the audience by reading between the lines.

We also utilized the selective exposure theory, which states that people choose messages that fit their interests, attitudes, and beliefs (Stroud, 2017). In addition to filtering the information, people

may also actively seek out and assign greater weight or credibility to information that supports their current attitudes (Williams et al., 2016), i.e. their current frames of reference.

Context of the Study

Cyprus Russian-speaking community began with the 1990s immigration of former USSR residents after its collapse. Cyprus was a popular migration destination due the cultural, historical and religious affinities, financial investment opportunities, and moderate temperature (Kamolov et al., 2019; Delanoe, 2013).

The Russian-speaking community is one of the largest in Cyprus (Kamolov et al., 2019), but has different and approximate data: from 20,000–50,000 (Ryazantsev, 2015) to “more than 100,000 Russian-speaking residents” (Goncharenko, 2023). According to another source, Limassol alone “has a Russian-speaking community of around 50,000 in a city of 237,000” (Stamouli, 2022). The Russian-speaking community has been growing intensively since 2022: due to the Russo-Ukrainian War, skilled human capital is emigrating from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus in higher numbers (Ilyushina, 2022).

In conducting research for this article, we found a lack of academic studies on the Russian-speaking media audience in Cyprus.

Estonia–Russia relations have a different kind of history and are older. In the late 17th century, a few Russians stayed in Estonia, while Old Believers, who refused to accept the liturgical reform of the Russian Orthodox Church, migrated to the western coast of Lake Peipsi, which was a part of the Swedish Empire (Isakov, 2008). In 1710–1917, when the territory of modern Estonia was a part of the Russian Empire, more Russians went there, with another influx after the 1917 revolution (Furman & Zadorozhnyuk, 2004).

Estonia declared its independence in 1918, and the Estonian Liberation War ended by concluding the Treaty of Tartu with Soviet Russia in 1920 (Piirimäe, 2021). Most of Petserimaa and some areas behind the Narva River, inhabited mostly by ethnic Russians, were ceded to Estonia (Piirimäe, 2021). In 1934 Russians were the largest ethnic minority (8.2 %) in Estonia (Eesti Entsüklopeedia, 2012).

In 1940 Estonia was annexed by the USSR. After World War Two many Russian-speaking people moved to Estonia from the republics of the USSR (Furman & Zadorozhnyuk, 2004). Estonia restored its independence in 1991.

Thus, the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia includes Estonian citizens before 1940 and their descendants, USSR immigrants and their descendants, and new immigrants after 1991. The 2020 population has a 33% Russian-speaking minority (Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2021). They are mostly citizens of Estonia (majority), Russia, people with undefined citizenship, also Ukraine, Belarus, etc.¹

Some studies of Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia were conducted in the 2000s. A significant part of them has been reviewed and cited in the previous study (see Kremez, 2023, pp. 20–21).

Cyprus has no grievances as Estonia did with the USSR (Stamouli, 2022; Kremez, 2022). Estonia has a territorial dispute with Russia (Kremez, 2022), whereas Cyprus does not. Cyprus has also been occupied over the centuries, with the latest occupation – since 1974 – being that of the island's northern area by Turkey, its bigger neighbor (Stamouli, 2022). Economic, political, and cultural cooperation has been effective between Cyprus and Russia (Delanoe, 2013). Cyprus wanted Russian visitors and investment (Varvitsioti, 2022). Cyprus

1. https://andmed.stat.ee/en/stat/rahvaloendus__rel2021__rahvas-tiku-demograafilised-ja-etno-kultuurilised-naitajad__kodakondsus/RL21424

followed EU sanctions against Russia after Russia invaded Ukraine, causing complications (Varvitsioti, 2022).

Hence, Cyprus and Estonia have differing cultural, economic, political, and historical contexts in their relations with Russia that may differently affect the frames of reference of Russian-speaking audiences in both contexts.

Aim of the Study

The first step of the current study aimed to define the attitudes and preferences of Cyprus Russian-speaking audience towards news media and its content and this audience's abilities to recognize signs of information disorder in Russia-related news. We assumed that similar to the interviewees in Estonia (Kremez, 2023) the ability of Cyprus respondents to recognize information disorder is related to their media attitudes and preferences. The second step was to compare the results with the findings of a previous study (Kremez, 2023), and identify the similarities and differences.

The following research questions (RQs) were formulated:

- RQ1. What are the opinions of the Russian-speaking audience in Cyprus about media coverage and the media? Which media outlets do they perceive as reliable or unreliable, and what are the justifications behind their choices?
- RQ2. Has the Russian-speaking audience in Cyprus detected the presence of the elements of information disorder in news articles concerning Russia, particularly on COVID-19 and the Russo-Ukrainian War?
- RQ3. How does Cyprus Russian-speaking audience check the accuracy of the news and what strategies do they use to verify information?
- RQ4. What are the commonalities and disparities in the media attitudes, tastes, and discernment of information disorder between the Russian-speaking audiences in Cyprus and Estonia?

Methodology

The same research method was used in both countries – the personal semi-structured interview which is considered a “powerful tool to capture the voices and the ways people make meaning of their experience” (Rabionet, 2011, p. 563). This technique is adaptable and guarantees the anonymity and openness of the respondent (Young et al., 2018). It allows for the flexibility to rearrange the order of questions throughout the interview and introduce new ones based on the interviewee's responses (Young et al., 2018).

The participants in both countries were selected on the basis of their interest in the news. Those who in their opinion did not consume news were excluded. The basic information about the conducted interviews is presented in the Table 1.

The corresponding author has interviewed Cyprus Russian-speaking respondents from the cities and villages of the government-controlled areas of the Republic of Cyprus, including the villages located within the United Nations Buffer Zone. Some interviewees resided on the Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia (SBA), a British Overseas Territory on the island. Most of the Cyprus Russian native speakers (including some bilinguals and trilinguals) were the citizens of Russia and persons with dual citizenship of Cyprus/Russia, as well as the citizens of Ukraine, Belarus, and Latvia. Several interviewees had other dual or triple citizenship.

The sample population in Estonia included Russian native speak-

	Cyprus	Estonia
Period of research	October 2022–June 2023: time of full-scale Russo-Ukrainian War; some COVID-19 related restrictions in force in Cyprus	November 2020–March 2021: period of the COVID-19 pandemic’s social restrictions
Recruiting procedure	Acquaintances + snowball	Acquaintances + snowball
Invitations	Face-to-face, phone calls, emails	Phone calls, emails
Number of invitations	45	41
Number of interviews	24	29
Response rate (%)	53.3 Several respondents withdrew their consent owing to an unwillingness to address politically sensitive media coverage	70.7
Method of conduct	Face-to-face and several through Skype or Zoom depending on the person’s request	Face-to-face with face masks or through Skype depending on the person’s request
Time (min)	21–65	23–53

Table 1
The basic information about the interviews in Cyprus and Estonia.

ers with mostly Estonian, but also Russian, and Ukrainian citizenship. (Kremez, 2023)

The sample populations’ socio-demographic data were obtained in Cyprus (see Table 2 and Estonia (Kremez, 2023, p. 39) to ensure diversity. The fact that most Cyprus respondents have higher education could be explained by the influx of skilled human capital indicated above and the greater willingness of more educated people to participate. The latter is comparable to a previous study (Kremez, 2023). Women dominate due to a high proportion of mixed marriages (usually Russian “woman” and Greek Cypriot “man”) (Fulias-Souroulla, 2008).

The coding was used for both samples – in Estonia (see Kremez, 2023, p. 22) and Cyprus – which enabled to meet the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation² and research ethics requirements in social studies to protect the privacy of the participants. The Cyprus respondents were coded by the first letter of the country (C) and a given interviewee number (I#) using the format CI# (e.g., C1).

The interview consisted of two parts. The first aimed to explore the interviewees’ relationship with news media and content and their interests in the news, media use, media assessments, and assessments of the accuracy of the information. (Kremez, 2023)

The purpose of the second part with the stimulus materials was to explore the interviewees’ attitudes toward Russia-related news and their information-checking strategies (Kremez, 2023). The stimulus materials played the role of “clues” (Törrönen, 2002, p. 343) to the topics in the first part, including published news presented to the interviewees after a discussion about their media-related habits and Russia-related interests (Kremez, 2023). The presented news included elements of credibility: title severity, ownership (public, state, private media) and political orientation (pro-government, opposi-

2. Regulation (EU) 2016/679, abbreviated GDPR, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX-%3A02016R0679-20160504>

Socio-Demographic Characteristics	n	N
Gender		
F	16	24
M	8	
Age – years		
18–29	5	24
30–39	8	
40–49	7	
50–59	2	
60–69	2	
Highest level of attained education		
Higher Education	18	24
Vocational Education	1	
Secondary Education	3	
Unknown	2	
Employment status		
Employed	21	24
Unemployed	1	
Pensioner	-	
Student	2	
Unknown	-	
Primary place of residence		
Famagusta district	1	24
Larnaca district	9	
Limassol district	5	
Nicosia district	4	
Paphos district	3	
Akrotiri and Dhekelia (SBA)	2	

Table 2
Socio-demographic characteristics of the interviewees in Cyprus (N=24).
Source: authors

tion, neutral), referring to sources, the origin of information, news content, news tone (positive, negative, neutral), compliance with the requirements of the news style genre, agents covered (Kremez, 2023).

All the topics of the presented stimulus news for the interviewees in both countries were related to Russia or the Russians.

The topics of the news for the interviewees in Estonia included: the explosion in the Arkhangelsk region, the Eastern Economic Forum, the coronavirus vaccine, and fake news about a child named COVID (Kremez, 2023). The respondents had news in Russian from

outlets from Estonia, Germany, and Russia (see Kremez, 2023, p. 38).

The first stimulus news for Cyprus interviewees was a survey conducted by *RIK* (*Cyprus Broadcasting Corporation's* TV channel) on the invasion of Ukraine and sanctions against Russia, published by *Evropa Kipr*, a private news portal in Cyprus ("Opros", 2022). Second, *Deutsche Welle's* news portal in Russian reported that Germany eliminated COVID-19 entrance restrictions for tourists, including Russians and Belarusians (Lebedeva, 2022). The third notified about probable direct flights from Russia to the northern part of Cyprus, *CNN Turk's* news mediated by *Gazeta.ru* (Nurieva, 2022). *Rambler/novosti's* misinformation regarding the monkeypox "pandemic" was the fourth (Proshina, 2022). *Gazeta.ru* and *Rambler/novosti* belong to *Rambler&Co* owned by Russia's state-controlled Sber ("Sber", 2020).

The audio recordings of interviews were made, and notes were taken. The interviews were transcribed.

Next, we closely examined transcriptions to obtain a deeper understanding (Brummett, 2019) and performed reflexive thematic analysis with thoughtful engagement with the analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to define and analyze patterns, including interviewees' positions towards the news according to Hall's encoding/decoding model (2006). We strived to define both the literal (denotative) and associative (connotative) meanings of the audience's opinions by reading between the lines and taking into account written notes about the tone of speech, gesticulation and facial expressions of the interviewees.

The last stage involved comparing the research results in Estonia and Cyprus to determine the commonalities and disparities.

All translations of the Russian-language transcripts into English for this article are the responsibility of the corresponding author.

Findings

Favorite Topics and Assessment of Their Coverage

Cyprus Russian-speaking interviewees considered as more actual and relevant topics the Russo-Ukrainian War, foreign politics, and economics (Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, EU, UK, US, Turkey), coronavirus pandemic, news in Cyprus (politics, economics, laws, tourism, occupied territory), sports, celebrities, science and music. The selection of topics was connected to the agenda, professional or personal interests, state of origin, and the hobbies of the interviewees.

Since it affected their lives, families, and jobs, especially in tourism, the Russo-Ukrainian War was the main worry of most Russian-speaking respondents in Cyprus. The primary focus of the audience in Estonia was COVID-19, due to the preceding study period.

Some Cyprus interviewees were not interested in the Cyprus news preferring international news, and news from their states of origin. This pattern differed from the news interests of the Russian speakers in Estonia – all of them consumed news about events in Estonia (Kremez, 2023). The defined pattern reflected the shorter history of the Russian-speaking minority in Cyprus than in Estonia. Therefore, a portion of Cyprus respondents showed stronger cultural and economic ties to their states of origin than to the country of residence, for example:

Interviewee C22: "Cyprus agenda does not influence my life".

Some Cyprus Russian-speaking interviewees expressed their non-satisfaction with the coverage of their favorite topics in Cyprus and foreign media, for example:

Interviewee C2: “We do not have freedom of speech [concerning the coverage of political issues in Cyprus³], that is true.”

However, many of Cyprus interviewees were at least partially satisfied with the coverage of their favorite topics, except the coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian War and COVID-19.

Although most Russian-speaking interviewees in Estonia claimed that they were rather satisfied with the way the media covered their favorite topics, the analyses of their responses did not indicate complete satisfaction (Kremez, 2023). Nevertheless, the interviewees from Estonia expressed much higher levels of satisfaction with the coverage compared to the interviewees from Cyprus, particularly in relation to the reporting on COVID-19. A significant number of interviewees in Cyprus strongly criticized both domestic and international media for spreading false information about the pandemic, for example:

Interviewee C20: “All news in Belarus was like COVID-19 does not exist, which was just nonsense”.

While some Russian speakers in Estonia expressed partial satisfaction with the media coverage due to the paucity of reporting on the pandemic (Kremez, 2023), none of them exhibited the same level of profound criticism as the respondents from Cyprus.

Both audiences in Estonia (Kremez, 2023) and Cyprus demonstrated the need for more expert opinions in the news.

Interviewees in both countries utilized several sources in order to get sufficient information from a range of news outlets, reflecting their distinct media tastes, often known as media repertoires (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006).

Most Cyprus respondents stressed the significance of reading many Russo-Ukrainian War news sources. They claimed that both sides of the conflict frame events in their controlled media in their favor, disseminating fake news and propaganda:

Interviewee C10: “In one country they show what is profitable in that country, in another what is profitable in this”.

Hence, Cyprus Russian-speaking interviewees do not fully trust the media of either country in coverage of the war. One respondent claimed more trust towards Ukraine’s media in coverage of the war, because “they are more open, they provide live broadcasts” (C11).

Some also accused Cyprus, EU, and US media of non-journalistic, single-sided conflict coverage, for example:

Interviewee C14: “Essentially I do not follow what they speak here [on TV in Cyprus], if there is no other view, second point of view”.

That corresponds with Estonian Russian-speaking respondents’ belief that news might be spun to assist authorities, and politicians (Kremez, 2023). Both audiences stressed that the media is a conduit for interest group framing.

The topic of full-scale war was not covered by the research in Estonia, but interviewees in Estonia claimed that special attention must be paid to coverage of Russia-related political news, which could be biased (Kremez, 2023).

Cyprus interviewees expressed the opinion that the media creates fear and disseminates negativity in the news that could lead to the rejection of consumption of defined media outlets or media in general. A large portion of respondents criticized the media for spreading fear about COVID-19, which produced panic and boosted interest groups. For example:

Interviewee C3: “There is some kind of pressure going on, every-

3. Clarifications inserted into translated transcriptions in square brackets are made by the authors.

one got scared, and ran. (...) Yes, someone is probably promoting something”.

The same pattern was defined regarding several Russian speakers in Estonia (Kremez, 2023, p. 30). However, it had a notably lower occurrence, likely because of less stringent lockdown measures and shorter COVID-19 limitations compared to Cyprus, which many respondents from Cyprus expressed dissatisfaction with.

A significant number of respondents in Cyprus expressed a very skeptical perspective towards the media, casting doubt on all news across all media platforms. For example:

Interviewee C20: “I do not trust any media outlets”.

Significantly fewer the interviewees in Estonia shared the same deep distrust.

Members of both audiences mentioned conspiracy theories. Some interviewees in Estonia said media outlets report what they can, and the main news organizations follow interest groups’ directives (Kremez, 2023). Several Cyprus respondents believed the coronavirus pandemic was a media-promoted COVID-19 strategy, for example:

Interviewee C10: “It seems to me that most of this was paid for”.

Media Preferences and Attitudes towards Consumed Media Outlets

Several respondents in Cyprus consumed Russia’s state media, including TV stations *Russia-24*, *Russia-1*, and news agency *RIA Novosti*, but indicated they cannot trust them because they broadcast propaganda (C23, C19), spread fake news (C5), and report events one-sidedly (C6). For example:

Interviewee C5: “On *Russia-1* they said that there is no water in London, there are lines in shops, and the lights are off. My daughter lives in London. I called because I was worried, but she said to me: “No, everything is OK!”

Russian speakers in Estonia showed a similar criticism to Russia’s state media, but they considered the state news agency TASS as a trusted information source with some nuances (Kremez, 2023).

Cyprus Russian speakers’ consumed Russia’s privately owned media, such as *Lenta.ru*, *Mail.ru*, *Gazeta.ru*, *Rambler/novosti*, and questioned their reliability. News of pro-government non-trusted (C1, C22) *Gazeta.ru* and censored (23) non-trustworthy (C8, C9, C22) *Rambler/novosti*, were used as stimulus materials. The decisions considering the reliability of the abovementioned news were influenced additionally by the distrust towards the abovementioned media channels. All respondents, besides three persons, detected the misinformation in *Rambler/novosti*’s news. Cyprus respondents were more sensitive to stimulus material assessments than respondents in Estonia due to greater familiarity with fake news regarding COVID-19 and the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Several interviewees in Estonia consumed the same and some other Russia’s private media outlets, considered them also as not reliable with some exceptions (Kremez, 2023). Many Cyprus interviewees read *Meduza* and *Dozhd*, opposition Russian media in exile (Kremez, 2023). Some complimented their coverage (C7, C23), but most distrusted them and criticized their single-sided coverage, for example:

Interviewee C19: “Opposition Russia’s media demonize Russia”.

The interviewees in Estonia, consumed opposition *Meduza*, *Dozhd*, *Novaya Gazeta*, similarly mentioned that Kremlin-critical Russia’s media outlets present one point of view (Kremez, 2023).

Several Cyprus interviewees speaking Greek sufficiently consumed Cyprus TV news regularly. They were rather satisfied with the media coverage of TV channels *RIK1* and *RIK2* of *Cyprus Broadcasting Corporation (CyBC)*, for example:

Interviewee C4: “*RIK TV*, I think, it’s worthy”.

However, *RIK 1* and *RIK 2* were often criticized for the single-sided coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian War and for being too politicized. Nobody mentioned the consumption of *CyBC*’ radio stations.

Almost all interviewees in Estonia regularly consumed *Estonian Public Broadcasting’s (ERR)* news in Russian language on TV channel *ETV+* and news portal *Rus.ERR.ee*. Both are considered reliable and highly valued news sources, because of the high-quality coverage of the events in Estonia. However, *ETV+* was criticized for doing “cheap” work inviting the same experts and using the same sources (Kremez, 2023).

Interviewees speaking Greek routinely watched TV channels *Sigma*, *Ant1*, *Omega*, *Alpha* and read related news websites like *Sigmalive.com* and *Ant1live.com*. Cyprus respondents criticized the abovementioned media sources for biased political news coverage:

Interviewee C8: “*Sigmalive.com* distorts the news [about the war] the way it suits them!”

Among the interviewees in Cyprus, the top three preferred domestic media outlets in Russian were privately owned online news sources *Vestnik Kipra (vkcyprus.com)*, *Cyprus Butterfly (cyprusbutterfly.com.cy)*, and *Evropa Kipr (evropakipr.com)*. The news on *Evropa Kipr* regarding the Cypriot’s opinions concerning Russia’s invasion and the sanctions used among the stimulus materials was considered as true by all respondents. All three were praised for the coverage of the Cyprus news, wherein the *Vestnik Kipra* was named as “older” and “more serious and classical”, and *Cyprus Butterfly* as a “faster publisher” (C5, C16, C24). Although most of Cyprus interviewees read these outlets regularly, some expressed criticism towards their reliability and unprofessionalism:

Interviewee C1: “All these *Evropa Kipr* and *Vestnik Kipra* are more like a women’s chat”.

Interviewee C8: “*Cyprus Butterfly* has such a reputation that nobody trusts it”.

Many interviewees in Estonia regularly consumed news from domestic privately owned news portals in Russian as *Rus.DELFI.ee* and *Rus.Postimees.ee*, praised for their coverage, but also criticized (Kremez, 2023).

Hence, the attitude of both audiences to the private news portals in Russian in their countries was balanced and critical.

Several Cyprus interviewees consumed the newspaper *Cyprus Mail* online in English, considered as reliable:

Interviewee C13: “*Cyprus Mail* is trustworthy, they publish facts”.

Many Cyprus interviewees consumed news in Ukrainian and/or Russian language about the Russo-Ukrainian War and other topics related to Ukraine broadcasted by Ukrainian media. They consumed the unified information telethon *United News*, launched by the largest Ukrainian broadcasters (including state ones) on the first days of Russia’s invasion in 2022 (Ostapovets, 2023); the privately owned opposition online newspaper *Strana.ua*, blocked in Ukraine (“Ukraine”, 2021); the privately owned *Ukrainian Independent Information Agency of News (UNIAN)*. Most said they lack confidence in Ukrainian media.

None of the interviewees from Estonia engaged with Ukraine’s media outlets.

A number of interviewees in Cyprus accessed news from the EU through various sources, including *Euronews* in Russian, *Deutsche Welle* in Russian and German (with *Deutsche Welle*'s news being included as part of stimulus materials), as well as Latvian news outlets *Lsm.lv* and *Apollo.lv*, which provide news in Latvian and Russian. Some criticized the EU media for its single-sided and biased nature:

Interviewee C22: "The EU [media] present news very superficially, in a single-sided manner, with deliberate hyperbolization and disinformation. *De facto* they are similar to Russia's media, but they speak from the European viewpoint".

Although *Euronews* received criticism, it was commended for its commitment to broadcast only factual information (C9). *Deutsche Welle* was seen as a reliable source of information (C23).

The interviewees in Estonia reported consuming news from both *Euronews* and *Deutsche Welle*, and they exhibited a higher level of trust in both sources compared to the respondents in Cyprus (Kremez, 2023).

The interviewees in Cyprus expressed a range of opinions on their level of trust in frequently consumed media channels from the UK (*BBC*) and the US (*The New York Times*, *CNN*), varying from trust to strong mistrust:

Interviewee C7: "*BBC* has a centuries-developed fact-checking culture".

Interviewee C19: "*BBC* produces trash news".

Estonian participants watched *BBC*, *CNN*, and *Fox News*, but noted their bias (Kremez, 2023).

In contrast to the audience in Estonia, respondents in Cyprus acquired news from Belarusian media (particularly *Belarus 1* and *Onliner.by*) and Polish outlets *Belsat TV*⁴ and *Charter97*⁵ targeted at the Belarusian audience but remained skeptical of the substance of these sources.

Medialoft.eu (for Russian-speaking emigrants and expats in Europe⁶), *DEN TV* (*dentv.ru*, anti-liberal and pro-imperial channel⁷), *YouTube* vlogs and news reviews, some Cyprus groups and pages on *Facebook* and *VK* (Russia's social media platform), and most often *Telegram* news sources were used by Cyprus respondents to learn about the Russo-Ukrainian War and other topics.

The authors of consumed sources on *YouTube* were personalities mainly from Russia, Ukraine and the UK with various political views.

Telegram news sources included *Telegram*-based news sources, information sources created by well-known personalities from different countries, and official *Telegram* channels of the media outlets, namely the abovementioned Cyprus news portals in Russian. Almost all Cyprus Russian speakers considered the *Telegram* news sources as more safe, independent, reliable and user-friendly:

Interviewee C24: "I trust *Telegram* channels more, where people report from the place of event".

According to some Cyprus interviewees, more users decided to move to *Telegram*, because of restrictions and censorship in other social media.

Telegram was considered a primary platform for reading Cyprus and international news by most of Cyprus interviewees, for example:

Interviewee C16: "The main information sources are *Telegram* channels".

Estonia interviewees did not mention using *Telegram* for news consumption (Kremez, 2023).

4. [https://ru.belsat.eu/79795688/-](https://ru.belsat.eu/79795688/)

5. <https://charter97.org/en/news/>

6. <https://www.medialoft.eu/en/about-media-loft>

7. <https://dentv.ru/about/>

Verification of Information

Both Cyprus and Estonia's interviewees' assessments of media coverage and attention to fake news were related to their media literacy and experience with information disorder regarding the main topics – COVID-19 pandemic for Estonia's audience (Kremez, 2023), the Russo-Ukrainian War and the pandemic for the Cyprus audience members.

Both Estonia (Kremez, 2023) and Cyprus interviewees understood that the dissemination of mediated and direct information influences the quality and reliability of the news. The mediated news was often considered suspicious by both.

The interviewees in Estonia assessed the reliability of the news based on their pre-existing knowledge (Kremez, 2023). The news with the information conflicted with that knowledge or experience, or frame of reference could be considered as suspicious. A similar pattern emerged for Cyprus interviewees, but additionally they relied on the experience of the people important to them presented at the place of the events.

Some interviewees in Estonia were more vulnerable to information disorder because of a lack of knowledge in some areas and found suspicious news that was reliable, and nine respondents (9/29) claimed fake news about the child named COVID was credible. This pattern was less common regarding Cyprus interviewers, who were, in general, more accurate in news analyses, and almost all (21/24) detected the misinformation regarding the monkeypox "pandemic".

The frames of reference of several interviewees in Estonia strongly criticized the media and suspected fake news in all political news (Kremez, 2023). Cyprus interviewees also claimed that political news, especially the Russo-Ukrainian War, should be considered very accurately as potentially including mis-, dis- and malinformation. As a result, the attitudes of both audiences towards certain speakers –politicians and governments– covered by the media, decreased their trust towards the news, concrete media outlets or the media in general.

The interviewees in Estonia believed that is easier to check news about geographically closer events (Kremez, 2023). A similar trend was noted in Cyprus.

Interviewees in Estonia often employed the strategy of engaging in discussions about dubious news with others who hold significance in their lives, such as family members, friends, and coworkers, as a means of identifying incorrect information (Kremez, 2023). The same strategy was evidenced in the Cyprus sample, especially for detecting fake information about the Russo-Ukrainian War. For checking of the news about the events abroad many Cyprus interviewees relied on their relatives, friends and partners living in the region of an event. Interviewees in both countries avoided discussions with people with different views to avoid conflicts.

Many of the respondents in Estonia preferred to check the information using multiple diverse information sources –other media outlets and official sources– and juxtaposition of them (Kremez, 2023). Most interviewees in Cyprus did the same, but also often checked the information using alternative sources.

The participants from Estonia were frequently dubious about the themes that raised questions, the sensational headlines in the news, and the absence of sources, references, or citations (Kremez, 2023). The respondents from Cyprus likewise agreed, however several added that dates, the content's narrative logic, framing, and emotive language should all be taken into consideration.

The news generated by the mistrusted media outlet was seen as dubious by the respondents from Estonia (Kremez, 2023). Cyprus interviewees claimed many media outlets from many countries as unreliable. Similar to the interviewees in Estonia, they questioned the news in the outlets with “suspicious reputation” (C3), considered as “yellow press” (C1), “censored” (C23), etc. Some mentioned that the reliability of the news additionally depends on the reputation of the journalist.

Interviewees from both Estonia (Kremez, 2023) and Cyprus had a tendency to verify dubious news only when the subject matter was personally intriguing and pertinent to their interests, and when they had sufficient time available for fact-checking.

Discussion and Conclusions

The comparative analysis in our research sample reveals that populations adopt distinct views according to Hall’s encoding/decoding model (2006).

The interviewees in Estonia take the negotiated rather than opposing or dominant position – partially perceive the encoder’s thoughts, but also have their own views, being balanced and skeptical. They take the dominant position accepting the encoder’s thoughts towards news from well-trusted media outlets. They may operate in opposing code rejecting the encoder’s intended content and creating their own, if it is published in a non-trustworthy media outlet. Only a few Estonia-based interviewees expressed a deep distrust towards the news media through an opposing code. (Kremez, 2023)

Cyprus-based Russian-speaking interviewees operate rather in the opposing than dominant and negotiated codes. They considered many media outlets or media as non-trustworthy. Due to the deeper distrust towards the media, especially in the coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian War and COVID-19, Cyprus Russian-speaking interviewees regularly used alternative news sources. They consumed sources from different social media platforms, but more often from *Telegram* which is considered to be the most safe and user-friendly.

Both audiences consumed news from their country’s public service media – *Cyprus Public Broadcasting (CyBC)* and *Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR)*, respectively. *CyBC* TV channels broadcast news in Greek, Turkish, and English, wherein only the first two are official languages (The Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus, art. 3, § 1). Less Cyprus-based fluent Greek-speaking interviewees regularly watched *CyBC* TV channels, and several expressed criticisms towards the coverage of the political issues on these. *ERR* operates media outlets in Estonian, Russian and English, although Estonian is the only official language (The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, chapter I, § 6). Almost all Estonia-based respondents consumed news on *ERR*’s outlets in Russian and sometimes in Estonian, and mostly trusted them.

Although some Cyprus interviewees declared no interest in local news, most of the respondents regularly read Cyprus-based private news portals. Almost all Estonia-based interviewees actively consumed private news portals in Estonia. In both countries respondents praised, but also criticized various aspects of domestic private media.

Both audiences actively consumed news content from Russia. The respondents from Estonia expressed skepticism over the reliability of Russia’s media platforms, placing limited faith in them. All

of the respondents in Cyprus reported a profound sense of suspicion towards all Russian media outlets. The interviewees from Cyprus accused all Russian media outlets, whether state, privately owned, or opposed (in exile), of providing single-sided and biased coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian War and other matters.

The respondents in Cyprus consumed news from Ukrainian media regarding the Russo-Ukrainian War in order to understand Ukraine's perspective. Most of them expressed a lack of complete faith in these sources, citing concerns about biased reporting.

Both audiences consumed US and UK media, but most questioned their credibility. Interviewees in Estonia trusted EU media such as *Euronews* and *Deutsche Welle*, while there were both critics and supporters of these outlets among Cyprus respondents.

Thus, both audiences have broad and varied media preferences to obtain enough information from different sources, but the media repertoires of Cyprus-based interviewees are broader.

Both audiences expressed the need for more expert, quality, and unbiased information, especially in coverage of political issues and globally important topics. The information disorder in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hansson et al., 2021) has improved the information search and fact-checking skills of the interviewees in both countries.

Information disorder in the coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian War (Bachmann et al., 2023) deepened Cyprus interviewees' distrust of the media, but expanded their media repertoires and improved media literacy.

Both audiences considered the pre-existing knowledge to be a primary basis to assess the reliability of the news: the news could be considered unreliable if it conflicts with such knowledge. Cyprus interviewees also rely on the knowledge and experience of trusted people from the place of a covered event.

Interviewees in both countries will not check the credibility of the news if the topic does not match their personal interests, attitudes and beliefs that support the selective exposure theory's approach (Stroud, 2017). Members of both audiences seek out and assign more credibility to the news supporting their current attitudes (Williams et al., 2016), namely, their current frames of reference (Grawitch, 2021; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981, 1986). Hence, if the news is created by a journalist whose frame of reference contradicts the consumer's frame of reference, it may be considered unreliable.

A second basis, also related to frames of reference, plays a crucial role if the interviewee has a long-established negative attitude towards the media in general, specific media outlets, its host country, agents, or particular aspects of the covered event. Cyprus interviewees expressed such an extremely critical attitude more often than respondents in Estonia, because of the political context of the Russo-Ukrainian War in the research period.

As strategies for detecting information disorder, both audiences used diverse sources and juxtaposition of such, as well as discussion of the news with people important to them. The latter was more often used by Cyprus interviewees for detecting fake news about the Russo-Ukrainian War by contacting people in Ukraine and Russia on the ground.

Both audiences paid attention to text-level elements: links to trusted news sources, active links, citations and clickbait headlines. Cyprus interviewees also paid more attention to dates, logic of the content, framing, and emotive language.

Based on defined differences and similarities we can draw the following conclusions.

Firstly, the media preferences of both audiences are wide and diverse supporting their ability to be less receptive to information disorder in the news. Audience media repertoires in the Cyprus sample are broader due to the use of more news sources, including sources in social media – more often in *Telegram*. However, most Cyprus interviewees do not consume local public service media, unlike Estonia-based respondents, who actively consume Estonian public service media outlets in the Russian language. The broadcasting of quality news for the largest Estonia's minority in their native language in the public service media helps to avoid its polarization in the country and ensures a trusted alternative to Russia's media disseminating pro-Russian narratives. The Russian-speaking minority in Cyprus is seeing rapid growth (Ilyushina, 2022; Stamouli, 2022), yet they do not have the same opportunities in terms of local public service media, which might lead to skepticism towards official institutions.

Secondly, both audiences show critical thinking towards the news. However, Cyprus interviewees expressed deeper distrust towards the media primarily, but not only, due to the political context of crucial topics – the coronavirus pandemic (stricter lockdowns and long-lasting social restrictions in Cyprus) and the commencement in 2022 of a full-scale Russo-Ukrainian War that was not covered by the research in Estonia.

Thirdly, both are capable of recognizing the elements of information disorder, but they do need fact-based, unbiased, and diverse information. They know the techniques and have their own strategies for verifying information, but they apply them when the news is relevant to them personally and they have enough time.

Fourthly, given the absence of prior academic studies on the Russian-speaking media audience in Cyprus, as well as its rapid expansion and continuous instability in EU–Russian ties, we believe that more research is needed.

All of us confront the information disorder in our everyday lives that involves understanding and addressing the challenges posed by misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. The development of media literacy, critical thinking, and fact-checking skills helps us to better navigate the news and contribute to a more informed and discerning society.

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