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BEFORE AND AFTER THE INVASION: SECURITIZING RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN  
ESTONIA AND THE SHIFTING DISCOURSES OF RUSSIAN-SPEAKING AUDIENCES

MA Thesis

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## **Authorship Declaration**

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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# **Before And After The Invasion: Securitizing Russian Influence In Estonia And The Shifting Discourses Of Russian-Speaking Audiences**

## **Abstract**

Securitization is a process in which the political actors frame issues as existential threats, therefore justifying extraordinary measures to combat the threats. This thesis explores the transformation of Estonia's securitization of Russian influence, with a particular focus on Russian-speaking audiences' reactions. Despite a long-standing exposure and acknowledgement of Russian influence, explicit securitization acts were only accelerated following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The research addresses the puzzling question of why were the rapid securitization processes delayed until 2022 and how the discourses have transformed between two key periods: 2014 to 2022 and post-2022. Drawing on the securitization theory of the Copenhagen School and its extensions by Balzacq and Côté, the research sees the audience as an active agent in the securitization process. Particularly, a focus has been placed on audience agency, including desecuritization and counter-securitization moves. A post-structural discourse analysis is applied to parliamentary transcripts and media content, allowing for an analysis of securitization strategies and audience reactions between the two periods. The research concludes that the earlier securitization moves prioritised integration and inclusion, whereas the latter period saw more explicit exclusion and prohibition of Russian influence. While the previous period provided alternatives for the Russian-speaking audience, the post-2022 timeframe left little room for bargaining and for exceptions. Furthermore, the post-2022 period was illustrated by greater resistance from the Russian-speaking audience through desecuritization attempts, which included ignoring the issue, reconstructing the threat and counter-securitizing the state. The research contributes theoretically by advancing a more nuanced model of securitization acts and highlights the importance of the audience. It also encourages further investigation into post-Soviet securitization processes, particularly those involving minority-related discourses.

**Keywords:** Securitization theory, Estonia, Russian-speaking minority, discourse analysis, Russian influence, agency, desecuritization, counter-securitization, post-Soviet.

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## **Introduction**

Since the restoration of independence, Estonia has been situated at a critical crossroads between Western security and the geopolitical sphere of the Russian Federation. Due to historical ties, geopolitical placement and being a host for a sizable Russian-speaking minority, Estonia has become a frequent target of Russian foreign influence. Most notable events are disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks and exploitation of social cleavages between the Estonians and the Russian-speaking population. As a result, the Estonian national security discourses have been shaped by not only conventional military concerns, but significantly by hybrid and soft power threats. Although the threat has been known by the Estonian people for decades, the recent full-scale invasion of Ukraine has caused a rapid securitization acts against Russian foreign influence.

The objective of this research is to examine why the Estonian state did not undergo explicit securitization attempts against Russian influence during the first phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war between 2014 to 2022. Only after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine did the securitization landscape expeditiously change in Estonia. In addition, the aim of the work is to compare the securitization processes and discourses of the two time periods (2014-2022 & post-2022) to find the similarities and differences in audience reactions, goals, strategies and themes. By questioning the Estonian choices of rapid securitization of Russian influence only after 2022, despite the threats being known and used against Estonia decades before, makes the subject puzzling. The research does not argue that securitization did not happen before 2022, but seeks to understand due to what reasons the Russian influence in certain fields was previously not removed or banned. In relation to the puzzle and the main question, the research expects the reasons to lie in the securitizing actors'/Parliament members' decisions. Moreover, arguing that the decision to rapidly securitize the Russian influence comes from a shift in political goals around the Russophone minority.

In this context, the securitization theory of the Copenhagen School will be applied to thoroughly investigate and compare two periods of the war in Estonian security discourses, from 2014 to 2021 and the post-2022 period. The Copenhagen School entails issues as existential threats to the state or society, which enable measures out of the realm of normal politics (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998). Complementary to the Copenhagen School, the research aims to fill the gap in the literature in regard to audience behaviour and reactions to

securitization acts. Treating the audience as a dynamic force in the securitization process (Salter 2008, 324) provides the research to understand the motives behind the state's actions and examines how the audience plays a role in the securitization process.

Furthermore, the research analyses how the audience responds to particular securitization acts, including the potential for acceptance, resistance, desecuritizing, or counter-securitisation of the issue. Due to the intersubjectivity surrounding the evolving discourses, the research utilises post-structural discourse analysis to compare the two time periods and investigate the reactions of the Russian-speaking population in Estonia. In examining these reactions, the research scrutinises the discourses and narratives produced themes. In order to examine the securitization processes in depth, the research relies on sources like Parliamentary transcripts for initial actions by the actors and follows up with interviews and opinion pieces from public media, which represent audience reactions. The data is gathered from government databases, such as Riigikogu's official website and the archives of public news outlets, such as ERR, Delfi and Postimees.

The relevance of the topic lies in its timely contribution to both the theoretical framework around the contemporary Securitization Theory, and the empirical understandings of securitization practices in Estonia. In particular, the inclusion of audience reception and desecuritization dynamics addresses a gap in the application of securitization theory. Moreover, contributing towards the conceptualization of desecuritization moves, thus bringing light to new terms and treating the audience as an active force. By analyzing the interplay between securitizing actors and minority driven audience reactions, the research offers a valuable insight into the changing landscape of securitization processes. In addition, the research holds relevance within the broader regional context of Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet sphere. As other states like Latvia, Lithuania and Poland have to tackle similar security challenges, Estonia's experiences provide comparative insights into integration policies and securitization attempts.

The structure of the research includes three chapters, starting with the methodological framework. In the methodology chapter, the outline of the research is explained by introducing the post-structural discourse analysis, which will be used to analyze the sources. In addition, the chapter gives a detailed overview of the analyzed sources, the case and limitations. Then the research ties the methodology together with the theoretical framework,

which includes a relevant literature review and concepts. In the conceptual framework section, the necessary concepts are presented, such as desecuritization, non-verbal securitization and counter-securitization. The empirical and the third chapter is divided into two sections, which deal with two different time periods: 2014 to 2022 and post-2025. In both subsections, securitization processes or acts are presented for analysis, which are respectively compared to each other. The chosen securitization cases represent exemplary actions against Russian influence in Estonia during respective time periods. Lastly, the research is concluded by presenting the most important findings and the theoretical contribution towards the securitization theory.

## **Chapter 1: Methodology**

This chapter outlines the methodology used in the study. Firstly, it begins by introducing the broader research design, including the reasoning behind a single case study and a decision to adopt a comparative framework focusing on the periods 2014-2022 and post-2022. In addition, the study's research questions are introduced. Secondly, the methodology of the analysis is laid out while bringing attention to post-structural discourse analysis and its suitability for the upcoming work. The case selection chapter provides evidence why Estonia is a well-suited case for the upcoming study, mainly due to the significant Russian-speaking population and the rapid changes in securitization policy. Following this, the timeframe and data selection are introduced. Namely, why these two time periods suit the research and the decision to use parliamentary transcripts and media articles to study discourse. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the study's limitations, including challenges related to representativeness in discourse sampling and the interpretive nature of the analytical framework.

### **1.1 Research design**

The following research employs a single-case study of Estonia to explore why the securitization policies combating Russian foreign influence rapidly started after 2022, despite the threats being known for decades prior. In particular, the research focuses on discourses created by securitization processes to analyse the transformation of the Russian-speaking population's reactions to the acts. Similarly, the aim of the work is to find parallels between securitization acts, meaning to see what tactics were used by the audience and what governmental actions were taken in order to carry through with the securitization process. Moreover, what were the end goals for the elite by securitizing Russian influence in Estonia? Nevertheless, the research aims to contribute to the existing literature and empirics by providing an in-depth insight into a complex issue of who securitizes, for whom the securitization is done and how the reactions shape the process. In addition, the research broadens the current literature by conceptualizing counter-securitization and adding to the theory that the audience is also able to desecuritize extreme matters. Thus, it is aimed at filling the void in Copenhagen School's literature that dismisses the audience as an active participant in the securitization process. Lastly, it is vital to emphasise that the research looks

at and analyses securitization moves against Russian foreign influence in Estonia, not the Russian-speaking audience that resides in Estonia.

Taking into account the aim and scope of the study, the following main research question is presented:

- Why did the Estonian government escalate its securitization of Russian influence only after 2022, given its prior awareness of influence over several decades?

The question is formed with a logic, that even if the Russo-Ukrainian war could have been the catalyst for the securitization moves, the author argues that the war already started in 2014, and was acknowledged similarly during the first period.

The complementary questions are:

- How do the securitization process and results differ between the two time periods: 2014-2022 and post-2022
- What have been the reactions of the Russian-speaking audience to the securitization acts? A comparison of acceptance, denial, methods of creating discourses, and themes.

## **1.2 Methodology of analysis**

The aim of the research is to understand the transformation processes and underlying reasons behind securitization processes in Estonia during the Russo-Ukrainian war. According to the Copenhagen School, securitization is a discursive process shaped by interactions between elites and their audience. In order to analyse these subjective and transforming discourses, the work applies post-structural discourse analysis (PSD), theorised by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Post-structural discourse analysis is well-suited for this research because it conceptualises the social interactions and discourses not as a product of fixed structures or inherent truths, but as discursively constructed, contingent, and politically contested phenomena. Laclau and Mouffe see discourse as a “structured totality resulting from articulatory practices”, which consists of signs or moments that figuratively are like knots in a fishing net. Each knot is connected in relation to other knots (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, 26). Similarly, adaptations of securitization theory see the audience as a dynamic force in the

securitization process, thus indicating the use of discourse analysis that accounts for context-based analysis. Laclau and Mouffe's theory is interested in looking at how discourses are constituted and changed, which is done by analysing articulations that challenge or transform discourses (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, 30). Since securitization processes are incomplete and always dislocated, the post-structural discourse analysis provides a well-suited framework for the issue of subjectivity. Due to the research's focus on discourses around agency and audience reactions, the post-structural discourse analysis is methodologically fitting for researching identity, since it is fluid and always in transformation. As the securitization theory relies on subjects or audiences, the PSD can shed light on changes within audiences. As Thomas Jacobs claims, all forms of subjectivity are intersubjective, emphasising: "*There are no ideas and thoughts that are purely individual and personal; they are all products of our social environment*" (Jacobs 2019, 8). This emphasises the necessity of analyzing audience reactions not at the individual level, but on a larger discursive terrain, which for this study is the Russian-speaking population.

In sum, the post-structural discourse analysis provides a well-suited methodology that puts emphasis on intersubjectivity and dislocation of discourses and offers a nuanced lens through which securitization processes, discourses and audience reactions can be understood.

The given methods allow the research to highlight how the securitization processes have transformed, how threats were constructed and, more importantly, in what ways the audiences engaged with the securitization acts. Similarly, it opens up a possibility to delve into the audience's agency when creating discourses around securitization processes. When analysing the texts, a focus is put on responses that resonate with the securitization moves. Furthermore, an emphasis is placed on linguistic performances, which help to determine whether the audience accepts or rejects the speech acts presented by the securitizer. For instance, if the audience voices new threats, such as the state creating a hostile environment for the audience, it accounts for an attempt to counter-securitize the current matters and reject the speech act. Similarly, if the audience tries to deconstruct the securitization narratives, it signifies desecuritization. In order to categorise the reactions, the analysis examines key terms and elements that are associated with certain reactions. Moreover, the texts are analysed to understand what key themes are being integrated and expressed in the discourses.

The securitization processes are dealt with in chronological order, meaning that the analysis starts with the initial speech act by the securitizer during which the threat is created, and is

followed by every reaction made by the audience. Due to the reaction-action formula, the initial securitization texts are taken from Parliamentary hearings, mainly transcripts. Since securitization is a “trickle-down” process between the securitizing actor and the audience, other reactions are taken from public media, in the form of interviews and opinion pieces. At the end of a reaction by the audience, the analysis determines whether it can be seen as acceptance or rejection of the process. If the reaction is a rejection, then the analysis determines if the securitizer replied with another action, which in the end creates a formula to follow until the securitization process is complete or is brought back to “normal” politics. The action-reaction formula allows the analysis to go through a single securitization process act by act, which gives in-depth context but at the same time allows for drawing parallels with previous securitization acts. In other words, it will enable us to see how discourses are contested and transformed during the discursive processes.

Lastly, the analysis will compare the results of the two time periods in order to answer the given research questions. By comparing the results, the analysis will determine the reasons behind rapid securitization moves after 2022, and will analyse the transformation in Russian-speaking population’s reactions and agency.

### **1.3 Case Selection**

This study is based on a single case study of Estonia. Estonia presents an opportunity to research securitization towards foreign influence and simultaneously look into minority reactions towards the securitization moves. Due to the Soviet occupation of Estonia, around 22% of the population is Russian speakers, which makes the case selection an apposite choice to study changes in securitization and Russian-speaking audience reactions. Factors like geographical location, Russian foreign influence, and an active democratic society make Estonia a compelling case on which to conduct the study. Reactions towards the securitization moves have extended back to 2007 when the Bronze Night (Pronksiöö) riots happened due to the Estonian government changing the location of a Soviet war memorial. Following the riots by mainly Russian-speaking youth, Estonia underwent a wave of cyberattacks by Russia.

Given the Russo-Ukrainian war that started in 2014 and the full-scale invasion in 2022, Estonia has had to start reconsidering its policies towards Russia and, more importantly, policies regarding the Russian-speaking population in Estonia.

These drastic changes in Eastern Europe have presented the chance to research the rapid changes in security and dynamics between the state and the Russian-speaking population. By delving into Estonia, the single-case study allows to see how adjacent wars influence neighbouring countries' securitization policies and, most importantly, the *modus operandi* among the Russian-speaking population that the Russian state sees as compatriots and part of the Russian world. Moreover, using Estonia as a single-case study provides an opportunity to look into in-depth reactions by the audience (Russian-speaking community) that were caused by securitization moves. The single case study allows to examine and showcase their tactics and strategies, such as counter-securitization, and was their agency suitable for providing discourses in the process.

Choosing Estonia as the research case is suitable for answering the research question because of the recent and rapid changes in local policies that indicate securitization, which previously have gone unnoticed or have been ignored. Estonia's drastic change against Russian influence has yet to be studied, and more specifically, the transformation of the securitized audience's agency has not been given in-depth focus in the Baltic context. Furthermore, the case selection is justified due to the researcher's knowledge of the Estonian language.

Other cases which could be studied within this theoretical and methodological framework include other Baltic states, previous Soviet republics (Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, etc.) and other states that have a significant Russian-speaking minority. The named cases share similarities with Estonia due to the influence of the Russian world on local politics, securitization attempts of foreign influence and the reactions to the Russo-Ukrainian war within domestic policies.

#### **1.4 Time frame selection**

The timeframes of 2014-2022 and 2022-2025 are chosen in parallel with the Russian-Ukraine war. As mentioned previously, the research states that the war started already in 2014, when the "green men" annexed Crimea and eastern parts of Ukraine. The first time frame represents the dormant period when the Western powers, including Estonia, did not directly intervene (through military aid) but imposed sanctions and condemned Russian actions. During that period, the first articles and interviews appeared, contemplating if Narva held the same fate as Donbass or Crimea (Kopli 2015). Focusing on 2014 until 2022 allows looking

into the reasons why the initial phase of the war was not sufficient to start securitizing Russian influence in Estonia. It also provides an insight into the domestic policies and discourses to find out why certain policies were ruled out or not even considered (language reform in schools, framing certain habits as a potential threat). Similarly, it acts as a starting point for comparing the Russian-speaking population's agency in Estonia before and after the full-scale invasion in 2022.

The vital turning point was 2022, when Russia started a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The aftermath of the invasion shifted international politics drastically, implying that conventional wars have returned after the Cold War. The European Union placed Russia under heavy sanctions and started to support Ukraine with weapons and ammunition, meaning that the previous habits of interaction were ruled out. The post-2022 period also illustrates a significant shift in Estonian domestic politics and how Russian influence was securitized. Furthermore, the shift focused on practices through which the Russian influence could be enforced on the local Russian-speaking population. Focusing the second part of the analysis on post-2022 securitization moves allows the research to see the action-reaction dynamics and agency transformation within the domestic minority, offering insights into the evolving nature of securitization theory and audience dynamics. Moreover, allowing for comparison to the previous time period, when the adjacent war was in a “colder” state.

It is essential to mention that the timeframe from 2007 until 2014 could be considered for future studies since it allows us to see the decisions and discourses after the Bronze Night Riots, but for the current research, it would not fit with the Russo-Ukrainian war period, thus would make the comparison invalid.

### **1.5 Data selection & sources**

As the primary goal of the research is to see the reasons behind securitization changes whilst tracking changes in the securitization process and audience reactions, the data selection for the study consists of publicly available sources that represent discourses between securitizers and Russian-speaking audiences. These sources include parliamentary transcripts, bill proposals, news articles, community statements, and interviews.

Moreover, in order to study securitization discourse that deals with state behaviour, the transcripts from the Estonian parliament are an invaluable source for analysing speech acts and actions on the state level. These transcripts allow the study to see in-depth changes and reasoning behind the enactment of specific policies and, more importantly, how Russian influence was perceived in the Parliament. To know the core reasoning behind securitization moves and threat perception by the government, the study uses parliamentary bills that are all published and available in the government's databases. Similarly, the Riigikogu transcripts show how the securitization process trickles down from the elite to normal-scale discourses among the audience.

Since the research is based on audience agency and “the action-reaction” formula, secondary sources will be used to see how the Russian-speaking audience reacts to securitization moves done by the state. Interviews and opinion pieces count for reactions (resistance, acceptance, denial, etc.) by the audience, thus using secondary sources is credible for the study. Secondary sources are mainly taken from three larger news outlets: ERR, Delfi and Postimees. Due to Estonia's democratic nature and high levels of free speech, the most relevant reactions by the government or the audience are documented, meaning that they are covered by media outlets. Given this reason, the study finds these sources a valid and reasonable way to track changes in agency and Russian-speaking audiences' behaviour. It is important to highlight that ERR is a state-run media outlet. Thus, the pro-Russian content that might arise among the audience may not be published.

## **1.6 Limitations of the study**

While the study provides valuable insights into securitization in Estonia and audience agency, several limitations in the work must be acknowledged.

First, the study's scope is constrained by its narrow focus on two time periods: 2014-2022 and 2022-2025. Although the Russo-Ukrainian war plays an important role, a larger time frame could offer a deeper understanding of previous securitization motives and give more context on the political reasons behind securitization moves.

Secondly, the study acknowledges data availability and potential bias that may pose challenges. Although, as mentioned before, Estonia ranks high in the civil liberties and press index (Freedomhouse 2024) (Reporters Without Borders 2024 ), mainstream media articles

may pose censorship, especially when dealing with pro-Russian or anti-Estonian narratives. Moreover, self-censorship among the Russian-speaking population can arise when desecuritization or counter-securitization themes are being discussed. Due to these reasons, the study may face underrepresentation of particular motives and narratives produced by the Russian-speaking audience during the securitization process. In addition, the research deals with Russian-speaking audiences' agency, the most prominent speech acts and reactions will come from members of the audience who possess more agency than others. Reactions done in closed communities and outside of popular media (news, talk shows, etc.) will not be analyzed. In other words, a substantial amount of analysed reactions are prone to come from the Parliament members and public figures who represent the Russian-speaking audience. Similarly, the study uses minority-driven media, but due to the ongoing war, these pro-Russian media outlets have been either closed or are run by Russian Federation institutions, thus not representing the Estonian minorities' thoughts and ideas.

Lastly, the limitations cover the chosen time periods. Since the periods were selected in relation to the war, the connotations are different, meaning that the timelines should not be seen as identical. As the war shifted, so did the politics regarding the time. Similarly, the time frame lengths are substantially different. Since the timelines are not identical, the material and sources regarding each period are also prone to change, especially regarding shorter periods, when the war was more active. The different connotations and length attributes of various styles of securitization and reactions.

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

### **2.1.1 Russians in Estonia**

Literature on Russians in Estonia has been an intriguing topic among scholars since the restoration of the independence of Estonia in 1991. The main themes cover integration policies by the host state, identity politics, and minority rights. The importance of Russian minorities in neighbouring countries to Russia has become an even more fascinating topic after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Scholars have started to look into the post-Soviet spaces to understand the Russian minority's behaviours and policies affecting them in the host states.

One of the most avid researchers on Russian-speaking population matters in Estonia is Jennie L. Schulze (2025). Her work dates back to the last decade when the first studies about Russian speakers in Estonia emerged. In her recent work “Securitizing Russian-speakers in Estonia and Latvia: The Frame-Policy Nexus before and after Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine”, she undergoes a similar comparison between the pre-2022 securitization moves and after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine securitization discourses. While the work also includes Latvia, the frame-policy nexus provides an extensive and in-depth analysis of minority securitization. The study finds that the recent developments in Estonia hinder minority inclusion and finds that mobilization among securitized audiences has been minimal (Schulze & Pupcenoks 2025, 20-21). Although the current research acknowledges the valuable contributions of their work, particularly its rigorous analysis and focus on securitization, differences in theoretical grounding have led to diverging interpretations. Framing the work in a manner that the Russian minority has been securitized since 1991 shows the lack of contextual interpretation. The current study argues that most of the examples that the authors bring out in their work have been instead focused towards potential Russian foreign influence within Estonia, such as the ban on some media from Russia, not against the Russian minority. Similarly, the results conclude that minority mobilization has been minimal. Although there have been no mass demonstrations, reactions from Russian speakers (the audience) have been vocal and have created multiple discourses with the state, especially regarding the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, and securitization moves against non-citizen voters.

The Russophone community in Estonia has not gone unnoticed by scholars, especially after the continuation of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022. Cases of exception and how the Russian diaspora operates between “two worlds” have been largely researched by Andrey Makarychev. His work on exceptions and de-exceptionalizing, indicates how Estonia has changed its policies regarding Russophone events, cities and other biopolitical domains (Makarychev 2024). For example, how Narva’s soviet monuments can not be an exception anymore, while in the past the city had been granted exceptional means due to its Russian-speaking community. The work has contributed to a larger research theme of exceptionality and rebordering within the post-Soviet sphere (Makarychev 2024). Makarychev, in his work, does not use securitization theory as a baseline, but taking into account the observations and findings, the author finds the concept of exceptionality and de-exceptionality valuable for the current work. Exceptionality regarding securitization could be seen as another side of the same coin, where certain entities gain a state of exception, similar to securitization, where an issue is taken out of the normal political sphere, and given it an exceptional state. Thus, using his work for the current research gives a valuable framework for researching how Russian influence has reached a new state after the reinstatement of war in Ukraine.

As previously stated the Russo-Ukraine war has not gone unnoticed when researching the Russian diaspora in neighbouring states and has been a catalyst for researchers to pay attention to this underrepresented topic. Beginning from 2015, scholars started comparing Estonia to Ukraine. “Russians in Estonia: Is Narva the Next Crimea?”, a study written by David J. Trimbach and Shannon O’Lear (2015), paid attention to Narva’s spatiality and identity of Narva’s residents. The study furthermore focused on citizens' identity, perceptions of Russian activities and local fears (Trimbach & O’Lear 2015). Makarychev (2023), in a similar manner brought attention to the Russophone community during the continuation of the war in 2022, focusing on how new narratives and discourses are unfolding in relation to the war by significant Russian-speaking public figures. According to his findings, pro-Kremlin narratives in Estonia are “a combination of home-grown voices reflecting the state of minds within a significant part of the local Russophones and direct projections of Russian propaganda.” Moreover, the war influenced the speaking positions within the Russian diaspora to be flexible by borrowing Russian narratives and adjusting them for local Estonian consumers (Makarychev 2023, 23-24).

### 2.1.2 The Securitization Theory

Securitization theory, more widely known as the Copenhagen School (CS), is a work conducted by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde departed from traditional security studies that focused on military threats and conventional means to a broader understanding of security as a socially constructed process. Buzan et al. have framed security as a self-referential practice, saying: “because it is in this practice that the issue becomes a security issue - not necessarily because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is present as such a threat” (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998, 24). In addition, according to Buzan et al., the concept of securitization is considered something outside of “normal politics” (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998, 24).

The Copenhagen School argues that security is not an objective condition but instead an intersubjective and discursive practice, where issues are framed as existential threats through securitizing speech acts. Speech acts are the main element of determining if the securitization is successful or not, meaning whether the audience accepts the existential threat or not (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998, 31). The Copenhagen School’s key contribution to securitization theory is also the evolving nature of security. This means that the sphere of security is beyond the traditional military domain and includes political, environmental, economic, and societal sectors. According to Buzan et al., security threats are more manageable to conjure if they contain objects that are generally believed to be threatening, such as “...tanks, hostile sentiments, or polluted waters” (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998, 33). The “hostile sentiments” become especially relevant in the research since they encapsulate the Russian Federation's attitude towards Estonia, thus being part of the securitization process.

As previously covered, CS explores how “normal politics” are made into exceptions, creating securitization; the opposite action of going from exception to “normal politics” is considered de-securitization. Weaver explained desecuritization as “the shifting of issues out of emergency mode and into the normal bargaining process of the political sphere” (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998, 4). This explanation gives a relatively brief overlook of what it is. Still, it does not expand on concepts like the agency of desecuritized or what is required for successful desecuritization. For this purpose, this study has included the concept of agency in the research framework to examine its importance in the process of desecuritization.

Thierry Balzacq (2005), in his work “The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context”, has laid out a foundation for political agency and its connectivity with securitisation theory. Balzacq argues that the audience or agents, as he refers, play a vital role in securitisation theory, saying that: “*audience, political agency and context are crucial, if overlooked, aspects of securitization that should guide the analysis of the linguistic manufacture of threats in world politics*” (Balzacq 2005, 173). Furthermore, he puts emphasis on intention and linguistic competence, which is seen as “who is allowed to speak about a subject matter or who can partake in the debate” (Balzacq 2005, 190). The idea of being allowed to speak emerges and becomes evident when discussing minority groups in political settings. The power of words depends on three factors: context and power position, validity of statements towards the audience, and discursive strategy (*ibid*). The power of words becomes relevant in the sense of how the Russian-speaking population understands the threats that the elites are displaying. For example, are the messages clear and understandable to the complying agents or is the threat presented by authorities relevant? Similarly, it entails the importance of words and sentences that are interpreted by the target audience (Balzacq 2005, 192).

Lene Hansen criticises the Copenhagen School’s treatment of desecuritization for conceptual vagueness. More specifically, she brings attention to the fact that desecuritization is not only the absence of securitization but a political process that involves negotiation in the political sphere. In a similar manner, her findings include the importance of context in desecuritization. For example, desecuritization depends on specific cultural, historical, and political settings and narratives (Hansen 2011). She claimed that desecuritization is a multi-dimensional process and that future studies should explore more power dynamics and identity politics within the theory.

While Lene Hansen’s (2011) work brings attention to more nuanced and context-based desecuritization theory, her work lacks specific examples of real-life practices, including how desecuritization can fail. Mark B. Salter expands the theory and finds that “The statist model of securitization does not match the complexity of contemporary social dynamics of security” (Salter 2008, 324), suggesting that NGOs and civil society groups also play a part in securitization and desecuritization acts. Whilst NGOs play a marginal part in the current thesis, the importance of civil society groups in Estonia is significant when it comes to

deseuritization of Russian influence. Furthermore, Salter criticises the existing research on why deseuritization fails, saying: *“There are a number of assumptions within articles about securitization theory about the differential ease or difficulty of securitization and deseuritization. These unexplored assumptions arise because there is no theory for the actual process of the success or failure for a securitizing or deseuritizing move”* (Salter 2008, 324). He proposes that this criticism can be resolved by using different approaches to analysing securitization as a process, which leads him to use dramaturgical analysis with “the vocabulary of the theatre to understand social settings, roles, and performances of identity” (Salter 2008, 328). The importance of performances of identity (certain rituals and habits) and social settings plays a significant role in the current research, given that the Russian-speaking population's practices, norms and social settings are being used as an influence tool by the Russian government against Estonia.

As previously brought up, the Copenhagen School sees securitization and deseuritization as processes between an elite and the audience. Speech is being used to convey a message that should persuade social actors and the general public to accept the securitization move. Considering the latter means that speech is the primary mechanism through securitization, and threats are constructed. Assuming that it creates uncertainty if securitization can happen without speech or if it can be done without explicitly framing it as a necessity for survival. In order to go more in-depth with the theory, some authors have found silence to be part of securitization. Silence has been seen as a strategic tool, such as staying silent during threats or danger to avoid public panic. Secondly, it can be used to delegitimize securitization attempts by the opposing side. However, analysing silence in securitization becomes difficult due to its interpretative nature. Xavier Guillaume has described silence as a “Pandora’s box” because, apart from situations when the meaning of someone’s silence is made explicit through other signs, what silence means is always premised on the interpreter’s own ‘horizon of expectation’ (Guillaume 2018, 477). Thus, the ambiguity of silence is shown in examples where the state actor finds silence done by subalterns to be a form of consent or ignorance. In reality, silence by these actors could be an act of deseuritization or protest. Silenced protest to ignore and delegitimize the securitization acts done by higher authorities. Guillaume sees this ambiguity as a dilemma and a challenge to conceptualize silence, thus criticising the securitization theory on that part (Guillaume 2018, 479).

### 2.1.3 Agency

As previous literature has established, securitization theory deals with multi-dimensional processes, such as audience acceptance, desecuritization and social dynamics. Within these processes, a concept of agency emerges, considering that the audience is a central element; its nature and the role of the audience have been underrepresented in the Copenhagen School (Côté 2016, 547). Agency as a concept has been theorized in multidisciplinary fields, mainly in social studies and philosophy. Even though the concept of agency has been vaguely defined and conceptualized, it still plays a significant part in security studies, especially among minorities and groups that are poorly represented. Since various authors have loosely defined agency, this passage will cover some of the literature around it, whilst the conceptualization for this thesis will be explained in the upcoming chapters.

Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische have loosely conceptualized agency as a process of social engagement that is “informed by the past” but also “oriented towards the future and towards the present” (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, 962). While this conceptualization of agency remains philosophical, it does not constitute real feelings or actions that humans are driven by. The authors have found that human agency is defined by three dimensions: iterational-, projective-, and practical-evaluative elements. More precisely, the authors have explained the three dimensions by the capacity of how the audience or actors respond to problematic situations (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, 971). Iterational elements encapsulate how routine and past patterns shape the thoughts and actions of actors in order to sustain identities, institutions, and interactions over time (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, 971). Sustaining identities, institutions and interactions are key elements when researching audience acceptance and desecuritization. Thus, it largely comes down to identity politics and institutions that shape and help carry out processes in order to desecuritize threats. Emirbayer & Mische (1998, 971) have described the projectivity element as: “Projectivity encompasses the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors’ hopes, fears, and desires for the future”. Similarly, the hopes, fears and desires for the future are some of the key elements and driving forces for the audience to either accept securitization moves or deny them, including desecuritization moves done by the audience. Lastly, the practical-evaluative element entails “the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among

alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations” (Emirbayer & Miche 1998, 971).

The lack of theoretical interplay between securitization theory and the concept of agency has not gone unnoticed and has received criticism from authors like Adam Côté who has argued that the Copenhagen School has characterized the audience as agents “without agency”, while the theory itself proposes that the audience is intersubjective (Côté 2016, 543).

Côté’s criticism is valid since the theoretical works based on the Copenhagen Schools theory treat the audience as a passive entity- they either accept the security arguments through speech acts or reject them. In relation to the passive nature of the audience it has made securitization seem as a linear process. This is in contrast to real-life practices, where the audience reacts to securitization moves.

For more intersubjective security studies that take into account the dynamics between the elite/actor and audience, Côté has suggested a new and more robust framework to tackle this issue. As he contends, *“Taken together, this framework shifts the focus of securitization theory towards the processes of deliberative interaction between securitizing actor(s) and audience(s), in which the mobilization of multiple security discourses enables securitizing actors and audiences to contribute shared perceptions of ‘security’”* (Côté 2016, 553). In addition, he has added that in this view, the securitizing actors act together and engage with the audience that is actively responding to them (Côté 2016, 553), transforming the audience into “an active agent” (Côté 2016, 554). The described framework will benefit future studies due to its complex nature and intersubjectivity of the securitization process, which will allow the researchers to look into reactions by securitizers but also the audience. For example, how does the audience react to certain threats or does this reaction vary by audience group? Do institutions among the audience play a role in securitization? Similarly, using Côté’s (2016) logic of interactive audience and securitizing actor, grants the possibility to analyse the transformation of the securitization processes, whether it is done through techniques like bargaining or arguing.

Due to the vast literature on the concept of agency and the case selection for the research, a concept of democratic agency emerges. Democratic agency refers to the capacity of individuals and collectives to actively participate in and shape the political processes that govern their lives, embodying both the rights and responsibilities inherent in democratic

citizenship. This concept is closely tied to the idea of empowerment (Gaventa 2006, 24), where marginalized groups gain the ability to influence policies and institutions that affect their well-being.

## 2.2 Conceptual Framework

### 2.2.1 Securitization

The definition of securitization for the ongoing research will be a combination of Copenhagen School's theory and additional nuances proposed by authors like Balzacq (2005) and Hansen (2011). According to the Copenhagen School, securitization is constructed as a more extreme version of politicization, where public issues are set forth as security concerns and existential threats that require urgent government intervention (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998, 23-24). The process of securitization is created through discourses, which are referred to as speech acts. Through the speech acts, the issue is submitted as a matter of supreme priority and seeks to convince the audience (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998, 26). It is important to note that although Copenhagen School has said: "...the security speech act is not defined by uttering the word *security*" (*ibid*, 26), it is still largely hinted that a keyword must be used. Firstly, the research conceptualizes securitization as a matter of extreme measures that are taken out of "normal" politics and uses speech acts to frame the issue. Furthermore, securitization is not just an act or process done by state actors/elite; moreover, it is conceptualized as a string of actions or activities where the audience and the state interact with each other. Essentially, where both parties are reacting to one's actions and moves.

Since the Copenhagen School presents the speech act part of securitization as a linear process (state actor convinces → audience accepts/refuses), it does not fit in the framework of the current work. Thierry Balzacq, on the other hand, conceptualized securitization and, specifically, "the speech act" in a more complex and pragmatic way that takes into account the interplay between agency and intersubjectivity among actors. To understand securitization as a strategic practice instead of universal rules, securitization has to contain three components: "audience's frame of reference", "its readiness to be convinced, which depends on whether it perceives the securitizing actor as knowing the issue and as trustworthy" and "its ability to grant or deny a formal mandate to public officials" (Balzacq 2005, 192).

Essentially, it represents how convincing the threat presented to the audience is. Furthermore, following Balzacq's (2011) description of securitization as "...an articulated assemblage practices whereby heuristic artefacts (metaphors, policy tools, image repertoires, analogies,

stereotypes, emotions, etc.) are contextually mobilized by a securitizing actor, who works to prompt an audience to build a coherent network of implications (feelings, sensations, thoughts, and intuitions), about the critical vulnerability of a referent object, that concurs with the securitizing actor's reasons for choices and actions, by investing the referent subject with such an aura of unprecedented threatening complexion that a customized policy must be undertaken immediately to block its development" (Balzacq 2011, 3).

As previously mentioned, the Copenhagen School treats agents or audiences in a passive manner; therefore, the research conceptualizes the audience as an active participant in the process, not one who only accepts or rejects securitization. The audience becomes a central element, which has the ability to exploit contextual advantages or use other means to gain greater influence in the process (Côté 2016, 552). The audience is treated as an entity that has the potential to transform itself, the relationship with securitizing actors, and shape the outcome of future securitizing moves due to the power relations and context (*ibid*). Conceptualizing the audience in such a manner gives the research the potential to compare different time frames of securitization and gives the possibility to look into the power dynamics between the securitizing actor and the audience during different contexts. Similarly, it allows for the actor-audience relationship to be delved into.

### **2.2.2 Non-verbal/Indirect securitization**

As previously mentioned, the Copenhagen School finds speech acts as one of the main elements of the securitization process. Following that logic means that every act of securitization must contain a speech act done by elite actors that exclaim an existential threat that has to be dealt with in "non-normal" ways. The research proposes that securitization and speech acts can be done without articulating an existential threat to security. More specifically, to fill the gap in securitization theory, the linguistic part of securitization, such as trying to convince the audience why it is a threat, can be absent. This is in contrast to the definition of the Copenhagen School, which reclaims that it must follow the grammar of security and an existential threat with no point of return (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998, 33). It is important to note that it does not mean that the discursive part is absent; rather, the securitizing actor does not verbalize an immediate threat, but relies on intersubjectivity. In addition, the threat can be constructed or implied through previous trauma and collective

memory among the audience. While prior literature has seen silence as an ambiguous part of securitization, it has mainly attached it to the audience and seen it as a dilemma. Silence has been seen from the feminist standpoint as an inability to speak security, such as subalterns unable to speak due to danger to themselves (Guillaume 2018, 496).

The thesis adds to the current theory that state actors refrain from overtly verbalizing threats in securitization speech acts due to the complex interplay of strategic, normative, and diplomatic considerations. Since the tactics vary by context it is impossible to set a universal rule or theory for it. Instead, it gives another facet to securitization theory. This strategic ambiguity or as the research conceptualizes it as indirect securitization can deter internal opposition while avoiding escalation during the securitization process. For example, these escalations were seen in Estonia in 2007 during the Bronze Night riots after the decision to move the Bronze Soldier statue. Normatively, excessive threat framing may breach societal norms surrounding governance and state stability. State actors seeking to uphold a reputation and legitimacy may opt for implicit signalling rather than direct signals of threats. Additionally, ambiguity in speech acts allows states to maintain flexibility during securitization and avoid inducing panic among the general public.

Furthermore, the thesis proposes and adds to the current literature that the existential threat can be constructed through intersubjectivity and collective memory among the audience, thus creating an absence of threat in the speech act. Even though the threat is absent during speech acts, it is still prevalent in the securitizing narratives. During the securitization process, contextual and historical narratives or traumas are already implied, and threats or security concerns are already created and known among the audience. Examples of historical narratives that have contributed towards non-verbal securitization include, for instance, being part of the Soviet occupation (former republics), thus creating self-explanatory cautiousness against Russian aggression or Russian influence. Similarly, one could account for terror attacks, like 9/11, as a collective memory trauma that allows future securitization moves to be done without formulating the security issue through linguistic speech acts since the trauma already implies the threat from previous attacks.

### 2.2.3 Desecuritization & counter-securitization

The conceptualization of desecuritization is directly derived from the concept of securitization. Desecuritization is defined as moving issues from the “emergency mode” into the “normal political” sphere (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998, 4), where they are not treated as existential threats. However, the idea of a “normal” political sphere is unspecified, thus creating ambiguity around the term. Moreover, desecuritization can also be conceptualized as a process of deconstructing the ongoing securitization discourses (Šulović 2010, 4).

Strategies around desecuritization have been studied little, but three theorized ones include ignoring the threat and not speaking about it, bringing the issue back to “normal” politics, and trying to manage the securitization so it does not generate security dilemmas and does not spiral (Wæver 2000, 253). The thesis sees these strategies as fitting for the current framework for studying desecuritization moves in Estonia. Thus, the work defines desecuritization as a process of turning an emergency issue into a state of non-exceptionalism and usual norms, which is led by either securitizing actors or the audience.

As the main focus of the research is the audience as an acting force in securitization theory, it has become evident that the previous literature does not specify if desecuritization can be done by the audience in contrast to the agents that possess authority. The thesis proposes that desecuritization can also be carried out by the securitized agents, following the logic of de-escalation and delegitimization of urgent issues. The audience-based void in securitization theory has been filled by recent authors who have created a concept of counter-securitization as a form of resistance. Defined by Stritzel and Chang, counter-securitization is: *“moves resisting crucial elements of the securitization process for the purposes of this article narrowly and rather technically as indeed counter-securitizing in the sense that counter-securitizing moves also follow the ideal-type of the grammar of securitizing speech acts of claim, warning, directive (typically demand) and propositional content...”* (Stritzel & Chang 2015, 552). Although the definition of counter-securitization is sound, Tsering Topgyal has found it flawed, claiming that counter-securitization is not only open to “hard” military threats but also to non-traditional security issues and the performative power of language is being ignored before implementation phase (Topgyal 2016, 169). Topgyal's examples can be used to illustrate and provide real-life context for counter-securitization. He

finds that the Tibetan self-immolators (audience) frame China's repressive policies (counter-securitize) as the main security concern for them (Topgyal 2016, 178-179). Similarly, counter-securitization was done during Malaysia's 14th general election when the coalition party ruled "fake news" as a source of insecurity, to which the opposition counter-securitized and proved that the coalition's embezzlement scandals were the real security threat during the elections. Essentially, undermining the credibility of the coalition and delegitimizing their reasoning (Lim 2020). These examples show that counter-securitization is seen as a form of protest, which includes delegitimizing the initial security threat whilst formulating a new security issue, typically regarding the securitizing actor.

The former claim becomes relevant for the current research since the case study deals with Russian influence, which is not considered a "hard" military security issue or threat per se. Taking into account the previous literature, the research defines counter-securitization as a process or action-reaction game of resistance against securitization by the audience that follows the linguistically regulated vocabulary of securitization moves (Stritzel & Chang 2015, 552). Furthermore, the aim of counter-securitization is to delegitimize and deny the securitization move and bring attention to another security issue instead. For instance, framing the securitizer as a threat to the audience.

#### **2.2.4 Agency**

As the focus of the research is the Russian-speaking population as an audience, the concept of agency emerges. The audience exercises agency as an active, dynamic force that critically shapes the success or failure of securitizing acts. Audiences are not treated as a passive force (Côté 2016, 552), thus giving them the agency to react to securitization moves. This agency extends to resistance or compliance: audiences can mobilize counter-narratives, counter-securitize as previously stated, or even desecuritize as the current research proposes. Furthermore, the conceptualization of agency becomes crucial when looking into reasons why certain securitization attempts fail or succeed.

The research combines the conceptualization of agency by multiple authors. Emirbayer and Miche reconceptualized agency as a "*temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a*

*capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)*” (Emirbayer & Miche 1998, 963). Although the definition fits the current research framework, it lacks context and specifics around securitization theory and how the audience acts against securitization. To fill the gap, Côté lays out a conceptualization of the audience, but within that claims that the audience *“has the capability to authorize the view of the issue presented by the securitizing actor and legitimize the treatment of the issue through security practice”* (Côté 2016, 548). His statement emphasises that the audience, during securitization, has the capability to authorize and legitimize, thus giving them the agency to influence and direct securitization moves. Without agency, the audience would be a passive receiver that either accepts or denies.

Furthermore, Balzacq has found agency to be “the practical force of discourse” (Balzacq 2005, 186), stating that discursive action is part of agency and vice versa, where it creates a communicative action and leads to specific interactions (Balzacq 2005, 187). However, the agency that Balzacq refers to is “word’s agency”, which expresses the power of words and statements (Balzacq 2005, 190), it can be argued that the idea of “word’s agency” is not a standalone concept but, rather a mixture of Côté’s (2016) framework and reconceptualization done by Emirbayer & Miche (1998). In order to have the ability to transform the securitization process, the agent or, in this case, the audience must possess some kind of authority (Balzacq 2005, 190). Whose authority in this case is not specified, but looking at it from the perspective of the audience, it relates to the notion of being able to facilitate or constrain the securitization process. If the authority is absent or the power dynamics do not align the actor or audience is not a dynamic force but rather a passive speaker.

Taking into account the previous literature and research, the current thesis conceptualizes and defines agency in securitization theory as follows. Agency in securitization is a practical force among the securitizing actor or the audience through which the institution, community or a person exerts their authority to bring transformation to the securitization process. The concept of agency is a part of discourse, which can lead to resistance, counter-securitization, desecuritization or acceptance of the ongoing securitization process. Through agency, audiences or agents are allowed to take part in the securitization process.

**Table 1.** Summary of concepts and their definitions for the current framework

<u>Concept</u>	<u>Definition</u>
Securitization	An extreme version of politicization, where public issues are set forth as security concerns and existential threats that require urgent government intervention.
Indirect securitization	Securitization, where the threat is constructed through intersubjectivity and collective memory instead of verbalizing it in the securitization speech act.
Agency (audience)	An agency in securitization is a practical force among the audience, through which the institution, community or a person exerts their authority to react to the securitization process or created events.
Desecuritization	De-escalation, rejection or turning the emergency issue into a state of non-exceptionalism.
Counter-securitization	The process or action-reaction game of resistance against securitization by the audience follows the linguistically regulated vocabulary of securitization moves. Usually, a form of resistance by the audience.

## **Chapter 3: Analysis and findings**

### **3.1 2014-2022**

The upcoming chapter of the research sheds light on Estonian security politics from 2014 to 2022. The main focal point, being the first phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war, was highlighted by the occupation of Crimea and the “little green men” in Donbass. Furthermore, the passage will briefly go over securitization attempts done in the post-2022 time period, and see if these (EOC MP, soviet monuments, third-state voters) acts were brought up in 2014. Moreover, the passage scrutinizes the Estonian security landscape after 2014 and analyzes the discourses and reactions around moves against Russian influence. In more detail, the creation of ETV+ will be examined in detail, as it has become an exemplary securitization process during the time period.

#### **3.1.1 No securitization at all or securitizing towards integration?**

After the 2014 occupation of Crimea, the Estonian state voiced its clear concerns about the aggression in Ukraine. Although Russia presented an explicit threat by conducting a war in Europe, rapid securitization measures in response to Russian influence in Estonia were not evident. Nevertheless, discussions regarding Estonian security policies increased in frequency within the Parliament. Since the focal point of the research is the Russian foreign influence, it will not cover securitization processes that are meant to answer “hard power” measures, such as investments for the Defence Forces or border disputes.

During the period from 2014 to 2022, the Parliamentary disputes involved many instances of combating Russian influence. Moreover, those debates and speech acts were done in information meetings and not during draft act enactment sessions. During the period, the Russian foreign influence was connected to two themes: information influence (disinformation & propaganda) and influence against societal cohesion. The influence towards the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, Soviet monuments, and the third-state voter issue did not face any concerns during the period. Analyzing the

parliamentary debates on these topics indicated no results from the members. Despite the Bronze Soldier monument being a frequent talking point in the Parliament, it did not raise any security concerns around it or other soviet monuments. The existential issue of third-state voters also did not reach the Parliamentary debates and was shadowed by the European Union immigration crisis.

In light of creating the ETV+, that the next passage will cover, the Estonian state held debates about the Russian TV channel PBK (Первый Балтийский канал). Although the discourses around the channel did not spark any securitization moves like they did with ETV+, it is still notable to showcase the thoughts behind the debates. Moreover, the analysis finds that the discussions around PBK exemplify why securitization processes did not happen as explicitly during 2014-2022. In addition how the securitization processes leaned towards integration and not towards harsher means. Discussions around PBK fell into two categories - funding and promoting pro-Russian information. Eerik-Niiles Kross was one of the main figures who led the process against PBK. For example, his speech acts indicated the threat that the channel posed, claiming that it spreads information that does not align with Estonian security interests. Similarly, Kross stated that PBK spreads identical messages with the Russian state TV (Kross 2017). Reactions to the suggestions that the PBK channel should be either closed or removed from state funding saw responses from both Estonian and Russian speakers in the Parliament.

For that reason, it can not be said that the securitization process around PBK failed due to Russian-speaking audience resistance. Furthermore, the Prime Minister, Jüri Ratas, clearly stated that he will not stop giving interviews to PBK, justifying it by claiming that he has never seen any hostility towards Estonia from the channel and information has to reach also the Russian-speaking residents (Velsker 2017). In addition, Ratas stated that it is right if Estonian politicians give interviews to PBK, meanwhile being sceptical of ETV+'s rating and ironically asking if we should close the doors to PBK journalists (Velsker 2017). The justifications and the resistance from members of the parliament, including the Prime Minister, illustrate why certain threats did not become securitization acts. First, showcasing that the securitization acts lacked initiative from other securitizing actors, meaning that these concerns about the threat were not seen as threatening by other Parliament members.

Moreover, the resistance by other members of the Parliament outweighed the speech acts by actors who saw it as a threat. Secondly, as Ratas' speech slightly hinted, the securitization attempts failed. According to the analysis, it happened due to integration goals and the fear of losing the progress of integrating the Russian-speaking population. In other words, to "win over" the Russian-speaking population through inclusion and ignoring the perception of threat from the Russian influence. The latter two examples were seen in Jevgeni Ossinovski's speech act when asked about PBK. Ossinovski's speech act was harsher than Ratas', as he claimed that ignoring the channel would be "*An absolutely catastrophic decision, one that could only be made by someone completely unqualified in integration policy. There is no question about it*", moreover he claimed that ignoring the channel could leave out a large portion of the Russian-speaking population from Estonian information (Ploompuu 2018).

Ossinovski's speech act illustrates the discourses and mentality around potential Russian influence threats during that time period, where attempts to securitize the issue were quickly desecuritized or resisted due to different goals and hopes. Hoping that the Russian-speaking population would integrate more efficiently if their *modus operandi* or lifestyle were not disrupted. Instead of securitizing the Russian influence that was known, alternative options were created. For example, instead of ignoring or banning PBK, the government had created a state-run Russian-speaking TV channel, in hopes of convincing the Russian-speaking population to opt for the latter. Thus, according to my analysis, the rapid and explicit securitization acts were not undertaken during the first time period due to different securitization goals (focus on integration), lack of political initiative and hopes for alternative measures.

It is important to note that although the discourses around PBK did not lead to direct securitization acts during that period, the channel stopped airing in Estonia in February 2022, due to rapid securitization acts. Moreover, exemplifying the different goals and mentality until 2022.

Secondly, the securitization goals during the 2014-2022 time period are well illustrated by the discourses around granting automatic citizenship for children born to stateless parents in 2014. In other words, the process is seen as securitizing inclusion (Schulze & Pupcenoks 2025, 1). Despite the speech acts clearly stating a security threat, the further debates indicated why the process counters Russian influence in Estonia. Members of the parliament and the securitizing actors argued that integrating the Russophone community would enhance social

cohesion and mitigate the risk of cooperating with Russia (Schultze 2018). In addition, during the presentation of “Estonia’s Security Policy Guidelines through 2015”, the Minister of the Interior brought up the new law about granting citizenship to children of stateless parents (Pevkur 2015), thus indicating the securitization aspect in that process. The examples show that the goals to securitize Russian influence relied on “winning over” or gaining the trust and loyalty of Russian-speakers, instead of them favouring Russia. Reactions by the Russian-speaking audience to these securitization acts were acceptive, but proposed more integrative policy options, such as expanding the automatic citizenship to children whose parents are a Russian citizen and a grey passport holder, and similarly simplified citizenship acquisition to the elderly (Efendijev 2014). Similarly, these examples show how the securitization acts were not aimed towards influence containment by restricting it but strategically enhancing the societal cohesion. Whereas, in the upcoming passages that deal with post-2022 securitization the inclusion strategy was explicitly reconstructed.

### **3.1.2 Securitizing Russian media - The case of ETV +**

During 2014 and 2015, the Estonian state made great advancements to combat the Russian influence within media and television. The upcoming analysis covers how the securitization process around television started, and examines how the Russian TV channel of ETV+ came to life. In addition, reactions around ETV+ are brought up.

The initial securitization attempts to combat Russian media influence started at the beginning of 2014 within the Riigikogu. IRL’s (Fatherland) party proposed a bill to create a commission against the soft power that the Russian Federation’s television channels possess. Within the bill, the threat of Russian influence was securitized, stating: *“In broader terms, the matter is regarded as a security issue.”*, followed by referring to Arnold Sinisalu, *“It is important that people be assisted in recognizing hostile influence and propaganda concealed behind soft power and seemingly innocent concepts. It is once again emphasized that, as the V. Putin regime seeks to designate individuals in Estonia as compatriots of Russia and to incite them against the Estonian state, a threat may be posed to the constitutional order”* (Riigikogu 2014). As the speech act stated, the threat is against Estonian national security and the constitutional order. In addition, the text explicitly states that the Russian Federation uses compatriots in Estonia as a tool of influence.

The speech acts regarding the securitization of Russian media continued in the Parliament, where Urmas Reinsalu (2014) brought out two important factors regarding the securitization process. Firstly, the proposed problem commission should look into creating a second national television channel, which would help to relay positive information in Russian and according to public law. Secondly, to examine the laws regarding local media and seek to combat Russian propaganda that is spread through their news networks, such as Rossija RTR. Lastly, an idea to create a European Union Russian-speaking television channel. In addition, Reinsalu emphasised that the issue should be dealt with and not forgotten, which has happened multiple times during previous crises (Reinsalu 2014). Reinsalu's speech act brings out essential notions in the securitization process that frames context for the larger picture. Firstly, the first sparks regarding creating a national Russian-focused TV channel and secondly, to combat the foreign propaganda that has previously been forgotten to be dealt with. In other words, the speech act also revealed that the parliament loses its focus on crises if another issue arises. Furthermore, it indicates or hints at why previous securitization moves on immediate matters have failed.

Reactions to the committee and the propositions were diverse and came only from Estonian-speaking parliament members. Although no Russian-speaking parliament members reacted to the proposition, the reactions that arose are vital to understanding why the securitization process did not succeed. The majority of the reactions by the parliamentary audience to the speech act were acceptance, but with notions of scepticism towards the commission. Attempts to desecuritize the issue were minor, but relied on deconstructing the speech act and creating new narratives around the proposed bill. Desecuritizing speech acts found the idea to be part of a "propaganda war", drawing parallels to Soviet Estonia, where Western television channels were banned (Allik 2014). Similarly, the securitizer's speech act was reconstructed as propagandistic, provocative, and censoring, which would aggravate the local Russian-speaking population and create a security threat by going through with the ideas. (Allik 2014). Similarly, the analysis finds that the audience used a consequential narrative that aligns with the concept of counter-securitization. Jaak Allik (2014) stated in his speech: "*Naturally, this provokes widespread resentment toward the Estonian state among the viewers of these channels among our compatriots. Thus, in reality, it creates a threat to internal security rather than reducing it.*" Allik's statement can be seen as an attempt to counter-securitize the act by stating that the securitization process itself creates a possible

threat to national security. Other speeches regarding the securitization process were focused on questions and did not include elements of counter- or desecuritization.

The securitisation process ended the same parliamentary session, during which the leading commission (juhtivkomisjon) proposed to push back the draft act or bill, which 53 parliament members agreed to, leaving only 8 to oppose it.

Although the initial securitization attempts against Russian television channels did not succeed, the notion of expanding the local Russian-focused media continued. The research finds that despite the lack of threat formulation in speech acts towards the audience, the creation of ETV+ can be accounted for as an indirect securitization move against Russian foreign influence in Estonia. The reasoning behind it lies in previous speech acts and governmental programs that were tied to the creation of the channel. Firstly, as the previous passage noted, Reinsalu's (2014) speech act combined the Russian foreign threat and the creation of a state-run Russian TV channel. Using the foreign threat as a catalyst or a reason to create a channel provides an explanation why the creation of ETV+ is seen as a securitization act. Secondly, the creation of an audience-specific TV channel for the Russian-speaking audience was introduced as a goal or a measure of the strategic development plan "Lõimuv Eesti 2020" (eng. Integrative Estonia 2020). Despite the development plan predominantly focusing on integration goals between Estonians and Russian-speakers, it was related to internal security. In other words, the development plan claimed to amplify internal security and deter threats for example, psychological (Kultuuriministeerium 2014, 25). Moreover, emphasis was put on internal security in Ida-Virumaa (Kultuuriministeerium 2014, 29), where the majority of the population is Russian-speaking.

As mentioned before, the establishment of ETV+ did not see many speech acts that indicated a threat to Russian influence, because the reactions and desecuritization attempts by the Russian-speaking audience were relatively scarce. Despite the sparse reactions, the analysis finds criticism towards the channel that involves elements of desecuritization. Mihhail Stalnuhhin, a member of the Estonian Centre Party, claimed that he is boycotting the creation of the new TV channel, primarily hinting that the channel will produce local news that are not objective and the investment is not worth the expenses (Stalnuhhin 2014). The latter argument, not being part of the desecuritization process, still reflects a broader issue that was voiced during the channel creation process. Stalnuhhin's speech act in the parliament

contained elements of resistance, delegitimization and reconstruction of the narrative around the securitization process. He stated that the upcoming channel will push people further, spread misinformation, negativity and hatred about Russia, which will spill over to Russian-speakers in Estonia (Stalnuhhin 2014). In addition, he found that Estonian media would present only certain type of information, saying: *“We’ve been talking about Ukraine for a year and only one standpoint has been presented. This is not exactly what is really going on in the world.”*, continuing with *“In Estonian media everything is in black and white and everything has been decided in advance”* (Stalnuhhin 2014). Stating that the channel will relay misinformation can be seen as a form of reconstructing the securitization narratives, which delegitimizes the securitization act. Moreover, this implies that the Russophone media content would not be a legitimate source of information due to the chosen narratives by the state. Similarly, consequential narratives were created that implied that the media would be counter-productive towards integration due to its negative tone towards Russia and Russian-speakers. Similarly, Stalnuhhin’s statements draw attention to scepticism about the channel among the Russian-speakers, especially concerns around the objectivity and whether it can be seen as state propaganda. Stalnuhhin’s reaction towards the securitization act did not get any responses from the Parliament members and can be seen as a failed attempt.

In a similar manner, reactions were seen by Jana Toom (previously, Yana Toom), a fellow party member and a Russian-speaker. Toom’s reactions were modest compared to Stalnuhhin’s, mainly emphasising the incompetence of the upcoming channel. Attempts at desecuritization of the channel were rather brief and vague, but the act was worded clearly: *“ETV+ goal is to stand against Russian propaganda and inform the local Russian-speakers adequately about events on which they receive alleged fake information from Russian channels”* (Toom 2015). The word usage of “alleged” shows again the irony by the Russian-speaking audience of the idea that Russian media spreads fake news and that the new TV channel will counterbalance it with objective information. Similar examples of sarcasm can be seen in the speech where, Toom said: *“Secondly, by explicitly and aggressively contrasting the as yet non-existent channel’s 'honest journalism' with Russian 'montage,' she has, declared a war on an opponent who is significantly more powerful and competent than herself”* (Toom 2015). The usage of sarcasm does not necessarily seem as an attempt to desecuritize the issue, but rather a way to delegitimize its goals and objectives by undermining its objectivity. Similarly, did Toom criticize the to-be editor of the channel, finding that she has “killed” the trust towards the channel before it was created because of her

interviews. Moreover, the quality of the Russian language in the channel will be lacking, due to Estonia's "strangling" reforms in Russian schools (Toom 2015). The latter reaction shows resistance against the Estonian language reform in schools. Lastly, Toom predicted that the ETV+ channel will be run by old TV personnel and dilettantes, who suffered from the Estonian-focused school reform (Toom 2015).

Actions by the securitizers towards the audience's reactions were scarce and limited. The narratives that the channel will only produce pro-Estonian information did not go unnoticed, and Darja Saar, then the main editor of ETV+, replied to these reconstructed narratives. Her interview's goals can be analysed as reassuring and convincing towards the Russian-speaking audience. Saar reassured that the channel will provide diverse information to the people and emphasised that the channel is willing to "man the barricades" if necessary (Põld 2015). At the same time, she mentioned that the channel will not be for counter-propaganda, but rather a journalistic channel where there are no "black lists" (Põld 2015). The latter comment refutes the narratives created by the Russian-speaking audience in the Parliament. Similarly, did Saar touch on the consequences if the channel were not to come online. She found that the controversial opinions (annexation of Crimea or situation about Eston Kohver) that exist in the society could explode at some point, if the people weren't given a chance to express their arguments and thoughts on a designated platform (Põld 2015). Saar's speech was one of the last actions done before ETV+ came online. Reactions by the audience, such as opinion pieces from common folk, did not gain any attention from the state and thus, are irrelevant towards the securitization process. The channel, launched in September 2015 and is still active during the release of this research.

In conclusion, the securitization of Russian influence through media was successful in 2014-2015, whilst the main securitization act was the release of ETV+, a Russian-focused and spoken state-run TV channel. The analysis found that the initial attempts to securitize Russian influence through media fell through due to a Parliamentary vote and lack of initiative. In contrast, the ETV+ TV channel saw great success, facing only minor desecuritization attempts from Russian-speaking parliament members and none from the larger Russian-speaking audience. Attempts to resist and counter-securitize the issue included two larger themes. Firstly, the audience claimed that the channel will produce only an anti-Russian narrative, making it an unreliable source of adequate information. Secondly, the channel acts as a state propaganda source, that is meant to counter the Russian information

space, thus creating a division in the society. These reactions were answered by the securitizing actors with interviews and opinion pieces, where they refuted the created narratives and reassured the audience that the channel would respect free speech and no topics would be banned.

### **3.2 Post-2022**

The 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine changed European geopolitics dramatically, triggering a wake-up call for all the EU member states. Immediate policy changes were enacted, including Sweden and Finland joining NATO, and the countries that border Russia became key security players. Previous accommodating strategies towards Russia had failed, and European states had to adapt to a new reality - danger from the East.

In Estonia's context, the danger that Russia poses was acknowledged decades prior, mainly due to being a former Soviet state and hosting one of the largest sums of grey passport holders. Although the danger was known beforehand, Estonia underwent a significant amount of securitization moves in the upcoming years against Russian foreign influence.

The following paragraphs analyse what areas and topics have been securitized against Russian influence and seek to study how these changes happened after 2022. Furthermore, the chapter gives context, goes over the reactions caused by the audience, and analyses the discourse between the securitizing elite and the Russian-speaking audience. The chapter draws a parallel between the 2014 and 2022 timeframes and discusses how the Russian-speaking audience's reactions and implications were transformed after the large-scale continuation of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Furthermore, the subsection examines actions made by the government in response to the Russian-speaking audience's reactions. The paragraph discusses three larger fields or themes that underwent securitization against Russian influence, which are the Russian Orthodox church in Estonia, Soviet monuments, and lastly, the constitutional change regarding third-state voters in municipal elections.

#### **3.2.1 Securitization of the Russian influence within the Russian Orthodox Church**

After the escalation of war in 2022, Eesti Kristil Õigeusu kirik (before: Moskva Patriarhaadi Eesti Õigeusu Kirik (MPEÕK) or the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate

(EOC MP) has been one of the most significant talking points during securitization against Russian foreign influence. During the securitization process, two smaller topics or fields emerged that the Estonian government found to be matters of supreme priority. First, the relations between EOC MP and Moscow's patriarchate (direct ties with the Kremlin), and the head of the church representing Russian narratives and influencing local politics (interfering and influencing local voters). In order to understand the securitization process and discourses around the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, further context is necessary. According to Statistikaamet (2022), orthodoxy is the most prevalent religion in Estonia, with believers making up 16% of the population, which is around 220,000 people. Moreover, 50% of people of Russian nationality feel connected to Orthodoxy in Estonia.

### **The case of the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (EOC MP)**

The first phases of securitization on the EOC MP started in the spring of 2024, a bit over two years after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with speech acts done in the Parliament. The first notions were formed as a statement on behalf of the Estonian Parliament members in order to enact a bill that declares the Moscow Patriarchate as an institution that supports military aggression in Ukraine. The statement written by members of the parliament declared: *“In today's world, a state must protect its people not only from physical threats but also from terrorist and other hostile propaganda, as well as incitement to violence. Protection against such propaganda also concerns Orthodox Christians living in Estonia, regardless of their language, nationality, or canonical affiliation. The Riigikogu expresses its dismay over the abuse and distortion of religion and Orthodox tradition by the Moscow Patriarchate and the current Russian regime. Given the past actions of the Moscow Patriarchate, there remains a significant risk of influencing people within such a pseudo-religious context“* (Riigikogu 2024).

In the statement, a direct threat towards Estonian security was also stated, which is one of the few times during the securitization acts after 2022 where the securitizing actor has explicitly declared a threat by a certain influence tool or method. More importantly, the danger was verbalized as *“a security threat to Estonia and to its continuation, including a direct menace to public and constitutional order”* (Riigikogu 2024). Although the speech act directly focused on Moscow's Patriarchate, it paved the way to further securitize the influence within the EOC MP, which directly conforms to the former.

Despite the fact that the audience for these speech acts were not common Russian-speaking people or people that the literature treats as the audience, but rather the parliament members and leaders of the church. Two clear reactions among the parliament members emerged. First, an attempt to desecuritize the issue by postponing it could be seen as an attempt to ignore it, which is an established strategy (Wæver 2000, 253). Deliverances stated that the issue should not be argued in its current state since the Parliament has not held talks with church leaders and, more importantly, the issue is being enacted during Easter, an important time for Christians (Kovalenko- Kõlvart 2024; Belobrovtssev 2024). The analysis finds, that the her, speech act indicates that the securitization speech act failed, since the issue is not a matter of importance.

Secondly, the issue was reconstructed, and the narrative was changed by members of the Parliament. They found that it is an attempt to incite hatred among the Estonian Orthodox community and to create conditions to illegally dismantle the EOC MP (Vooglaid 2024). Vooglaid's statements and reactions to the speech acts can be seen as a method of counter-securitization and delegitimization of the issue - a form of resistance. He used similar language that is inherent to securitization speech acts, for example, calling it an attempt to illegally dismantle the EOC MP and the issue of the Parliament inciting hatred, which can be seen as a threat to the Estonian Orthodox community.

The securitization process against Russian influence within the EOC MP continued during 2024. Lauri Läänemets (2024), who was the minister of interior during the securitization process, verbalized his concerns about the EOC MP, which conforms to the head church in Moscow, finds that Ukraine is part of the Russian world and Estonia as a country that should not exist (Läänemets 2024). Läänemets' plea to the EOC MP can be seen as another speech act in the process. Even if the speech act was meant for the churches' congregations, it still reached a larger audience through ERR (state media). Läänemets said: *“When a high-ranking church leader delivers a message that calls for aggression and terrorism, it inevitably casts a shadow of terrorism over the entire church he leads—the Russian Orthodox Church—regardless of where its congregations and other denominational structures are located outside of Russia. The people of Estonia who wish to live freely and peacefully in their faith must also be free from the reality that their religious leader, the Patriarch, is part of an aggressive and terrorist state apparatus”* (Läänemets 2024). The plea did not explicitly verbalize that the EOC MP is a terrorist and dangerous organisation, but the analysis sees it

as a way of indirect securitization by implying its connection to Patriarch Kirill. Further indicating the connection between Moscow and EOC MP is a danger to Estonia's freedom and peace.

Reactions by the audience (the church) arose after these events, in which the church's spokespeople used their agency in the media and wider Russian-speaking public to try to desecuritize the immediate matters stated by the state. During the initial phase of these events, the church focused solely on desecuritizing the issue and spreading the narratives to local Russian-speaking audiences. Bishop Daniel's methods of desecuritizing the matters were to distance the EOC MP's opinions and actions from Moscow's, indicating that they do not share opinions on a full-scale Russian invasion. On the other hand, Daniel's statements included the impossibility for the EOC MP to cut the canonical ties to Moscow's patriarch and that political human errors are not a good enough reason to destroy the church's hierarchy (Eesti Päevaleht 2024). The initial attempts to desecuritize the issue revolve around helplessness and canonical issues on the EOC MP's part, meaning that they are incapable of ruling out new decisions without Moscow's acceptance. For example, they are unable to denounce Moscow's ties, or they can not merge with the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church under a new name that was recommended. However, they state that they possess autonomy in thought and opinion (Eesti Päevaleht 2024). My research finds that the former ways of deconstructing an immediate issue through ignorance or, in bishop Daniel's case, incapability of going forward with securitization is an established tactic or strategy in desecuritization theory, according to Wæver (2000, 253).

In contrast to the church's statements of being incapable of accepting the government's terms, the EOC MP has been an active desecuritizer and enforcer of their agency among the Russian-speaking audience, mainly producing discourses through giving interviews to journalists, writing opinion pieces in larger media outlets, and visiting TV programs that broadcast their messages to a larger audience.

Attempts to bring the Russian influence within the congregation out of the extreme to normal politics, continued on the church's part. According to my analysis, the initial phases mainly included desecuritization by stating that it could not be dealt with, a way of ignoring the threat. Furthermore, the research finds that a new tactic to desecuritize the menace presented by the ministry included reframing and deconstructing the threat. According to Bishop Daniel, the speech by patriarch Kirill was misinterpreted by the ministry. Thus, this indicates

that the speech did not imply any geopolitical ambitions but rather was meant in a religious-philosophical way that dates back to the Middle Ages (Lomp 2024). The current research's scope can not give an answer to Bishop Daniel's statement, but relying on securitization theory, the research finds the EOC MP's reaction as an attempt to desecuritize the process by presenting counter-narratives.

The second and current phase, during which the study is being conducted, involves increasing resistance from the church, which the analysis finds as a strategy to counter-securitize the state. In addition, the study refers to the transformation from desecuritizing the matter through ignorance to a resistance that delegitimizes the government's actions.

The government's reaction to the EOC MP's "inability" to act was to transform the securitization process into a legal issue. Since the state found that the EOC MP had not broken ties with Moscow's superiors, the Ministry of Interior drafted a bill to combat the Russian influence within the EOC MP. Moreover, the bill (Kirikute ja koguduste seaduse muutmise seadus 570 SE) would enact a law that prohibits a church, monastery, or convent from being ruled by a foreign institution or a person that poses a threat to Estonian security, public and constitutional order. In addition, Estonian religious institutions can not be connected to a person or institution that promotes terror or violence. Moreover, all religious institutions must reconcile their statutes and actions to Estonian law (Riigikogu 2025).

The reactions that the study accounts for as attempts to counter-securitize and deconstruct the actions started in Riigikogu by the members of Parliament. The main themes that connected the audience (note: largely Russian speakers) in Parliament were that the government is closing all Russian Orthodox churches, they are ignoring the principle of freedom of religion, and the ministry's actions are not based on facts. Similarly, parallels between the USSR's repressive rhetoric were drawn (Stenogramm 2025). The study finds the parallels between the USSR and other leaders of the Soviet Union a strategy. Using figures like Viktor Kingissepp and Stalin in counter-securitizing discourse signifies the severity of dismantling the securitization process. Due to that, the historical figures may have been used to draw in a larger Estonian community to the desecuritization process since these figures signify historically tragic and hurtful times among the general population and are part of a larger collective memory. Thus, the government is framed as an oppressor or a threat.

Reactions by the Russian-speaking community sparked after the statements in the Parliament. Discourses were produced by Bishop Daniel, clergymen from other denominations, and also ordinary Russian speakers. Narratives to desecuritize and counter-securitize united the audience in the process. Similar to the initial reactions from the Parliament members, the larger orthodox audience is attempting to deconstruct and delegitimize the government's securitization moves. Examples of delegitimizing and counter-securitization attempts can be seen in an opinion piece that was written by Ludmila Bariševski and Natalja Paško. The authors have written: *“The purpose of the legislative amendment, as stated in the explanatory memorandum of the bill, is to ensure national security. The security threat arising from the Estonian Orthodox Church has not been substantiated in any way. There was no societal pressure to make these changes.”* (Bariševski & Paško 2025). The example shows resistance through deconstructing the official narratives. Emphasising the fact that the securitization narratives were built on false premises and implying that the EOC MP's threat has not been confirmed. Thus, the governmental narratives are not legitimate according to the authors. A similar example of deconstructing the securitization narratives and reframing the state as a threat to the audience (the orthodox community) was raised by the authors who stated: *“The legislative amendment in question is directed solely at the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, and we believe that in doing so, it becomes dangerously easy to incite national and religious discord among Estonia's population by labelling Orthodox Christians as a "security threat" (Bariševski & Paško 2025).*

Bishop Daniel's reaction to the continuous securitization moves was to call the international community to the audience's aid. Similar counter-securitization narratives were employed to bring attention to the issue in the international arena. Such an event took place at the UN United Nations Human Rights Council 58th session, where Daniel turned to the leaders of UN states (Postimees 2025). The counter-securitization moves were more direct, instead of the previous vagueness, and framed Estonian government actions as a breach of international law that could violate human rights. The study finds that his speech act in the UN moved the counter-securitization into a higher state of emergency than it previously was. This transformation can be seen in his choice of words. Whilst the previous narratives by the audience were about threats to the Orthodox community (freedom of religion), the usage of the UN's genocide prevention methods increased the severity of the securitization moves and reached out to a larger international community. As Daniel presented to the UN: *“According to the UN's methodology for the prevention of genocide, the targeting of specific groups on*

*the basis of nationality, ethnicity, religion, or other criteria and the incitement of hatred against them, can lead to tragic consequences. We call on the international community to protect the rights of the faithful of our Church.”* (Postimees 2025). Bishop Daniel’s speech acts intentionally distort the position of the government by creating a narrative that the Orthodox community is targeted, but in reality, the threat is the harmful influence from Moscow that is upon this group. The scope of the study does not analyse whether the speech act was accepted by the international community, but it allows us to see that the discourses and reactions of the Russian-speaking audience transformed severely during the securitization process. Similarly, the analysis finds the change of tactics when constructing new narratives around the securitization attempt.

Considering all the aspects, the study found that during the securitization process that dealt with the Russian influence within the EOC MP, the church reacted to every action done by the government in a resisting manner. The securitization speech acts by the government were direct, as they verbalized the threat and found it to be a danger to Estonian security and public order. The audience did not accept the speech acts and used their agency to produce discourses on what the government further engaged with. The audience used media to dissent from the securitization narratives and created critical media coverage of it. Moreover, the strategies to combat the securitization process involved mainly desecuritization that transformed, or rather became, part of counter-securitization attempts. During the initial phases, the EOC MP used a strategy of ambiguity or incapability of action, which meant that they could not canonically sever the ties, thus avoiding commitment to the securitization goals. Furthermore, the EOC MP desecuritized the immediate matters by reconstructing the threat narratives, implying that the government had misunderstood the threat (Patriarch Kirill’s speech). The second and ongoing phase was mainly based on counter-securitizing the government by reframing the state actions as an existential threat to the orthodox community. Moreover, the audience changed their strategy and brought the process to the international arena to gain support from the UN. Counter-securitization reactions and moves included framing the governmental actions as overstepping freedom of religion, drawing parallels between the Estonian government and the USSR and emphasising how the EOC MP’s survival is threatened by bills that are planned by the Parliament.

The outcome of the securitization process has yet to be seen, but by the time of writing, the audience is actively rejecting the state's proposed securitization moves and is pursuing legal and international discourses to dismantle it.

### 3.2.2 Removal of the Soviet monuments

In 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the reassertion of militarised aggression in Europe, the Estonian government began to securitize Russian influence through Soviet monuments and symbols. An action that had not been done on a large scale since regaining independence in 1991. The following sections of the research give context, create a timeline and analyse the securitization process that took place. Moreover, the analysis includes speech acts by the elite and the audience, meanwhile dissecting the audience's reactions and strategies. A more detailed analysis has been conducted on the T-34 tank, which was one of the main symbols of Soviet power, that caused the most discourses around the securitization process.

The previous securitization attempts of soviet symbols and monuments in Estonia have not gone without resistance. As the study briefly mentions in the initial passages, the most notable event culminated in 2007, when the government decided to relocate the Bronze Soldier (Pronkssõdur) monument to a military cemetery. The securitization events ended up with mass riots by the audience, who resisted the securitization attempts. The majority of the rioters were Russian-speakers with agitators from the Russian Federation. The reactions by the audience included mass rioting on the streets, conflicts with the police, looting and destruction of the city's property (Anvelt 2022). The riots lasted for two days, during which the Russian Federation launched cyber attacks against the Estonian state institutions and companies. The securitization process concluded with the relocation of the Bronze Soldier to the military cemetery, but the scars that the audience's reactions left are still talked about to the present day.

The most recent securitization process started in 2022, a couple of months after the war in Ukraine intensified. The first attempts to combat the Russian foreign influence through monuments and symbols were initiated in the Parliament in April of 2022 by members of EKRE (Conservative People's Party of Estonia) who proposed a bill (Ettepaneku tegemine Vabariigi Valitsusele võtta tarvitusele meetmed Vene sõjajõudude vallutuspoliitikat õigustavate monumentide eemaldamiseks" eelnõu (588 OE)) to the government to take action against monuments justifying Russian invasions. Since the bill's explanation frames a threat, it accounts for the first official speech act regarding Soviet monuments after 2022. For instance, in the bill, EKRE's party stated: *"The presence of such memorial objects is*

*intolerable for our state, especially as they inflame social divisions, incite international hostility, and significantly undermine both social and political security”* (Riigikogu 2022). Despite the bill being proposed in April of 2022, it did not reach the Parliament until November of 2022, when the tank monument in Narva had been displaced. This created a securitization vacuum between the bill and extreme matters that revolved around the displacement of the tank.

The speech act explicitly stated how the monuments pose a threat to Estonian security, bringing out social cleavages between Estonians and the Russian-speaking population. Moreover, it vocalized a clear statement about the threat to social and political safety. Although Russian foreign influence was not brought out as a threat in this instance, it can be accounted for, due to how the Russian Federation has previously used foreign Soviet monuments to create conflicts within ex-Soviet states. Moreover, the implication of the Russian Federation using Soviet monuments as a tool of influence can be seen in Anti Poolamets’ statement in the Parliament: *“We know that the Russian intelligence services in Tallinn were involved in organizing this unrest (Bronze Night riots in 2007). This is precisely an example of how these very symbols can be used to disrupt internal peace and create tensions within society. That is exactly how this monument was actively used”* (Poolamets 2022).

### **Rapid securitization - The case of the T-34 tank in Narva**

During the rapid securitization process that started after 2022, the most prominent event became the Soviet monument of a T-34 tank in Narva. Narva’s tank had become a highly appreciated landmark for the local Russian-speaking community due to its symbolic meaning. The tank was erected for the liberation of Narva by the Red Army, despite the original reasons, modern interpretations include a memorial for fallen soldiers and a place where locals held wedding rituals.

According to my analysis, the starting date of the securitization process around Narva’s tank is difficult to pinpoint. It could be debated, that the bill started by EKRE, which was mentioned in the previous passage, was the initial point of the securitization process. On the other hand, Urmas Reinsalu’s speech in the Parliament in April hinted that Narva’s Tank represents an aggression act, and should be sanctioned by a draft act that was being enacted

(Reinsalu 2022). The bill “Karistusseadustiku ja vääртеomenetluse seadustiku muutmise seaduse (agressiooni toetamine) eelnõu (585 SE) (ühendatud eelnõud 556 SE ja 576 SE)”, which was enacted in April of 2022 (Riigikogu 2022a), did not trigger any reactions from the audience in the Parliament, in contrast to the bills regarding the Orthodox Church in Estonia, as the previous part of the analysis found.

The securitization process of the tank reached its height in July and August 2022 when the act of removing the tank shifted between the Narva city council, led by Katri Raik, and the government. The analysis considers the city administration as a part of the audience, due to their initially rejecting reactions and attempts to desecuritize the process. The first attempts to desecuritize the extreme matters arose from Katri Raik (mayor of Narva), who stated it in an interview given to a radio channel. Raik’s interview embodied a strategy of denial and shifting the securitization narratives to different, more important matters. As she stated in the interview, Narva’s city council will not displace the tank: “*The tank is not Estonia’s biggest problem, nor is it Narva’s. Heating, electricity prices, jobs, and Estonian-language education, those are the real issues*” (Müller 2022). Bringing out other fields of more important problems indicated resistance to go along with the securitization process. Furthermore, indicating in the speech, that the tank does not serve a position of important matters, thus trying to bring it back to the “normal” sphere of politics and out of the “extreme”.

Consequently to Raik’s speech act, the government officials’ reactions were to hasten up the securitization process around the tank by taking the initiative, instead of waiting for the city council to do it. Two of the most definite speech acts that indicated a hasty securitization process were done by the then PM Kaja Kallas and former Minister of Foreign Affairs Urmas Reinsalu. Kallas stated in a press conference that since Narva’s city council does not plan to relocate the tank by themselves, the Estonian state must do it by themselves. Similarly stating: “*The main decision has already been made: Soviet monuments must be removed from public spaces, and we will carry this out without delay.*” (Kallas 2022). Kallas’ statements present that the securitization process does not accept any kind of resistance or attempts at desecuritization, even if the local administration tries to do that. Decisions regarding the monuments have been made, and there is no room for bargaining or bringing this issue to the normal political sphere.

Urmas Reinsalu's interview given to ERR proved a significant pattern in the securitization process, as his speech act stated that the tank needs to be removed within a month. Furthermore, explaining that if it takes a longer time, Russian provocateurs and instigators have time to create a crisis within the society, something that happened during the Bronze Soldier removal. Moreover, he emphasised: "*Society is ready and awaiting this decision. Simply delaying it means acting against the interests of the Estonian state, its security, and its people. Therefore, the decision must be made*" (Kiisler 2022). Moreover, the threats were stated in an interview with Postimees, where Reinsalu said: "*The message must be clear: in our country, our rules and our way of life apply. We will uphold this, protect our security interests, and defend the principles and values on which we build our society*" (Martin 2022). In contrast to the previous speech acts, the threat to Estonian security was verbalized, something that the securitizers had not previously explicitly stated to the public media and to larger audiences. Moreover, the dangers of Russian influence regarding the monument were brought out quite clearly by referring to the 2007 Bronze Night riots that were instigated by foreign agents. In addition, the speech act done as an interview with Postimees shows clear red lines, as there are no exceptions to Narva anymore, and people must obey local customs, whereas previously Narva and the Russian-speaking population had experienced exceptions by the government. The analysis finds that those exceptions were part of integration policies that were carried out before 2022.

The Russian-speaking audience responded to the speech acts promptly, with rejection and resistance. The desecuritization acts were done more in a demonstrative and protesting way, meaning that citizens of Narva (mostly Russian speakers) visited the monument and brought flowers to it. More extreme cases of protest were reported by Õhtuleht, where groups of people took residence in nearby camper vans to protect the tank. Interviews that were done with the protestors, indicate resistance and attempts to desecuritize the issue. The most extreme desecuritization strategy was through threats, which had not previously been done. A Member of the Russian-speaking protestors claims that if the tank were to be removed, thousands of people would show up and it would be like the Bronze Night Riots. Moreover, they found that if the Estonian government relocated the tank, a war would break out and Estonia would become smaller (Joakit 2022). The analysis finds that these two statements were extreme, but it was a very small fraction of people who expressed themselves like that; moreover, they had no agency to spread these messages to a larger public or the securitizers. In conclusion, the initial attempts to desecuritize the issue by local Russian-speaking citizens

were done peacefully by showing their support for the monument. However, snippets of interviews did show that parts of the audience drew comparisons to the Bronze Night riots and used a strategy of threats to desecuritize the issue.

A significant theme that represents the desecuritization of the tank arose in interviews and opinion pieces that Russian-speaking audiences wrote in public media. First, the audience attempted to desecuritize the issue by distancing themselves from the ongoing war in Russia and stating that the tank was only a memorial. For instance, Jevgenia Parv wrote in *Eesti Päevaleht*: “*This is our tank, this is the memory of our fallen, leave it to us... What does Russia have to do with this? We do not support its aggression, so stop linking our tank to what is happening in Ukraine right now*” (Parv 2022). A similar tactic or strategy was also seen in the initial desecuritization attempts of the Orthodox Church by hinting that the current issue has nothing to do with the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Similarly, the audience created a narrative around the discourse, that the existence of the tank is not connected to the ongoing war at all, but is merely a symbol for the fallen.

Secondly, the audience framed the outcome of the securitization process as a damaging move in integration between the Russian-speaking community and the Estonian state. Moreover, the removal of the tank created bigger divisions within the population, mainly constructing a narrative that the Russian-speaking population feels left out in the process and is framed as a security threat. Examples of reconstructing the narrative to create divisions between populations can be seen in multiple interviews and speeches. Mihhail Stalnuhhin in his interview with Postimees stated: “*The objective is to create Russians as the enemies again and to tear apart our society, where there are going to be huge problems anyway*” (Martin 2022a). Similarly, Yana Toom, a member of the European Parliament, implied in an interview that it would be a grave mistake to move the tank and create a feeling that the Estonian state does not care about the people of Narva. Moreover, claiming that the Estonian state would not want more people hoping for Putin’s win (ERR 2022). In addition, the second theme and a strategy to desecuritize the matters can also be seen in Parv’s opinion piece, where she also finds that the Estonian politicians are acting short-sighted towards their own people and the securitization process regarding the tank would push Narva further away, all the achievements of integration would be wiped out, and the state would become the enemy of the citizens of Narva (Parv 2022). These three examples show a clear resistance to the securitization process, but instead of protesting, the authors used their agency to produce

discourses for mass media, which the analysis sees as an attempt to desecuritize the issue. Bringing out the dangers that the securitization act could cause and pointing out an already problematic field, which has been Russian integration in North-Eastern Estonia. Thus, they are trying to turn back the securitization act and trying to grant Narva exceptional status in the process.

The analysis finds that the last phase during the Narva Tank's securitization process involved a back-and-forth tug-of-war between Narva's city council (the audience) and the state (securitizers). The first reactions and discourses created by the city council indicated that they had accepted the securitization process, meaning that the tank would be relocated. Therefore, on the 8th of August 2022, Katri Raik announced that the city council would relocate the tank by themselves, explaining that it would show Narva's independent city council and would not let the state dictate local decisions. Similarly, did Raik mention that relocating the tank by themselves would prevent Estonia from splitting into two (ERR 2022a). Although the speech did indicate that if the state removed the tank, the population would be split, it can not be counted as a desecurization attempt because acceptance was vocalized through the discourse. The speech shows a larger result of the securitization process. Whereas in the beginning a strategy by the city council was to ignore the issue and distance themselves from it, but after the continuous speech acts done by the Prime Minister and other state officials, the city council decided to vocalize their acceptance. Although the acceptance was shown, it only functioned as a linguistic act, not as a practice.

Despite the speech act that showed acceptance of the securitization process, the city council tried to desecuritize the process one last time. Similarly to the first attempt, the reaction involved ignoring the problem, thus trying to bring it out of the emergency mode that the state had elevated it to. In this instance, Narva's city council decided not to bring the tank issue into the collective meeting's agenda, which took place days after stating that they would relocate it. Similarly, local councilmen told journalists that the state has not made legal prerequisites to relocate it, thus the delay in action (Postimees 2022). The council's lack of initiative and clear opposite reaction to the previous speech act, where they agreed to relocate the tank, indicates their tactic to desecuritize the issue. A parallel can be drawn between how the Orthodox church in the first phase claimed its inability to deal with the matters, thus trying to delay the securitization process. The council's indecisiveness was dealt with a clear response from the state. The tank was removed by the government on the 16th of August, a

day after the last desecuritization attempt (ERR 2022b), thus putting an end to the securitization act around the monument.

In conclusion, the securitization process of the T-34 tank in Narva showed clear and forthright actions by the government. Speech acts done by the securitizers vocalized the Russian foreign influence, a threat that the tank amplified if left in Narva. Moreover, the government did not want to repeat mistakes that were made in relation to the relocation of the Bronze Soldier. Attempts to desecuritize the issue were made by Narva's city council and the local Russian-speakers. The city council tried initially to ignore and redirect the issue by creating new narratives about more important matters. The local Russian-speaking audience expressed their resistance by peacefully mobilizing and using their agency to give interviews to larger media outlets, thus creating discourses between the government and the audience. A common theme that the securitized used was creating a consequential narrative. Moreover, stating that the securitization process creates divisions within society and the government is going backwards with the integration process in Ida-Virumaa. New narratives and attempts to desecuritize the issue were not taken into account, and the securitization process around the tank ended with the government's swift actions to relocate the tank.

### **3.2.3 Constitutional change regarding third-state voters**

The third and most extensive and substantial case that the analysis examines is the 2025 securitization process in the Estonian constitution regarding the voting rights of non-citizen or third-state voters. The last time the Estonian constitution was changed was in 2016, also in relation to voting. It is important to note that the changes in voting rights only applied to local municipal elections. Non-citizens have never had the possibility to vote in the parliamentary elections in Estonia. The securitization process caused significant reactions from both the Parliamentary audience but also by the larger Russian-speaking population. The analysis examines the themes and reactions caused by the audience, meanwhile looking at actions done by the securitizers.

The first notions towards the securitization of the Russian influence through local voting were seen in early 2022, a couple of months after the large-scale invasion started. The speech act was done by Helir-Valdor Seeder in an information hearing, where the members of the

Parliament could ask questions from the Prime Minister. Seeder's speech took place during a national security hearing, where he proposed the idea of banning municipal voting for Russian and Belarusian citizens (Seeder 2022). The speech act also formulated a very clear threat to Estonian national security and voiced the possibility of rapid results, thus making it a securitization process. Seeder emphasised that the ban on non-citizens and non-EU voters has been implemented in 13 EU member states, especially in Latvia, where the population of Russian-speakers is high. Similarly, he brought up that "practice has shown" that it has become a security threat in Estonia (Seeder 2022). The speech acts did not cause any reactions from the audience and were seen in a positive manner by the Prime Minister.

Since the securitization process involves multiple draft acts that were rejected and sent back, it will not cover all of them, since the essence of them has remained the same. The analysis will look at the most prominent ones, such as the first and the last draft Acts. Similarly, those drafts that possess substantial legislative changes.

The first securitization move in the process was made in 2022, when draft Act 594 SE (Amendment Act to the Local Government Council Election Act) was proposed to the Parliament. The draft act proposed a change in local municipality elections, which would only allow voting for citizens and European Union residents (Riigikogu 2022b). Within the draft Act (bill), the threat was again clearly constructed, in a similar wording to Seeder's (2014) speech, claiming that third-country nationals have become a security threat. For instance, Estonian universities have banned Russian and Belarusian citizens from their lists, but in contrast, they are still allowed to vote in local elections (Riigikogu 2022b). No further analysis or data were provided to exemplify the threat within the speech act. Parliamentary audience reactions to the initial securitization move were mostly rejective and included elements of desecuritization by counter-securitising the move but also referring to consequential reactions. Since the analysis focuses on the Russian-speaking audience, the speech acts are taken from members of the Parliament, who tend to represent the larger Russian-speaking population in Estonia, mainly Keskerakond (Centre Party).

Deliverances in the parliament during the first reading focused on desecuritizing the issue by resistance and creating new narratives around the securitization results. In addition, bringing out how the act would negate the principles of the legal state, which would delegitimize the process. For example, Kovalenko-Kõlvart (2022) found the act to be sanctioning and imposing a collective responsibility on a certain demographic group, which goes against the

principles of the state of law. Similarities to her statement can be seen in the previous passages of the analysis, where one of the strategies of desecuritization was to distance the Estonian Russian-speaking population from the Russian Federation's threat. In other words, claiming that the local minority is being punished for the Russian Federation's actions. The research finds that the desecuritization narrative of "collective punishment" becomes notable during the securitization process, due to its common use among the audience. Similar rhetoric was delivered by Maria Jufereva-Skuratovski (2022), who stated that the Act will create "our's" and "others" in society, thus hindering the integration processes. The consequential narrative of working against the integration process has previously been used in the Narva Tank's and EOC MP's securitization cases, which makes it one of the most common themes or strategies among the desecuritizing audience. Drawing parallels to historic discrimination also emerged in the audience, where Viktor Vassiljev (2022) said: *"But if certain residents with residence permits are denied this constitutional right, the next step could be taking away their right to work in government jobs, then their right to higher education, and eventually telling them they can only sit at the back of the bus and nowhere else"*. The latter part of the reconstructed narrative hints towards the discriminatory laws in the United States regarding black people, thus drawing a parallel between Russian-speakers and African-Americans. In contrast, the statement does not take into account that the US black population is not culturally and politically oriented towards an external force.

Attempts at desecuritization continued during the second hearing of the draft Act, where once again the desecuritizing audience relied on the narrative that the securitization move would damage integration in Estonia. Furthermore, stating that it would not help towards state security or the sense of security, but would insult people who are honest taxpayers and contribute towards Estonia's development (Jufereva-Skuratovski 2022a). The speech indicates the first time, when the "taxpayer's argument" from the audience was brought in, which goes under the theme or desecuritization strategy that Estonia's Russian-speakers are distant from Russian Federation Russians and should not be treated as such. The taxpayer discourse also indicates a narrative that paying taxes makes someone loyal and trustworthy. Similarities were seen with the previous cases, where local Russian-speakers and citizens were distanced from Russian Federation crimes.

The securitizers responded to the audience's speech acts with clear messages, focusing on the significance of Russian-speakers and their effect on Estonian domestic policy. For instance,

stating the risk of 70,000 Russian citizens who could be used by the Russian Intelligence apparatus. Moreover, emphasising how every Russian citizen must protect the Russian Federation according to its constitution (Kivimägi 2022). The analysis finds that these explicit speech acts by the securitizer indicate a shift in securitization tone in comparison to the previous time period. Previously, the local Russian citizens were granted exceptionalities and were treated in an integrative light, whereas the new securitization process considers them potential tools for Russian influence. It is important to highlight that the Russian-speaking population is not considered an existential threat in the securitization process, whereas the Russian foreign influence is. Attempts to desecuritize the initial securitization act did not succeed, since it passed the readings in the Parliament but later failed due to the expiration of Parliament's mandate.

Continuation of the securitization process became more intense in 2024 and entered its last phase in 2025. Although in 2023, the Parliament members made multiple attempts to push through with edited draft Acts, they lacked initiative and parliamentary support. Moreover, due to rapid coalition shifts and the conflict with the constitution (requirement to change the constitution), the topic lost traction within hearings. The analysis finds that the second and last phases of the securitization process were hastened due to the 2025 local municipal elections. The necessity to push the securitization act through by the state officials became evident during Parliamentary meetings, where it became a talking point monthly. Similarly, the securitization act became a topic in every information hearing. As mentioned previously, speech acts by the securitizers carry the same talking points as previously, thus requiring no repetition within the analysis. Despite the audience reactions not being as intense as in the upcoming phase, the 2022-2023 period experienced some desecuritizing speech acts from a non-parliamentary audience. Katri Raik, Narva's mayor and a key figure during the Narva's Tank desecuritization process, found that Russian-speakers pose no security threat to Estonia, especially towards the Presidential elections, saying that it is a made-up threat. In addition, she claimed that switching citizenship for Russians is rather complex (Muraveiski 2023). Using her agency as the mayor of Narva and a known spokesperson for Russian-speakers, the initial threat narrative was deconstructed, hinting that the speech act by the securitizing actors failed. In addition, a common desecuritization discourse was reproduced - renouncing Russian citizenship is a complex, if not an impossible undertaking. Thus, according to the reacting audience, the securitization process has become unjust towards the Russian-speaking audience who despite their efforts, can not gain citizenship.

In addition, during the second securitization phase, the process was intensified by finding ways to urgently change the constitution, which during previous phases was not seen as a feasible possibility. Securitizing actors shifted, and the leaders of Reformierakond/Isamaa became the leading figures during the second and last phases. Furthermore, more speech acts were released on public media by the securitizers, and the process was brought out from the Parliament to an everyday audience, including Russian-speakers. Since the securitization act regarding third-state voters went into the limelight, discourses by the Russian-speaking audience became more prominent and vocal, thus enforcing their agency in the securitization process. The majority of the reactions by the audience towards the securitization process were done in a resisting manner and included elements of desecuritization.

Very explicit resistance started from the Parliament, where previously voiced themes arose again. Since the process was closely related to the Estonian constitution, a new delegitimizing narrative was created by the Parliamentary audience, stating that the securitization act would be unconstitutional. Aleksei Jevgrafov, a member of the Centre Party, stated that taking away the voting rights from certain Russian-speakers is unconstitutional (Jevgrafov 2024). An argument by the securitizing audience came from Kaja Kallas (2024), who brought out the option for rapidly changing the constitution to carry out the process. Kallas' statement indicates a significant change in the process. Previously, the act was tried to be carried out without making changes to the constitution, but now it is seen as a possibility. Desecuritization attempts and discourses by the audience continued to rely on everyday justifications, the themes of Russian-speakers included being incapable of acting (helplessness), being law-abiding and paying taxes to the Estonian state. The former discourses are similar to the EOC MP's case, where the audience claimed to be helpless and unable to act in a required manner. Jevgrafov's speech act indicates all these themes and elements of desecuritization, as he claimed that it is impossible to get a reception at the Russian Embassy, since the electronic system will not allow it, and no one answers the phone. Similarly, you can not do it in a different Baltic state, since you have to be a resident there (Jevgrafov 2024). In addition, he said: "*They are law-abiding, they pay taxes, they do not support the Russian political regime, and as a recent integration study showed, they are loyal to the state*" (Jevgrafov 2024). The analysis notes that the "taxpayer" argument is unique to the present case, while the EOC MP and Narva's Tank cases did not see any desecuritizing attempts by that narrative.

As the second phase moved on in 2024, the Russian-speaking population's agency, resistance and attempts to desecuritize the extreme matters increased. People who possess higher agency among the Russian-speaking community began to resist and speak out against the securitization process. For instance, the chief editors of popular media outlets. An emergence of a prominent desecuritization narrative arose that indicated a rejection of the speech act that had constructed the threat of Russian influence. The analysis finds that audience members started to discredit the constructed threat, bringing out in speech acts that it is either not true or there are no indicators for that. The chief editor of the Russian-language Delfi resisted the securitization process in a very clear manner by writing an opinion piece on the extreme matters. Šumakov's attempt at desecuritization included eight larger arguments that indicated resistance against the governmental moves. The reconstructed desecuritization narratives were similar that have already been established by other Russian-speakers, claiming that the securitization act is unreasonably punishing people for Putin's actions, dividing the state into "our people" and "others" or "them" (Šumakov 2024). Furthermore, a common and well-established desecuritization strategy was used - the inability to renounce Russian citizenship. As Šumakov said in his opinion piece: "*Next, the Police and Border Guard Board (PPA) issues a document confirming the right to an Estonian passport, which must then be taken to the Russian embassy. The problem is that sometimes the embassy refuses to accept documents for months due to "technical reasons," and sometimes it does not - and still does not - accept papers issued by the Estonian police. According to the law, it is impossible to renounce Russian citizenship without holding the citizenship of another country*" (Šumakov 2024). As the analysis previously established, this narrative can be considered a desecuritization strategy of "inability to act" or "helplessness", a tactic that was very predominantly used during the first phase of EOC MP's case.

Šumakov's article caused instant actions by the securitizing actors, which indicated that the agency behind the desecuritizing speech act was sufficient. Otherwise, the speech act would have gone unnoticed by Parliamentary members. In the response, Raimond Kaljulaid was very explicit about answering the narratives that the audience had created, by claiming that Russian citizens are not "our" people and the citizenship question does not matter, since it is purely constructed by Russian-speakers (Kaljulaid 2024). Kaljulaid's speech act reinforced and legitimized the existential threat narrative around the securitization process, which had previously been reconstructed and delegitimized by the audience into a political move against

Russian-speakers. According to Kaljulaid, the securitization process and the threat are not a collective punishment, but: *“This is not a punishment, but a preventive security measure aimed primarily at reducing the Russian Federation’s ability to influence Estonia’s domestic politics”* (Kaljulaid 2024). According to the analysis, Kaljulaid’s speech act reinforces and emphasises the new stance of the government on securitization acts against Russian influence, while previously, the Russian citizens in Estonia were treated with exceptional measures, which aimed for better integration, then in the post-2022 period, the tone had shifted. In other words, securitization acts have become clearer and resolute, giving very little room for exceptions and political stalemates.

The second phase of the securitization process also included counter-securitization attempts by the audience. The counter-securitization discourses were largely reconstructed narratives around the existential threat. The threat was redirected from the Russian foreign influence to the securitizing actors and the act. For instance leader of Keskerakond (Centre Party) Mihhail Kõlvart stated that the behaviour around the securitization process and the communication has essentially become a security threat, moreover finding that the Social Democratic Party has become a security risk (Ruus 2024). Furthermore, discrediting the securitization process can be seen in Kõlvart’s reaction, stating: *“The current coalition is simply offering up topics that stir emotions and distract attention, so that people don’t discuss how they will live next year when tax increases and new taxes come into effect, but instead focus on what could be done with voting rights. In reality, it’s a trivial issue”* (Ruus 2024). Similarly, to the Narva tank’s case, the security issue was seen by the desecuritizing audience as a secondary problem, while the real issues are being ignored due to it. Counter- securitization discourses were not limited to members of the Centre Party but also by the Social Democrats. For instance, in an interview given to ERR, Jevgeni Ossinovski claimed: *“I believe this (securitization process) weakens Estonian society and is more likely to increase security threats rather than reduce them”* (Krjukov 2025). My research finds that his statement fits the elements of counter-securitization by recreating the threat narrative and directing it back to the securitizing actor. Moreover, the consequential discourse was reproduced, which has been a common theme within all the desecuritization attempts that have happened after 2022. The narrative alluded that the securitization processes can not be ruled out due to uncertain security risks for the Russian-speaking audience. Thus, it is largely tied to discourses and arguments about loyalty and working against integration.

The final phase of the securitization process picked up speed at the end of 2024 and the beginning of 2025. Desecuritization attempts intensified, but still carried the same reconstructed discursive narratives as in previous phases. Moreover, the counter-securitization attempts against the final draft Act (536 SE) started to emerge. Despite the security risks being clearly brought out in a speech by Hendrik Johannes Terras (2025), the Parliamentary audience rejected the speech act. Narratives around threat perception were reconstructed, which commonly believed that the securitization process is becoming a threat itself, not the Russian influence. For example, claiming that the act creates more internal stresses (Arhipov 2025) and reduces Estonia's national security (Kovalenko-Kõlvart 2025). The research finds that the narrative created by Arhipov, indicated a new and more intense discourse in the process, as he verbalized: *"In fact, this is destabilization. My question is: in whose interests are you carrying out this destabilization"* (Arhipov 2025). Claiming the securitization process to be destabilizing and moreover, ironically asking who leads the destabilization, led to very clear and straightforward actions by the securitizing actors. Terras (2025) said it is done as a preemptive security measure, as one day someone can vote for Putin and the next day vote for the mayor of Tallinn. Terras' reaction shows the straightforwardness in the securitization acts after 2022, where the previously blurred lines have become very clear and boundaries have been created. Bold desecuritization attempts by Arhipov (2025a) continued during the last reading of the draft Act, where he claimed: *"You (the securitizing actors) are creating a fifth column, and we do not wish you success in that."* Using the fifth column as a consequential narrative or a result of the securitization process has never been used during the speech acts before. Furthermore, using the fifth column as a desecuritization attempt signifies a momentous shift from light counter-narratives to indirect threats, due to the fifth column being an internal security risk that the Estonian government has been cautious of since the reindpendence. The research finds that a parallel can be drawn between Arhipov's statements and the counter-securitization attempt at the UN by clergymen during the EOC MP's process. In both instances, in later stages of the securitization process, extreme and impactful threats were constructed that found the securitizing actors to be guilty of. Furthermore, indicating the logic that as the securitization process hastens, the desecuritization attempts become more resistant and create narratives that emphasise extreme threats, such as genocide (Postimees 2025) and the fifth column.

The legal part of the securitization process ended on the 9th of May 2025 when the Estonian president promulgated the constitutional change. In the announcement, the president noted

that the change is legitimate, but it is important to remind third-state residents that the state does not wish to exclude them or see them as a security threat, but internal security can not be only a slogan (Karis 2025). Furthermore, using the last chance to convince the audience to see it as a legitimate move, and state that the Russian-speaking population can integrate if wished.

## **Conclusions: Summary of Findings**

The objective of the research was to examine the Estonian securitization processes and discourses against Russian influence between two time frames: 2014 to 2022 and post-2022. Despite being threatened and affected by Russian influence for decades, the rapid securitization against it happened only after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Although the war was acknowledged in 2014, the securitization moves during the first period were mild. The central aim was to uncover the factors behind the delay in swift securitization acts and to understand the evolution of the Russian-speaking audience responses, discourses, strategies and themes.

The theoretical foundation of the research was tied to the securitization theory of the Copenhagen School, which sees security as a discursive practice where political actors construct threats, such as the Russian influence, as existential threats which require extraordinary measures to deal with. The theoretical framework was expanded by incorporating critical perspectives from scholars like Thierry Balzacq (2005), Adam Côté (2016), and Mark B. Salter (2008). The latter scholars contributed towards a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of the securitization process. Moreover, the audience in the securitization process was seen as an active and discursively engaged subject, who possessed the agency to react to securitization acts by acceptance or resistance, where the resistance was connected to desecuritization and counter-securitization moves. Thus, the research treated the securitization not as a linear process, but as an intersubjective and dynamic interplay between the securitizing actors and the Russian-speaking audience.

Methodologically, the research followed post-structural discourse analysis, theorized by Laclau and Mouffe. Post-structural discourse analysis was chosen due to its emphasis on fluidity and contingency, especially when analyzing audience and securitizing actor dynamics. The objective of the work was met through deconstruction of the discursive processes and strategies used by both the actors and the audience. The empirical data for the research consisted of Estonian parliamentary transcripts, legislative documents, interviews and statements made by both political figures and members of the Russian-speaking audience. Furthermore, the analyzed data were collected from public sources, such as the

official government and media archives, that resulted in a consistent availability of the sources.

In addressing the research question and concluding the findings, the analysis found why the rapid securitization moves against Russian influence in Estonia did not happen during the 2014-2022 period of the Russo-Ukraine war due to multiple reasons. First, the securitization acts against Russian influence during the first period were focused on different goals compared to the post-2022 period. Explicit securitization processes were often avoided and focused on integration-oriented policies and goals between the Estonian state and the Russian-speaking community. The securitizing actors found that to combat the Russian influence, the state must undergo more Russophone-favoured moves, which eventually would convince the Russian-speaking audience to distance themselves from Russia. Securitizing Russian media influence was dealt with by creating a state-run Russian TV channel, ETV+ which fostered inclusion, but at the same time was a replacement for the idea of banning the Russian state-run TV channel PBK. Furthermore, integration and cohesion were seen as a way to reduce security risks that the Russian influence posed to Estonia's society. As an additional example, the analysis found the process of automatically granting children of stateless parents citizenship at birth, which would gain the trust of the parents.

Secondly, the research uncovered that the first time period lacked the political initiative and interest to frame the threat of Russian influence that later was connected to the EOC MP, soviet monuments and the third-state voters. The three cases, that were examined in the post-2022 period, did not see any talking points as an existential threat from 2014 to 2022. Although the threat of Russian influence was acknowledged, it was outshone by other period-related issues, such as mass migration.

The conclusion of the comparison between the two time periods illustrated significant changes in Estonian securitization discourses. Starting with the government positions and tactics. As the answer to the research question indicated, the previous securitization processes were mild and focused on the inclusion of the Russophone community, whereas the post-2022 processes were more explicit in framing the existential threat to the Estonian state. In contrast to the post-2014 period, the post-2022 securitization processes moved more rapidly, making more progress. For instance, the Narva Tank's process concluded within 4 months. Moreover, the research found that the contemporary securitization goals dealt with the threat by excluding it from Estonian society instead of integration or providing alternative

choices. During the securitization processes, the audience who were affected by the moves were given the possibility to deal with the Russian threat themselves. If the audience did not resolve the threat of Russian influence, the securitizing actors took it upon themselves. For instance, in both the EOC MP and Narva Tank's cases, the audience had the possibility to deal with the threat, since the reactions were resistance by inability to act (desecuritization), the state took it upon itself to securitize the threat through legal means. Moreover, the research found that in the post-2022 period, the exceptionality for the Russophone community shifted by leaving little room to bargain and making no exceptions. Although it is still possible to be part of the Estonian society if one follows the customs.

Concluding the Russian-speaking audience reactions, the research found that compared to the 2014 to 2022 period, the post-2022 period saw a significant increase in resistance, including different themes, tactics and narratives. Although the reactions differed between the time periods, one discursive theme remained consistent: russian integration. The theme was produced in the first period as a narrative for more favourable conditions for the Russian-speaking audience, whereas in the second period it was used as a consequential narrative. Consequential narratives were identified in all post-2022 cases, where the Russian-speaking audience attempted to desecuritize the matters by claiming that the act will work against integration goals and inclusion of the Russophone community. The consequential narratives of working against the integration process were also used in counter-securitization attempts, emphasising that the acts will create internal threats and cleavages in society. More extreme cases of counter-securitization included framing the government of genocide (EOC MP) and creating the fifth column (Third state-voters), similarly, parallels were drawn with the USSR. Moreover, the desecuritization attempts included the tactics of deligitimizing the securitization processes where emphasis was put that the state actions are unconstitutional or rely on illegitimate reasons.

Furthermore, strategies of deligitimizing the securitization processes by the audience included distancing themselves from Russia. The strategy narratives emphasised that the Russian-speaking community in Estonia does not represent Russian values, and they have been loyal to Estonia by paying taxes and obeying laws, thus are being unfairly punished by the Estonian state. Whereas from 2014 to 2022, these themes were not used by the audience. In addition the audience reactions during post-2022 period enforced more audience and had more engagement from non-political figures. Whereas politicians like Yana Toom and

Mihhail Stalnuhhin were prominent desecuritizers during both periods. More prominent usage of agency for desecuritization moves, was seen during the Narva Tank process, where Russophone audience members mobilized for protest in person and giving interviews to Estonian media outlets around the monument. The period of 2014 to 2022 did not see any mobilization attempts or extraordinary engagements by the audience, and the reactions were commonly done by Russian-speaking politicians.

The theoretical contribution of the research lies in its advancements in reconceptualization of the audience within the securitization theory. Examining the audience as an active member of the securitization process rather than a passive recipient. Integrating and conceptualizing desecuritization theory into the research demonstrated and advanced that the concepts of counter-securitization, indirect securitization, and desecuritization are sufficient for studying audience behaviour. Moreover, the research provided a dynamic and intersubjective framework for researching securitization processes that deal with active audience behaviour.

In terms of broader implications, the findings of the research offer valuable insights for academic and political discourses. Theoretically, the study contributes to debates within security studies by operationalizing the audience and conceptualizing desecuritization attempts. Furthermore, understanding how the audience shapes securitization processes. Practically, the research gives insight for policymakers in democratic states that are host to an ethnic minority, that is influenced by an external force. Recommendations for future research include a comparative work with similar framework for other post-Soviet states with a significant Russian minority. Lastly, the thesis calls for future research on securitization processes in post-Soviet spaces after the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war, with the goal of establishing new emerging discourses and examining evolving challenges within the shifting geopolitical landscape.

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