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EUROSCEPTIC NARRATIVES AND DISINFORMATION IN ESTONIA IN THE
CONTEXT OF 2024 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

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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Abstract

The European Parliament elections play a principal role in shaping the EU and its member states' politics as the event introduces new political actors and agendas, often bringing along domestic changes. This thesis investigates the evolution of Eurosceptic narratives in Estonian alternative media throughout 2024, with particular focus on the European Parliament (EP) elections and possible connections to political disinformation. Additionally, the year 2024 offered a variety of other events shaping the political information related to the EU, such as other relevant controversial Eurosceptic actors, including Viktor Orbán and Hungary, which appear in the narratives. While previous studies have emphasised Euroscepticism among Estonia's Russian-speaking population, this research concentrates on Estonian-speaking (far-right and nationalist) alternative media platforms. Using narrative analysis, the study examines 108 narratives across six major alternative media sites to identify core Eurosceptic themes and assess the presence of disinformation. Seven dominant narrative categories were identified, the most prevalent being portrayals of the EU having authoritarian tendencies. Although only a few narratives were confirmed as disinformation, many were found to be misleading, highlighting the blurred line between propaganda and outright falsehoods. The results also indicate a growing resonance of Euroscepticism in Estonia, reflected in the country's increasing support for Eurosceptic parties during the 2024 EP elections. While explicit election-related campaigning was limited, post-election developments—such as dissatisfaction with the new Commission and continued emphasis on issues like climate policy and migration—intensified Eurosceptic rhetoric. The study contributes to broader discussions on the regional variations of Eurosceptic discourse, the strategic use of disinformation in populist media, and the role of emotional appeals and historical sensitivities in shaping anti-EU sentiment in Eastern Europe.

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List of abbreviations

EU - European Union

EP - European Parliament

MEP - Member of Parliament

EKRE - Conservative People's Party of Estonia (*Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond*)

ERR - Estonian Public Broadcasting (*Eesti Rahvusringhääling*)

UK - United Kingdom

NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

EPP - European People's Party

DSA - Digital Services Act

BECID - Baltic Engagement Centre for Combating Information Disorders

1. Introduction

Euroscepticism has been a part of European Union (EU) politics since the union's early years and first expansions. The phenomenon has evolved through different periods, driven by various issues that fueled opposition to European integration. In recent years, several factors have contributed to Euroscepticism's decline and resurgence. Events such as Brexit, increasing immigration, and the growing popularity of populist parties have intensified scepticism. In contrast, geopolitical challenges, particularly the war in Ukraine, have, on the other hand, strengthened calls for deeper integration and expanded cooperation within the EU. At the end of 2024, the Eurobarometer reported that 51% of Europeans trusted the EU—the highest level in nearly 15 years (Eurobarometer, 2024). This surge in trust is attributed mainly to the war in Ukraine, which EU citizens view as a top priority (ibid.). Nonetheless, significant economic challenges, including high energy prices and the rising cost of living, continue to fuel support for Eurosceptic parties.

Similar trends of Euroscepticism have spread across the EU, particularly in the Baltic states and Eastern Europe. However, despite strong support for Ukraine, many of these countries have faced economic challenges stemming from the war and EU sanctions against Russia. Nevertheless, the COVID crisis has had a continuous influence on populism. One such contradicting example is Estonia, where the citizens' support for Ukraine is 15% higher than in the EU in general (ibid.). Still, the cost of living, taxes and popularity of more Eurosceptic parties are rising. Since the COVID pandemic and rising immigration, support for Estonian far-right politics has increased, having been represented in the government and getting the second most votes during the latest national elections. These views are also heavily connected to ideas that often go against specific EU values - the policies on climate action, immigration, minorities, etc.

The year 2024 held importance in the new political direction of the EU due to the European Parliament elections and the formation of the new College of Commissioners. All year round, politics held significant importance in Europeans' daily lives, with election campaigns and

the backlash of the changes. The media was overflowing with different opinions on how the EU should be led and what changes must be made. Moreover, there has been an increasing issue with disinformation that serves certain political ideologies. In addition, the Hungarian presidency in the Council of the European Union in 2024 also gave far-right parties many opportunities to express their support for Euroscepticism.

The case of Estonia offers research interests in their Eurosceptic views that arose in 2024, since there is a contradiction between the support for parties connected to opposing EU policies and high support for EU policies towards Ukraine, which directly influences the Estonian economy. The puzzling aspect is how the topics were covered during the election campaign and after the results. Moreover, there was a historical moment for Estonia when their former prime minister, Kaja Kallas, was appointed as a new Vice President and a High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in the new Commission since the person was disliked among the far-right community in Estonia and the year fostered lots of topics to create Eurosceptic narratives, which highlights the importance of unravelling them.

The relevance of researching the topic is high since the year was eventful and offers a lot of material for Eurosceptic discourse. Furthermore, there is a specific focus on far-right information platforms, which are sometimes primary sources for the spread of false or misleading media. In Estonia, the analysis of similar sources has sought pro-Russian narratives; however, comparatively, the Eurosceptic audience has not received enough academic attention in Estonia, particularly in light of recent political events. In addition, many articles published on related topics have primary sources in the Russian academic field, which can make the neutrality of the results questionable and cause doubt on a possible agenda of deepening or making Estonia seem more Eurosceptical.

The objective of this thesis is to discover the Eurosceptic narratives in Estonia, which do not focus on the Russian-speaking or pro-Russian population. Furthermore, studies have yet to be done on platforms sharing misleading information or far-right political propaganda, which are known to oppose the mainstream political agenda. Additionally, the importance of the thesis is apparent in the context relating to the European Parliament elections and other events in 2024 that caused the need to express particular political agendas on alternative media sites.

Therefore, the aim is to analyse the described media platforms and discover the central narratives in Estonia that expressed Euroscepticism in 2024.

The research question will be the following: How have Eurosceptic narratives evolved in Estonian alternative media channels in 2024, relating to European Parliament elections campaigning and aftermath? Additional questions that will give more insight into the results will be: If and what are the differences in narratives from different platforms? Is there a connection to disinformation among the discovered narratives in EU databases, and if so, where do those originate? Have some of those Eurosceptic or disinformation narratives navigated through the mainstream media threshold?

The expectation for the results would be that the main political propaganda against the EU would focus on views against the European Green Deal, equality (the disapproval of sexual minorities), and immigration. The expectation is that there will also be some disinformation.

The methodology used in the thesis will be narrative analysis, and the data will be gathered from the seven most popular alternative (far-right) media platforms in Estonia. The sources will be analysed by discovering keywords in the 2024 time frame and categorised based on the topic and content of the results. Disinformation will be checked on the main narratives based on the truthfulness of the arguments and facts communicated through the narrative.

The theoretical section of the thesis will focus on the concepts of Euroscepticism and information manipulation, as well as the previous narrative analysis of Euroscepticism. The methodological section will give an overview of narrative analysis and how it will be applied to the thesis, and it will also explain how the data will be gathered and categorised. The empirical section will focus on each narrative discovered and explain its background and possible connections to disinformation.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical section of the current research will cover the two main concepts - Euroscepticism and disinformation. The focus will be on the concepts themselves, their development and usage, as well as trends and the connections to the analysis which will be conducted. As the research questions focus on Eurosceptic narratives in Estonia in 2024 and the occurrence of disinformation within the narratives, the theoretical discussion will provide the necessary framework to understand how these phenomena manifest in political discourse and media content. The study also intends to find and analyse Estonian alternative media, which has a special focus on Euroscepticism, serving as a space where the two main concepts can intersect, while still remaining distinct, as Euroscepticism does not inherently entail disinformation, nor does disinformation necessarily reflect Eurosceptic views.

2.1 Euroscepticism

2.1.1 Theory and development

Euroscepticism refers to opposing European integration, but also more radically if the opposition is fundamentally against the concept of the EU and its integration. Still, on the other side, it can be more superficial by disapproving of specific EU policies or the course of EU integration (Djouvas et al., 2023). Authors Paul Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak have categorised the phenomenon into “soft” and “hard” Euroscepticism based on how significant a role it has in someone's political views. As one might assume by the names of the terms, one refers to principal opposition to the EU and the other less. “Soft” Euroscepticism can be seen as people and political parties being concerned or not in favour of specific EU policies, yet they still value the overall membership to the EU, often keeping in mind their state’s best interests (Taggart & Szczerbiak 2002, 4). “Hard” Euroscepticism, on the other hand, has a more complex nature, expressing fundamental opposition to EU integration and the union itself while actively advocating withdrawal from the union and proposing policies that resist the course of the EU's current political direction (ibid.). The “hard” Euroscepticism appears

in political parties described as anti-EU and against ideologies and characteristics that have a presence in the EU, such as bureaucracy, capitalism, liberalism, etc (ibid.). Briefly, the two concepts differ as one sees the EU as an enemy and the other as flawed.

Another approach to the theoretical aspects of Euroscepticism is categorising it into dimensions, which Cas Mudde and Petr Kopecky initially did and was later expanded by several authors. Based on the dimensions of principles, practice and the future of Eurosceptic parties, Sofia Vasilopoulou has divided party-based Euroscepticism into three categories: rejecting, conditional, and compromising Euroscepticism (Vasilopoulou, 2009). Since the main issues, such as migration or liberalism, that fuel Euroscepticism have been associated with far-right politics, Sofia Vasilopoulou also builds up her theory from the view of extreme far-right political parties. In her theory, rejecting Euroscepticism refers to a party that is against the future, principles and practices of the EU and thus is the most radical form of Eurosceptic party, similar to “hard” Euroscepticism, in which they oppose the delegation of power and decision-making authority to the EU, aiming to reinstate the sovereignty of national institutions (ibid., 8). On the other hand, Conditional Euroscepticism is a middle ground where the opposition to the EU’s practices and future exists. However, they are not against the principle of European integration or member states’ cooperation; instead, they seek more intergovernmental dynamics (ibid.). Finally, conditional Euroscepticism expresses disapproval only of future perspectives while still supporting the principles and practices of the EU integration, aiming to strengthen their state’s position in the union, however, by not advocating more integrated cooperation (ibid.). In sum, the three dimensions are more advanced and precise forms of “soft” and “hard” Euroscepticism applied to party politics.

In a developmental aspect of the concept, the early waves of Euroscepticism started in the mid-1980s when several UK politicians disapproved of the EU’s integration perspectives after the Single European Act. From there, the term “Euroscepticism” was used with negative framing in referring to opposing aspects of the EU integration (Leruth et al. 2018, 4). While the concept has roots in the political sphere in the UK, it has since gained significance geographically, having become a phenomenon described transnationally across the EU (ibid.). Furthermore, the output of the concept has, over time, fastened itself in a large spectrum of platforms, especially in media and civil society (ibid., 9). Euroscepticism appears

to be more present prior to major changes in the EU, such as the Maastricht Treaty and the Lisbon Treaty, as well as enlargements. Each major step forward in integrating the EU poses a threat to certain national issues, such as less control over one's policies, a loss of sovereignty and becoming more multicultural with enlargement. Over time, different crises have made Euroscepticism one of the mainstream views in EU politics, both in discussions in EU policy-making and among countries possibly accessing the EU (Brack & Startin, 2015).

Although “Euroscepticism” was not used before the 1980s, its characteristics can be seen with the first enlargement in 1973. The first debates on the integration path and possible scepticism can be found when Denmark, the United Kingdom and Ireland joined the European Community after the initial countries signed the Treaty of Rome. However, the debate mainly was not within the European Community but rather on the countries that contemplated joining the others, such as the rejection results in Norway after the referendum (Usherwood & Startin, 2013, 3). Public trends within member states have shown fluctuating trust and support towards the EU, usually reflecting types of policies discussed or crises surrounding the EU (ibid., 7). Public opinion is represented through the European Parliament (EP), in which eras of Euroscepticism are clearly seen during the elections. The first anti-EU group in the EP was formed after the 1994 elections due to the Maastricht Treaty, which enforced notable changes in integrating the union, such as the common currency (ibid.). Later on, the amount of Eurosceptic political groups increased; however, the fundamental opposition to the idea of the EU decreased, meaning the anti-EU parties in EP still see a value in the EU and have gotten used to being in it, showing more “softer” Euroscepticism over the time (Hix et al., 2023). Thus, Euroscepticism has always had a role and presence in discussions, but over time, the EU’s path and features have become natural and slowly fading the “hard” Euroscepticism.

In contemporary politics, the primary influence of the Eurosceptical agenda in EU member states can be considered Brexit, which unleashed a precedent in the history of EU integration. The impact of Brexit on deepening Euroscepticism can be questioned since economic and migration crises have shown more presence in Eurosceptical agendas and debates (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2019, 119). Nevertheless, Brexit and the preceding referendum influenced a new era for EU politics with new options and a real-life example to follow or not to follow.

2.1.2 Factors contributing to Eurosceptic vote

Although Euroscepticism becomes more prominent during critical political debates, several underlying factors contribute to public support for anti-EU movements. One widely discussed explanation is the second-order elections theory, which could explain the popularity of Eurosceptic parties. The theory suggests that EU politics is less relevant to voters than national issues, making EP elections an arena to express approval or disapproval of national governments, and this dynamic gives an advantage to populist parties, especially given the overall lower turnout for EP elections (Treib 2014, 1547). On the other hand, opposing theories suggest that EP elections are more about preferred outlooks for the EU, which explains why people would likely vote for a populist party that is firmly against specific EU policies (ibid.). The second-order elections theory, however, better explains the election results concerning political instability or member states' government performance, showing often political changes within member states after the EP elections (ibid.).

Political preferences in EP elections have also shown emotional connections to the results. One of the highly emotional topics is immigration, which is also often used by populist and Eurosceptic parties. Studies have found that enthusiastic emotions towards immigration favour the person's choices for common immigration policy, and anger does the opposite, whereas negative emotions also support cooperation in the fight against terrorism (Erisen et al., 2019). Therefore, Eurosceptic parties often capitalise on these emotional responses to immigration and other issues to gain support by framing their platforms around emotions that benefit them.

Although most of the campaigning of Eurosceptic parties has a connection to emotions, particular topics are more likely to support the Eurosceptic agenda. Economic issues or a member state's economic situation are often a matter that affects election results. It is a universal matter that influences all types of elections; however, in the context of EU politics, it is tightly connected to the state's contribution to the EU and the amount of funding it receives, which is also why more significant economies such as was the UK have larger debates on the beneficiary of the EU. Furthermore, economic crises and high rates of unemployment have shown a beneficial effect on Eurosceptic parties (Kang &

Chang-Rhyong, 2020, 4). The effect can be explained on an emotional basis if people suffering from economic conditions are more prone to vote for a party that emotionally relates to them, but the impact can also be explained by a lack of trust towards the EU's economic policies.

Additionally, in the political context of Euroscepticism, there are more general topics that are often tied to minor issues that cause Eurosceptic stances. The topics are sovereignty and national identity, which are also the main arguments in a debate against federalism in the context of the EU. Federalism is one of the leading theoretical debates on explaining the EU, but also a possible direction for it, with the idea that the EU is or should be a federation that has one government, supranational institutions, and a centralised authority that can make binding decisions across all member states (Moravcsik, 2001). In some views, this is already the case; however, it also explains the Eurosceptic arguments that member states are losing their sovereignty by increasing control by the EU while becoming more diverse and losing their national identity. Furthermore, the debate is intensified by elitist and bureaucratic accusations and the centre and cleavage theory, where Brussels makes the main decisions, while EU citizens do not have enough say (Treib, 2020). Therefore, Eurosceptic views are tightly connected to the origins of anti-federalist views, and the current agendas can be traced back to the original arguments against further integration into creating a federation.

Another aspect of explaining the Eurosceptic vote would be looking into the demographic aspects and voter-behaviour-related aspects. One of the factors contributing to Eurosceptical parties' success is tied to the populist characteristics, which often are also prone to having harsh political campaigns, mobilising voters more effectively (Nai et al., 2021). Studies have shown connections between Euroscepticism and people with backgrounds of lower socio-economic status (Eick, 2024). This could have several possible explanations, such as whether they have less trust in the EU in improving their socio-economic issues or feel more emotional towards a campaign's economic aspect, making them more prone to vote for emotional and populist campaigns. In addition to socio-economic status, a voter's education has a role in their preferences; specifically, studies show that people with lower education are more likely to support leaving the EU and have less trust in EU institutions (Fortunato & Pecoraro, 2022). Furthermore, people with low educational backgrounds are more likely to be

influenced by Eurosceptic political activities in media and social platforms and are likely to follow certain pages associated with anti-EU content (ibid.). In sum, the generalisation of Eurosceptic voters illustrates that the Eurosceptic parties are radical and populist, and the described voter is more likely to be affected by such political campaigns.

2.1.3 Eurosceptic trends

The popularity of Eurosceptic parties has fluctuated over time, but distinct periods of growth and decline can be identified. The first major surge in support occurred after the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, continuing until 2000, as reflected in national election results across the EU (Filip 2021, 85). A second notable rise began around 2010 and has persisted, indicating a sustained increase in Eurosceptic sentiment (ibid.). Until the mid-1990s, left-wing Euroscepticism was more prominent than its right-wing counterpart. However, right-wing Euroscepticism has since gained the upper hand, though both strands have continued to grow over time (ibid.).

The topics and popularity of Eurosceptic parties across the EU are different, influenced by the region's historical and cultural differences. In Central and Eastern Europe, most Eurosceptic agendas are linked to sovereignty and migration due to their history under the Soviet Union (Dmytrenko 2024, 60). Meanwhile, Southern European countries are more influenced by Euroscepticism, which adheres to economic questions and is related to debt crises (ibid.). In contrast, Northwestern European countries are mostly worried about migration and potential loss of identity regarding the Eurosceptic agenda (ibid.). Although the areas have different agendas for Euroscepticism, there is no connection between the popularity of Eurosceptic parties and the region's wealth (Vasilopoulou & Talving, 2023).

Before EP elections in 2024, a Eurobarometer survey showed that the five most important topics for voters were: “fight against poverty and social exclusion”, “public health”, “support for the economy, and the creation of new jobs”, “EU's defence and security” and “action against climate change” (Eurobarometer, 2024). The election results show an increase in far-right parties with 25.97% of the seats in the EP, as opposed to pro-European parties with

69.44% of seats; although far-right parties have significantly fewer seats, it is the highest result compared to previous elections (Carnero, 2024). The main topics for the current far-right representatives in the EP are anti-globalisation, nationalism, neoliberalism, cost of living/ economy, denial of climate change, anti-feminism/ not identifying sexual minorities and finally immigration (ibid.). Currently, three different political groups in the EP are associated with Euroscepticism - the European Conservatives and Reformists Group, Patriots for Europe and Europe of Sovereign Nations (European Parliament, 2024). Despite the considerable win for Eurosceptics, these results do not allow them to have a blocking majority in voting, which makes it difficult to achieve a successful vote for the topics they advocate.

Euroscepticism in the context of EU decision-making is mainly focused on the EP; however, there is also a Eurosceptic representation at the supranational level, in which the member state governments have an influence. In the Council of the European Union and the European Council, heads of state and government representatives can shape the policies in the EU, which is especially important in foreign policy, in which member states have decision-making authority and where a successful vote needs to be unanimous. Euroscepticism can be easily manifested in such settings if one of the member states' governments is led by a Eurosceptic or far-right party that does not agree with central EU values. There have been several examples over the years. However, the most notable ones in recent years would be Hungary and Slovakia, with far-right leaders who, in terms of foreign policy, are known to have pro-Russian views. The EU has adopted a position of supporting Ukraine during the war against Russian aggression, which makes Hungarian and Slovakian opposition an issue for the EU and its values on democracy and human rights, as well as in terms of international law. Both Slovakia and Hungary have a history of blocking sanctions on Russia. Nevertheless, there are other topics in which some governments in the EU can be seen as Eurosceptical regarding climate policies or equality. One such example would be Italy, where the current government, led by Giorgia Meloni, is publicly against LGBTQ+ rights, which in the EU is seen as an essential part of equality (Le Monde, 2023). Thus, Euroscepticism appears at multiple levels of governance in the EU and is on the rise over the years.

2.1.4 Eurosceptic trends in Estonia

In the 2024 elections, one Eurosceptic candidate from Estonia was elected to the EP. The MEP is Jaak Madison, who was elected from the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (*Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond*) and later that year changed his national party to the Estonian Centre Party (*Eesti Keskerakond*). After the change nationally, Madison remained in the European Conservatives and Reformists Group in the EP, although another MEP from his national party belongs to Renew Europe Group, which has been the case for previous MEPS that have been elected from the Estonian Centre Party. The overall performance from the Conservative People's Party of Estonia in the 2024 EP election was 14.8% of all votes in Estonia, putting them fourth in the results poll (European Parliament, 2024). This party is the main one in Estonia, advocating Eurosceptic views in terms of electoral success. The party could be seen mainly as a "soft" Eurosceptic party since they do not campaign to leave the EU, nor do they see the EU as an enemy. Nevertheless, the party's political agenda shows significant disapproval of the EU's political direction. During the 2024 elections, the party programme stood for the following topics: more supranational decision-making power; equal national powers (such as being against qualified majority voting); no more climate action (not recognising climate change); stopping immigration; strengthening external border control; less bureaucracy and more economic independence to member states; protecting free society (disapproval of tolerance, supporting only freedoms of religion, opinion, thought, speech and the press); reducing the influence of large corporations and finally deepening cooperation with other conservative parties in the EU (Conservative People's Party of Estonia, 2024). Consequently, the programme shows the main topics advocated by Eurosceptic parties, in which conditional Euroscepticism is apparent due to disapproval of current policies and the direction of integration, especially in aspects of the Green Deal and tolerance in the perspective of equality.

In EP elections, Estonia tends to have a dynamic that is different from that of national elections, which can be explained in several ways. Firstly, there are experienced candidates in EP elections who are often trusted, and because of this, the popularity of parties differs from that of national elections. For example, social democrats perform relatively better during EP elections, usually gaining two seats out of seven, and were the second most popular party in

2024, whereas in national elections, they performed in fifth place in terms of popularity, having 10% less support than in EP elections (State Electoral Office of Estonia, 2023). Secondly, EP elections can reflect a second-order election dynamic, in which the popularity of certain parties and candidates expresses disapproval of existing national governance. Eurosceptic and far-right popularity in national elections in 2023 was higher than during EP elections, where the Conservative People's Party of Estonia gained the second most amount of votes with altogether 16% of all votes, which in contrast is less than they gained for previous national elections in 2019 (ibid.). However, 2019 was a significant turn for far-right representation in Estonia, where they gained twelve seats in the national parliament compared to seven before, gaining over 10% of support (State Electoral Office of Estonia, 2019). Also, in the 2019 EP elections, Estonia had one of the first Eurosceptic members elected to represent the Identity and Democracy Group at that time. Thus, 2019 can be seen as the year in which Estonia took a turn towards far-right politics, and Euroscepticism developed a role in the Estonian political field.

As described, the main Eurosceptic political party in Estonia is EKRE, which is moderately opposed to EU policies and certain values. However, there are more political actors in Estonia, which occasionally can be associated with a Eurosceptic stance. One of those parties is Isamaa, which is a right-wing conservative party, with members in the EP and a historical background in Estonian politics since regaining independence. Despite the party stating in their statute their commitment to the EU, there is more ideological difference from the EU's current political agenda than in most of the pro-EU political actors (Isamaa). A notable assumption to compare the party with slight Euroscepticism is their commitment to sovereignty and conservatism, which can oppose the idea of supranational institutions and increasing liberal values. Nevertheless, the party does not actively advocate against any of such political views conceptually, thus the party does not play a significant role in Estonian Euroscepticism.

Another similar political actor is Keskerakond with centrist views, which does not actively advocate a Eurosceptic agenda, but in several instances can seem more anti-EU than some other parties. One of the main reasons such assumptions can be made is due to the parties' voter demographics over the years. Specifically, the party has been known to speak to the

Russian population in Estonia, although less and less over the years. The specific demographic is also seen as more pro-Russian and less liberal, enforcing the bias towards Euroscepticism. In real politics, the party does not have a direct connection to any Eurosceptic aspect in its statute. Nevertheless, the main comparison to Euroscepticism can be made based on EKRE's former member and MEP in the EP, Jaak Madison, who currently belongs to Keskerakond.

Along with the parties having a deep foundation in the Estonian political sphere, there have been many parties and movements throughout the time which have not crossed the electoral threshold and have seemed Eurosceptic. The main Eurosceptic campaigning could be seen during the time Estonia started considering membership in the EU and began its accession process. For example, the most popular movement in terms of members was Liikumine Ei Euroopa Liidule (Movement No for the European Union), which was specifically made to advocate for Estonia not to join the EU (Vallaste). However, these movements do not have a role in today's politics. Additionally, there are several individuals who have been known as Eurosceptic actors in Estonia. However, those Eurosceptic personas are usually individuals with no membership in any parties and primarily speaking to the Russian population, mainly leading the overall anti-Western ideology with a pro-Russian stance. One example of such a political persona would be Mihhail Stalnuhhin, who has been playing a dominant role in Estonian politics, opposing mainstream politics and supporting the Russian regime. Therefore, the individual Eurosceptic actors are mostly pro-Russian, as there is a lack of political parties which support Russia's ideological views. Furthermore, the Estonian demographic votes for Euroscepticism based on arguments other than those of the Russian minority in Estonia, making the issues more policy-based.

Finally, a notable Eurosceptic actor in Estonia would be the alternative and social media. Those in turn are divided into Estonian and Russian media spheres, which also differ in topics. The mediums for these are social media platforms, in the Estonian community, this would be mostly Facebook or YouTube and for the Russian community, VKontakte or Telegram. The more popular Estonian social media pages and accounts which share Eurosceptic news and opinions are mostly reposted from web-based news media platforms and are the same actors in alternative media and social media. For instance, more popular

ones in Estonia are *Objektiiv* and *Uued Uudised*. As the focus for the current thesis is not on the Russian media sphere, it has gained more academic attention and is less related to the EP elections, so alternative media platforms as actors play a central role in this case. Additionally, the alternative media can be associated with political actors, as there are not many in Estonia that are noticeably Eurosceptic.

2.2 Disinformation in political campaigning

2.2.1 Defining terms of information manipulation

Modern political campaigning has been adapted to digitalisation, which has become the main platform for parties during the elections. Nevertheless, it is an effective ground for populist parties due to social media, where controversial topics can get lots of attention and thus advance political support for ideas such as opposing views on the EU. Although the media offers a useful and effective tool for political communication, it has several downsides, especially for citizens consuming the content. One such issue with media consumption is the spread of false news, a tool often used in populist politics. Another issue would be information overload, which can be confusing for consumers, not to mention in political campaigning. However, information manipulation remains one of the central topics in the context of Euroscepticism.

Information manipulation can be displayed in different forms, with the most common terms being disinformation, misinformation, and fake news. All those terms can be used to refer to false information, yet they all have different meanings and can be used differently. Misinformation is a core concept in understanding others, which refers to false information in general and can be used universally in describing manipulated information (Guess & Lyons, 2020, 11). Disinformation, conversely, characterises a certain phenomenon in which the misinformation is intentional and beneficial to the distributor (*ibid.*). Consequently, false information can be merely shared due to a mistake, making it difficult to determine whether it is intentional. In terms of political misinformation that is not contributed by individuals, an

assumption would be that the content benefits an ideology or a party. Therefore, it should be identified as disinformation. The issue surrounding the spread of intentionally false information has gotten lots of attention in the context of Russian propaganda against Ukraine, which is also relevant in the EU and member states with a significant Russian minority, such as Estonia. For example, one of the popular disinformation articles was about Ukraine's president Zelensky secretly buying an expensive villa during the war, which caused lots of backlash on social media networks (EUvsDisinfo, 2024). False information such as this can be very harmful in causing unjustified opposition or irritating communities involved, such as citizens of EU member states who have supported Ukraine during the war in this case.

Another term that is often used and popular in association with disinformation is false news. This term in a political context gained much attention during the US presidential elections in 2016, when Donald Trump started using "fake news" by referring to institutionalised mainstream media with accusations of spreading false or biased information (Ross & Rivers, 2018). More traditionally, false news is defined as misleading news, usually lying about facts or untruthful in some way (Anderau, 2021). Fake news has more space for interpreting the definition in comparison to disinformation. The main difference from disinformation would be the measures of the intent and falseness of the content. Fake news can be expressed more subtly, where the falseness of the content can remain unknown, such as using clickbait in the news article names. In disinformation, the precision of facts can be easily traced, and false facts are clearly stated. However, disinformation and fake news can overlap, and most of the disinformation can be identified as fake news since it is more universally and accurately defined.

Another necessary distinction from disinformation would be propaganda, which is often used in political contexts instead of disinformation. The main characteristic of propaganda, in contrast with all the previously used terms, is that propaganda can spread information that is, in fact, truthful (Guess & Lyons 2020, 11). Propaganda can vary in its sources; thus, it is not necessarily done by political organisations; however, it is a form of persuasive communication that is, in most cases, unethical and manipulative with the purpose of serving someone's agenda, such as a political ideology (Lock, 2019). Propaganda can serve a greater

purpose than all previously mentioned forms of information manipulation. Furthermore, disinformation can be seen as a tool for propaganda.

The selected forms of information manipulation can appear in political campaigns, especially populist campaigns that favour the Eurosceptic agenda. The concept that will be most focused on for the current thesis is disinformation because it is the most precise form to discover. The described political campaigning can be seen as propaganda, often including misleading and false information. However, the disinformation would have to be specific about untrue facts; thus, this form will be the main focus of the following chapters.

2.2.2 Disinformation sources and role in politics

In the age of digitalisation, the rising issue of disinformation has become an unavoidable consequence of increased online communication and media consumption. However, it has also become a tool for political campaigns, as mentioned previously in the case of US elections. As it is also a form of propaganda, its unethical nature has brought unfair advantages to populist parties and has become especially harmful to people who are easily manipulated by the media. Disinformation has also brought harmful consequences to people who follow false information, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which disinformation on scientific suggestions was challenged and caused health risks to people who trusted false information.

In politics, disinformation is widespread, but in a subtle way. Disinformative political campaigning directly by a party can be harmful to its reputation and, in some cases, potentially cause legal issues, which is why the main messages have to be interpretive. However, this situation describes specifically disinformation in democratic states, where there are free media and not state-controlled propaganda. The described phenomenon in democratic states often characterises radical right-winged politics, where disinformation spreads around different platforms that promote their political ideology. Those sources are usually one of the following categories:

“(a) alt news sites promoting ethnic nationalism, anti-immigrant and refugee hate news, and globalist conspiracies, along with tie-ins to daily national political news developments; (b) party and movement website networks such as those run by the Austrian Freedom Party, with links to Facebook and social media accounts of leaders supplying updates on party news, interspersed with 'nostalgic' nationalist propaganda; (c) foreign 'non linear warfare operations (a term coined by Putin advisor Vladislav Surkov) aimed at destabilising elections and governments; and (d) along with enterprising fake news businesses springing up in the 'attention economy' ” (Bennett & Livingston 2018, 128).

Additionally, disinformation can be spread through booklets and papers or by conversation during outdoor campaigning; however, it has become a more significant issue due to social and internet platforms that allow information to spread easily and fast to large audiences. Nevertheless, disinformation is rarely found in mainstream news media and described platforms offer more effective results in manipulating opinions due to limited debate on topics and non-transparent and unreliable sources for presented facts.

In contrast, disinformation has not only affected political campaigning but has also lowered trust in media and democratic institutions (European Parliament 2021, 14). The spread of false or misleading information also undermines the credibility of traditional news outlets, making it increasingly difficult for the public to distinguish between factual reporting and fabricated narratives. This erosion of trust extends to democratic institutions, as disinformation often targets governmental bodies, electoral processes, and public officials, fostering scepticism and diminishing civic engagement. Studies have also found some positive impacts of disinformation on election results for populist parties (Cantarella et al., 2023). Therefore, disinformation is also a tool to be used in Eurosceptic propaganda, which would potentially lead to distrust in the EU.

2.2.3 Disinformation campaigns in the EU

As the spread of disinformation continues to rise, the European Union is no exception to this growing challenge. The rapid dissemination of false or misleading information, particularly through digital platforms and social media, has threatened democratic processes, public trust, and policy-making across EU member states. In recent years, many cases of disinformation campaigns have been reported on different topics, such as conspiracies during the COVID-19 pandemic or campaigns on non-democratic values. The campaigns are targeted both from inside the union and by foreign actors, creating new challenges and policy areas for the EU.

One of the recent disinformation-related issues in the EU in 2024 was the interference in Romania's presidential elections, aimed at supporting far-right candidate Călin Georgescu. A candidate who promoted pro-Russian views and opposed the EU's common decisions regarding support for Ukraine during the war. The issue surrounding the situation appeared when the candidate became a frontrunner for the elections. At the same time, unethical campaigning was discovered, in which voters were not only manipulated by fear but also by false narratives on defence-related aspects (Erizanu, 2024). Specifically, disinformation was spread through algorithm manipulation on social media, circulating the content widely. As a result, it also gained attention in Russia, where support for the candidate was openly expressed on social media (ibid.). Disinformation campaigns such as this pose a threat to ethical, democratic processes and highlight a greater issue in the EU in terms of ensuring fair elections and protecting public discourse from external manipulation by exploiting digital platforms.

Despite the challenges posed by disinformation, which counters EU views and values, it is also a significant issue from a legal perspective. The EU has a fundamental responsibility to uphold and safeguard the values outlined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, particularly democracy and the rule of law, which include the principles of free and fair elections and as a result, it is committed to addressing and countering any forms of abuse, whether procedural or substantive, that threaten these core democratic principles (Bayer et al. 2019, 71). In a broader sense, the EU is responsible for protecting its citizens' fundamental rights. However, disinformation presents further challenges in other areas of EU legislation.

For instance, manipulating algorithms to promote specific political ideologies, often alongside disinformation, threatens citizens' autonomy and privacy (ibid., p. 74). Additionally, digital spaces present a range of issues from a legislative perspective, with the EU bearing responsibility in areas such as data protection.

The EU has taken a comprehensive approach to combat the issues surrounding disinformation. Key initiatives have focused on improving the regulation of digital platforms, increasing transparency in political advertising, and fostering collaboration with stakeholders such as fact-checkers, media organisations, and educators. Early efforts included the establishment of the East StratCom Task Force in 2015 and the introduction of the Code of Practice on Disinformation in 2018 (European Commission). Over time, these efforts have expanded, with the EU implementing frameworks like the Digital Services Act and the European Media Freedom Act, which hold platforms accountable for harmful content and promote digital literacy (ibid). Additionally, the EU has introduced measures to protect electoral integrity, including the Defence of Democracy Package and regulations targeting online political advertising, which is crucial considering recent developments in the area (ibid.). These actions highlight the EU's commitment to safeguarding democratic values and ensuring that disinformation does not undermine the rule of law, media freedom, or public trust.

Although disinformation often appears in Eurosceptic communities and argumentations, the two concepts do not entail each other, and they serve different purposes. Disinformation is a more general issue which can appear in any political or non-political context. Euroscepticism, however, is based on factual data and statements; however, in more radical campaigning, it can get misleading and be emphasised by disinformation. Furthermore, Eurosceptic disinformation is more relevant in communities not engaged in mainstream European media. Especially, it is problematic in Eastern Europe with significant Russian communities affected by Russian media discourse on the matters in the EU. The content directed to people in the European media sphere differs from the topics and supports nationalist views, which conceptually oppose Russian discourse. Moreover, the spread of disinformation originating inside the EU can be managed more effectively than in the case of foreign interference.

2.2.4 Disinformation campaigns in Estonia

Estonia is no exception to the phenomenon of disinformation; however, its content is shaped by the country's history and geopolitical context. Most disinformation in Estonia stems from fears of its territorial proximity to Russia. This manifests either in Estonian communities, where fearful narratives spread or in Russian minority communities, which are influenced by Russia-affiliated disinformation. One of the most significant cases of disinformation in recent years in Estonia concerned the pandemic, with false news spreading about the possible effects of vaccines, conspiracies about governments plotting to gain more control, and even claims about certain regions in Estonia being fully isolated (Malts, 2025). Another major wave of disinformation was triggered by the war in Ukraine, which heightened focus on the military sector. A notable rumour that spread suggested that NATO troops were assaulting Estonian women (ibid.). Finally, Russian disinformation appears in various forms. For instance, in 2023, written threats in Russian were found in people's mailboxes, falsely claiming that bombs had been placed in schools and kindergartens (ibid.). These examples have drawn the spotlight to media literacy and the need for stronger public awareness of the spread of disinformation in Estonia.

On platforms that spread disinformation, several central narratives have been identified in Estonia, originating both from Russian- and Estonian-speaking communities. Firstly, one prevalent narrative claims that the quality of life in Estonia was better under the Soviet Union, which is promoted in disinformation campaigns opposing the government, aiming to create nostalgia for Soviet-era policies and undermine trust in Estonia's democratic institutions (Malts, 2025). Another widespread narrative targets Estonia's electoral system, spreading rumours of electoral fraud and fostering scepticism about online voting (ibid.). Given Estonia's status as one of the global leaders in digital governance, such disinformation seeks to erode public confidence in the country's secure and transparent e-voting system. Finally, there is a narrative that fuels fear of a potential Russian invasion of Estonia (ibid.). This fear-based disinformation often exaggerates geopolitical tensions, exploits historical anxieties, and can be used to justify divisive policies or actions. These narratives collectively contribute to societal polarisation, weaken public trust in democratic institutions, and reinforce divisions between linguistic and political communities.

Although Estonia has made significant efforts to combat disinformation, there is still work to be done. The country collaborates with various fact-checking platforms, the EU, and other nations to address the issue collectively. However, Estonia lacks specific legislation to hold individuals accountable for the deliberate spread of disinformation. While certain aspects of national law allow for regulation depending on how disinformation is expressed, there remains a legal gap in addressing the broader dissemination of false information. Strengthening legal frameworks and expanding media literacy initiatives will be crucial in further countering the spread of disinformation.

3. Methodology and data

Current research aims to use a qualitative method in which narrative analysis will be conducted on Estonian alternative media sites to discover Eurosceptic views. The latter goal is to narrow down results into the main narratives of Eurosceptic views used in 2024. Finally, these narratives will be examined for the presence of disinformation, assessing whether disinformation plays a role in shaping and spreading Eurosceptic ideas in Estonia. The research will employ a multiple case study approach, analysing several media outlets while maintaining a consistent narrative theme. The results will help identify similarities and differences among the narratives found on these platforms and determine whether a common theme linking disinformation and Euroscepticism emerges. The following chapters will give an overview of the analysis approach, data, case selection and research limitations.

3.1 Overview of narrative analysis

Narrative analysis is a method used for qualitative research that aims to understand how stories are created by focusing on the content, its structure and performance (McLeod, 2024). This method is a key approach in content analysis, particularly in media studies. A narrative itself is a form of discourse that manifests through storytelling, structuring events, experiences, or ideas in a coherent and meaningful way (Cortazzi, 1994, 157). It serves as a fundamental means of communication, important in passing on cultural or ideological perspectives.

The analysis process involves identifying narratives, coding and grouping them and ultimately determining the main narratives based on the findings. Narrative analysis can be used by three different models: structural-, themati-, and interactional/performative (McLeod, 2024). These can be used separately or combined based on the type of content being analysed. The structural model focuses on the structure of a story, such as the setting of the content or the characters (ibid.). The thematic model, on the other hand, analyses the

content itself, seeking to identify themes within the story (ibid.) Finally, the interactional/performative model examines the contextual factors that influence the formation of narratives and how meaning is constructed through the interaction between storytellers and their audience (ibid.). The analysis for the current thesis will be focused on the thematic model since the research aims to discover narratives from Eurosceptic content from media, prioritising themes related to the 2024 EP election campaigns.

The coding part of the analysis can be either deductive or inductive. In deductive coding, predefined codes for narratives are applied to the content, whereas in inductive coding, the codes are developed during the analysis (ibid.). This research will use an inductive approach, allowing narratives to emerge organically through content analysis. Consequently, this method relies on the researcher's interpretation to identify, categorise, and contextualise the narratives.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The content for the data analysis will be news media in Estonian alternative media sites, which are known for their government / value-based opposition or for sharing disinformation. In this case, media content is an article in which the object of analysis is the content itself, the sentences and paragraphs expressing specific narratives. Alternative media emerges from distrust and scepticism toward mainstream media, offering different approaches and perspectives that challenge dominant narratives (Holt, 2018). Therefore, alternative media are particularly suited for shaping narratives within Eurosceptic communities, as overall trust in the EU is high, and mainstream media tends to present content that is either neutral or positively biased toward the EU.

The alternative media in question will be narrowed to the six most popular online sites under the described category. The popularity is assessed based on the number of followers on social media, taken from the platform with the highest followers. Thus, the selection will be the following:

1. Objektiiv (24,000 followers on Facebook);
2. Uued Uudised (24,000 followers on Facebook);
3. Vanglplaneet (9700 followers on Facebook);
4. Telegram (7200 followers on Facebook);
5. Eestinen (3400 members in Facebook group);
6. Vabadused (2900 followers on Facebook).

Narratives will be collected exclusively from textual media, focusing on prioritising the meaning and interpretation of the content. The articles will be optimised in terms of time frame and topics. The analysis will cover the period from January 1, 2024, to December 31, 2024, considering significant events throughout the year, including the European Parliament elections, the campaigning period, and its aftermath. Other relevant events, such as Hungary's presidency of the Council and the appointment of new Commissioners, will also be considered. If the platform does not publish daily or extensively, all the media will be reviewed in that time frame. Otherwise, the optimisation in terms of content will be done through title and content keywords, which will be:

1. “European Union” (Estonian version - “*Euroopa Liit*”),
2. “EU” (Estonian version - “*EL*”),
3. “European Parliament” (Estonian version - “*Euroopa Parlament*”),
4. “European Commission” (Estonian version - “*Euroopa Komisjon*”),
5. “The Council of the EU” (Estonian version - “*Euroopa Liidu Nõukogu*”/ “*EL Nõukogu*”),
6. “Hungarian presidency” (Estonian version - “*Ungari resist mine*”),
7. “(European Parliament) elections” (Estonian version - “*(Euroopa Parlamendi) valimised*”).

After analysing the content from the selected sites, all gathered narratives will be compiled into a table, providing a structured overview of the findings. The narratives will be categorised based on recurring themes, allowing for the identification of key narratives that will be examined for their meaning and impact. The coding table will include an overview of sources, publication dates, relevant keywords, and quotations of text sections that convey the

identified narratives. This method enables a qualitative analysis of media articles while systematically uncovering dominant narratives.

Data will be interpreted across entire articles, with sentences or paragraphs serving as coding units. Narratives will be gathered based on sections that express an attitude toward the EU, whether neutral or critical. The core narratives will be categorised according to recurring themes and patterns, allowing for an analysis of how Eurosceptic views are framed within alternative media. These categories will help distinguish between different types of narratives, such as ideological or economic Euroscepticism. Additionally, the analysis will assess the intensity of critique, ranging from “soft” scepticism to “hard”, and examine whether these narratives align with broader Eurosceptic discourse found in other European contexts.

The final results will be used further to examine their impact on the European Parliament elections. Specifically, party programs for the EP elections will be analysed to determine whether they incorporate the identified narratives. If they do, the parties' performance in the elections will be analysed, considering both election results and their online campaigning strategies. Ultimately, this approach will provide insights into the role of alternative media in shaping public perceptions of the EU and the extent to which disinformation contributes to the spread of Eurosceptic narratives in Estonia.

3.3 Analysis on disinformation

An additional objective of this research is to identify instances of disinformation within the gathered narratives. Disinformation can significantly influence election outcomes and contribute to the spread of Eurosceptic ideas. In chapter 2.2.2, various far-right disinformation campaign sources were discussed, with alternative media sites and blogs emerging as one of them. Given this, there is a strong likelihood that the media sites analysed in this study also utilise disinformation to attract audiences. Moreover, some of these sites have already been flagged in disinformation databases. For instance, Telegram, one of the platforms included in this research, falsely claimed that Estonian reservists were being sent to

fight in Ukraine despite there being no factual basis for this assertion (Propastop, 2024). Such cases highlight the role of alternative media in spreading misleading narratives and reinforce the need for a thorough examination of how disinformation intertwines with Eurosceptic discourse.

The process of analysing disinformation will be conducted before categorising narratives into core themes, ensuring a broader selection for assessment. More specifically, narratives will be examined in the context in which they appear, determining whether they are presented with factual accuracy or contain illustrative, potentially misleading elements. The disinformation analysis will be based on two key factors. First, narratives will be assessed to determine whether they reference universally known facts or specific events that could potentially contain misleading information. Second, any narratives that remain questionable will undergo fact-checking through official portals dedicated to detecting false information. Three primary sources will be used to verify factual accuracy:

1. EUvsDisinfo – A platform led by the European External Action Service that monitors and identifies disinformation across the EU, primarily from foreign sources. Although this thesis focuses on Estonia’s internal disinformation landscape, EUvsDisinfo provides valuable insights, as much of the misleading content targeting the EU originates from foreign influence campaigns.
2. Propastop – A fact-checking platform specifically designed to detect and combat disinformation in Estonia.
3. Baltic Engagement Centre for Combating Information Disorders (BECID) – A regional initiative that monitors disinformation in the Baltic states, including Estonia, by tracking various sources of misleading content.

By utilising these sources, the analysis will verify the accuracy of the narratives and identify potential cases of disinformation in Estonia. However, if none of the sources confirms the presence of disinformation but the accuracy of a narrative remains questionable, it will be flagged as potentially misleading. This is particularly the case when a narrative lacks references to original sources, making it difficult to verify its credibility. Finally, the analysis will also assess whether these disinformation narratives have made their way into mainstream media by examining coverage in Estonia’s national media, ERR. This allows for a deeper

assessment of the impact disinformation can have on public opinion, political discourse, and electoral outcomes.

3.4 Case selection

The research puzzle revealed that there is still a cap on the Eurosceptic influence on the changes in the EU in 2024, meaning the EP elections and the new Commission, as well as the overall union-wide and global changes relevant to the time period. Nevertheless, the case of Estonia offers particular interest due to the lack of studies focusing on Eurosceptic narratives in the Estonian media sphere for two reasons. Firstly, since the primary disinformation discourse, particularly Eurosceptic narratives, has largely focused on Russian influence, disinformation within these communities does not typically originate from native Estonians. As a result, the discourse and underlying reasoning differ among communities, highlighting the need to focus on Estonian discourse. Secondly, there is a lack of studies on Estonian alternative media sources, especially regarding their disinformation and effect on elections. It is particularly puzzling since Euroscepticism and far-right ideologies in Estonian politics have risen in the last decade. In general, this case concludes some of the contemporary phenomena, such as disinformation and the role of online sources in politics.

Additionally, the case of Eurosceptic narratives during 2024 is still highly relevant since the influence of political campaigns and election results can shape the trajectory of member states' responses and EP decision-making in the coming years. The interplay between Euroscepticism, disinformation, and political mobilisation, especially in Estonia, provides a crucial insight into how public opinion is shaped in smaller EU member states with distinct historical and geopolitical contexts. This study, therefore, aims to fill the existing research gap by examining the evolution of Eurosceptic narratives in Estonia. By doing so, it contributes to the broader scholarly discussion on Euroscepticism, disinformation, and media influence in European democracies, offering insights that could inform the current situation of disinformation and Euroscepticism in Estonia.

3.5 Research limitations

Possible issues in the analysis could arise, firstly, by interpreting the content. There is a possibility of over-interpreting content and seeing a narrative indirectly. However, this will not be a significant problem since the data can be double-checked later after gathering. The second possible problem could be missing out on important narratives since the materials could be comprehensive. To avoid that, especially in optimising search, all data in the time frame will be looked over as much as possible. However, it might be inefficient for some sites since there can be unlimited publications daily, and some narratives could be hidden in articles that do not focus on the EU or its policies. Another issue that could arise is the availability of the data, primarily due to restricted access to the sites under analysis. This issue can be easily solved by ordering the site subscription, which is initially not preferred. Finally, for media sites, an issue can also be the deletion of an article that has already been used. Since it can happen, a link and the surrounding text of the narrative will be put into the coding table immediately.

The validity will be ensured, firstly, by focusing on several different alternative media sites connected to disinformation distribution or Eurosceptical views, where the results can vary and the content and topics differ. Furthermore, the effect of narratives will be looked into, meaning what political parties used the central narratives in their political agenda and how successful those parties were during the elections. This allows us to look into how much those alternative media sites are connected to party politics, but it also gives insight into their role in shaping election results and agendas. Finally, the checks on disinformation presence for final narratives will be done by using disinformation detection web pages, which have databases of different EU-related disinformation and sources. Additional checking will be done by searching for evidence for stated arguments.

The reliability of the research will be guaranteed through a clear structure for coding the narratives. This means there will be coding tables with traceable references to the sources. The coding tables will also include necessary context or text parts that express particular narratives.

4. Analysis

The analysis discovered seven Eurosceptic core narratives gathered from 107 narratives found from Estonia's six most popular alternative media sites that are often associated with Eurosceptic or far-right views. Additionally, the results showed some connections to disinformation, although most of the questionable narratives remained misleading. The following chapters will cover the results for the analysis, focusing on an overview of the platforms, common themes across the platforms, the discovered core narratives and finally the results for the analysis among disinformation associated with the narratives.

4.1 Overview of the platforms

Among the six platforms analysed, two stood out with the most narratives, which were also the most popular platforms in social media. Generally, the popularity of the platform, the number of narratives found and also the frequency of publications correlated, except for platform Vabadused and Estinen, in which less popular Vabadused offered more narratives and content, although their popularity had an insignificant difference, with 500 fewer followers on Vabadused. Additionally, both platforms covered fewer narratives and have fewer followers on social media. Since one of the research questions aims to identify whether differences exist among the platforms and what those differences are, this chapter will analyse the platforms and the main narratives found within them.

The most popular platform with the most narratives appeared to be Objektiiv, which offered 34 narratives and covered all the core narrative categories. Sixteen of the narratives were found in articles published before elections; thus, the connection to election campaigns wouldn't be that clear. The dominant topic for Eurosceptic views on the platform was the authoritarian features of the EU or its references, primarily focusing on the EU's coercive tactics on countries and citizens, as well as the supervision culture. The platform itself does not have direct connections to certain parties in Estonia; it is led by *Sihtasutus Perekonna ja Traditsiooni Kaitseks* (Foundation for the Protection of Family and Tradition) and aims to share news honestly and selflessly and in accordance with the fundamental values of our

culture, which are guided by conservative and traditional values (Objektiiv). Consequently, the content was mostly biased towards those conservative values, with criticism of the EU's liberal initiatives and also criticism of the EU's actions against Hungary's government on their ideology.

The second most popular platform was Uued Uudised, with 30 narratives discovered, also covering all seven core narrative categories. Again, the connection to the election campaign wouldn't be clear, since 13 of the narratives originated before the elections. Unlike the previous platform, Uued Uudised is directly connected to party politics, since the publisher is the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE). However, it is stated on the webpage that opinions on the platform might not comply with the party's, and the main focus of their content is freedom of speech (Uued Uudised). As in the previous platform, this one also mostly focuses on the EU's authoritarian features, which are revealed mainly through the EU's comparisons to the Soviet Union and the centralisation of political power.

The next platform with significantly fewer narratives turned out to be Vanglaplaneet, with a total of 16 narratives covering five core narratives. Nine of the narratives were found before the EP elections, and similarly to previous platforms, Vanglaplaneet also mainly focused on the EU's authoritarian comparisons. This platform differs from others in that its aims are more conspiratorial. The platform states that it aims to reveal global financial and power elites' action plans (New World Order), which are to rule the world, decrease population and create dictatorship over science (Vanglaplaneet).

The next platform with 14 discovered narratives was Telegram, which covered four different categories of narratives. Eight of the narratives were found in the pre-election timeframe. The main topic for this platform differed from the others in that it focused on the EU being corrupt. Furthermore, mainly the EU's corrupted narratives appeared in the context of the COVID pandemic and how it was either orchestrated by the authorities and the elite or how there have been secret deals in COVID vaccines. Although the relevance of the COVID pandemic is generally low in society, those narratives are highly emotional for the public engaged with Telegram, thus it is also efficient during elections to remind people of the conspiracies and allegations. The site itself is less politically oriented than others under the

analysis, while it still claims as its slogan that it is transparent media (Telegram). Additionally, the site offers a selection of other non-scientific content, such as conspiracies or mystical content. What is more, some of the articles on the site use explicit language and sometimes offensive expressions to emphasise the main argument, for example, calling Ursula von der Leyen a terrorist in several contexts.

The fifth site used for the analysis was Vabadused, which revealed nine narratives under three categories. Only two of the narratives were discovered before the EP elections. Thus, the connection to political campaigning would be low. The site was the most neutral out of the sources, sharing mostly news and referencing mainstream or reliable media sources. Nevertheless, the content focused on a certain selection of news relating to general topics discussed in conservative or far-right communities, such as climate policies or the pandemic. The site is relatively new; it was founded in 2023 and focuses on power dynamics, the spread of authoritarian tendencies, the planned economy, and individual freedoms (Vabadused). The most popular topic among the narratives is freedom of speech, often in relation to the EU's limitations, but also in the context of Elon Musk as one of the spokespersons for the topic.

The final platform analysed was Estinen, which revealed four narratives under three narrative categories. One narrative was found before the EP elections. Two narratives focused on the EU's authoritarian features, making it the most popular one out of the four. The site itself focuses on Estonian communities in Finland or those needing information on Finland, thus often publishing news that relates to Finland. Nevertheless, the political section of the platform equally focuses on global news and covers Estonia as well as other countries' politics. The platform does not indicate any connections to particular ideologies or political parties. However, the content offered on the site is often focused on topics that would gain many readers, whether controversial or threatening; for example, there is a lot of coverage on Donald Trump, Putin, or defence. The site is relevant for the current research as its public is Estonian, despite its coverage of Finnish topics. Furthermore, the site has published articles focusing on non-mainstream or non-factual statements, embracing its alternative media features and giving a base for EU opposing statements. Additionally, the content on the pages is occasionally unprofessional, containing grammatical errors and mistakes and having simplified wording.

In sum, all of the alternative media sources used focused on similar topics but with different outputs and explicitness. Only one of the sources had a connection to a certain political party, while others casually mentioned some in the context of their values. Generally, the selection was effective for researching Eurosceptic narratives. Although the direct connection to the election campaign could not be concluded, the topicality suited, since the focus was on events that happened in the EU and were expected to get coverage for the research.

4.2 Discovered core narratives

The analysis concluded seven different core narratives based on the central argument of the text or paragraph, which the narratives presented (Table 1). Several themes were discovered in different Eurosceptic narratives. The narratives themselves were decided upon the main idea or argument underlying the text, whereas certain topics recurred among all narrative categories used to prove the argument. Such topics were: COVID, migration, war in Ukraine and censorship. The found core narratives are following: “The EU has authoritarian tendencies”; “The EU has caused huge loss in sovereignty and raised dependence for member states”; “The EU is corrupted”; “The EU liberal values, diversity and equality have negative influence”; “The EU limits freedom of speech” and “The EU treats Hungary unfairly”. The following seven sub-chapters will cover the content of all the core narratives and the underlying narratives.

Table 1. Results of Eurosceptic narrative analysis on Estonian alternative media in 2024

Core narrative	Narrative example	Number of narratives found	Sources
The EU’s green policies have a negative influence	EU green policies aim to destroy the farming sector and replace animal products (Objektiiv, 2024)	10	Objektiiv, Uued Uudised, Telegram, Vabadused

The EU has authoritarian tendencies	The EU suppresses dissent and silences opposition to maintain its authority (Objektiiv, 2024)	38	Objektiiv, Uued Uudised, Vanglapaneeet, Telegram, Vabadused, Estinen
The EU has caused significant loss in sovereignty and raised dependence for member states	Lack of member state sovereignty - EU will impose policies even if it has a negative outcome for industry or heritage (Objektiiv, 2024)	11	Objektiiv, Uued Uudised, Vanglapaneeet
The EU is corrupt	The European Commission is not transparent and comparable to the mafia (Uued Uudised, 2024)	11	Objektiiv, Uued Uudised, Telegram
The EU liberal values, diversity and equality have a negative influence	The EU's liberal values and Marxist ideology are destroying Estonia (Uued Uudised, 2024)	13	Objektiiv, Uued Uudised, Vanglapaneeet, Telegram
The EU limits freedom of speech	The EU's fight against misinformation is a cover for censorship and authoritarian control (Objektiiv, 2024)	14	Objektiiv, Uued Uudised, Vanglapaneeet, Vabadused, Estinen
The EU treats Hungary unfairly	The EU does not support Hungary enough in their positions on migration, gender policies and defence (Objektiiv, 2024)	10	Objektiiv, Uued Uudised, Vanglapaneeet, Estinen

4.2.1 Core narrative: “The EU has authoritarian tendencies”

The most common core narrative, dominating with 38 narratives, was the “the EU having authoritarian tendencies” category. The narrative category appeared in all of the analysed platforms, being the only category as such. The category concludes narratives that criticise the power centralisation in Brussels, surveillance, undemocratic decisions, manipulation, coercion, ideological imposition, and comparisons to previous authoritarian regimes such as the Soviet Union. In some cases, authoritarianism is also expressed as dictatorship. The overall idea in relation to authoritarianism, in this case, refers to a regime that has centralised power, represses citizens, limits freedoms, and lacks transparency. Dictatorship in the same context would refer to total power belonging to the EU or, often mentioned, to Ursula von der Leyen. However, both of the terms in direct use serve the role of an adjective rather than a factual statement, thus not explaining the arguments.

One of the recurring terms across the narrative is centralisation of power or Brussels-centrism. It is expressed as a situation where the EU gathers or aims to gather all the decision-making power in Brussels, making the member-states and political representatives have less decision-making power. Thus, it mostly refers to the political independence of the Commission. However, there are also certain references to ideological centralisation, which represses the minority, meaning the conservative or far-right Eurosceptic communities. For example, an article published in Vanglaplaneet claimed the following:

“The long-term goal of Brussels' left-liberal circle is to create EU military forces, including the removal of defence-related decision-making processes from member states and their centralisation in Brussels. According to such a proposal, a situation could arise where a common compulsory military service is implemented in all EU member states.”¹

Therefore, the centralisation of power is often expressed in the future tense and as a conspiracy based on EU's that are interpreted as an excuse in order to potentially gain more power. In general, many of those narratives demonstrate the dissatisfaction with current

¹ “Brüsseli vasakliberaalse ringkonna pikaajaline eesmärk on aga ELi sõjaliste jõudude loomine, sealhulgas kaitsealaste otsuste tegemise protsessi eemaldamine liikmesriikidelt ja selle tsentraliseerimine Brüsselisse. Sellise ettepaneku kohaselt võib tekkida olukord, et kõigis ELi liikmesriikides rakendatakse ühine ajateenistuse kohustus.” (Vanglaplaneet, 2024).

leadership in the EU, referring to the elite as “maniacs” who are in leadership positions, mainly in an ideological context.

Another narrative often appearing in the category describes the authoritarian feature of surveillance. This is expressed by the EU's initiatives, which aim to create transparency, for example, over finances or certain property, which would be visible on digital databases. However, the surveillance in this case also refers to limitations of some activities online, such as hate speech. However, some of these initiatives focus on personal limitations and less individual sovereignty, which gives more control to governing bodies. The issue is reflected, for example, on the Vabadused platform, which discussed the influence of the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA) in the following way:

"All these proposals envision a scenario where correspondence confidentiality is non-existent, every letter is inspected before sending, and the postal service is obligated to assess whether its services could be used unlawfully. This is the dream of authoritarian or dictatorial regimes, where, under the guise of fighting serious crimes, citizens can be surveilled, controlled, and suppressed for any dissenting thought." ².

The presented quotation refers to DSA, which regulates digital platforms with the overall purpose of making them safer, and one of its outputs is filtering harmful content that violates fundamental rights (European Commission). The narrative in the text is expressed in a radicalised manner, which would benefit Eurosceptic views, since the functioning of DSA on social platforms is mostly filtered with automated tools, with exceptional cases of harmful content.

Another recurring narrative is on the EU's coercive manner, reflecting authoritarian tendencies. The narrative is presented in several ways, for example, in the context of EU pressuring member states in their political decisions, but also in the case of EU policies being

² “Kõik need ettepanekud looks samaväärse olukorra, kus kirjavahetuse salastatust ei ole, iga kirja kontrollitakse juba enne selle saatmist ja kirja vahendanud postiteenusel lasuks kohustus hinnata, kas tema teenust võidaks ebaseaduslikult tarvitada. Tegemist on autoritaarsete või diktatuurirežiimide unistusega, kus tülgastavate kuritegudega võitlemise ettekäändel on kodanikke võimalik jälgida, kontrollida ja lämmatada juba eos igasugune teisitõtlemine.” (Tuul, 2024).

implemented in a way that an individual would be negatively affected. An example of this is from the platform Uued Uudised:

"A particularly striking example of Brussels' subversion is the power shift in Poland. While conservatives were in power, various pretexts were used to withhold all funds due to Poland, including post-COVID recovery funds that Poland had actually borrowed along with others. Before the elections, Brussels promised to release all these funds if Donald Tusk and the Civic Platform won—and the ultra-liberals did indeed win. Polish votes were bought with euros." ³.

The text above expresses the EU's coercive tactics, which initiated a liberal shift in Poland. The coercion is apparent in the example, both in an ideological and methodical sense, as the EU used funding to achieve an ideological purpose. Thus, coercion is a vital aspect in expressing the EU's tendencies to broaden its power range in the Eurosceptic agenda.

Finally, an often occurring narrative among the category is about the Soviet Union as an example authoritarian regime, which is constantly compared to the EU as an argument on the EU's lack of democracy. In most cases, the example is introduced as a pattern that relates to the EU and not directly to its policies that undermine the people's will. An example of this would be Uued Uudised, who argued that "The Soviet Union collapsed economically because it accumulated too many negative factors for its economy at once. The same threatens the European Union, which is burdened by the war in Ukraine, the green transition, mass immigration, and struggles with strikes." ⁴. Therefore, a prediction of the EU's economic collapse is made based on economic decisions made in the Soviet Union, leading to its downfall.

³ "Üks eriti hea näide Brüsseli õonestustööst on Poola võimupööre. Kuni võimul olid konservatiivid, pandi erinevatel ettekäändel kinni kõik Poolale kuuluvad rahad, sealhulgas ka koroonajärgne taasterahastu, mida tegelikult laenas Poola koos teistega. Enne valimisi lubati Brüsselist Donald Tuski ja Kodanikuplatvormi võidu korral kõik need rahad vabaks lasta – ja äärmusliberaalid võitsidki. Poolakate hääled osteti eurorahadega ära." (Uued Uudised, 2024).

⁴ "Nõukogude Liit kukkus majanduslikult kokku sellega, et ühele ajale kuhjus kokku majanduse jaoks liiga palju negatiivseid tegureid. Sama ähvardab ka (Ukraina)-sõdivat, rohepööravat, massisisserännet toitvat ja streikides vaevlevat Euroopa Liitu." (Uued Uudised, 2024).

In conclusion, the topics under the authoritarian comparison as a Eurosceptic narrative highlight dissatisfaction with the EU's dominant liberal values and governing dynamics. Narratives under this category employ analogies to emphasise perceived threats to national sovereignty, individual freedoms, and democratic principles.

4.2.2 Core narrative: “The EU limits freedom of speech”

The second most popular Eurosceptic narrative discovered during the analysis focuses on the EU regulating freedom of speech, often referred to as a consequence of limiting hate speech. The narrative appeared 14 times in five platforms and was often related to topics that also, in another context, fell into the previous category of the EU's authoritarian tendencies. For example, the narratives mainly appear in the context of DSA or the EU censoring the media. However, for this category, the main emphasis is on people's right to have the freedom to express themselves. The main themes occurring under the category are censorship, DSA, Elon Musk and X. The last three are used mostly jointly in the exact text.

Censorship under this core narrative broadly concerns the issue of limiting freedom of speech in social networks and media, where people can share public content. The concern is that limiting content that could be harmful is generally a limitation on free speech. For example, the issue was discussed in the context of EU elections in *Objektiiv*:

"The EU's bureaucracy fears the European Parliament elections. Consequently, major social media companies must hire a large number of influencers and fact-checkers to counter 'hostile' viewpoints. Requirements for limiting freedom of speech on social networks, harmful content created by artificial intelligence, and misleading advertising are outlined in the EU's Digital Services Act. Public consultations on enforcing censorship were held this February."⁵

⁵ “Euroopa Liidu nomenklatuur kardab Euroopa Parlamendi valimisi. Selle tõttu peavad suuremad sotsiaalmeedia ettevõtted palkama "vaenulike" seisukohtade tõrjumiseks suure hulga jutusuunajaid ning faktikontrolle. Sotsiaalvõrgustike sõnavabaduse, tehisaru loodud kahjuliku sisu ja valetava reklaami piiramise nõuded on kirjas Euroopa Liidu digiteenuse määruses. Käesoleva aasta veebruaris toimusid tsensuuri jõustamise teemal avalikud konsultatsioonid.” (*Objektiiv*, 2024).

The specific article was discussing the censorship being applied to election campaigns on social platforms. The issue is especially limiting for Eurosceptic campaigning as the content filtering could flag such campaigns as harmful, for example, in terms of advocating anti-LGBTQ+ values. Therefore, censorship would allow the EU to protect people's fundamental rights, whereas it would limit certain content and political campaigns.

Another topic in the category focuses jointly on the issues of DSA, Elon Musk, and the media platform X (formerly Twitter). This appears on several platforms and is mostly on the same topic. Specifically, the narrative highlights the discomfort DSA has brought to social media platforms and their owners, one of them being Elon Musk with the X. Elon Musk in the Eurosceptic community is seen as someone who respects freedom of speech, and thus gaining lots of popularity and support. However, he is also seen as someone who contributes to discovering the truth and revealing information. The topic is well illustrated in a quotation from Vabadused:

"As we know, Musk and X have been 'taken on' by the European Union for some time now. The European Commission initiated infringement proceedings against X last December, citing a significant shortcoming in the platform's measures to combat so-called misinformation. The proceedings were launched in August under the Digital Services Act (DSA), which requires large social media platforms to combat 'illegal content,' including 'misinformation.' If platforms fail to meet or violate their DSA obligations, they could face substantial fines, up to 6% of the platform's parent company's global revenue. For X, the maximum fine could reach an estimated 200 million euros based on 2023 revenue. Additionally, the Commission could potentially halt the platform's operations in Europe under certain circumstances. We have written more extensively about DSA-related risks here." ⁶.

⁶ "Nagu teame, siis Euroopa Liidus on Musk ja X „ette võetud“ juba mõnda aega tagasi. Euroopa Komisjon alustas X-i suhtes rikkumismenetlust mullu detsembris, heites platvormile ühe olulise puudusena ette just nimelt ebapiisavaid meetmeid nn valeinfo levikuga võitlemisel. Menetlus algatati mullu augustis Euroopa Liidus kehtima hakanud digiteenuste õigusakti (Digital Services Act, DSA) alusel, mis paneb suurtele sotsiaalmeediaplattformidele kohustuse võidelda „illegaalse sisu“, sh „valeinfoga“. Kui platvormid ei täida või rikuvad neile DSA raames pandud kohustusi, võib neid ees oodata märkimisväärselt suur rahatrahv – kuni 6% platvormi pidava ettevõtte globaalsest käibest. X-i puhul ulatuks maksimaalne trahvisumma 2023. aasta käibe järgi hinnanguliselt 200 miljoni euron. Samuti oleks komisjonil võimalus platvormi tegevus teatud juhtudel Euroopas üldse peatada. Oleme DSA-ga seotud ohtudest pikemalt kirjutanud siin." (Sarv, 2024)

Most of the platforms covering the issues concerning Elon Musk describe situations in which the EU punishes Musk or his businesses. This specific example also uses quotation marks on words “misinformation” and “illegal content”, which is often a strategy used to show the critical stance towards the accuracy of these terms in their approach. By using quotation marks, the authors imply that the definitions are subjective, suggesting that these labels might be applied unfairly or used to suppress certain viewpoints. Thus, it means that misinformation or illegal content from the EU's point of view would not be universal, and those who repress the ideological other.

In sum, the current category is specifically built upon similar narratives concerning social media and the limiting influence on the activities of Eurosceptic communities. It is also similar to the previous category in that it is concerned about the EU's interference in individual freedoms. Furthermore, it emphasises the power centrism of the EU as a governing body that seeks to consolidate control over digital platforms and public discourse.

4.2.3 Core narrative: “The EU liberal values, diversity and equality have a negative influence”

The third most common core narrative among Eurosceptic views in Estonian alternative media, appearing 13 times, concentrates on conservative opposition to the EU's liberal views regarding migration, tolerance and minority groups, which would offer a negative influence on EU member states and their national identity as well as economy. The main topics falling under those narratives are migration, LGBTQ+ and diversity. The core narrative occurs in four platforms, whereas half of them are from Uued Uudised.

Migration under this category is often framed as something predicting negative consequences or a less important topic that the EU prioritises instead of more crucial ones. It is also expressed as an ideological liberal value to stand for tolerance. For example, one of the articles published in Uued Uudised described the migration crisis in the EU as the Western Roman Empire, predicting a fall of the union as the migration intensifies:

"The European Union is currently like the Western Roman Empire before its fall. Barbarians invaded from all sides back then, and the empire constantly yielded to them, much like it does now with migrants, especially the Islamic segment. Having amassed the wealth of all conquered lands, Rome grew complacent in its affluence and was no longer capable of resisting external influences. It was an empire without democracy, so misjudgments stemmed from the flawed politics of a narrow patrician circle—there are many similarities, and likely, a similar end awaits." ⁷.

The example highlights the pattern among which the Western Roman Empire fell apart due to migrants draining all the empire's wealth, and it's referring to the same pattern happening currently in the EU, as migrants are financially supported and would be participating in the job market. Therefore, a Eurosceptic argument suggests that migration over time overtakes the EU, leaving nationals suffering.

Another theme in the category is specifically concerned with the EU prioritising LGBTQ+ rights and the negative effect of it on traditional values and the enforcement of the values on member states and candidate countries. Similarly to migration, this narrative emphasises how the EU would fight for LGBTQ+ rights rather than deal with more important issues, such as the war in Ukraine. An illustrative case could be an article published in Uued Uudised, stating the following:

"The end of Hungary's Ukraine boycott depends more on Brussels than Budapest, but the European Union would rather leave Ukraine without aid than abandon its demand for Hungary to allow same-sex couples to adopt. It could also be said that Ukraine is not receiving funds because the European Union prioritises LGBT empowerment in Hungary over pushing back against Russia in Ukraine. Moreover, some countries that have always

⁷ "Euroopa Liit on praegu nagu Lääne-Rooma enne oma lõppu. Barbarid tungisid tollal igalt poolt sisse ja impeerium andis neile kogu aeg järele – nagu nüüd migrantidele, eriti selle islamistlikule osale. Ahminud kokku kõigi vallutatud maade rikkused, mandus Rooma oma jõukuses ega olnud enam võimeline välismõjudele vastu panema. Oli impeerium ja polnud demokraatiat, mistõttu valeotsused tulid kitsa patriitsliku ringi ekslikust poliitikast – neid ühisjooni on palju ja ilmselt tuleb sarnane ka lõpp." (Uued Uudised, 2024).

been sceptical of Ukraine, such as Germany, which has been cut off from Russian gas, might be content to keep the money in their pockets." ⁸.

Generally, the concern in this case is more about the prioritisation of equality over a war, in the sense of allowing Hungary to step over the EU's fundamental rights, which could possibly change Hungary's position on Russian aggression. However, despite the focus being on prioritisation, the text also reveals the values the publisher shares about equality in a way that illustrates the arguments, such as saying "allowing same-sex couples to their pants" which is a negatively charged phrase that diminishes the significance of LGBTQ+ rights. Thus, the underlying concern would still be about the EU's values, which could be presented in a way that would seem more radical.

Finally, the core narrative also focuses on diversity and multiculturalism and their representation in the EU. The narratives under the topic are presented in a way that people are being disappointed in the way the EU fights for diversity, but also how the EU undermines certain nations, such as Estonia. An example of this is from *Objektiiv*, which is concerned about diversity negatively affecting democracy:

"Due to 'barbieland' thinking, it is found that since there are too few Black individuals, Muslims, Central and Eastern Europeans, and young people in the European Parliament, the ideals of the European Union's enlightenment era are essentially being trampled underfoot, which in turn negatively impacts the Union's democracy." ⁹.

The criticism in this example is directed to the perceived overemphasis on diversity, which is seen to be compromising the democratic principles and national identities of member states. The narrative suggests that the focus on multiculturalism and representation undermines the sovereignty and cultural integrity of nations like Estonia.

⁸ "Ungari Ukraina-boikoti lõpetamine sõltub rohkem Brüsselist kui Budapestist, aga Euroopa Liit jätab pigem Ukraina rahata kui loobub nõudest, et ungarlased laseksid samasoolised oma püksi. Võib öelda ka nii, et Ukraina ei saa raha, sest Euroopa Liidule on tähtsam LGBT võimutsemine Ungaris kui Venemaa tagasilöömine Ukrainas. Ja mõnigi riik, kes on alati Ukrainasse pahuralt suhtunud, nagu Venemaa gaasist ilma jäänud Saksamaa, ongi ehk rahul, et raha jääb taskusse." (Uued Uudised, 2024).

⁹ "'Barbiemaast' johtuvalt leitakse, et kuna Euroopa Parlamendis on liiga vähe musta värvi inimesi ja moslemeid, nende kõrval kesk- ja ida-eurooplasi ning noori, siis sisuliselt tallatakse jalge alla Euroopa Liidu valgustusaja ideaalid, mis omakorda mõjub halvasti Liidu demokraatiale." (Objektiiv, 2024).

Consequently, this core narrative of the EU's diversity, equality and liberal values having a negative effect is primarily driven by conservative opposition to the EU's stance on migration, LGBTQ+ rights, and multiculturalism. This perspective argues that the EU's focus on these issues undermines national identities, economies, and democratic principles of member states. The recurring similarity among the categories focuses on prioritising such topics over others that would seem more crucial or relevant.

4.2.4 Core narrative: “The EU has caused significant loss in sovereignty and raised dependence for member states”

Another Eurosceptic core narrative found in the Estonian alternative media focuses on how the EU's governance and decisions have made member states suffer or depend on the union. The narrative can be summed up with “loss of sovereignty” as one of the main arguments in Eurosceptic discourse. The narratives under this category appeared in three of the analysed platforms, occurring 11 times. In this category, specific themes cannot be pointed out; rather, the focus is directed to certain aspects of sovereignty that have been taken away in the EU.

More than half of the narratives in this grouping appeared in Uued Uudised, and the main similarity among those narratives is the connections to migration and the Soviet Union. One of the arguments illustrating Estonia's perceived loss of sovereignty is the historical incongruity of Estonians fighting for freedom to overcome the Soviet regime and achieve independence, only to cede that autonomy to the EU subsequently. The quote from Uued Uudised describes it in the following way:

"Another significant shift is the departure from the principles of nation-statehood, Estonian identity, the Estonian language, and culture, as well as sovereignty, with a move towards Eurofederalism and multiculturalism. Although this is not yet openly acknowledged, there is still talk of preserving Estonian identity and national independence, but only because a comprehensive departure from the constitutional order of the Republic of Estonia has not yet been admitted.

No one can overlook how the Russification policies of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) are returning, with Russian and English languages encroaching, the Estonian language being marginalised even as the official language, the state being overrun by migrants, and the growing influence of Muslim communities raising concerns about the imminent arrival of Islamist terrorism. Russification is strengthening as the Kremlin's 'second colony,' and Estonia is not deciding for itself on matters of mass migration, gender equality, or social values. Undemocratic tendencies are strengthening (hate speech laws), and the society we envisioned during the Singing Revolution no longer exists." ¹⁰.

The quote not only explains the hypocrisy considering historical context, but it also highlights how the EU membership has caused a loss of national identity with rising multiculturalism and immigration, complementing it with the EU Green Deal and hate speech law, which express the disappointment. Such narratives are the closest to “hard” Euroscepticism that can be found in the analysed media, which usually is more subtle in their attitude towards the EU. Mostly, Euroscepticism is tied to certain policies or actions; however, in the case of sovereignty, the negative effect of the EU becomes comprehensive.

In sum, the category employs common anti-federalism arguments to express the fundamental negative impact of the EU on member states' sovereignty. This narrative underscores the perceived loss of national autonomy and identity, emphasising how EU policies have undermined the independence of nations like Estonia, with an additional discourse on historical experiences. This perspective represents a more pronounced form of Euroscepticism, viewing the EU's influence as detrimental to the decision-making authority that member states have.

¹⁰ “Teine oluline muutus on loobumine rahvusriiklusest, eestluse, eesti keele ja kultuuri prioriteediks seadmisest ja suveräänsusest, suund on võetud euroföderalismile ja multikultuursusele. Seda veel avalikult ei tunnista, endiselt räägitakse eestluse hoidmisest ja omariiklusest, aga seda vaid seetõttu, et põhjalikku loobumist Eesti Vabariigi põhiseaduslikust korrast ei juleta veel tunnista.”

Kellelegi ei jää ju märkamata see, kuidas NLKP-EKP venestamispoliitika on tagasi, vene ja inglise keel tungivad peale, eesti keel taandub isegi riigikeelena, riik ujutatakse üle migrantidega, moslemikogukonna meeletu kasvab lubab eeldada islamiterrorismi peatset siiajõudmist ning venestamine siinse Kremli “viienda kolonni” tugevnemist, Eesti ei otsusta ise ei massimigratsiooni ega majade soojustamise, ei kliimameetmete ega ühiskondlike väärtuste üle, tugevnevad ebademokraatlikud tendentsid (vaenukõneseadus). Seda ühiskonda, mida me tahtsime Laulva revolutsiooni ajal, lihtsalt enam pole.” (Uued Uudised, 2024).

4.2.5 Core narrative: “The EU is corrupt”

This narrative of expressing the EU's corruptive actions appeared in 11 instances on three different platforms. However, the narrative was dominant in Telegram, with eight narratives out of the 11. More than half of the narratives under this category are connected to the COVID pandemic. Additionally, in the context of COVID, the narratives often direct the blame to Ursula von der Leyen. This category of narratives also addresses the new Commission and political changes in the EU in 2024.

The issue of COVID under the category primarily refers to the lack of transparency on the policies made during the time, as well as the decisions in a more recent context. The narrative also expresses disappointment in the new Commission since it is led by Ursula von der Leyen, who is the accused person on the issues surrounding COVID under these narratives. The criticism is directed at the way Ursula von der Leyen handled the deals of vaccine orders, specifically in the case of Pfizer vaccine orders through text messages, which was also discussed in court. Furthermore, there are allegations that COVID was also a fraud, and the EU has a responsibility for it. An illustration for such narratives can be shown based on an article published in Telegram, which states the following:

"This week, 'COVID terrorist' and pathological liar Ursula von der Leyen was 're-elected' as President of the European Commission. Member of the European Parliament Ewa Zajączkowska-Hernik called for von der Leyen's imprisonment in a public speech, accusing the German-born political terrorist of imposing climate fraud on Europeans and organising illegal migrant influxes." ¹¹.

Firstly, the text expresses Ursula von der Leyen's guilt in the pandemic-related issues by calling her a “COVID terrorist” as well as a liar to describe her way of governing, referring to the Commission's corruption. Secondly, the argument questions the transparency of her election process, which can indicate either the failure or transparency of the way the

¹¹ “Koroonaterrorist ja patoloogiline valetaja Ursula von der Leyen “valiti” sel nädalal tagasi Euroopa Komisjoni presidendiks. Euroopa Parlamendi saadik Ewa Zajączkowska-Hernik nõudis oma avalikus kõnes von der Leyeni vangistamist, süüdistades Saksamaalt pärit poliitterroristi eurooplastele kliimapettuse pähe määrimises ja organiseeritud illegaalsete migrantide sissevoolus.” (Telegram, 2024).

Spitzenkandidaten process elects the Commission president or that the electoral opposition was not considered. The second argument is also presented in other narratives, which concerns the undermining of the right-wing parties' vote since the Commission president is elected by majority vote. Furthermore, the narrative also accuses the overall fraud in other policy fields as well, making the previous and current Commission formations seem corrupt.

To further generalise the topic of corruption allegations, the issue for the Eurosceptic community is also compared to an ideology-related concern. The main accusation is directed at the policies regarding equality and climate change, which are seen as ideological. An article posted in *Objektiiv* describes it as follows:

"Unfortunately, it must be acknowledged that yes, in addition to the life-strange, nature- and moral laws raping, made-up political ideologies (woke ideology, gender ideology, enforced green agenda), and deliberately provoked and directed immigration, the economically bankrupt European Union representatives are already imposing new existential measures on Europe." ¹².

The quote concludes the narrative by emphasising the broader concerns of Eurosceptics, who view the EU's policies on equality, climate change, and immigration as ideologically driven and detrimental to Europe's well-being. This perspective frames the EU as an organisation that imposes its agenda without adequate consideration for the diverse interests of member states, further fueling the corruption of the union.

In sum, the narrative portraying the EU as corrupt in Eurosceptic media particularly emphasises the EU's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the actions of Ursula von der Leyen. The narrative highlights concerns over transparency, the politicisation of vaccine deals, and the ideological nature of the EU's policies. The criticism extends to the election process of the Commission, contributing to a broader perception of the EU as a non-transparent organisation.

¹² "Kahjuks tuleb tõdeda, et jah, eluvõõraste, loodus- ja kõlblusseadusi vägistavate, väljamõeldud poliitideoloogiate (woke-ideoloogia, sooideoloogia, pealepressitav rohepööre) ning tahtlikult esilekutsutud ja suunatava sisserände kõrval suruvad rahandusliku süvariigi äraostetud Euroopa Liidu esindajad Euroopale peale juba uusi loomuvastaseid võtteid." (Orosz, 2024).

4.2.6 Core narrative: “The EU’s green policies have a negative influence”

In 10 times, the narratives under the analysis focused specifically on the negative influence on the EU Green Deal, which is one of the EU’s main policies currently, that focuses on climate neutrality by the year 2050 and has several sub-goals and activities, that face criticism, especially in communities not recognising the effects of global warming. Far-right and Eurosceptic parties are known to oppose the idea either fundamentally or in ways that have a destructive effect on the economy, habits, etc. The narrative appeared in four of the analysed platforms; however, the main platforms were Telegram and Objektiiv. Main topics to stand out under the category were agriculture, non-renewable fuels and veganism.

Agriculture is one of the biggest issues in terms of climate change, which also gives opposing parties considerable arguments. The problem concerns different chemicals, heavy machinery and animal products in farming, which are often controversial in achieving goals for the Green Deal without making some areas suffer. Due to the issue, the agricultural sector is protesting and receiving attention from the media, especially under this analysis. A quote from Objektiiv expresses farmers' dissatisfaction in the following way:

"Protests will become even more intense if European Commission President [Ursula] von der Leyen does not give a clear commitment to change the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) rules," added the farmers' representative. According to them, the policies implemented by former Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans as part of the Green Deal "have ultimately failed, and the Commission must acknowledge this and act accordingly." ¹³.

Specifically, the issue in this case focuses on the criticism of not considering agricultural sector concerns enough, which could be applied to a larger public as well. In view of Euroscepticism, this is a constructive criticism, which would also be useful to the decision-making process, thus providing valuable insight into improving the policies. However, this is not the case for all of the narratives under this section. Some narratives offer

¹³ "Meeleavaldused muutuvad veelgi jõulisemaks, kui Euroopa Komisjoni president [Ursula] von der Leyen ei anna selget lubadust muuta ühtse põllumajanduspoliitika (CAP) reegleid," lisas põllumeeste esindaja. Tema sõnul on endise komisjoni rohelise kokkuleppe asepresidendi Frans Timmermansi kehtestatud poliitikat "lõplikult läbi kukkunud ja Komisjonil tuleb seda tunnistada ning vastavalt tegutseda". (Objektiiv, 2024).

more principal opposition to the Green Deal. Such as the following statement published in *Objektiiv*:

"The complaining higher commissar is a sight to behold. The idea of international cooperation within the European Union may not need to be abandoned, but in its current form, it is almost pure malice. Leyen's tenure has been one blunder and catastrophe after another, but this seems to be the goal for which she was appointed—not exactly the sharpest tool in the shed. The Green Deal, which is at the forefront of Leyen's agenda, is utterly destructive and nonsensical, and therefore, it is foolish." ¹⁴.

The criticism in this is directed to the overall governing principles in Ursula von der Leyen's presidency, emphasising the destructiveness of the Green Deal. Furthermore, it expresses the incompetence of von der Leyen by various adjectives, such as saying “not exactly the sharpest tool in the shed”. Nevertheless, the criticism also suggests that the perceived incompetence and destructive policies are not accidental but rather intentional, implying a deeper, systematic issue within the EU's governance and the principles guiding von der Leyen's presidency.

Finally, the narrative category also addresses veganism negatively, as the EU would enforce it on citizens. Narratives claim that the EU exterminates animal herds and deliberately increases the prices of animal products to decrease consumption in order to make achieving the goals of the Green Deal more realistic. Although animal products are not sustainable in several aspects, the narrative radicalises the situation, making the EU seem diabolical and against the will of citizens. Specifically, the narrative found in *Objektiiv* is expressed in the following way:

"A significant aspect of the green transition is limiting human meat consumption and ideally replacing all animal-based food with plant-based, insect, and synthetic meat alternatives. The goal of 'animal welfare' in green policies is not so much to improve the living conditions of

¹⁴ “Hädaldav ülemkomissar on vaatamiseks kaunis pilt. Euroopa Liidust riikidevahelise ausa koostöö ideena ilmselt ole vaja lahti saada, aga selle tänasel kujul on tegemist pea puhta kurjusega. Leyeni ametiaeg on olnud ainult üks äpardus ja katastroof teise otsa, aga see vist on eesmärgiks, milleks nimetati ametisse mitte just kõige teravam pliiats. Rohepööre, mis on Leyeni tegevuskavas esimesel kohal, on üdini kõike ilusat hävitav hullumeelsus, ergo see on rumal.” (Kallas, 2024).

animals, but rather to eliminate livestock farming, making meat, dairy, and poultry products increasingly expensive, which in turn means reducing the share of these foods in human diets." ¹⁵.

Thus, the emphasis for the narrative concerning veganism as enforced by the EU is portraying the transition as an authoritarian imposition rather than a voluntary process, highlighting the perceived overreach of EU initiatives. Nevertheless, narratives in this category are expressed misleadingly, undermining the importance of policies to achieve the aims of the Green Deal. The quotes illustrate how the use of language can intensify perceptions and shape opinion, often framing the EU's initiatives as overly intrusive or misguided, thereby fueling Eurosceptic sentiments.

4.2.7 Core narrative: “The EU treats Hungary unfairly”

The final core narrative, appearing 10 times, describes the way the EU treats Hungary unfairly. The category is apparent in four of the analysed sources, while *Objektiiv* remains a dominant source. This category is also specific to the events of 2024, where Hungary held the presidency of the Council of the EU. However, the category also addresses the issues with the EU and Hungary since the full-scale war in Ukraine started, as Hungary has not adopted a specific position in their support, and this has also troubled the decision-making in the EU. Although even Eurosceptic parties in Estonia strongly support Ukraine, the issue of Hungary receives a lot of attention due to its conservative positioning. This is also expressed in the narratives on the category, with a focus on different policy areas.

The main narrative in this category focuses on the EU suspending fund payments to Hungary in a coercive way. It also expresses the EU's failure to comply with the rule of law, making such actions seem illegal. However, it also argues that it is a strategic move from the EU and

¹⁵ “Rohepöörde oluline osa on inimeste liha tarvitamise piiramine ja eelistatult kogu loomse toidu asendamine taimede, putukate ja tehislihaga. Loomade "heaolu" rohepoliitikate eesmärgiks pole niivõrd loomade elutingimuste parandamine, kuivõrd loomakarjade hävitamine ehk liha- ja piima- ning linnutoodete järjest kallimaks muutmine, mis omakorda tähendab, et selliste toitude osakaal inimeste toidulaul väheneb.” (*Objektiiv*, 2024).

not to make Hungary support Ukraine, but rather, the move is economically beneficial to the EU. The argument is presented in Uued Uudised as follows:

"Now, the European Union reportedly wants to assist Ukraine with a large aid package, but one 'bad' Hungary is preventing this from happening. Various plans have been discussed to bypass Hungary's boycott, but no actions have followed. However, maybe the EU is actually content with Hungary's actions because it keeps their money at home initially?"¹⁶.

The narrative expresses a justification to Hungary, as its doubts align with the overall EU's position by putting "bad" in quotation marks. Nevertheless, the analysis shows an understanding towards Hungary, since they see the EU being against Hungary in an unfair and prejudiced way, aiming to destroy the country's economy. A quote from Objektiiv claims it as:

"If the European Union has previously forced Poland, Greece, and Hungary to 'behave wisely' by withholding support and using bureaucratic measures, then an initiative that aims to deliberately destroy a member state's economy has never happened before."¹⁷.

Therefore, the narratives express the EU systematically being against Hungary and planning to make it suffer. Furthermore, the narratives also doubt whether the issue is really against Hungary not supporting Ukraine or their strict position on immigration and equality, which opposes the majority's views in the EU. For example, a quote in Objektiiv describes the viewpoint of Hungary as follows:

"Now, of course, there are voices claiming that because of this, the European Union will not give us billions of euros. However, it wouldn't give them to us even if we were obedient, because for 14 years now, there has been a fundamental difference between Brussels and Hungary: we do not want mass immigration, we do not want gender ideology, in our country

¹⁶ "Nüüd tahab Euroopa Liit väidetavalt Ukrainat suure abipaketiga aidata, aga üks "paha" Ungari ei laskvat seda teha. On räägitud paljudest plaanidest, kuidas Ungari boikotist mööda minna saaks, aga tegusid ei järgne. Järsku on EL Ungari tegevusega hoopiski rahul, sest see hoiab ka nende raha esialgu kodus?" (Uued Uudised, 2024).

¹⁷ "Kui Euroopa Liit on sundinud Poolat, Kreekat ja Ungarit varemgi toetuste kinni hoidmise ja bürokraatlike vahenditega "viisakalt käituma", siis sellist algatust, millega nähakse ette liikmesriigi majanduse sihilik hävitamine, pole varem juhtunud." (Objektiiv, 2024).

the man is the head, the woman is the neck, we do not want war, we are not willing to submit to liberal mainstream globalism, and we are not willing to surrender our country to the whims of external forces." ¹⁸.

Therefore, the support and coverage of Hungary in Eurosceptic platforms would be self-explanatory, since the portrayed enemy is the EU's liberal values and not Hungary's pro-Russian views. The EU's restrictive measures towards Hungary merely intensify the underlying argument. In addition, these arguments can support the core narrative of the EU's authoritarian tendencies in ways that the EU particularly enforces its agenda on Hungary and belittles the principle of consensus decision-making in foreign matters in the Council of the EU.

4.3 Analysis of disinformation

The second main research concept was the occurrence of disinformation, which is often used to describe radical campaigns. Accordingly, the analysis of the narratives for their connections to disinformation revealed only a few clear instances and one direct source of disinformation. Nevertheless, without proven detection of disinformation, many found narratives remained misleading, spreading conspiracies or expressing unproven statements. The results highlight the issue of discovering disinformation and the blurred line between information manipulation forms. This chapter will describe the instances of disinformation and the misleading content that could not be proven to be disinformation despite having problematic statements.

The main article found disinformation article directly adhering from an analysed article for this research is about the narrative on the EU aiming to ban the right to repair vehicles older

¹⁸ "Muidugi kostab nüüd kohe hääli, et selle tõttu ei anna Euroopa Liit meile kümneid miljardeid eurosid. Ainult et ta ei annaks ka siis, kui oleksime silmakirjalikud, sest juba oma 14 aastat on Brüsseli ja Ungari vahel põhimõtteline erinevus: meie ei taha sisserännet, ei taha sooideoloogiat, meie maal on isaks mees, emaks aga naine, meie ei taha sõda, meie pole nõus alluma rahvusvahelisele liberaalsele peavoolule, pole nõus loovutama oma riiki välisjõudude meelevalla." (Objektiiv, 2024).

than 15 years, which was found in an article in Telegram (Telegram, 2024). The article was detected as disinformation in BECID, with a fact-checking source on Estonian news outlet Eesti Päevaleht (Eesti Päevaleht, 2024). The specific false information that was debunked shows that the article published in Telegram added information that was not mentioned in the referenced proposal, such as the 15-year age limit for vehicles (ibid.). However, the main argument about the EU restricting the repair of older cars was also misrepresented, as the proposal actually encourages remanufacturing and the use of valuable resources (ibid.). Furthermore, a similar narrative was also presented in another article published in Objektiiv a few months later, and did not receive fact-checkers' attention. The article presented a narrative in which the EU would coercively take older cars from their owners (Objektiiv, 2024). The described disinformation was originally taken from an alternative media site called The Exposé (Harrity, 2024). The content itself received lots of attention in Estonia as it reached mainstream media, however, in the form of debunking the false information.

Another narrative that could be compared to disinformation, but does not directly originate from any of the analysed articles or platforms, focuses on the EU's social media censoring prior to the EP elections. The disinformation that EUvsDisinfo in the context refers to is from a Russian media site, which focused on the EU censoring Russian influence on the elections and was not specifically relating to Estonia (EUvsDisinfo). The idea of censorship relating to EP elections in 2024 was also covered in Vanglplaneet, however, in a more subtle way. The article's name would suggest the same narrative since it was "Censorship measures are expected before the European elections"¹⁹. However, the main narrative found in the article focused on other aspects, such as the classified disinformation, mainly speculating on a conspiracy involving liberal connections to the increased filtering on social platforms. Furthermore, article titles do not give a clear indication of disinformation, since the content itself explains arguments and the titles are often used as clickbait.

Another similarity in narratives was found in EUvsDisinfo with a claim that the EU would collapse after the EP elections in 2024. The debunked article was again published in Russian media, not relating to Estonia, which used statistics to prove the argument on the EU's upcoming collapse (EUvsDisinfo). Resembling arguments were found in several narratives in

¹⁹ "Euroopa valimiste eel on oodata tsensuurilaine" (Vanglplaneet, 2024).

this analysis that made the collapsing or doomsday predictions based on historical patterns of the Soviet Union or the Western Roman Empire. However, the narratives differentiate from the relation to EP elections, where narratives found during the current analysis did not address the connections to such predictions. Nevertheless, the articles in question expressed relatively “hard” Euroscepticism, for example, in an article published in Uued Uudised, the content focused on comprehensive opposition to the EU’s actions, especially the ones relating to liberal ideology, criticising the overall societal condition the EU has reached. The article, for example, describes the EU as totalitarian, elitist and distant from people (Uued Uudised, 2024). Therefore, the narratives surrounding the EU's possible collapse can be found in Russian media as disinformation, but also in Estonian alternative media with less factual statements and more predictions.

Although further disinformation connections were not shown, there were remarkable cases of questionable and misleading narratives, which could not be proven as disinformation, since no specific factual statements were delivered. Nevertheless, the information in the narratives could be harmful in creating a one-sided and harsh opposition to the EU and promoting views that are based on non-factual arguments. One such case was after the EP elections in Uued Uudised, where a narrative claimed that Ursula von der Leyen lied on her campaign and the voters were deceived; however, explanatory arguments and examples were not followed after the claim (Uued Uudised, 2024). Similarly, another narrative in Vanglaplaneet claimed that Ursula von der Leyen was elected undemocratically and secretly, referring to the European People’s Party (EPP) nominating her as a lead candidate from their party for the role of Commission President (Vanglaplaneet, 2024). Again, the statement is misleading, since it frames the situation in an undemocratic way as it highlights lack of people’s vote in her position and not mentioning, how the process works in reality, where EPP would only get a chance to have their lead candidate for the position as they would have the majority of votes during the EP elections. Therefore, those statements do not give basis to disinformation since they are shared as opinions, although the claims are straightforward and share limited information.

Another case of a misleading narrative was found in Objektiiv, which claimed the EU to be a cooperative conspiracy that aims to repress member states and their citizens (Objektiiv,

2024). Specifically, the theory focuses on current world-leading organisations such as the UN and the EU, practising surveillance and being managed by the rich elite and corrupted politicians who endorse the green agenda and equality. Since it is a conspiracy theory, it could not be seen as disinformation either; however, the arguments presented in the text are merely based on opinions. Similarly, the issue of the COVID pandemic got coverage in the articles, suggesting it was fake and caused by the EU. Overall, conspiracies hold an important role in the Eurosceptic agenda, since they are inspired by controversial policies such as the Green Deal or the pandemic restrictions that limit individual freedoms.

A final example of a misleading narrative standing out from the analysis claimed the EU's common currency to be the cause of economic difficulties in EU member states (Objektiiv, 2024). The statement was shared in Objektiiv in the context of explaining economic vulnerabilities and restrictions in EU member states with significant national debt as a main argument. The common currency was brought up, despite not further explaining the claim or using it to support other arguments. The article itself was translated from an article published by a Hungarian author, which overall criticised the EU's policies that have led to crisis-like situations. The content was applicable to the Eurosceptic perspectives advocated in the Objektiiv, thus reinforcing the narrative that the EU's economic policies are detrimental to the well-being of its member states. In most cases, as in discussing the topic of climate policies, the platforms generally explain statements, which would eliminate disinformation; however, claims such as these are on the borderline and can be used without consequences.

In conclusion, the discovered disinformation and misleading narratives proved the use of propaganda in alternative media and ideological campaigning. Despite finding only a few direct sources of disinformation, the amount of conspiracies and misleading narratives raises a concern in the aspect of media literacy, which is taken advantage of for the analysed platforms. Since the platforms did not show various political campaigning content before the EP elections, it could suggest that the Eurosceptic community knew they would not dominate in comparison to major liberal parties, making their agenda more focused on the overall expression of dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, disinformation on Estonian platforms needs more precaution due to DSA and other activities debunking false information, especially during

election campaigns, as the monitoring for disinformation increases. Free speech and opinion statements are expected to be more refined and not cross the lines of disinformation.

4.4 Discussion on the results

The findings of the analysis confirmed the expectations of discovering some disinformation and the narratives focusing on the topics of the EU Green Deal, migration and equality. However, the found topics were minor compared to the narratives that dominated the results. Based on trends across the EU and in Estonia, the dominating narrative of seeing the EU with authoritarian tendencies was not expected. Additionally, topical narratives were found, which were also expected regarding the events specific to 2024. The following chapters will discuss some observations that appeared while analysing the results, covering the impact of shared Eurosceptic narratives and the link between mainstream and alternative media Euroscepticism.

4.4.1 Eurosceptic narratives' impact on EP elections results in Estonia

The comparison of the political agenda of EKRE as an Eurosceptic party and the results of the analysis reveal similarities, as the focus was to increase the role of member states in the EU, stop immigration and climate action, protect a free society, etc. All of the topics in the agenda were evident in the narratives across all the analysed sites. Furthermore, the topics under the dominating narrative of the EU's authoritarian tendencies were also expressed in the agenda, but in an indirect and less radical manner. Such topics were bureaucracy, individual freedoms and less supranational power. Therefore, the narratives showed similarities with the central concepts the party emphasised during the elections.

The 2024 EP election results in Estonia showed increasing support for Euroscepticism. As mentioned before, EKRE received 14,80% of the votes, which is 2% more than they did in 2019, with voter turnout remaining the same. Furthermore, the overall support for Eurosceptic parties increased, since there was also a party named KOOS, which received

3,10% of the votes (European Parliament). The party's focus, among other aspects, is to restrict migration, reduce the importance of climate policies and reduce the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, expressing a clear conservatism and Eurosceptic stance (Erakond KOOS). Although the other party did not have any candidate gaining enough votes to get a seat in the EP, they together with EKRE add up to almost 18% of support towards Eurosceptic parties, which is the highest amount, compared to any previous EP election held in Estonia. Furthermore, Eurosceptic narratives align with the programs of both parties, whose correspondence may reflect shared underlying attitudes among voters and media but does not necessarily imply a direct influence on electoral outcomes.

Despite discovering no noticeable increase in the volume of narratives before the elections, alternative media continued to play a visible role in the broader political discourse. One argument to support the statement would be the content of narratives prior to and post-election. The main emphasis after the elections was on the new Commission and the way it is problematic, while also referring to Ursula von der Leyen's leadership in her first term. There was also more focus on direct policies, such as climate action, sovereignty, and liberal policies. However, most of the topics were discussed during the time when those were communicated by the EU, thus reducing the effect of campaigning.

4.4.2 The presence of Eurosceptic narratives on Estonian national media

As the research aimed to discover whether some of those Eurosceptic (and/or disinformation) narratives navigated through the mainstream media threshold, it was found that the narratives also maintained a presence in national mainstream media, albeit to a relatively small extent, with no connections to disinformation. Estonian Public Broadcasting (*Eesti Rahvusringhääling - ERR*), as a state-funded media service, covered some of the narratives, which were also found in the analysis. Most of the narratives were published as opinion articles, where Estonian members of the EP published several. For instance, an article of opinion of EP member Riho Terras, who belongs to EPP, was published in the ERR online media platform, sharing Terras' views on the need to shift focus from climate policies to the economy, expressing that climate action should be similar to a planned economy (ERR,

2024). The statement resembles narratives found from the analysis, which compared the EU's policies regarding climate change to the Soviet Union's planned economy. Furthermore, the concerned MEP is not a member of a Eurosceptic party, which could increase the severity of the criticism.

ERR also covered some opinion pieces from MEP Jaak Madison (ECR), who is the most Eurosceptic Estonian in the EP. However, while the articles offered criticism of EU policies, they did not mention any narratives that were found from current research. For example, he discussed the topic of developmental aid to Africa and how it is wasting taxpayers' money (ERR, 2024). Although the topic of economic decisions and the effect on member states was expressed among the Eurosceptic narratives, the specific issue was not covered. More specifically, the narratives did not focus on the EU wasting tax money at all, despite it being a compelling argument often used in political campaigns. It is also worth noting that the article by the MEP was published after he changed his domestic party, making his image less Eurosceptic in the Estonian public's view.

Although national media did not focus on Euroscepticism directly, there were instances where certain criticism was expressed. One of the examples was concerning the entrepreneurs' request for impact analysis regarding the EU Green Deal (ERR, 2024). A similar view was apparent in the analysis, where the criticism of the lack of impact analysis on climate policies was compared to the functioning of the Soviet Union. However, the framing for the narrative in the analysis was more negative, and there was no request for improvement; it was rather an accusation. In addition, the EU's lack of transparency was also covered in ERR. Specifically, the focus was on the perspective of EU ombudsman Emily O'Reilly, who criticised the extensive power of commission advisors and the receding transparency over the years (ERR, 2024). The same statement from O'Reilly was used in Uued Uudised; however, the dominant narrative from there was the Commission's comparison to the mafia. Nevertheless, issues surrounding a lack of transparency were apparent in several narratives, especially in the category of seeing the EU with authoritarian tendencies.

While the issue of the limitation of freedom to share opinions on social media was a concern in Eurosceptic narratives, the topic in national media received the opposite attention. In the analysis, the perspectives around DSA and regulating the use of social media were seen as a threat to individual freedoms. However, in the national media, it was expressed in a way that the actions were seen as crucial to ensure a safe internet. More specifically, ERR focused on the limitations on social media content before elections, where the actions were described as necessary to ensure fair elections and eliminate harmful disinformation (ERR, 2024). At the same time, the concern in Eurosceptic media received highly critical attention as it was also possibly a threat to their campaign. Therefore, the topic of regulating media platforms demonstrates the difference between mainstream media and Eurosceptic alternative media, where certain policies that are seen positively by the wider public can be augmented negatively.

In general, the national media offers a neutralised perspective, while also emphasising critical aspects of the EU and publishing opinion pieces regardless of the political stance. However, the mainstream media refrains from intensive and radical statements, without constructive argumentation, which is often lacking in alternative media sites. This approach ensures that the public receives balanced information, fostering a more informed and nuanced understanding of EU policies and their implications.

4.4.3 Implications on found narratives

The results of the analysis unveiled a category of narratives that is not dominant in pan-European discourse, as the common themes of narratives are policy-related, such as migration, equality, etc. Although those topics had significant representation in the results, the narratives referring to the EU's increasing authoritarianism were the main narrative category. This category amplifies concerns about democratic deficits and the perceived overreach of EU institutions, highlighting a unique perspective within the broader Eurosceptic discourse in Estonia. The fear of authoritarian tendencies could be seen as a greater threat than in many other EU member states, since Estonia and the whole region of the Baltic, as well as Eastern Europe, have a historical experience under an authoritarian

regime. Regional peculiarity can explain why this narrative holds a major role in Eurosceptic media.

Furthermore, several narrative categories mention the Soviet Union as an example to emphasise the EU's integration path with a pattern that led to certain events in history. The comparison was apparent mainly in the authoritarian tendencies category, but also in illustrating overreaching policies, such as climate action. The contrast also expresses region-specific characteristics overlapping with the more general idea of authoritarianism. In Estonia, historical narratives surrounding political order offer a great basis for populist propaganda, as it is an emotional issue. Therefore, the increase in popularity for Eurosceptic parties would be less challenging as emotional arguments need less proof and persuasion.

One topic that was subject to the selected time frame was the EU and Hungary relations. In narratives, the bias was towards Hungary, showcasing the EU's actions, which make a member state suffer, further highlighting the EU's extensive supranational powers, which Eurosceptic parties oppose. Hungary receives high support in the Eurosceptic community as its government and political views are currently also Eurosceptic and conservative. The ongoing political battle with Hungary within the EU is a useful example of the EU's power dynamics and evolution. By highlighting the EU's actions against Hungary, these narratives aim to galvanise support for national sovereignty and resistance to supranational governance, thereby strengthening the cohesion and appeal of Eurosceptic ideologies across different member states.

The results also present the hierarchy of Eurosceptic topics based on the number of narratives under core categories. As mentioned several times, the fear of authoritarianism was the main theme with 38 narratives; however, among other topics, the lack of freedom of speech and the EU's liberal social values held more importance than climate change, for instance. This statistic suggests that the EU's initial function of economic cooperation has become less important than conservative values in the viewpoint of the analysed media. The category concerning the EU's Green Deal expresses the distress for economic consequences, with some additional narratives from the category expressing member states' dependence on the EU and loss of sovereignty. Altogether, economic aspects remain far less important than

social values, which can be explained by being an emotional rather than a rational consideration. Overall, the topic would also speak more to the supporters of Euroscepticism and conservatives, as the economy is rarely the topic under discussion in the debate between liberals and conservatives. Furthermore, social values are more present in national debates, making the EU's economy seem more distant and less relevant to the public that such media aims to speak to.

The narrative analysis reveals a common understanding of security in Estonia, as the narratives rarely focus on the war in Ukraine or Russia as an actor. Furthermore, the touch upon those topics did not directly criticise the efforts the EU has made relating to the war or see it negatively. As the statistics in Estonia showed a significant support for Ukraine, the Eurosceptic community does not oppose the majority. Furthermore, this highlights the Estonian Eurosceptic discourse to be against the Russian regime, thus making overall Euroscepticism in Estonia divided into two radical oppositions - the Russian community and the Estonian nationalist community. The only fear that was discovered during the analysis relating to Ukraine was the possibility of military personnel in member states being sent to Ukraine, showing the fear of being physically involved in the war. Also, the narratives that focused on Hungary's troubling behaviour regarding the EU's efforts in Ukraine, the Estonian Eurosceptic narratives did not diminish the need to support Ukraine, but they also supported Hungary's actions. Instead, the narratives focused on Hungary's issues in the EU, which are connected to the fact that the EU does not agree with Hungary's views on liberal values. In the context of Ukraine, the narratives expressed the statement that the EU needs to let Hungary pursue its agenda, as then it would be in support of Ukraine.

An additional aspect, the analysis reveals, is the similarity of topics which appear among several core categories. Although certain topics are common among many of the categories, those do not show a narrative themselves, and rather, these are being used to emphasise a broader narrative. One of these issues is migration, being present in five of the concluded core narrative categories. The issue of migration can also be seen as part of a core category in describing the negative influence of the EU's liberal values, as migration is seen as a topic more likely to be supported by liberal Europeans who are in favour of diversity. For Eurosceptics, immigrants are a great threat to national security and ethnic purity. Therefore,

the issue offers a variety of examples to emphasise different positions. The example is presented in ways that illustrate the effect on different areas, such as the economy, but also in ways that powerful actors in the EU belittle the issue or oversee the positions of some member states or political parties which do not align with the current policies and the EU's ideological position on migration. Thus, migration has become a universal issue which can be used in many arguments to prove the EU's weaknesses or problems.

Another topic recurring among different narrative categories is sovereignty, a central concept in Eurosceptic discourse. The issue of sovereignty is a foundational matter in Euroscepticism and can be illustrated through many narratives, which conceptually lead back to the basis. The analysis revealed the matter in three categories, one of them having sovereignty as a core narrative as well. In addition to the core category, the issue was associated with the negative effect of liberal values but also with the EU's authoritarian tendencies, which entail a lack of independent decision-making power for member states. In all of the examples, sovereignty is used in a way that the overall narrative expresses the loss or lack of it as a consequence. Thus, sovereignty remains a central issue in Euroscepticism and is also historically important in Estonia.

Hungary was also discovered as a common theme, as it appeared in four core narrative categories and was also one itself. This theme differs from other common topics as it is temporarily relevant and not a part of traditional Eurosceptic discourse. Hungary, in this sense, is used as a patron for conservative and Eurosceptic propaganda. The examples are thus being used in the context of the EU repressing Hungary, when it fights for an illiberal community. Furthermore, the coverage of Hungary's or Orban's opinion pieces was also high, which does not directly point to certain narratives, but the general argument would originate from Hungary. Therefore, Hungary stands out as a new aspect of Euroscepticism, providing the community with a large variety of content and arguments, which helps Eurosceptics with their purpose.

In comparison of the found results in Estonia to the more general EU-wide narratives, the current analysis reveals the overall correspondence between the domestic and foreign narratives. It is not surprising to see that green policies, liberal values, migration, and

sovereignty hold great importance in the Eurosceptic agenda, as they are common EU-wide. Hungary has also had a trend in the community for several years now, which is also apparent in Estonian alternative media. However, an unexpected topics were the EU's authoritarian tendencies and corruption. Although both topics do have international coverage, they do not instantly reveal a significance among the results, but the authoritarian category, having a dominant role with 35% of all narratives, does refer to a more Estonian-specific phenomenon.

The finding on dominant authoritarianism narratives suggests a regional difference, as it is associated with a historical authoritarian regime, emphasising a collective memory of nations previously being under the Soviet regime. According to the assumption, the matter can be used to gain support for Euroscepticism, as the topic can be made emotionally relevant. Therefore, the narratives on the EU's authoritarianism offer more effective results to Eurosceptical campaigning compared to certain policies, which can often leave people indifferent. For instance, narratives often focusing on the effects of the EU's Green Deal might not appeal to people who are not directly affected by the changes or simply have no interest in the topic. Authoritarian claims, however, can create a connection between less appealing topics, such as framing the decisions regarding the Green Deal as not democratic, which can be seen in the found narratives as well. As transparent, independent, and democratic decision-making holds great importance in Estonian society, the authoritarian claim enhances the opposition to the EU's specific policies, giving Euroscepticism a stronger and more conceptual presence. Thus, authoritarian narratives to propagate Euroscepticism in Estonia are the closest method to have more "hard" Euroscepticism in the society.

The results of the narrative analysis enabled the making of implications on the popularity of topics and trends in the Eurosceptic community, region-specific peculiarities and differences among different member states or the EU-wide agenda. The most popular topics were proved to mainly overlap with expectations and trends in other member states, as the topics focused on green policies, migration, liberal values and sovereignty. Some topics appeared in different categories, which offered better examples, such as green policies, sovereignty, and Hungary. Furthermore, Hungary was discovered as a specific trend in the community, which gives Eurosceptics lots of aspects to discuss and apply to their statements. Finally, region-specific differences from overall Eurosceptic discourse appeared to be authoritarianism,

complemented with the EU's comparisons to the Soviet Union, highlighting historical patterns.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the Eurosceptic narratives that appeared in 2024 in the Estonian alternative media sphere, the connections to the Eurosceptic political agenda, and the role of disinformation in the narratives. The research is based on the need to discover the effects of the 2024 EP elections in Eurosceptic communities, as the topic is timely and relevant. The case of Estonia was especially puzzling since the focus was on the Estonian-speaking Eurosceptic audience, since the primary academic interest is on Russian communities and Eurosceptic narratives from their point of view. The thesis aimed to discover the Eurosceptic arguments in Estonian nationalist and right-wing public and the ways those communities express their statements, as well as the focus of the narratives. Disinformation was an additional research focus, as it is getting more attention and becoming increasingly problematic in populist political campaigning. As the media used was non-mainstream, the assumption was to discover more non-factual information and disinformation in the narratives. The objective after gathering narratives was also to analyse differences in topics and platforms and whether the narratives navigated through the mainstream media.

The thesis applied narrative analysis to gather insight into Eurosceptic aspects and disinformation, which were the two main theoretical concepts. The central theoretical expectation was to find several Eurosceptic arguments from six of the platforms that were used, and the connections to disinformation, to some extent. The main topics that were expected to be discovered in the narratives were climate change policies, migration, and equality. The narrative analysis used the following most popular Eurosceptic alternative media platforms in Estonia: *Objektiiv*, *Uued Uudised*, Telegram, *Vanglaplaneet*, *Vabadused* and *Estinen*. Data from those sites was collected by narrowing down the content with the following keywords: “European Union”, “EU”, “European Parliament”, “European Commission”, “The Council of the EU”, “Hungarian presidency” and “(European Parliament) elections”. For several platforms, it was possible to analyse all published articles, as the publishing frequency was lower or the site did not allow search optimisation. The narratives were taken from textual paragraphs in articles. Disinformation was analysed

among the narratives, which were discovered by flagging the arguments and later looking up the arguments on the following platforms made to find disinformation in the region: EUvsDisinfo, Propastop and Baltic Engagement Centre for Combating Information Disorders. However, the analysis of disinformation was conducted separately from the aims of narrative analysis, as it represented an additional research aspect and not a conceptual component of Euroscepticism.

The research questions for the thesis were: How have Eurosceptic narratives evolved in Estonian alternative media channels in 2024, relating to European Parliament elections campaigning and aftermath? Additional questions were: If so, what are the differences in narratives from different platforms? Is there a connection to disinformation among the discovered narratives in EU databases, and if so, where do those originate? Have some of those Eurosceptic or disinformation narratives navigated through the mainstream media threshold?

The analysis concluded 108 different narratives from all six platforms, summarising seven different core narrative categories. The categories and incidence of them in the results was following: “EU’s green policies have negative influence” (10 times); “EU has authoritarian tendencies” (38 narratives); “EU has caused significant loss in sovereignty and raised dependence for member states” (11 narratives); “EU is corrupted” (11 narratives); “EU liberal values, diversity and equality have negative influence” (13 narratives); “EU limits freedom of speech” (14 narratives) and “EU treats Hungary unfairly” (10 narratives). The division of narratives in terms of platforms was as follows: Objektiiv (34 findings), Uued Uudised (30 findings), Vanglapseet (16 findings), Telegram (14 findings), Vabadused (9 findings) and Estinen (4 findings). The topics and main narratives reappeared mostly on all platforms, not indicating a significant difference. However, taking into account the specifics of certain platforms and their overall focus, some topics were more common in certain sites, such as platforms mainly focusing on free speech, mainly expressing Eurosceptic narratives on that topic, as was the case for Vabadused, Telegram and Uued Uudised.

The analysis of disinformation concluded that there were a few cases of disinformation and misleading information. Mainly, the disinformation appeared in the argument and not as a

direct citation to the specific article that was published in the analysed sites. The only direct source of disinformation focused on the EU banning the possibility of repealing old vehicles, which was explicitly false. However, most of the flagged narratives remained misleading as they do not express concrete, factually wrong content, but rather describe opinions on certain issues in a radical manner. Therefore, the results highlight a difference between propaganda and disinformation, as one is more regulated, leaving a nuanced understanding of how information manipulation can still influence public perception without being outright false, which sometimes is the case for Eurosceptic campaigning.

Found Eurosceptic narratives did have a little presence in the Estonian mainstream media on the Estonian Public Broadcasting platform. However, the results showed opinion pieces with less radical content than those found in the analysed alternative media articles. Moreover, the content did not express any association with disinformation in ERR. The mainstream media is rather showing transparency and neutrality by publishing slightly Eurosceptic opinion pieces with clear argumentation. Therefore, while Eurosceptic views are represented, they are done so in a balanced way that avoids the extremes and false information often found in alternative media.

The analysis did not show a noticeable campaign for EP elections in the Eurosceptic community, as the narratives' appearance remained the same before and after the elections. Furthermore, the content primarily did not touch upon the occurrence of EP elections. However, the aftermath of the EP elections had frequent coverage, as there was a new Commission and disapproval of the political direction after the elections. The research also found an increasing Euroscepticism in Estonia in view of EP election results, as the support towards Eurosceptic parties was highest compared to any previous EP election held in Estonia. This suggests that while Eurosceptic narratives may not have been explicitly tied to election campaigns, the outcomes of the elections themselves show increasing disapproval in Estonia for the EU's current path.

Finally, the results of the narrative analysis enabled the identification of specific trends in Eurosceptic communities, in Estonia and EU-wide. While most of the topics found on the narratives aligned with the general Eurosceptic discourse in the EU, some aspects illustrated

region-specific features of Estonia. The most common narrative expressed the EU's authoritarian tendencies, which is far from common in general discourse. The findings suggest Estonia's fears of authoritarian regimes, which are also apparent in the frequent connections to the Soviet Union among the narratives found. The popularity of Eurosceptic parties is often tied to emotional arguments, which well explains the suitability of the topic for the Estonian audience. A trend which was also discovered, differing from the usual Eurosceptic agenda, was the popularity of Hungary in the community, with its recent troubling relations with the EU. The focus for those narratives was on the support for Hungary in its values on equality and migration, however the issues of Hungary obstructing the EU's support for Ukraine were framed in a way where the problem is tied to the liberal values, as the support for Ukraine is still high in Estonian Eurosceptic community.

This research offered valuable insight into modern methods of Eurosceptic campaigning and the region-specific arguments, as well as emotional connections to the popularity of propaganda. In view of further research, it is possible to take into account that the results of this thesis would be connected to information manipulation and the role of misleading narratives, but also the discussion on the problematicness of the lines between disinformation and misleading content. Furthermore, the insight of the research can be used to regulate the issues regarding free media and the regulatory compromise between free media and propaganda. Further valuable research could also look into region-specific Eurosceptic agendas, finding the Eurosceptic narratives in other Eastern European countries.

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Appendices

1. Coding table for narrative analysis:

 Analysis coding table

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