

MIHHAIL KREMEZ

Constructing and sending Russia-related
news frames by different media and
their perception among various audiences



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LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

This dissertation is based on the following four original publications referred to by Roman numerals:

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- III. **Kremez, M.** (2023). Estonia's Russian-speaking audience's media attitudes, preferences and susceptibility to the spread of fake news and information disorder in media outlets. *Central European Journal of Communication*, 16(1(33)), 19–39. [https://doi.org/10.51480/1899-5101.16.1\(33\).2](https://doi.org/10.51480/1899-5101.16.1(33).2)
- IV. **Kremez, M., & Hajimichael, M.** (2024). Two small EU states in the face of information disorder: A comparative analysis of Russian-speaking media audiences in Cyprus and Estonia. *Zealos: Studies in the Humanities, Social Sciences, Arts and Design*, 2, 149–167.
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AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

- Study I “Framing Russia in the Estonian, German, and Bulgarian online media: Coverage of two concrete events”: the author was solely responsible for collecting the data, was predominantly responsible for the method, and was predominantly responsible for the other parts of the manuscript.
- Study II “Dividing and uniting news frames: Framing Russia-related border issues in the Estonian, Latvian, Finnish, US public service media and Chinese state media”: the author was solely responsible for all the parts of the manuscript.
- Study III “Estonia’s Russian-speaking audience’s media attitudes, preferences and susceptibility to the spread of fake news and information disorder in media outlets”: the author was solely responsible for all the parts of the manuscript; the supervisor and two students assisted the author in conducting the interviews – all of them are mentioned in the acknowledgments part of the study.
- Study IV “Two small EU states in the face of information disorder: A comparative analysis of Russian-speaking media audiences in Cyprus and Estonia”: the author was solely responsible for collecting the data, and was predominantly responsible for the other parts of the manuscript.

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PREFACE

In this preface, I consider it important to highlight several points related to the preparation and conduct of my research in light of recent international political events related to Russia.

Firstly, the dissertation topic was chosen in 2019, and I started my work on it in the same year. The first three studies of four cover the period from August 2019 to December 2021, hence they were conducted before the beginning of Russia's full-scale and illegal invasion of Ukraine that started on February 24, 2022. Hereinafter, I use the shorter term with the same meaning, the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War, for better readability.

Secondly, the decision to study Russia-related news frames was based on the fact that Russia is an important and active actor in geopolitics and also due to the increasing tensions in the late 2010s and early 2020s between Russia and the West, including the EU and specifically EU member states with significant Russian-speaking minorities. Since the activities of Russia affect many countries and alliances and attract much attention from the media and the general public at a global level, the study of topics related to Russia is appropriate.

Thirdly, since my family ties also extend to Russian and Ukrainian cultures, I am sad on a purely human level to see what is happening now. There is no justification for war. There is no justification for aggression against an independent state.

1. INTRODUCTION

We live in a world of geopolitical instability (COVID-19 pandemic, migration crises, the Russo–Ukrainian War, war conflicts in the Middle East, etc.) and an age of information disorder (Wardle, 2020) that we all face daily. We see that under these circumstances, some ideas and messages find more fertile ground in societies, and some do not. For example, if we look at which societies or countries condemn Russia’s expansionistic policy towards Ukraine and which do not, we see differences in the cultural, economic, and political development of these societies or countries. Similarly, we see differences in the media coverage of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in these countries (e.g., Ji et al., 2024; Liu, 2024; Arcangeletti & Zunino, 2023). The formation of such attitudes is a complex combination of historical, social, and cultural factors, and this dissertation, rooted in the social constructionist paradigm, seeks to shed light on their formation by examining the interaction between media and audience from the perspective of framing (Entman, 1993, 2010; Entman & Usher, 2018) and accepting, partially accepting, or rejecting the frames, based on Stuart Hall’s approach to reception theory (1973, 2006).

Social constructionism claims that reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). According to Berger and Luckmann, all kinds of knowledge, even the most fundamental ideas about social reality, are derived from and maintained through social interactions, and thus reality is constructed by the participants of interactions themselves (1966). Media as a communicator (D’Angelo, 2017) plays an active and relevant role in constructing social reality, among other sources (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Carter, 2013). However, when following the critical media studies approach (e.g., Herman & Chomsky, 2008; Baroud, 2022; Scahill, 2022), we cannot assume that the media is absolutely impartial or a mirror image of reality. The media do not present but represent events, contributing to the construction of social reality by making certain narratives more salient while silencing others (Hall, 1997; Hall et al., 2018; Hajimichael, 2023), focusing on particular aspects of covered events – framing them for media audiences (Entman, 1993, 2010).

So, what is the frame? The frame is a “written, spoken, graphical, or visual message modality that a communicator uses to contextualize a topic, such as a person, event, episode, or issue, within a text transmitted to receivers by means of mediation” (D’Angelo, 2017, p. 1). As a result of using frames, sometimes the social reality represented by the media outlet in the news differs from the social reality of the reader of that news, or sometimes two media outlets present different versions of the same event (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). The decision-making process of journalists as news creators and gatekeepers of the information (Stern et al., 2020), and who contribute to constructing and sending frames (Brüggemann, 2014), depends on following various internal and external factors.

The internal factors are related mostly, but not only, to professional requirements for journalistic work and journalistic culture (Nygren, 2015; Wiik, 2019),

the journalist's personal frame of reference (Atanesyan & Rumachik, 2017; Lohner et al., 2016), social norms and values plus ideological or political affiliations (Scheufele, 1999; Scahill, 2022), and self-censorship (Herman & Chomsky, 2008; Fadnes et al., 2020; Himma-Kadakas & Ivask, 2023). One of the main factors that shape journalistic frames is the tendency of journalists to construct newsworthiness – certain news values in their stories – preferring to use vocabulary that emphasizes the negativity, urgency, or unexpected nature of the event being covered (Bednarek & Caple, 2017).

The external factors are related mostly, but not only, to the following aspects. Economic pressure in the form of the need to increase incomes for media companies, which may cause potential restrictions on journalistic autonomy (Beckert, 2023), and the growing use of clickbait solutions aimed to make news more attractive and, therefore, collect more views and clicks (in online news) (García Orosa et al., 2017; Kaushal & Vemuri, 2021; Kanižaj et al., 2022). The lack of time, due to the rapid development of society and technology, which has accelerated the processes in journalism (Himma-Kadakas, 2018). The crucial role of the context (Hall, 1997) – cultural (Goffman, 1974), economic (Hajimichael, 2023), political (Entman, 2010), and historical (Fleming, 2021) – in which journalists produce the news content. Also, there is the possibility of control by the state through government censorship (Baroud, 2022).

In addition to the abovementioned external factors, the transition of the media system to the hybrid media system in the twenty-first century (Chadwick, 2017) has become a new challenge for the media industry and journalists (Peña Fernández & Meso Ayerdi, 2023; Hiltunen, 2021). The different types of media (both legacy and new, including social media with all its user-generated content) form a transitional system with multiple actors interacting with each other (Peña Fernández & Meso Ayerdi, 2023). According to Chadwick, “the hybrid media system is built upon interactions among older and newer media logics in the reflexively connected social fields of media and politics” (2017: xi). Hiltunen (2021) claims that contemporary journalists working in the hybrid media environment “face a multitude of external pressures and threats, ranging from political and commercial interference to online harassment and increasing anti-press hostility” (2021, p. 2106). Post and Kepplinger (2019) also highlight the increasing attacks and the broad reach of the audience's hostility towards journalists, which impacts their professional behavior. They refer to the spiral process of the influence of audience feedback on journalists' work: “Audience feedback on past news coverage influences ongoing news coverage, producing audience feedback that influences ongoing news coverage, and so forth” (Post & Kepplinger, 2019, p. 2422). In summary, the decision-making process of contemporary journalists, as news creators, is impacted by many external political and commercial pressures, threats, attacks, and strong dependence on audience feedback, including increasing anti-press hostility.

Hence, media reflect different and complex audiences (Hajimichael, 2023) that read news, watch news, and/or listen to news in certain political, economic, cultural, and historical contexts (Hall, 1997; Goffman, 1974; Entman, 2010;

Fleming, 2021). According to Hall's encoding/decoding communication model, the audience members do not simply passively accept the media messages; they may decode these messages differently by operating in distinct codes based on their own meanings and ideas (1973, 2006) – i.e., frames of reference (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981, 1986; Grawitch, 2021). Hence, this model allows me to study the decoding of the news frames by the audience based on their frame of reference, including the socio-cultural background (Zabihzadeh et al., 2022) while reading news, watching news, and/or listening to news about Russia produced by the media in different host countries.

Audiences used to rely mainly on legacy news media in earlier times to access information about local, national, and international events (Carter, 2013). However, the transition to the hybrid media system provided them with more opportunities due to the contribution of many new actors to the production and dissemination of the news content (Chadwick, 2011, 2017; Langer & Gruber, 2021; Peña Fernández & Meso Ayerdi, 2023). These new so-called “peripheral actors” include “bloggers, activists, programmers, hackers, web analytics managers or designers” (Zamith, 2023, p. 16). I acknowledge that the abovementioned new actors (agents), such as, for example, prominent information sources, may also contribute to the framing, but I focus on two agents. The first agent of my research interest is the news media aimed at the general public, where professional journalists, who are considered as gatekeepers of information (Stern et al., 2020; Fisher, 2018) and final arbiters of the news frames (D'Angelo, 2017), work. The second is news media audiences, who are the target of the news frames.

Despite the presence of the aforementioned new and well-known agents, legacy news media still plays a crucial role: news media outlets can amplify the salience of the covered event, and sustain attention and pressure, often remaining “at the core of the “national conversation” and certainly in the eye of a media storm” (Langer & Gruber, 2021: p. 315). I also admit the existence of other factors besides the framing, such as the issue salience, sustaining attention and pressure, and agenda setting (Langer & Gruber, 2021), influencing the interaction between the media and the audience. However, my research is focused specifically on the framing.

I focus on framing because, with its help, it is possible to influence the audience's perception of events and make them react in specific ways, i.e., achieve certain motivated behaviors (Moses et al., 2023; Kokurina & Khoret-skaya, 2018). The framing is often used, for instance, when covering countries (e.g., Saleem, 2007; Golan & Lukito, 2017; Abdullina et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2023) or international events that have a global impact (e.g., Schwalbe, 2013; Mutua & Ong'ong'a, 2020; Okorie, 2022; Kirat & Slamene, 2024). The framing may also contribute to initiating and escalating or de-escalating international and regional conflicts or crises (e.g., Ji et al., 2024; Moses et al., 2023; Vladislavljević, 2015; Alimba, 2020).

In addition, the conditions of our current age of information disorder, which includes misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (Wardle, 2020; Ireton & Posetti, 2018), make the interaction between the media and audiences

more complicated. The spread of misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information in media and social media threatens democracy (Baron & Ish-Shalom, 2024; Levitt & Grubaugh, 2024; Monsees, 2021). The complicated political context in the 2010s and 2020s has contributed significantly to the information disorder that has become a serious challenge for the media, audiences, and also authorities in the EU and beyond. The two most serious challenges have been: a) the COVID-19 pandemic (Nielsen et al., 2020; Balakrishnan et al., 2022; Hansson et al., 2021) and b) the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War (Bachmann et al., 2023; Skarpa et al., 2023; García-Marín & Salvat-Martinrey, 2023). Russia, which is considered by the EU and by NATO as a dominant hostile actor in the dissemination of disinformation (Marín Gutiérrez, 2022; Pamment, 2020), has contributed to the information disorder by disseminating disinformation regarding both the COVID-19 pandemic (Michlin-Shapir & Khvostunova, 2021; Rodari, 2021) and the Russo–Ukrainian War (Geissler et al., 2023; Solopova et al., 2023), and also other topics on the agenda related to the EU and other countries (Kalniete & Pildegovičs, 2021; Pamment, 2020; Thompson, 2020). Russia disseminates pro-Russian narratives through its state and pro-government media (Solopova et al., 2023; Champion, 2022; Rodari, 2021), global media including Western news agencies (Watanabe, 2017), media in EU countries (Kahn, 2023; Tondo, 2023; Vorotnikov & Ivanova, 2019), and social media (Geissler et al., 2023; Helmus et al., 2018). Hence, Russia’s active and regular contribution might be realized in constructing and sending specific Russia-related news frames.

The media coverage of the events in Russia or connected to Russia may differ from country to country – this is highlighted in previous studies (e.g., Ji et al., 2024; Liu, 2024; Kokurina & Khoretskaya, 2018). Taking into account Russia’s contribution to the information disorder and the context of the increasing tensions between Russia and the West, specifically the EU, it is crucial to study the resilience of the EU countries’ media and audiences to information disorder (Hoorickx, 2021; Pamment, 2020; Kalniete & Pildegovičs, 2021). Special attention should be paid to the EU countries with significant Russian-speaking minorities (e.g., Estonia, Latvia, Cyprus) who actively read, watch, and/or listen to news about Russia and may be influenced by Russia’s hegemonic geopolitical narratives (Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2021). That is why I focus, firstly, at the macro level on studying Russia-related frames in the news of media outlets in different countries with distinct contexts of cultural, economic, political, and historical relations with Russia. These are Estonia, Bulgaria, Germany, Latvia, Finland (all of which are EU member states), the US, and China – all besides Germany and Bulgaria also have a joint border with Russia. Secondly, at the micro level I study the perception of Russia-related frames by the Russian-speaking audiences in two small EU countries, Estonia and Cyprus (with the different contexts of relations with the USSR and Russia), as potentially more vulnerable to Russia’s misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation.

Hence, my dissertation aims to explore the interaction of the media and audiences contributing to the process of construction of social reality by

constructing, sending, and perceiving the news frames. It examines media as a creator of news messages and the audiences who read, watch, and/or listen to these created news stories. I study the Russia-related frames in news media and their acceptance, partial acceptance, or rejection by Russian-speaking audiences.

As was shown above, the studied framing takes place in the context of different media's host countries and in the complex international context of growing tensions between the Russia and the EU/West, which may impact the construction and sending of Russia-related frames by media outlets and the acceptance, partial acceptance or rejection of them by audiences. The latter has greatly stimulated my interest to study in my dissertation the context (Hall, 1997; Hajimichael, 2023; Mellado et al. 2024) – cultural, economic, political, and historical – in which the construction, sending, and perception of Russia-related frames takes place.

I take into account the frames of reference of journalists as producers of the news, contributing to the news framing, and the prominent information sources, who may occur as strategic agents (news agencies, elites, politicians, other organizations) that create frames (Özoflu & Arató, 2023; Boyle & Mower, 2018; Kokurina & Khoretskaya, 2018), and to the journalist/source interaction (Fisher, 2018; Kōuts-Klemm & Kremez, 2021).

Finally, I also consider the audiences' ability to create frames (Kokurina & Khoretskaya, 2018) due to their direct access to the information sources in internet-based communication (D'Angelo, 2017; Fisher, 2018), including social media sources (Liu et al. 2021).

My PhD dissertation contributes to the ongoing scholarly discussions and provides new insights on the following aspects. Firstly, I apply Hall's encoding/decoding model (2006) to study the news frames: do audiences detect the news frame and, if they do, do they accept it, accept it partly, or reject it? Secondly, I analyze the construction, sending, and acceptance, partial acceptance, or rejection of the news frames through the prism of cultural, economic, political, and historical contexts and frames of reference. Thirdly, I and my colleague Professor Mike Hajimichael (University of Nicosia) are pioneers in research on the Russian-speaking media audience in Cyprus and in the analysis of how the different contexts of Cyprus and Estonia and their relations with the USSR/Russia reflect in the perception of news about Russia and Russia-related frames by the Russian-speaking audiences in both countries.

Based on the above, my **research questions** are as follows:

RQ1: What Russia-related news frames prevail in the news media of various countries with different contexts of relations with Russia, and who are the frame-setters? (**STUDIES I–II**)

RQ2: How do the contexts of the various countries, including the contexts of their relations with Russia, impact the construction and sending of Russia-related news frames in their news media? (**STUDIES I–II**)

RQ3: How do the Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia and Cyprus respond to the Russia-related news frames? (**STUDIES III–IV**)

RQ4: What factors influence Russian-speaking audiences' acceptance, partial acceptance, or rejection of Russia-related news frames in Estonia and Cyprus? (STUDIES III–IV)

As I mentioned above, the focus of my empirical research is on the interaction between media and audiences, and I have conducted my research accordingly: the first part is focused on the news content provided by the news media, and the second part is on the audience.

The **first part** of my dissertation includes two empirical articles focused on studying Russia-related frames in the news media. The first study in my list of publications (**STUDY I**, “Framing Russia in the Estonian, German, and Bulgarian online media: Coverage of two concrete events”), co-authored with Associate Professor Ragne Kõuts-Klemm (University of Tartu), explored the Russia-related frames and their setters based on the coverage of two concrete events on the online portals in EU member states Estonia, Germany, and Bulgaria, with an emphasis on Estonia's news portals. This was followed by the second study (**STUDY II**, “Dividing and uniting news frames: Framing Russia-related border issues in the Estonian, Latvian, Finnish, and US public service media and Chinese state media”), which explored the frames of the Russia-related border issues in the news media outlets of several countries that had or have territorial disputes or conflicts with Russia. It also examined the frame-setters and historical and current political context of the frames. The sample included news from public service media outlets from the three EU countries (Estonia, Latvia, Finland) and the US, representing the West, and the state media outlet of China, considered to be a “strategic partner” of Russia (Fong & Maizland, 2024; Lukin, 2021), “a close Russian ally” (Konstantinovskiy, 2024) or “more than an ally” of Russia (*MID KNR*, 2021). The data for **STUDY I** and **STUDY II** were collected by the framing analysis.

The **second part** of my dissertation is focused on the perception of news about Russia by Russian-speaking audiences in two EU countries with significant and increasing Russian-speaking minorities. My third study explored the perception of news about Russia and misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation in the news media by the Russian-speaking audience in Estonia, and also their attitudes towards the media, media preferences, and abilities to recognize information disorder (**STUDY III**, “Estonia's Russian-speaking audience's media attitudes, preferences and susceptibility to the spread of fake news and information disorder in media outlets”). The fourth study (**STUDY IV**, “Two small EU states in the face of information disorder: A comparative analysis of Russian-speaking media audiences in Cyprus and Estonia”), co-authored with Professor Mike Hajimichael (University of Nicosia), explored the perception of news about Russia and misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation in the news media by the Russian-speaking audience in Cyprus, and their media attitudes, preferences and implemented strategies for detecting misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. It also included the comparative analysis of the results of **STUDY III** and **STUDY IV**, the data of which were collected using

the same qualitative research method: personal semi-structured interviews with stimulus materials.

This dissertation is structured as follows. In the Theoretical Framework, I present a more detailed overview of relevant theoretical concepts mentioned in the Introduction. In the Methodology section, I describe the methodological approach, give a brief overview of the limitations of the studies, and provide an overview of ethical considerations that I took into account. In the Results section, I present the main results of my studies. In the Discussion and Conclusions section, I discuss my findings and present the conclusions. My dissertation ends with a Summary in Estonian.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Framing in the news

The foundations of framing derive from seminal studies conducted in the second half of the twentieth century by scholars in social psychology such as Goffman (1974), Gitlin (1980), and Entman (1993). In media studies, where framing is considered an “integrative concept” (D’Angelo, 2019), Entman’s definition is widely used by many scholars, according to which framing is a process of selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them “more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” for the issue covered (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Entman claims a relation of framing to news slant and bias and ultimately to political power (Entman, 1993; 2010), naming the frame as an “imprint of power” that “registers the identity of actors or interests that competed to dominate the text” (Entman, 1993, p. 55). Rees, for his part, calls framing an exercise in power affecting people’s understanding of the political world (2001). In my dissertation, I share Entman’s and Rees’ approaches to framing, which are widely used in media studies. Other framing scholars highlight that media outlets may provide news with valenced – negative or positive – frames (Schuck & de Vreese, 2009; Golan & Lukito, 2017) constructed by the journalist or another frame-setter (Brüggemann, 2014). Valenced frames can influence the audience’s support and attitudes toward the framed event or issue (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2003; Busby et al., 2018). The study of the valenced frames is of great interest to me in this dissertation, including the context in which the valenced framing occurs (**STUDY I–II**).

According to Hall, the object becomes meaningful in a certain context, just as a physical object in the shape of a ball “becomes meaningful as a *football* within the context of the rules of the game” (Hall, 1997, p. 12; emphasis is original). Media reflect diverse and complex contexts (Hajimichael, 2023) that are meaningful to the audiences acting in these contexts. Hence, the specific context of the event or issue covered in the news influences the meaning and understanding of this event or issue and impacts the process of constructing and sending as well as the perception (acceptance, partial acceptance, or rejection) of the news frames. That context is cultural (Goffman, 1974), economic (Hajimichael, 2023), political (Entman, 2010; Entman & Usher, 2018), and historical (Fleming, 2021; Douglas, 2008). Thus, for a better understanding of framing a certain issue, event, or subject in the news, it is crucial to study the context of that issue or event in which framing occurs (**STUDY I–II**).

Active contributors to the framing process who operate in certain contexts are prominent information sources, media, and audiences. In my dissertation, I take into account the contribution of prominent information sources to framing but focus on media and audiences. See Figure 1, which visualizes the interaction between prominent information sources, media, and audiences in constructing, sending, and accepting, partially accepting, or rejecting the news frames within the context.

However, it should be noted that Figure 1 can only be interpreted as a schematic simplification supporting a better understanding of the explored interaction.

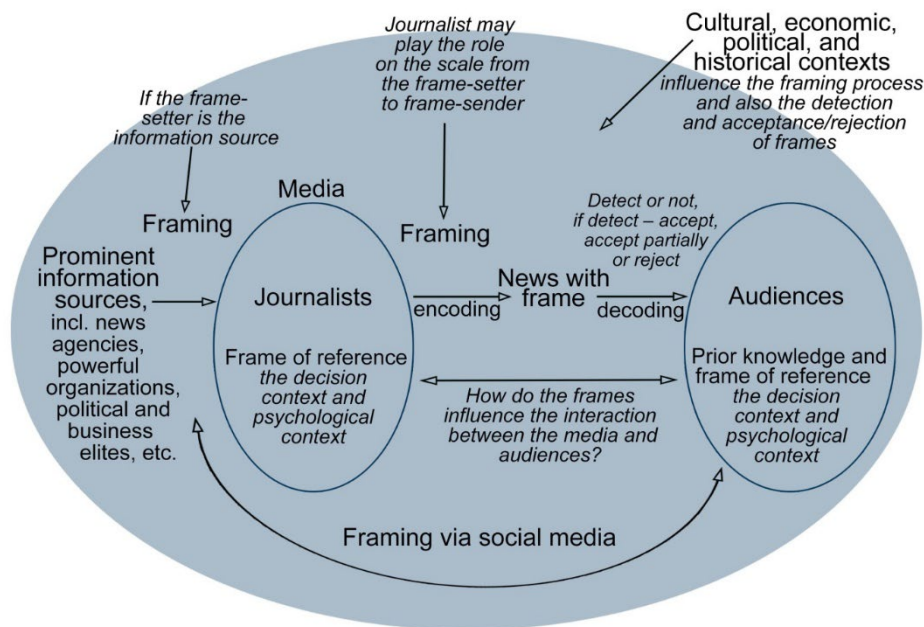


Figure 1. The interaction between the prominent information sources, media, and audiences in constructing, sending, and accepting, partially accepting or rejecting the news frames.

Next, I will explain the elements in Figure 1 and how prominent information sources, media (and journalists as important agents working for their media outlets), and audiences are involved in framing.

The **prominent information sources** (see Figure 1) from which journalists regularly garner material to write news are the strategic agents (or stakeholders) with dominant positions in society: news agencies, powerful organizations, political and business elites, respectable media with international reach, diplomats, religious leaders, social media influencers, and new opinion leaders (e.g., see Moses et al., 2023; Özoflu & Arató, 2023; Tirosh, 2021; Matthews, 2020; Levko, 2023; Capilla & Ruiz-Caballerro, 2023). How do they interact with the media, particularly journalists, disseminating their frames to them?

Firstly, prominent information sources may influence certain media outlets or journalists by implementing censorship (Herman & Chomsky, 2008; Baroud, 2022; Allen, 2023), especially if the media outlet or journalist is under direct control, as in the case of state media controlled by the government (e.g., Rohrhofer, 2014; Michlin-Shapir & Khvostunova, 2021; Kahn, 2023). Hence, journalists working in government-controlled media outlets may send news frames

approved by governmental censorship, e.g., frames supporting official views on international policy.

Secondly, prominent information sources may play the role of influential speakers for media outlets (Özoflu & Arató, 2023). As powerful agents, they have political or economic interests and aim to influence mass audiences by framing certain events or issues (Ji et al., 2024; Özoflu & Arató, 2023; Fisher, 2018). Thus, “a journalist’s expectations are based on the understanding that the source is likely to offer partial information that presents his or her interests in the most favorable light,” and “the source understands that the journalist will also be selective in the information he or she ultimately uses to frame the story” (Fisher, 2018, p. 6). However, an influential speaker’s created frames may be sent unintentionally by a journalist, so-called automatically, in the form of a direct quote, or being modified by re-writing in the journalist’s own words.

Thirdly, in the digital age, the same prominent speakers “can now communicate directly with their audiences without any media intervention” (Capilla & Ruiz-Caballerro, 2023, p. 161), and therefore construct and disseminate frames directly to the audiences through social media, as is shown in Figure 1. In turn, audiences may disseminate their frames similarly to prominent information sources.

It must also be noted that a significant part of the news content comes from prominent information sources that are pivotal in the news landscape: **news agencies**. These are international (Arcangeletti & Zunino, 2023; Tisler-Lavrentjev, 2021) and national (Boumans et al., 2018; Kultayeva et al., 2024), wherein both may cover international events, including events in Russia (Köuts-Klemm et al., 2020; Köuts-Klemm & Kremez, 2021; Watanabe, 2017). The news, especially online, is highly dependent on news agency content, “with the agency being responsible for up to 75% of the online news articles”, wherein “a large part of the online news consists of verbatim agency copy, involving little or no editing” (Boumans et al. 2018, p. 1768). Hence, news agencies may also frame events (Arcangeletti & Zunino, 2023). A news agency may represent the event in a one-sided way in favor of its owner, especially in the case of a state news agency fully controlled by the government, as is the case in Russia’s TASS and Ukraine’s Ukrinform covering the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War (Moses et al., 2023). The influence of Western – European and US – agencies on news content on the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War is noticeable in the EU and beyond (Kremez, 2023; Arcangeletti & Zunino, 2023). At the same time, Western news agencies may also provide pro-Russian narratives (Watanabe, 2017). In summary, news agencies may set frames in the news content that they provide for news media outlets, and journalists may send these frames to audiences.

Based on the above, it is crucial to distinguish between framing **through** media and framing **by** media (Van Gorp, 2007). The latter is **journalistic or media framing** (the framing directed from the media to the audience, see Figure 1), which often occurs in news stories (D'Angelo, 2017), while the former means sending frames set by the prominent information sources through the media. Regarding media framing, Brüggemann (2014) states that the media may play

one of the roles on a scale from frame-setter to frame-sender. If the original frame-setter is a speaker cited in the news, then the journalist as a frame-sender may transmit the frames set by the speaker or shape them before sending (Brüggemann, 2014). However, the journalist, based on his or her knowledge, as well as the rules and routines of the newsroom, can contribute to the selection of speakers and reliable information sources for news stories (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2009; Fisher, 2018). Hence, **it may be possible to detect frame-setters by analyzing the news texts' information sources and content, which helps to recognize the type of framing – media framing or framing by the prominent information sources.**

As **journalists** produce news, framing researchers tend to see them as gatekeepers of information (Stern et al., 2020) and news organizations “as the final arbiters of the frames that reach the public” (D'Angelo, 2017, p. 2), and I support this approach. However, as is shown above, in the coverage of specific topics, prominent information sources dominate framing, which sets limitations to journalistic autonomy (D'Angelo, 2017; Özoflu & Arató, 2023). Besides the influence of prominent information sources, the framing may occur due to the pressure of other crucial external factors, e.g., the abovementioned censorship by authorities (Herman & Chomsky, 2008; Baroud, 2022; Allen, 2023), and the impact of the **cultural, economic, political, and historical contexts** (see Figure 1) on journalistic role performance (Hall, 1997; Mellado et al., 2024; Hajimichael, 2023; Liu, 2022); and, therefore, on media framing because “journalists do not work in isolation” (Şahin, 2021, p. 555). **The study of the impact of context on framing is one of the main focuses of my dissertation.**

“Each culture has its own unique ideas, values, and other characteristics, which differentiate itself from other cultures” (Tong & Yuqing, 2020). The certain society where individuals are raised has its own culture – the **cultural context** that affects their behavior and includes the learned values and attitudes shared among groups of people (De Moraes & Teixeira, 2020). From the perspective of journalism, a journalist operating in a concrete cultural context has to take its characteristics into account while producing news to the audience in the same cultural environment, offering them meaningful and clearly understandable “*football*” (Hall, 1997, p. 12; emphasis is original).

The hybrid media system changed the **economic context** of media work in the 2000s: legacy news media, particularly privately owned media, faced competition from online news outlets and social media, which intensified during the Great Recession of the late 2000s (Chadwick, 2017). The situation of private newspapers has become more difficult due to the decline in circulation of print editions and competition from free newspapers, and some have tried to adapt by implementing the online subscription or pay-per-view model (Chadwick, 2017). Public service media found itself in a better situation due to its success online (Chadwick, 2017; Sjøvaag et al., 2018; Jöesaar & Kõuts-Klemm, 2019), but commercial media regularly accuse it of having an unfair competitive advantage called “crowding out” (Sehl et al., 2020) or “out-crowding” (Nielsen et al., 2016). Public service media, whose “mission is accompanied by significant public

funding”, are “often by far the biggest direct government intervention in the media market” (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023). Hence, in the new conditions of a hybrid media system, news media outlets, especially private ones, must find all available ways to provide attractive content for larger audiences and, consequently, be an attractive advertising platform to the advertisers. The desire to be attractive led to the use of clickbait solutions to collect views and clicks (in the case of online content) and, consequently, to the reduction of the credibility of news and the loss of audiences’ trust in the media outlet (García Orosa et al., 2017; Kaushal & Vemuri, 2021; Kanižaj et al., 2022). The clickbait solutions often play the role of news frames because they also tend to make certain aspects of the covered event more salient and silence others.

Media also reflect diverse contexts, including **political context** (Hajimichael, 2023), as a political environment in which journalists produce news that “also plays an important role in shaping the use of specific frames in news coverage” (Van den Heijkant et al. 2024). In addition, certain countries and regions have distinct models of media–politics relations that influence the functioning of media outlets there (see Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 2012; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2010). Moreover, in certain countries and regions, media is under intense and continuous political pressure (Reporters Without Borders, 2025), which may lead to setting and sending specific news frames. The aforementioned supports Entman’s approach that framing is related to news slant and bias and ultimately to political power (1993; 2010). For my framing research, I chose countries with different political contexts (including different political contexts of the countries’ relation with Russia) and media systems to detect different patterns in their news media’s framing (**STUDIES I–II**).

The **historical context** of the interaction between media and audiences within the framing process may be considered from two aspects.

Firstly, all the texts and sources, including news, have a historical context because they are created in a defined time (Fleming, 2024). When we conduct a critical analysis without considering the historical context, “we are only seeing a piece of the scene and not fully understanding the influence of the time and place in which a situation occurred” (Fleming, 2024). Hence, constructing, sending, and accepting, partially accepting, or rejecting news frames, which D’Angelo defines as written, spoken, graphical, or visual message modalities (2017), takes place in a certain historical context that a researcher should consider when detecting and understanding concrete frames.

Secondly, according to the historical institutional approach, “identified as a primary approach for studying changes in media” (Peruško et al., 2020: 10), we have to consider the influence of the historical contexts on the further development of media systems, where some of them change in one way and others in another way (Peruško et al., 2020). Peruško, Vozab, and Čuvalo consider a path dependency regarding media systems and its role in continuity, as opposed to change (Peruško et al., 2020). According to Mahoney, “path dependence occurs when a contingent historical event triggers a subsequent sequence that follows a relatively deterministic pattern” (2000: 535). Thus, the historical context may

determine further steps media can take to influence their interaction with the audiences, i.e., on framing.

Besides the impact of the context on **journalists'** work and media framing, there is a list of influential internal factors such as 1) professional requirements for journalistic work and culture (Nygren, 2015; Wiik, 2019), 2) social norms and values plus ideological or political affiliations (Scheufele, 1999; Scahill, 2022), 3) self-censorship (Herman & Chomsky, 2008; Himma-Kadakas & Ivask, 2023), 4) the tendency of journalists to construct newsworthiness, preferring to use vocabulary that emphasizes the negativity, urgency, or unexpected nature of the event being covered (Bednarek & Caple, 2017). Finally, all journalists as individuals have their **frame of reference**, including personal biases (Atanesyan & Rumachik, 2017; Lohner et al., 2016), which may be reflected in media framing.

The personal decision frames (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981, 1986), also called frames of reference (Duchon et al., 1989), consist of the decision context and the psychological context (Grawitch, 2021). The decision context refers to the specifics of the decision situation, and the psychological context refers to the decision maker's interpretations of the decision situation, influenced by the individual's attitudes, beliefs, previous experiences (Grawitch, 2021), and socio-cultural background (Zabihzadeh et al., 2022). It is noted that news journalists should cover events and issues according to the dimensions of news quality media listed by Bachmann, Eisenegger, and Ingenhoff based on literature on the topic (2022). These are, among others: acceptance, actuality, balance, clarity, completeness, detachment, diversity, factuality, impartiality, lawfulness, neutrality, objectivity, professionalism, relevance, and truth (Bachmann et al., 2022). However, the journalist is an individual with a personal frame of reference, which may unconsciously affect a journalist's behavior when constructing or sending the frames while producing news content.

Thus, as previous studies have also noted, media coverage of the event or issue may be one-sided, from the viewpoint of one party, when the journalist presents as a setter or sender of valenced – positive or negative – frames (Golan & Lukito, 2017). Positive frames are used for the supported party, and negative frames for the other, which manifests itself most clearly in media coverage of tensions and conflicts between countries, such as the confrontation between Russia and the EU and the West in general (Alieva & Bluth, 2023; Abdullina et al., 2020) and the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian War (Moses et al., 2023). The media can use framing to achieve certain motivated behaviors (Moses et al., 2023) by realizing its manipulative potential (Kokurina & Khoretskaya, 2018). As stated in previous studies, mass media may contribute to either initiating and escalating or de-escalating international and regional conflicts or crises by using framing (e.g., Ononiwu, 2024; Moses et al., 2023; Alimba, 2020; Andrew et al., 2018; Vladislavljević, 2015). For instance, Moses claims that “when two countries go to war, the media in these countries also go to war through the use of framing in content production” (Moses et al., 2023). Therefore, it is crucial to explore **how the construction and sending of valenced frames by news media outlets influence people's trust in their content, the outlets themselves, and media in general (STUDIES III–IV).**

Not coincidentally, the influence of framing on international conflicts, crises, and related issues is studied regularly by researchers worldwide. These studies have focused on the framing of war conflicts (Olmastroni, 2016; Winter, 2020; Liu, 2024; Kirat & Slamene, 2024), terrorism (Boyle & Mower, 2018; Campbell, 2017), refugees (Tirosh et al., 2022; Liu, 2022), and the COVID-19 pandemic (Okorie, 2022; Milutinović, 2021; Mutua & Ong'ong'a, 2020). The framing of the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War, which began on the 24th of February 2022, has been widely examined during the last three years (e.g., Selvarajah & Fiorito, 2023; Ji et al., 2024; Arcangeletti & Zunino, 2023; Ononiwu, 2024; Özoflu & Arató, 2023; Moses et al., 2023). Also, the framing of Russia has been studied during the last decade in the context of the sensitive topic of the deterioration of its relations with the West (e.g., Alieva & Bluth, 2023; Abdullina et al., 2020; Kokurina & Khoretskaya, 2018).

Although one part of my dissertation relies on the study of the Russia-related news frames, the scientific contribution of the dissertation is broader still because it also adds another part to the study of frames: the acceptance, partial acceptance, or rejection of the Russia-related news frames by the audiences.

2.2. Audiences' perception of the news frames

Audiences, including media audiences, are not passive recipients of information (Morley, 1993; Livingstone, 2013; Masip et al., 2019) – they are active actors (agents) who interact with media (Reiner et al., 2001; Hall, 2006) by constructing and interpreting the meaning of the text (Southerton, 2011). They are becoming more active in the digital age as producers and disseminators of news and other content (see Peña Fernández et al., 2020; Silver & Behlendorf, 2023; Masip et al., 2019). The transition to the hybrid media system caused two great transformations: it significantly increased the number of interacting actors able to generate information; and it gave more power and opportunities to audiences (Peña Fernández & Meso Ayerdi, 2023). Hence, **audiences** can now more actively contribute to constructing and sending the frames (see Figure 1).

The reception theory approach allows us to explore “how texts are interpreted, appropriated, adapted, transformed, passed on, canonized, and/or forgotten by various audiences” (Willis, 2021). When perceiving media messages, audiences are influenced by their socio-cultural background – social class, gender, age, ethnicity, education, and culture (*Reception theory*, 2023) – and they construct meanings of the media messages in a certain context (Hall, 1997). Scholars study the distinct aspects of audiences and their perception of the news, including: a) perception of the information disorder (disinformation, misinformation, mal-information) and fake news (e.g., Broda & Strömbäck, 2024; Benaissa Pedriza, 2023; Masrek et al., 2024); b) perception of the information disorder by audiences living in a specific context of a specific society or country (e.g., Ciofalo et al., 2024; Tully et al., 2021; Giomelakis et al., 2024; Hameleers et al., 2023); c) the

confirmation bias of audiences (e.g., Van der Meer et al., 2020; Modgil et al., 2021; Stibel, 2018); d) the identities and media preferences of audiences (e.g., studies on Baltic Russian-speaking audiences: Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2023; Kaprāns & Juzefovičs, 2019; Vihalemm et al., 2019). I am aware of these and other aspects, but I focus in my dissertation on several aspects that help me explore audiences' acceptance, partial acceptance, or rejection of the news frames (see Figure 1).

I focus on the impact of the **contexts** in which the news frames are perceived by the studied Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia and Cyprus, their **prior knowledge**, and their **frames of reference**, including their preferences, beliefs, and attitudes towards misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation in the news about Russia, towards the media outlets themselves, and towards media in general. I also take into account Russian as their shared native language, which is part of their socio-cultural background, their shared roots in the USSR or Russia, and their perception of the elements of information disorder in the news about Russia and/or Russians (**STUDIES III–IV**).

Firstly, audiences operate in certain **contexts** (Hall, 1997) – **cultural** (Goffman, 1974), **economic** (Hajimichael, 2023), **political** (Entman, 2010; Entman & Usher, 2018), and **historical** (Fleming, 2021; Douglas, 2008) – by reading, watching, and/or listening to news from the news media and social media, and some of them also by producing their news content in social media (Silver & Behlendorf, 2023). **Hence, I assumed that all these contexts could influence audiences' perception of the news and frames (enclosed in the news) and also the possible construction and sending of the news frame by the audiences via social media.**

Secondly, Wagner and Boczkowski (2019, p. 870) found that audience members who deal with fake news rely on “a) traditional fact-based media, accompanied by a rejection of opinionated outlets; b) **personal experience and knowledge** (emphasis added); c) repetition of information across outlets; d) consumption of cross-ideological sources; e) fact-checking; and f) trust in certain personal contacts on social media, who are perceived as assessors of news quality”. According to other scholars, by making decisions and establishing attitudes towards the media and its content, audience members rely on **prior knowledge**, socio-economic position, interaction with people important to the individual, and personal frame of reference (Livingstone, 2005; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Hall, 2006; Morley, 1980). At the same time, Lecheler and De Vreese (2019) state that news frames interact with individuals' **prior knowledge** (emphasis added) and predispositions. Hence, “frames in the news may affect learning, interpretation, evaluation of issues and events, and so on” (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2019, p. 13).

In turn, an individual's **frame of reference** also impacts the perception of the news frames. It includes an individual's attitudes, beliefs, previous experiences (Grawitch, 2021), and socio-cultural background (Zabihzadeh et al., 2022), also known as cultural identity in cultural studies and “refers to identification with, or sense of belonging to, a particular group based on various cultural categories” (Chen, 2014). These cultural categories include nationality, ethnicity, race,

language, family of origin, gender, religion, generation, etc. (Wilson, 2024; Chen, 2014). The frame of reference affects the decision-making process of both journalists, as was mentioned above, and audience members, as individuals. **The audience member's attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and socio-cultural background add subjectivity to his or her decisions, including decisions related to the news frames.**

Indeed, audiences are the target of the frames in the media, but they may also spread their distinct frames via social media that can shape political preferences (D'Angelo, 2019). Audience members "can make and send media frames, particularly since technological developments in Internet-based communication allow almost anyone to reach an audience" (D'Angelo, 2017, p. 2). So they can actively contribute to the framing.

These findings correlate with my dissertation, where I use **prior knowledge** (or **pre-existing knowledge**) and **frame of reference** (see Figure 1) as crucial factors which impact audiences' perception, construction and sending of news frames (**STUDIES III–IV**).

Thirdly, according to reception theory, audiences may interpret the same media text differently (Livingstone, 2005), operating in distinct codes (Hall, 2006). In 1973, Stuart Hall presented his encoding/decoding model concerning the active role of the media audience member (Hall, 1973). According to Hall, a media audience member may take one of three positions toward the news message (2006): dominant, opposing, or negotiated. The dominant or hegemonic position means that the audience member decodes the messages precisely as they were encoded, accepting the encoder's thoughts (Hall, 1973, 2006). The opposing position occurs when an audience member rejects the encoder's intended content and creates his or her own (Hall, 1973, 2006). If the audience member takes the negotiated position, he or she partially perceives the encoder's thoughts but also has his or her own views (Hall, 1973, 2006).

During the process of decoding the news message, audience members may understand both the literal (denotative) and associative (connotative) meanings of this message (Hall, 2006). Hence, I assumed that the audience member could detect news frames that make some aspects of the news more salient with the aim "*to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described*" (Entman, 1993, p. 52; emphasis in original). In my dissertation, I explore not only whether the audiences detect or do not detect the Russia-related news frames, but also whether **they accept, partially accept, or reject them based on the encoding/decoding model of Hall that I have adapted** (**STUDIES III–IV**).

Fourthly, I also study the audience's experience with the perception of the elements of information disorder in the news about Russia, which contributes to the information disorder via the media globally, and particularly in the EU (e.g., see Marín Gutiérrez, 2022; Geissler et al., 2023; Solopova et al., 2023; Campion, 2022; Rodari, 2021; Thompson, 2020). In my dissertation, I explore the media impact on Russian-speaking audiences in two different EU countries, Estonia and Cyprus, operating in distinct codes (**STUDIES III–IV**).

3. METHODOLOGY

This section explains the data collection and analysis that I carried out to find answers to the research questions. I decided to use the following methods (see Table 1): 1) framing analysis to examine the framing of Russia-related news, including the media's role in construction and sending of Russia-related news frames, in **STUDIES I–II**; and 2) personal semi-structured interviews with stimulus materials to explore audiences' attitudes and preferences towards news content and media, their susceptibility to information disorder, and, consequently, their contribution to the interaction with media in framing Russia, in **STUDIES III–IV**.

Table 1. The studies, focus, data collection, and empirical material of the dissertation.

Number of the study	Focus of the study	Data collection method	Empirical material
STUDY I	The construction and sending of the frames.	Framing analysis of the news about Russia on news portals of countries with different contexts, including their cultural, political, economic, and historical ties with Russia.	The frames in the news about Russia on two topics (the explosion in Arkhangelsk Oblast and the Eastern Economic Forum), which were published on the news portals of Estonia, Germany, and Bulgaria, with a focus on news portals in Estonia.
STUDY II	The construction and sending of the frames.	Framing analysis of the news about Russia on news portals of countries with different contexts, including their cultural, political, economic, and historical ties with Russia.	The frames in the news about Russia on border issues, which were published on the public service media news portals of Estonia, Latvia, Finland, and the US, and the state news portal of China – all the neighboring countries, which had or have territorial disputes and/or conflicts with Russia.
STUDY III	Detecting, and accepting, partially accepting, or rejecting the frames. Possible setting and sending of one's own frames.	Personal semi-structured interviews with stimulus materials with the Russian-speaking audience in Estonia. The stimulus materials included the news on the following topics: the explosion in Arkhangelsk Oblast and the Eastern Economic Forum (as in STUDY I), the coronavirus pandemic, and fake news on a Russian boy with the name COVID. The reflexive thematic analysis of the interview transcriptions.	Transcriptions of the interviews and notes, i.e., the materials include literal (denotative) and associative (connotative) meanings of the audience's opinions.

Number of the study	Focus of the study	Data collection method	Empirical material
STUDY IV	Detecting, and accepting, partially accepting, or rejecting the frames. Possible setting and sending of one's own frames.	Personal semi-structured interviews with the Russian-speaking audience in Cyprus. The stimulus materials included the news on the following topics: the Russo-Ukrainian War, direct flights from Russia to the occupied north of Cyprus, the coronavirus pandemic, and misinformation on monkeypox. The reflexive thematic analysis of the interview transcriptions.	Transcriptions of the interviews and notes, i.e., the materials include literal (denotative) and associative (connotative) meanings of the audience's opinions.

3.1. Framing analysis of news about Russia on news portals of countries with different contexts

To ensure the broader international focus of Russia-related news frames and the opportunity for further generalizations, instead of focusing on one country's news media, I decided to conduct the framing analysis of the news from different countries in the EU and beyond. Based on the theoretical framework of my dissertation, I assumed that **different cultural, economic, political, and historical contexts and the different frames of reference of the journalists** in the selected countries impact the framing process in the news in different ways (**STUDIES I–II**). Therefore, the patterns of the news frames may also differ, especially in the use of valenced frames (Morstatter et al., 2018), and I can collect more valuable international empirical material.

Hence, we (I and my co-author) chose the news portals of three countries for **STUDY I** – Estonia, Germany, and Bulgaria. The different contexts of Estonia, Germany, and Bulgaria, including their cultural, political, economic, and historical ties with Russia, were taken into account.

However, the focus was on the news media of Estonia, a neighbor of Russia (unlike Germany and Bulgaria) (**STUDY I**), which has a complicated cultural, historical, and political context related to Russia and its significant Russian-speaking minority – 29% of Estonia's population spoke Russian as their mother tongue at the beginning of 2022, based on the population and housing census survey from the end of 2021 to the beginning of 2022 (Raadik, 2022). The percentage of Russian speakers in Estonia increased after the beginning of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian War when the country accepted in 2022 about 60,000 war refugees from Ukraine who speak predominantly fluent Russian (Treier, 2022).

The German and Bulgarian news portals were selected for comparison with the Estonian online media in order to discover whether there were common trends and/or differences in the case of both dominant and less visible frames. As a journalist can play both the role of the frame-sender or frame-setter, we also assumed that the frames of reference, including socio-cultural backgrounds (Zabihzadeh et al., 2022) of the Estonian, German, and Bulgarian journalists representing different journalistic cultures (Hanitzsch et al., 2019), may additionally influence the framing process (**STUDY I**).

Two covered events, different in scope and nature, were chosen for **STUDY I** to identify similar frames. Both events were of interest to the neighboring countries and beyond. These two events were: 1) the explosion in Arkhangelsk Oblast in Russia on August 8, 2019 (with the release of radiation); 2) The Eastern Economic Forum, aiming to find more investors for the Russian Far East, that took place in Vladivostok between September 4 and the September 6, 2019. The four most popular Estonian news portals (as of 2019) were selected for data collection: *ERR* (ERR.ee), *DELFI* (DELFI.ee), *Postimees* (Postimees.ee), and *Õhtuleht* (Õhtuleht.ee). For comparison, **STUDY I** also included the news portals *Deutsche Welle* (DW.com, Germany, Russian version) and *News.bg* (Bulgaria).

The next study on Russia-related news frames on the news portals of different countries – **STUDY II** – involved the period between January 1, 2021, and December 31, 2021. I aimed to compare the news portals of five countries: public service media portals *ERR* (Estonia, ERR.ee in Estonian), *LSM* (Latvia, Rus.Lsm.lv in Russian), *YLE* (Finland, Yle.fi/novosti in Russian), *Alaska Public Media* (US, alaskapublic.org in English), and the state media news portal *CGTN* (China, Russian.CGTN.com in Russian). All of these countries are neighbors of Russia, who had or have territorial disputes and/or conflicts with it, hence the complicated historical and political contexts of their relations with Russia.

For **STUDY II**, I chose to analyze the news that is published only in the public service and state media outlets, instead of commercial media, because the first two types tend to cover international issues more often, in comparison to commercial media, where these topics might not be so newsworthy (Aalberg et al., 2010; Aalberg et al., 2013). The commercial, market-oriented media outlets are “less devoted to international news”, and the international news offered by them “more often focuses on soft news than hard news” (Aalberg et al., 2013: 403). According to previous studies, public service media also offers higher quality information (Sehl, 2020; Jõesaar & Kõuts-Klemm, 2019) and is more trusted than most other media (Newman et al., 2022). Going back to **STUDY I**, the Estonian news portal *ERR* and German *Deutsche Welle* also belong to public service media organizations.

STUDY II more clearly links the news frames and national contexts in analyzing the coverage of border disputes and conflicts because I have written more about the relations between Russia and its neighbors in historical, political, economic, and cultural contexts. I based it on the research of scholars who have studied Estonia, Latvia, Finland, the US, and China from these contexts (e.g., Piirimäe, 2021; Gromilova, 2016; Kharybin, 2017; Levinsson, 2006; Gordon

Dickinson, 2003; Kaczynski, 2007; Sidorov, 2014; Kogan, 2019). Scholarly studies and other publications on the Russian-speaking population in these countries were also taken into account (e.g., Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2021; Pikkarainen & Protassova, 2015; Kern, 2021). For more details see the free access article on **STUDY II**.

Hence, for **STUDY I** and **STUDY II**, I decided to examine the presence of the frames in the news about those events and issues in Russia on the agenda, which are different in scope and nature but are of interest to the neighboring countries and the world due to the complicated international relations with Russia. Among others, several topics are especially sensitive because of the neighboring countries' ecology, security, and economics. Hence, **the selection of the cases is directly connected to the different contexts impacting the framing process.**

I used a similar method for data collection and analysis for **STUDIES I–II** – framing analysis, also known as frame analysis – which “examines the selection and salience of certain aspects of an issue by exploring images, stereotypes, metaphors, actors, and messages” (Matthes, 2009: p. 349). Therefore, this method highlights the various text-constructing ways to emphasize specific aspects of a covered event. Matthes (2009) distinguishes the next possible methodological steps of framing analysis: 1) choose among text-based or number-based analysis; 2) apply the inductive or deductive approach; 3) use coding, manual or computer-assisted; 4) implement data-reduction techniques or code the whole frames as such. As I examined the framing in the news content, which is tightly connected to the texts and their contexts (Jensen, 2020), I decided to favor text-based framing analysis.

When it came to choosing between an inductive or deductive approach I was guided by the turbulence in the contemporary Russia-related context, especially political and economic. The typologies of frames presented in the beginning of frame analysis by Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992), and Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) were used as a base in the next studies (Linström & Marais, 2012). However, many variations and completely new frames and their typologies were presented in the next two decades (Linström & Marais, 2012; Hayat, 2018; Yang & Van Gorp, 2021) as a response to the media coverage of the new context (Zhu et al., 2023). Zhu, How and Krever claim that in the beginning of using the framing analysis as a research method the news did not report such images of allies and enemies, and now the “new social fissures, new international divisions, often along religious and ethnic divides, and new perceived threats to national interests dominate news media stories” (2023: 2). Instead of the deductive approach to framing analysis when a certain typology is used, in the inductive approach the “frames are generated as a result of the analysis; they are not (theoretically) derived beforehand” (Matthes, 2009). Hence, “in the face of new social and geopolitical realities” (Zhu et al., 2023: 2), **the inductive approach gave me a free hand to detect the patterns of news framing relevant to my study in the contemporary context related to Russia.**

According to Chong and Druckman, framing analysis may be applied to study the effects of media coverage of social and political issues, including different interpretations of these issues by competing sides (2007). The competing sides in the context of Russia-related framing in **STUDIES I–II** are first of all Russia, the West (and Ukraine supported by it) (Cuevas Herman, 2024; Chrysopoulos, 2024; Stent, 2024), and China, considered as a threat for the West (Lucenti, 2024; Cheng, 2021) and a “strategic partner” of Russia (Fong & Maizland, 2024; Lukin, 2021) or “close Russian ally” (Konstantinovskiy, 2024), and, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People’s Republic of China, as “more than an ally” of Russia (*MID KNR*, 2021). Thus, in my inductive qualitative framing analysis, I examined Russia-related semantic frames in the headlines, subheadlines, body texts of news, and visual elements. I aimed to detect frames and analyze them, where I considered each frame in-depth and with detailed quotes (Matthes, 2009), and in the specific context, by taking into account the **prominent information sources** (such as news agencies and powerful speakers), and the activities, highlighted problems and proposed solutions involved. Besides defining the prominent information sources, I studied how they are labeled, what the problem is, and how they are represented in the news on certain Russia-related politically, economically, culturally, and historically relevant topics published on the news portals in Estonia, Germany, Bulgaria, Latvia, Finland, US, and China. In total, 123 articles were analyzed for **STUDY I** and 115 for **STUDY II** (for further information, see the free access articles on **STUDIES I–II**). I listed up to four information sources regarding each news article with the frame(s) that helped me **define the frame-setter – the prominent information source or journalist (STUDIES I–II)**.

When conducting the qualitative framing analysis for **STUDIES I–II**, I focused on the following elements of the Russia-related news frames: 1) clickbait solutions (Blom & Hansen, 2015; Kaushal & Vemuri, 2021); 2) thematic and stylistically colored vocabulary, stylistic techniques based on a pragmatically motivated deviation from the linguistic norm and its stylistically neutral version (Kokurina & Khoretskaya, 2018); 3) emotionally-charged words (Pan & Kosicki, 1993); 4) tropes and figures (Franzosi & Vicari, 2018); 5) any graphic and visual elements (such as headlines written in capital letters and specially selected photos) that support framing (Griffin & Lee, 1995; D’Angelo, 2017); 6) emphasis on positive or negative aspects of the issue covered; the use of positive or negative frames (Schuck & De Vreese, 2009; Golan & Lukito, 2017). All the abovelisted elements of the frames, which promoted “a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993, p. 52), helped to determine the “tone” of media coverage of an event or issue” (Saleem, 2007, p. 135). In summary, I tried to find **any framing elements in the news that may impact the audience’s preferences regarding the framed issues** (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2003; Busby et al., 2018).

I also focused on defining the valency of the detected news frames. I defined the valency of Russia-related frames as neutral (ambivalent), negative, or positive in **STUDY I** based on the approach of previous studies (see Schuck & De Vreese,

2009; Golan & Lukito, 2017). However, in **STUDY II**, I defined the negative frames **dividing** and the positive frames **uniting**, depending on the effect of the frame on relations between the media's host country and Russia: Russia-related events may be framed as dividing countries, nations, and societies or as supporting dialogue and cooperation between them. During the work on the cover article of my dissertation, I decided to extend the classification of dividing/uniting frames to both **STUDIES I** and **II**, with some additions. The news frame is considered to be dividing if a) the covered Russia-related event is framed as dividing countries, nations, and societies and/or b) the frame condemns Russia's activities (at a national or international level) and/or actors that may harm the image of Russia abroad. The news frame is uniting if a) the covered Russia-related event is framed as supporting dialogue and cooperation between countries, nations, and societies, and/or the frame includes a positive assessment of Russia's activities (at a national or international level) and/or actors that favors the image of Russia abroad. All the other Russia-related frames are considered **neutral**.

Therefore, the aim of the framing analysis in **STUDIES I–II** was **to define and describe the specific patterns in framing Russia in the news on news portals of countries neighboring Russia and/or having relations in cultural, political, economic, and historical contexts**. In addition, I aimed **to define the frame-setters of the detected Russia-related frames – prominent information sources or journalists, and the valency of detected news frames – as dividing, uniting, or neutral (ambivalent)**.

3.2. Personal semi-structured interviews with Russian-speaking media audiences in Estonia and Cyprus

In the second half of my empirical research for a PhD dissertation – **STUDIES III–IV** – I aimed to explore the role of the audience in the interaction with the media in the process of framing Russia in the news. In **STUDIES III–IV**, I explored whether the audiences recognized the framing in the news, and, if they did, whether they accepted, partially accepted, or rejected the Russia-related news frames constructed and/or sent by the media.

The multiplicity of countries' contexts in **STUDIES I–II** showed how significant this variability is at the media or macro level. The next step of my dissertation – **STUDIES III–IV** – was to move to the micro level to study how the concrete Russian-speaking audiences perceive Russia-related frames in the news. Indeed, since the multiplicity of the macro level was already mapped in **STUDIES I–II**, the same multiplicity would not be obligatory at the micro level because one shared context – related to audiences' origins from the USSR or Russia – sets the limits itself. I decided to do the analysis at the micro level based on two countries with significantly different contexts where large Russian-speaking minorities live.

I chose **two small**, and therefore potentially more vulnerable to the foreign influence, EU countries – Estonia and Cyprus – with **two different cultural**,

political, economic, and historical contexts, including different contexts in their relations with Russia, which I briefly describe below.

Cyprus did not have the same bitter historical experience in its relations with Russia (Stamouli, 2022) as Estonia had with the Russian Empire and the USSR (see Raun, 1984; Haltzel et al., 1981; Aunin, 2024), and Estonia still has territorial disputes with Russia (see Piirimäe, 2021; Gromilova, 2016; Kharybin, 2017). However, Cyprus has been occupied over the centuries, and from 1974 until now, the northern part of Cyprus is occupied by Turkey (Stamouli, 2022). The relations between Cyprus and Russia before the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War were considered as an effective economic, political, and cultural cooperation (Delanoe, 2013; Varvitsioti, 2022). Both Cyprus (Varvitsioti, 2022) and Estonia (Lelich & Danishevskaya, 2024) condemned Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and followed EU sanctions against Russia. Furthermore, Estonia stands out for its active position in condemning Russia’s actions and supporting Ukraine (Lelich & Danishevskaya, 2024). Hence, there are differences and commonalities in the contexts of Cyprus and Estonia that allow me to make generalizations.

I chose the Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia and Cyprus, which are crucial parts of these countries’ contexts, especially in light of the increasing tensions between Russia and the EU (Cuevas Herman, 2024; Chrysopoulos, 2024). These large Russian-speaking minorities have a different history of emergence and formation (Isakov, 2008; Furman & Zadorozhnyuk, 2004; Kamolov et al., 2019; Stamouli, 2022). However, they also have the uniting part of their shared socio-cultural background: a shared native language and shared context of Russia’s/Soviet history and culture that again enable me to make further generalizations.

The Russian-speaking minority in Estonia has a longer history than the Russian-speaking minority in Cyprus. It started basically in the late seventeenth century, when Russian Old Believers refused to accept the liturgical reform of the Russian Orthodox Church, and part of them migrated to the western coast of Lake Peipus (Isakov, 2008; Kõivupuu, 2012). Russians were the largest ethnic minority (8.2 %) in the Republic of Estonia in 1934 (Eesti Entsüklopeedia, 2012). Today, it is a mix of Estonian citizens before 1940 (i.e., before the annexation of the Republic of Estonia by the USSR) and their descendants, USSR immigrants and their descendants, and new immigrants after 1991 (Eesti Entsüklopeedia, 2012; Isakov, 2008; Furman & Zadorozhnyuk, 2004). The share of the Russian-speaking minority at the beginning of 2022 was 29% of Estonia’s population, according to the population and housing census survey conducted from the end of 2021 to the beginning of 2022 (Raadik, 2022). It has since increased after the beginning of the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War when, in 2022, about 60,000 war refugees from Ukraine who speak predominantly fluent Russian were accepted by Estonia (Treier, 2022).

Cyprus became a popular migration destination for native Russian speakers from the former USSR after its collapse due to cultural, historical, and religious affinities, financial investment opportunities, and mild climate (Kamolov et al., 2019; Delanoe, 2013; Ryazantsev, 2015). The Russian-speaking community in

Cyprus has been growing more intensively since 2022 as a result of the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War, when skilled human capital started to emigrate from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus in higher numbers (Wachs, 2023; Ilyushina, 2022). The Russian-speaking community is one of the largest in Cyprus (Kamolov et al., 2019), with up to “more than 100,000 Russian-speaking residents” (Goncharenko, 2023). Stamouli claims that in Limassol alone, with a total population of 237,000, there is a Russian-speaking community of around 50,000 (2022).

Based on the above, I assumed that the differing cultural, economic, political, and historical contexts of Cyprus and Estonia affect the frames of reference of Russian-speaking audiences in these countries and, consequently, their perception of Russia-related news frames. I also assumed that because both audiences share Russian/Soviet culture and history and may have personal (family, friends, colleagues), cultural, economic, and political connections to Russia, they are more likely to be influenced by Russia-related news frames (including Russia’s hegemonic narratives) disseminated by the media. But because the Cyprus Russian-speaking audience has a shorter history of mostly first-generation immigrants (Kamolov et al., 2019; Ryazantsev, 2015; Stamouli, 2022), except for the youngest generation who were born in Cyprus, they may have closer relations with their country of origin than Estonia’s Russian-speaking audience.

As a result, I assumed that **the contexts and frames of reference influence specifically the media preferences, attitudes, and susceptibility to information disorder of the abovementioned audiences and thus their perception of the Russia-related news frames.**

I chose for **STUDIES III–IV** the qualitative method of the personal semi-structured interviews, considered to be a “powerful tool to capture the voices and the ways people make meaning of their experience” (Rabionet, 2011: p. 563). Firstly, this method guarantees the confidentiality and openness of the participants (Young et al., 2018). Secondly, this interview format allows the interviewer to be flexible, to rearrange the order of questions during the interview and introduce new ones based on the interviewee’s responses (Ruslin et al., 2022; Young et al., 2018).

The design of **STUDIES III–IV** provided participants with stimulus materials considered in the previous studies as important support materials (Vincent & Stacey, 2013; Törrönen, 2002) and used as “clues, micromodels, or provocateurs” in qualitative research (Törrönen, 2002: p. 343).

The interviews of **STUDY III** (N=29) were conducted from November 2020 to March 2021 in Estonia, when the COVID-19 pandemic’s social restrictions were enforced. The interviews of **STUDY IV** (N=24) were conducted from October 2022 to June 2023 in Cyprus at the time of the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War. During the **STUDY IV** period in Cyprus, several COVID-19 restrictions were still being enforced in the country.

In **STUDIES III–IV**, the interviews were conducted face-to-face or through Skype or Zoom, depending on the person’s request. Both studies employed a similar recruiting procedure, utilizing acquaintances and the snowball technique. The participants in **STUDIES III–IV** were selected based on their interest in the

news. Those candidates who said they did not read, watch, and/or listen to the news were excluded.

The sample populations' socio-demographic data were obtained in Estonia (**STUDY III**, Table 2 on p. 39) and Cyprus (**STUDY IV**, Table 2 on p. 154.). The sample population in Estonia included native Russian speakers with mostly Estonian but also Russian and Ukrainian citizenship (**STUDY III**). Most of the native Russian speakers interviewed in Cyprus (including some bilinguals and trilinguals) were citizens of Russia and persons with dual citizenship of Cyprus/Russia; others were citizens of Ukraine, Belarus, and Latvia; several had other dual or triple citizenship (**STUDY IV**).

The interview for **STUDIES III–IV** consisted of two parts. The first aimed to examine the interviewees' relationship with news media and news content and their interests in the news, media use, media assessments, and assessments of the accuracy of the information. The aim of the second part with the stimulus materials of **STUDY III** and **STUDY IV** was to explore the interviewees' attitudes toward Russia-related news and their information-checking strategies. The stimulus materials played the role of “clues” (Törrönen, 2002: p. 343) to the topics in the first part, including published news presented to the interviewees after discussing their media-related habits and Russia-related interests. The presented news included elements of credibility: severity of the headline, ownership (public, state, private media) and political orientation (pro-government, opposition, neutral), referring to sources, the origin of information, news content, news tone (positive, negative, neutral), compliance with the requirements of the news style genre, agents covered. All the topics of the stimulus materials for the interviewees in **STUDY III** and **STUDY IV** were related to Russia or Russians.

The primary criterion for selecting stimulus materials for **STUDY III** were two topics based on preliminary work from **STUDY I** and a new topic connected to the coronavirus pandemic, all about Russia. The first stimulus material of **STUDY III** was an explosion in Arkhangelsk Oblast in Russia on August 8, 2019, a catastrophe, connected to the new missile test, which always draws international attention. The second was The Eastern Economic Forum on September 4–6, 2019, an economic topic for readers with a special interest. The framing in the news on these two topics was analyzed in **STUDY I**; hence, in **STUDY III**, I was able to analyze the audience's perception of these frames. The third stimulus material was the psychologically relevant and actual news about the coronavirus vaccine in 2020. The fourth was fake news, originally a joke on the *KuzPress* website that spread widely and became fake news about a Russian child named COVID.

The next criterion for the stimulus materials of **STUDY III** was the media outlet. Participants were divided into three groups, with each group being presented with news from various platforms and with a range of credibility other than the fake news outlet, which was the same for all 29 interviewees. Each of the three groups received an item of news from one of three of Estonian news portals, in their Russian versions: the public *ERR* (*Rus.ERR.ee*); the private *DELFI* (*Rus.DELFI.ee*); and the private *Postimees* (*Rus.Postimees.ee*). Each

group also received one news item from the Russian version of the German public service media news portal *Deutsche Welle*, plus an item from one of three of Russia's media outlets: the pro-government state-owned newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*; the neutral, as of 2021 (Kõuts-Klemm & Kremez, 2021) privately owned *Kommersant*; and the independent *Novaya Gazeta*. This last media outlet was in opposition to the government until September 2022, when its licenses (print and online) were revoked (*Russia rescinds*, 2022).

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

The audio recordings of the interviews of **STUDIES III–IV** were made, and notes were taken. The interviews of **STUDIES III–IV** were transcribed, following the principle of naturalism, in which each statement is transcribed in as much detail as possible (Oliver et al., 2005), and reinterpreting what the participant said (Leech, 2002) was avoided. I examined transcriptions using the method of close reading to obtain a deeper understanding (Brummett, 2019). I performed the reflexive thematic analysis with the thoughtful engagement of the researcher with the analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to define and analyze patterns, including interviewees' positions towards the news according to Hall's encoding/decoding model (1973, 2006). I managed to gather the actual thoughts and attitudes of the interviewees because the initial aim was to define both the literal (denotative) and associative (connotative) meanings of the audience's opinions. Hence, I also read between the lines and took into account the interviewees' tone of speech, gesticulation, and facial expressions.

In **STUDY IV**, I and my co-author also compared the research results of **STUDY III** and **STUDY IV** to determine the commonalities and disparities.

Indeed, I did not expect members of the Russian-speaking audiences in Cyprus and Estonia to have any scholarly expertise on framing in the news. Hence, I aimed to discover their understanding of the framing and their experience with it. I decided to do this by deeply studying their media preferences, attitudes, and susceptibility to information disorder based on the news on sensitive topics connected to Russia or Russians. Finally, based on the collected empirical material with the help of Hall's encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1973, 2006), I was able to explore **whether and how they detect news frames and how they decode them – whether they accept, partially accept, or reject the Russia-related news frames constructed and/or sent by the media.**

In summary, the analysis of the international contexts based on Cyprus and Estonia and their relations with Russia/USSR, plus the analysis of the frames of reference of the Russian-speaking news audiences in both countries in **STUDIES III–IV**, has become sufficient ground for further generalizations in combination with the results of the analysis of Russia-related frames at the international level in **STUDIES I–II**.

3.3. Limitations of the studies

The framing analysis conducted in **STUDIES I–II** has some limitations.

Firstly, it cannot cover all possible frames in the news about Russia or Russians. However, the aim was to define the patterns that might be checked in the future on the news content in other countries and other languages not involved in **STUDIES I–II**.

Secondly, the context of the framing in the news about Russia and the frames of reference of the journalists change over time, and this may lead to the construction and sending of new news frames, unknown and uncovered during the periods of **STUDIES I–II**. Hence, totally new frames may occur and will be detected and described in future studies.

The approach of studying the impact of the journalist's frame of reference on the news framing also has some limitations. In addition to **STUDIES I–II**, based on the news content, it would be relevant to conduct personal interviews with active news journalists in at least several countries to collect more empirical material on the impact of their frames of reference on the journalistic framing. The latter may also shed light on the influence of the frames set and disseminated by the audiences on the journalists, emphasized in previous studies (Peña Fernández et al., 2020; Silver & Behlendorf, 2023; Masip et al., 2019), i.e., in the reverse direction (see Figure 1).

The results and conclusions of **STUDIES III–IV** cannot be applied to the entire Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia and Cyprus for the following two reasons.

First, most of the participants in Estonia and Cyprus have higher education, which could be explained by a greater willingness of more educated people to participate in the studies, and, in the case of Cyprus, by the influx of skilled human capital from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus in higher numbers after the beginning of full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War (Wachs, 2023; Ilyushina, 2022). However, the results give an idea of how people who are presumed to be more analytical and critical than average relate to the news frames. It can be assumed that if they already do not see through certain intentions behind the frames, then people with less analytical skills will see through them even less.

Second, **STUDIES III–IV** use a qualitative approach since the main task was to find out what people feel and think regarding the perceived news frames.

3.4. Ethical considerations

In this subsection, I explain some considerations regarding my studies of the countries' contexts (including their news media and the contexts of their relations with Russia) and my studies on Russian-speaking audiences (**STUDIES I–IV**).

Firstly, I have a very good knowledge of Estonia's cultural, economic, political, and historical contexts, its news media, and relations with neighboring countries, including Russia (**STUDIES I–IV**), as I was born and grew up in Estonia, as has my family for generations. I studied Estonian language, culture, history, and journalism at Tallinn University and worked for many years in Estonian media until 2019. During the work on **STUDY I**, I was also greatly supported by my co-author, Dr. Ragne Kõuts-Klemm, Associate Professor at the University of Tartu, who has a deep knowledge of Estonian journalism.

I know Russian culture, history, and media well (**STUDIES I–IV**) as I have Russian roots, speak Russian as one of my native languages, studied Russian literature, history, and journalism at Tallinn University, and published several articles on Russia's history and culture in Estonian media between 2014 and 2019 as an Estonian correspondent. I started to study the representation of Russia in the media at a scholarly level in 2004 with my MA studies.

As I also have Finnish roots, Finland's context (**STUDY II**), specifically the Finnish media and Finnish–Russian relations have always been of personal and scholarly interest. For example, for my MA thesis, I studied the coverage of Russia-related topics in daily newspapers of Estonia and Finland: *Eesti Päevaleht* (in Estonian), *Molodjož Estonii* (in Russian), and *Helsingin Sanomat* (in Finnish).

In addition, before I started working on my dissertation, I was familiar with the general context, media and relations with USSR/Russia of Latvia (**STUDY II**), Germany (**STUDY I**), the US (**STUDY II**), and especially Bulgaria (**STUDY I**), as I learned Bulgarian language during my MA studies. Indeed, I had to improve and update my knowledge of the contexts of all of these countries (including Estonia, Russia and Finland) by reading new scholarly articles and other publications on the topic.

However, for my dissertation, I needed to study the contexts of two countries not close to me and/or familiar to me – China for **STUDY II** and Cyprus for **STUDY IV** – through the prism of their relations with the USSR/Russia.

I must admit that my knowledge of China (**STUDY II**), its relations with the USSR/Russia, and Chinese media is based only on scholarly articles and other publications. My previous connections with the Chinese context were not regular and immersive, which could cause difficulties interpreting the Russia-related frames in Chinese state media.

Regarding the cultural, economic, political, and historical contexts of Cyprus (**STUDY IV**), I was supported by my co-author of **STUDY IV**, Dr. Mike Hajimichael, and other Cypriot colleagues during my studies in Cyprus in 2022–2023 at the Department of Communications at the University of Nicosia. I have conducted several interviews with Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, which are not included in my dissertation, to learn more about Cyprus and its people. In

addition, I conducted personal semi-structured interviews with Cypriot journalists (N=6), producing news on international topics, including Russia, for a better understanding of the problems and challenges of their work (Kremez, 2023).

Secondly, regarding **STUDIES III–IV** based on the personal semi-structured interviews with Russian-speaking audience members in Estonia and Cyprus, I was aware, as were the assistants who helped me to conduct the interviews of **STUDY III**, that the topic was related to identities of the interviewees and may affect them. I took into account that discussing Russia-related topics may be sensitive emotionally for the participants, who may have close relationships and feel a close connection to Russia, even while living in Estonia or Cyprus, or who may have relatives, friends, or partners residing (or living) in the regions where the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War is taking place.

I had to choose words carefully so as not to hurt the participants whose loved ones live in war zones. I had to be vigilant and not express or show my antiwar views and emotions to the participants when interviewing them, no matter how they talked to me about the war – condemning it, justifying it, or avoiding showing their attitude. My goal was to study their attitudes and opinions, even if they contradicted mine, e.g., several participants called the full-scale war a “special war operation” organized by the Russian Federation. The aim was not to “scare off” the participants and possible future participants so that the interviewee would not later say that the researcher is biased.

When a few participants in Cyprus (**STUDY IV**) withdrew their preliminary consent owing to an unwillingness to address politically sensitive media coverage or did not come to the scheduled interview (without answering my call and text message), I accepted their decision and did not disturb them anymore.

At the same time, some participants of both **STUDY III** and **STUDY IV** expressed their gratitude for having their opinions listened to. They also expressed interest in participating in possible future research.

All the **STUDIES III–IV** participants were adult persons (at least 18 years old) and were asked for their informed consent to be interviewed.

Participant coding was used for samples of **STUDY III** and **STUDY IV**, which enabled studies to meet the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation¹ and research ethics requirements in social studies to protect the participants’ privacy. **STUDY III** placed the interviewees at random into three groups of roughly equal size (Group 1, n=9; Group 2, n=10 and Group 3, n=10), in which they were coded by their group number (G#) and a given interviewee number (I#) using the format G#:I# (e.g., 1:9, 2:10, 3:5). The participants of **STUDY IV** were coded by the first letter of the country (C) and a given interviewee number (I#) using the format CI# (e.g., C1).

Having discussed my dissertation’s methodological foundations, the next section presents the results of **STUDIES I, II, III, and IV**.

¹ Regulation (EU) 2016/679, abbreviated GDPR, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A02016R0679-20160504>

4. RESULTS

In this section, I introduce the results of **STUDIES I–IV**.

In the first part, I present the results of **STUDIES I–II**, focusing on the news framing based on the analyzed news articles published by the news media in the countries covered. Hence, in this part, I focus on the journalists' contribution as frame-setters or frame-senders to constructing and sending Russia-related frames.

In the second part, I present the findings of the audience studies (**STUDIES III–IV**) conducted in Estonia and Cyprus. I focus on the audiences' media preferences, assessment of the media coverage, experience with recognition of the information disorder, and perception of the news frames: the experience within the decoding of the Russia-related frames, including accepting, partially accepting, or rejecting them.

4.1. Journalists' contribution as frame-setters or frame-senders to constructing and sending Russia-related frames

The framing analysis conducted for **STUDIES I–II** detected specific patterns in framing Russia in the news on Estonia, Bulgaria, Germany, Latvia, Finland, the US, and China news portals. The analysis revealed that all the public service media and state media in these countries (except in the case of Bulgaria, when I studied only the private news portal) contribute considerably to the framing of Russia in the news (**STUDIES I–II**). However, Russia-related frames were detected likewise in high numbers on studied private news portals in Estonia and Bulgaria (**STUDY I**).

In addition to the detection and description of the detected Russia-related news frames, I defined their valency, according to my above classification (see Methodology), as dividing, uniting, or neutral (**STUDIES I–II**). The detected dividing, uniting, and neutral (ambivalent) news frames, including some examples, are presented in Tables 2 (**STUDY I**) and 3 (**STUDY II**). It should be noted that the number of examples is limited due to lack of space in the tables; in some cases, they are presented only by the headline, subheadline, lead paragraph, or excerpt from the body text of news articles. However, the whole frame may include significantly more elements. Therefore, for a better understanding of the concrete dividing or uniting frame, i.e., the "tone" of media coverage of an event or issue" (Saleem, 2007, p. 135), the whole news should be read in the original language. For more details about detected Russia-related news frames, please see the free access articles on **STUDIES I–II**.

Table 2. The dividing (in red), uniting (not found), and neutral (in blue) news frames detected in **STUDY I** on the news portals in Estonia, Bulgaria, and Germany. The similar frames are in italics.

	Estonia	Bulgaria	Germany
Dividing frames with examples	<i>Hiding the truth</i> The Russian authorities have provided several explanations for what happened and a lot of conflicting information. (Viirand, 2019c) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added)	<i>Hiding the truth</i> Novaya Gazeta: There are 7 victims in Arkhangelsk, the authorities are hiding information (<i>Novaya Gazeta</i> , 2019) (Headline, emphasis added)	<i>Hiding the truth</i> The lies and conspiracy of silence surrounding the Arkhangelsk accident (Preobrazhensky, 2019) (Subheadline, emphasis added)
	<i>Disorder (in Russia)</i> ACCIDENT AFTER ACCIDENT: Seven people died at a Russian naval training ground (Hiitamm, 2019b) (Headline)	<i>Disorder (in Russia)</i> The Russian Navy has suffered numerous major accidents over the years. (<i>Tramp</i> , 2019) (Headline, emphasis added)	<i>Disorder (in Russia)</i> Rush, an initially controversial project... Due to its questionable feasibility and effectiveness , the much more powerful, professional, and, I must say, rational Soviet military-industrial complex abandoned it at the time. (Preobrazhensky, 2019) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added)
	<i>Nuclear threat</i> Russian floating nuclear power plant sparks fears of next nuclear disaster (<i>Vene Ujuvtuumajaam</i> , 2019) (Headline)	<i>Nuclear threat</i> The nuclear-powered rocket that exploded near Arkhangelsk has been dubbed “ flying Chernobyl ” by critics. (Kaschiev, 2019) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added)	<i>Nuclear threat</i> Rosgidromet reported 16-time increase of radiation in Severodvinsk (Makar, 2019) (Headline, emphasis added) *It is explained in the article’s body text that the real increase was “4–16 times”, i.e., “16-time” in the headline sounds like frightening clickbait.
	-	<i>Needless arms race</i> Scientist: Burevestnik will not give Russia any military superiority (<i>Uchen</i> , 2019) (Headline)	<i>Needless arms race</i> Rocket scientist: Burevestnik will not give Russia an advantage (Bushuev, 2019) (Headline)

	Estonia	Bulgaria	Germany
	<i>Putin as a magnet (clickbait type frame with dividing effect)</i> Analyst: Putin's regime is characterized by people looking for iodine tablets (Viirand, 2019a) (Headline, emphasis added)	-	<i>Putin as a magnet (clickbait type frame with dividing effect)</i> President Putin's favorite military project Russian President Vladimir Putin is the main person responsible for what happened in the Arkhangelsk Oblast. (Preobrazhensky, 2019) (Subheadline and an excerpt from the text)
	Label-sticking VIDEO: In Russia, exchanged prisoners carried their bags themselves, in Ukraine they were received as national heroes (VIDEO, 2019) (Headline) *The original headline in the news source, RTVI, is neutral and gives the readership an opportunity to think: "Watch how the exchanged prisoners were met in Moscow and Kiev" (Posmotrite, 2019)	-	-
	Bad boy After the annexation of the Crimea other members of the union threw away Russia from G8 and renamed it the G7 under the pandering of the US President Barack Obama. (Viirand, 2019b) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added)	-	-
	Blame game Russian officials blame the radiation on Fukushima crabs (Venemaa ametnikud, 2019) (Headline)	-	-

	Estonia	Bulgaria	Germany
	-	-	State does not care The accident of the “special unit” at the test site in the Arkhangelsk Oblast showed that the Russians are still heroes, but for the state they are cannon fodder, Ivan Preobrazhensky believes (Preobrazhensky, 2019) (Lead, emphasis added.)
	-	-	Violence OMON and Rosgvardia officers acted harshly, beating up activists and even bystanders. (Mylnikov, 2019) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added)
	-	Conflicting Russia Russia has blamed the United States for a failed missile test near Severodvinsk (<i>Rusiya obvini</i>, 2019) (Headline)	-
Uniting frames with examples	-	-	-
Neutral frames with examples	<i>Putin as a magnet (clickbait type frame)</i> PUTIN: The exchange of prisoners with Ukraine will be large-scale (Hiietamm, 2019a) (Headline)	<i>Putin as a magnet (clickbait type frame)</i> Putin: Russia and China coordinate international affairs (<i>Putin: Rusiya</i>, 2019) (Headline)	<i>Putin as a magnet (clickbait type frame)</i> Putin announced the imminent exchange of prisoners between the Russian Federation and Ukraine (Mishchenko, 2019) (Headline)

Table 3. The dividing (in red), uniting (in green), and neutral (not found) news frames detected in **STUDY II** on the news portals in Estonia, Latvia, Finland, the US, and China. The similar frames are in italics.

	Estonia	Latvia	Finland	US	China
Dividing frames with examples	<i>Russia is a provocateur</i> Marko Mihkelson, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Riigikogu, called the detention of Lätte [Estonian consul in Saint-Petersburg] a provocation. “Unfortunately, this provocative step by Russia confirms the deep slump in not only Estonian–Russian, but also Russian–Western relations,” he commented. (Nael, 2021) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added.)	<i>Russia is a provocateur</i> “Now the situation on the external borders of Latvia is relatively calm, but we need to be prepared for a possible increase in illegal migration and related provocations at the border (...)” said Minister [of Defense] Pabriks. (<i>Armiya pomozhet</i>, 2021) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added.)	-	-	-
	<i>No interest from the Russian side</i> Toomas Sildam: Estonia extended a hand, Russia did not accept it (Sildam, 2021) (Headline)	-	-	-	-

	Estonia	Latvia	Finland	US	China
	Russia is an occupier The state border determined by it also applies, despite the fact that Russia still occupies Petserimaa and the areas beyond Narva. We have neither the need nor any obligations to legitimize the criminal occupation (...) (Põlluaas, 2021) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added.)	-	-	-	-
	Bureaucratic Russia “The absence of a single stamp gives the right to destroy the entire shipment if necessary,” Karis wrote on social media. (<i>Vene toll</i>, 2021) (Excerpt from the text)	-	-	-	-

	Estonia	Latvia	Finland	US	China
	The high level of the coronavirus infection in Russia as a danger for Estonia (...) Ministry of Justice will submit a legal analysis to the government on Thursday on the legal possibility of Estonia requiring a negative test from foreign arrivals at the borders. This is important given the high level of infection in Russia at the moment, but also in preparation for a possible third wave. (Kisler, 2021) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added.)	-	-	-	-

	Estonia	Latvia	Finland	US	China
	Russia restricts travel of its citizens According to Maidla, Russian tourism is recovering very slowly as Russia restricts its citizens' exit from the country. (...) “more likely the center of gravity is there, how to get out of Russia, whether Russia allows its citizens to leave.” (Nikolajev, 2021b) (Excerpts from the text, emphasis added.)	-	-	-	-
	Russia could turn off electricity in Estonia If Vladimir Putin decides to achieve his goal of restoring the “glory” of communist Russia at the expense of its neighbors, it will be easy for him to bring the Baltic states to their knees by cutting off Russia's electricity. (Toomepuu, 2021) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added.)	-	-	-	-

	Estonia	Latvia	Finland	US	China
	-	Russian coronavirus requirements are less stringent Transportation with health risks – private traders offer trips to Russia. Through Estonia (<i>Perevozki s riskom</i>, 2021) (Headline, emphasis added.)	-	-	-
	-	-	Russia creates tension near the borders of Finland Military intelligence report: armed activity in Finland's neighboring territories continued despite the pandemic (<i>Otchet voennoi</i>, 2021) (Headline, emphasis added.)	-	-

	Estonia	Latvia	Finland	US	China
	-	-	Protectionism intensifies in Russia The increasing protectionism also hampers trade in Russia. Russia is the second country after China regarding the number of obstacles imposed on international trade with the European Union. (Zidan, 2021) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added.)	-	-
	-	-	-	Russia's expansion in the Arctic CG: Speaking of security issues and NATO, are there shared concerns between the two countries about Russia's expansion in the Arctic? AK: We see military buildup on the Russian side. And of course, we have to keep an eye on that. (Grove, 2021b) (Excerpt from the text)	-

	Estonia	Latvia	Finland	US	China
Uniting frames with examples	<i>Stability and success in cross-border regional projects</i> (...) Mihkelson cited joint cross-border projects with Russia funded under the European Union's new financial framework (MFF), which, according to him, have created significant stability and transparency in Southeastern Estonia and the Narva region. "All such infrastructure projects are crucial, which create predictable stability, because any instability can threaten us," he stressed. (Ots, 2021b) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added.)	<i>Stability and success in cross-border regional projects</i> About the Latvian-Russian cross-border cooperation program 2014–2020: "Well, of course, I wait with impatience when the Latvian–Russian border opens for tourism. Because the project partners – in Pytalovo, Ostrov, Palkino, Pskov also did not waste time, equipping their part of the "green" route." (Odiņa, 2021) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added.)	-	-	<i>Stability and success in cross-border regional projects</i> The launch of the gas pipeline gave a new impetus to cooperation between Moscow and Beijing in the energy sector. (<i>Po vostochnoi</i>, 2021) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added.)

	Estonia	Latvia	Finland	US	China
	<i>Cooperating Russia</i> “(...) Why are we annoying the Russian bear? Better let’s cooperate, ” Vähi told at the Economic Conference of the Center Party. (<i>Tiit Vähi</i> , 2021) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added.)	-	<i>Cooperating Russia</i> Speaker Ville Skinnari, Minister for Foreign Trade and Development of Finland, considered Russia as a cooperating partner in many areas through the whole text. (Mikkonen, 2021)	-	<i>Cooperating Russia</i> Meng Qingsheng, Deputy Head of the Committee for Management of the China-SCO Cooperation Area, said: “(...) We will promote this center as a new platform, a new bridge for cooperation between China and Russia. ” (<i>Rossiiskii tseentr</i> , 2021) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added.)
	<i>Russian tourists are highly valuable</i> The head of the spa regarding Russian tourists: it was like God’s blessing (Nikolajev, 2021a) (Headline, emphasis added.)	-	<i>Russian tourists are highly valuable</i> In South Karelia, they called for Russians vaccinated with Sputnik to be allowed into Finland. (<i>V Yuzhnoi Karelii</i> , 2021) (Headline, emphasis added.)	-	-

	Estonia	Latvia	Finland	US	China
	<i>Cooperating with Russia to save common environmental resources</i> Harry Liiv: The cooperation has saved Lake Peipus from phosphorus and nitrogen deaths (Liiv, 2021) (Headline, emphasis added.)	-	-	<i>Cooperating with Russia to save common environmental resources</i> But the ice doesn't follow international boundaries, and monitoring the migration of these species requires access to both American and Russian waters. (Early, 2021) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added.)	-
	<i>Ready for consultations on the border treaty</i> “In the conversation, among other topics, I raised the issue of the ratification of the border treaty, on which we felt that consultations must continue at different levels (...),” said Liimets. (Ots, 2021c) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added.)	-	-	-	-

	Estonia	Latvia	Finland	US	China
	Russia is ready to cooperate within the OSCE Estonian Defence Forces inspecting the Pskov Airborne Division (Ots, 2021a) (Headline)	-	-	-	-
	-	Russian television offers more entertainment “(…) I want good entertainment, I want a good concert, I want a good show, I want to talk to people. Moreover, for example, Russian television offers me all this. We do not politicize! You must be able to evaluate critically. (...)” Elvira is sure. (<i>V pri-granich'e nedovol'ny</i>, 2021) (Excerpt from the text)	-	-	-

	Estonia	Latvia	Finland	US	China
	-	-	Russia makes tourism easier Foreign tourists will be able to stay longer in Russia on a single or double entry visa (Fedorov, 2021a) (Headline)	-	-
	-	-	Russian schoolchildren learn Finnish in border regions Textbooks purchased with donations will help Russian schoolchildren learn Finnish (Tvaltvadze, 2021) (Headline)	-	-
	-	-	Russia is the most important supplier for the timber industry Russia announces the termination of timber transportation via the Saimaa Canal – bad news for the Finnish forestry industry (<i>Rossiya ob'yavlyayet</i>, 2021) (Headline, emphasis added.)	-	-

	Estonia	Latvia	Finland	US	China
	-	-	Russian students are needed to work in Finland The sparse but steady flow of Russians has become increasingly important for a region suffering from a labor shortage. One-third of the students at the JAMI (Järviseu tu Vocational Institute) are Russians. (<i>Pravitel'stvo khochet</i>, 2021) (Excerpt from the text)	-	-
	-	-	Most Russians are positive about Finland Most Russians, namely 68 percent, have a positive attitude towards Finland. (Fedorov, 2021b) (Excerpt from the text)	-	-

	Estonia	Latvia	Finland	US	China
	-	-	Transport connection with Russia is highly important It is done! Allegro will connect Helsinki and St. Petersburg again on December 12, but Russian tourists will not be allowed on it (Fedorov, 2021c) (Headline, emphasis added.)	-	-
	-	-	-	Russians have a long history in Alaska Russians have a long history in Alaska, with some Siberian migrant groups dating back as far as the early 1700s. (Kern, 2021) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added.)	-

	Estonia	Latvia	Finland	US	China
	-	-	-	Russia brings Russian and US people together “I mean this is a really, really significant event, and initiative to do this. I really can’t emphasize that enough. (...) It’s really a result of the Arctic Council, and the fact that the Russians now have the chairmanship, and they hold it until 2023.” (Grove, 2021a) (Excerpt from the text, emphasis added.)	-
Neutral frames with examples	-	-	-	-	-

The widespread use of the specific Russia-related frames in **STUDIES I–II** depended on the following factors.

Firstly, the selection of the dividing, uniting, and neutral frames was related to the **cultural, economic, political, and historical contexts** of the specific covered event, connected to Russia, often in relation to the country in which news media published the news about this event.

From the viewpoint of **cultural context**, cross-cultural relations between the specific country and Russia were covered using **uniting news frames (STUDY II)**. For instance, the news frame in Finland supports Russian schoolchildren learning Finnish in the border region (see Table 3). Or the journalistic frames in the US emphasize the mutually beneficial cultural contacts between the Indigenous residents of Alaska (US) and Chukotka (Russia) or consideration of Russians as respected native people of Alaska. For example, “**Alaskans** we’ve lost to COVID: Vladimir Khadjinov, **Russian** father of four” (Feidt, 2021) (emphasis added, see also Table 3) (**STUDY II**).

Journalists also used framing to adapt the event’s information – simplify the complexity of social reality – for the audience members with a specific cultural background (**STUDY II**) to make the news understandable and decodable, according to Hall (1997). For example, in the Russia-related news frames in Chinese state media – that it is possible to describe in general as simple and unambiguously understandable – Russia is framed as clearly an invaluable partner, friend, and ally (**STUDY II**). However, this simplification could also influence the reader’s attitude to the covered events.

From the viewpoint of **economic context**, if the covered event would positively influence the economic context of the media’s host country, such as, for instance, an increase in tourist flow from Russia (before the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War) to Estonia and Finland, the uniting news frames were used in coverage of that event in the news media of both countries. For example, a similar uniting frame, “Russian tourists are highly valuable”, was used on Estonian and Finnish public service media portals (see Table 3). This uniting frame was dominant on the Finnish portal (**STUDY II**).

The mutually valuable cooperation in many areas, but above all in the **economic context**, was framed by the similar uniting frames “Cooperating Russia”, and “Stability and success in cross-border regional projects” in Estonia, Finland, and China (both frames dominant in Chinese state media) (see Table 3). The similar uniting frame “Cooperating with Russia to save common environmental resources” also based on the economic context of saving environmental resources in the border areas was detected on the news portals in Estonia and the US (see Table 3) (**STUDY II**).

However, the abovementioned uniting frames in Chinese state media (**STUDY II**) are rooted not only in the **cultural** and **economic contexts**, but also in the **political context** of Chinese-Russian relations. The officially admitted good and close Chinese-Russian relations in all fields (*MID KNR*, 2021) were reflected in the framing of Russia-related events and issues – all the frames in the Chinese state news media were positive (see Table 3) (**STUDY II**).

The **economic context** of the hybrid media systems, characterized by news media's competition with many other actors (Chadwick, 2017), also caused a widespread use of framing in the shape of clickbait solutions (**STUDIES I–II**). For instance, the surname of the President of Russia was widely used as clickbait (sometimes emphasized graphically by capitalized letters) in the headlines and body texts of any news somehow connected to him (**STUDY I**). This frequently used news frame “Putin as a magnet” was detected on the news portals of Estonia, Bulgaria, and Germany (see Table 2) (**STUDY I**). This frame likens Putin to Russia and vice versa and is very close to the frame of human interest presented by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), where the emphasis is on the magnetism of the personality for foreign journalists and readers. When this surname is in the headline, news portal visitors are likelier to click on it. The frame was neutral in most cases, but it has a negative connotation in two cases, depending on the context (see Table 2) (**STUDY I**).

The aspect related to the transition to the hybrid media system is also reflected in the broader use of the statements and comments on social media posted by influential organizations and speakers from Russia, the media's host countries, and worldwide as information sources. The broader citation of the social media accounts of powerful organizations and speakers as information sources supported the sending of the frames they set in their original form through the media (**STUDIES I–II**).

The closely related **political** and **historical contexts** are often realized in the dividing frames in the news media in Estonia, Bulgaria, Germany, Latvia, and Finland, which framed Russia as conflicting, disorganized, and a threat (**STUDIES I–II**). For instance, Russia's actions of testing the new weapon and use of the floating nuclear power plant were framed as hiding the truth and potential nuclear threat to other countries associated with the catastrophe in the USSR in Chernobyl (officially called Chornobyl) in 1986 (**STUDY I**). Three frequently used dividing frames related to the abovementioned topics – “Hiding the truth”, “Disorder”, and “Nuclear threat” – were detected in the news on the studied news portals in Estonia, Bulgaria, and Germany (see Table 2) (**STUDY I**). The dividing frame “Needless arms race”, detected in the news about the explosion on Bulgarian and German portals (see Table 2), combined the arguments that the development of new weapons is unnecessary in a political context, as nobody plans to attack Russia (**STUDY I**).

The dividing frames also reflect the different **political** attitudes towards international political events and the different understandings of the joint history between the specific country and Russia (**STUDY II**). For instance, Estonia's and Latvia's news media framed Russia similarly as a provocateur in politically sensitive issues (see Table 3) (**STUDY II**). Moreover, the dividing frame “No interest from Russia's side”, specific to **political** and **historical contexts** of Estonian–Russian relations, was frequently used on the Estonian public news portal for presenting Russia as a non-active party, in contrast to Estonia, in the process of ratifying the border treaty (**STUDY II**).

It is also worth noting that news media in Estonia, Bulgaria, Germany, Latvia, Finland, and the US operate in political systems differing from the political system in Russia (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Hallin & Mancini, 2012), which defined the framing of Russia's political actions from their Western point of view (STUDIES I–II).

In summary, STUDIES I–II revealed that the contexts – cultural, political, economic, and historical – which have divided/united countries in the past and/or divide/unite them now can lead to the creation of dividing or uniting constructs of social reality – the dividing or uniting frames. The overall pattern of results on framing Russia in Estonia, Bulgaria, Germany, Latvia, Finland, the US, and China shows some commonalities among used frames, but also the diversity of the contexts and related to these contexts specific news frames (STUDIES I–II).

Secondly, journalists play a role along the spectrum frame-setter to frame-sender (Brüggemann, 2014). Hence, the next crucial factor that defines the construction of the valenced frames is the frame of reference of the frame-setter or frame-sender if the latter shapes the transmitted frame.

Use of the valenced frames may depend on the journalist's personal attitudes to the covered subject – to his or her **frame of reference**. The influence of the frame of reference is more often detected in articles with news content, usually but not only presented as opinion, editorial, or commentary. For instance, adding more power to the frame of Russia as having no interest in ratifying the Estonian–Russian border treaty in the emotional metaphoric headline: “Toomas Sildam: Estonia extended a hand, Russia did not accept it (Sildam, 2021)”. Or, for example, framing by using the metaphor of Russia as a conductor of an orchestra by *ERR* journalist as frame-setter: “**Russia's orchestrated** mass migration flow on and around the Belarus–Poland–Belarus–Lithuania border has been able to take precedence over coronavirus stories” (Mõttus, 2021) (emphasis added) (STUDY II).

The journalistic framing in the news on the explosion in Arkhangelsk Oblast reflected the tendency to add more newsworthiness to their news articles by using vocabulary that emphasizes the negativity, urgency, or unexpected nature of the covered event (Bednarek & Caple, 2017). For example, a *Deutsche Welle's* journalist published the frightening headline “Rosgidromet reported **16-time increase of radiation** in Severodvinsk” (Makar, 2019) (emphasis added), although the actual text of the article explained that the real increase was “4–16 times” (STUDY I).

However, based on the collected empirical material, the frames were set by prominent information sources rather than journalists (STUDIES I–II). Among the detected prominent information sources are officials, organizations and politicians from the covered countries/regions and from Russia, news agencies (Western, Russian, regional), and media outlets (Western, Russian) (STUDIES I–II).

In STUDY I, news portals in Estonia, Bulgaria, and Germany have usually taken information originating from Russia's organizations and authorities but provided by news agencies: international (*AFP*, *Reuters*, *Bloomberg News*), and

Russian news agencies, both state (*TASS*) and privately held (*Interfax*, *Belomorkanal*). Estonian *ERR* and *Postimees* have often used the regional news agency *BNS* as a news source, which belongs to Postimees Group and cooperates with *AFP* and *Interfax*. International media, such as *BBC* and *CNN*, and Russian media, such as *The Moscow Times*, a neutral Russian newspaper (as of 2019–2020) published in English or the oppositional *Novaya Gazeta*, were often used as sources. Also popular was *Meduza.io*, a Russian oppositional news portal based in Latvia, used both by the Estonian *ERR* and *Postimees*, and the Bulgarian *News.bg*. The German *Deutsche Welle* also used its own sources (**STUDY I**).

As all the topics of **STUDY II** are connected to border issues between the neighboring countries and Russia, the use of prominent information sources was based regionally and in the media's host country. The frame-setters were often officials, politicians, and other speakers of the media's host countries rather than Russia's speakers, news agencies, or journalists (**STUDY II**). Hence, journalists were often presented as frame-senders, conduits for the frames created by the outer agents (**STUDY II**). Several examples of the used information sources in **STUDY II** are below.

An influential Estonian politician, Marko Mihkelson, in the news on the Estonian *ERR* public news portal, set two Russia-related frames: one a dividing frame "Russia is a provocateur", and the other a uniting frame "Stability and success in cross-border regional projects" (see Table 3). The frame-setter of the similar dividing frame "Russia is a provocateur" in the news on the Latvian portal *LSM* was the Minister of Defense of the Republic of Latvia, Artis Pabriks (see Table 3) (**STUDY II**).

The agents of the frame "Russian tourists are highly valuable" in Finland (see Table 3) were a representative of Finnish regional authorities, Jukka Kopra, Chairman of the Regional Government of South Karelia, Jaana Rekolainen, Director General of the Finnish-Russian Chamber of Commerce, and other Finnish agents. The agents of the similar frame in Estonia (see Table 3) were CEOs and sales managers of Estonian spas in Ida-Virumaa County, who had to save their businesses during the pandemic (**STUDY II**).

The setters of the uniting frame "Cooperating with Russia to save common environmental resources" detected on Estonian and US news portals (see Table 3) were officials and researchers: in Estonia, Harry Liiv, Deputy Secretary General of the Ministry of the Environment; and in the US, Irina Trukhanova, a wildlife biologist with North Pacific Wildlife Consulting, and Paul Conn at NOAA Fisheries (Early, 2021). Additionally, Katya Gray, Executive Director of the Alaska Nannut Co-Management Council (Early, 2021), was cited. However, American journalist Wesly Early also contributed to the frame on the Alaskan portal (Early, 2021) (**STUDY II**).

Officials often played the role of frame-setter in dominant uniting frames in Chinese state media *CGTN*. For example, in the news article with a frame "Cooperating Russia" (see Table 3), both Chinese and Russian officials were agents of the frame: from the Chinese side, Meng Qingsheng, Deputy Head of the Committee for Management of the China–SCO Cooperation Area; and from the

Russian side, Alexey Yefimov, Deputy Trade Representative of the Russian Federation in China (*Rossiiskii tsentr*, 2021). A similar pattern was detected for other news with the same frame. Please read more in the free access article of **STUDY II (STUDY II)**.

Indeed, journalists may contribute to the framing when they select the relevant information sources according to the newsroom policy and/or journalist's frame of reference (Fisher, 2018; Kremez, 2023), the news content of which may include frames set by the prominent information source itself or cited speaker. In summary, the journalists in the studied framing cases more often played the role of frame-sender but sometimes modified the transmitted frame created by the frame-setter by adding new framing elements (such as clickbait, emotional language, pictures with a special connotation, etc.) and therefore made it more powerful (**STUDIES I–II**).

4.2. The audiences' media preferences, assessment of the coverage, experience with the detection of the information disorder, and perception of Russia-related news frames

The studied Russian-speaking audiences of news media in Estonia and Cyprus are undoubtedly active audiences who can decode the news messages, including the news frames defined by D'Angelo (2017) as written, spoken, graphical, or visual message modalities. Although, as a rule, they did not use the term “frames”, they showed an understanding of the essence of this phenomenon and described their perception of this (**STUDIES III–IV**). Several participants in Cyprus also said they feel the media is trying to put them in some “frame” to direct their attitudes and opinions about the covered event and to shape their political and other views (**STUDY IV**).

Based on the collected empirical material, I show the role of contexts in the perception of the news frames and then the role of perception bias in this process. Subsequently, based on Hall's encoding/decoding model (2006), I show the positions taken by the participants when they decoded news frames.

The studied audiences read and watched news from their domestic public service media: in Estonia, *Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR)*; and in Cyprus, *Cyprus Public Broadcasting (CyBC)*. However, the behavior regarding using domestic public service media differed due to the distinct **political** and **historical contexts** (**STUDIES III–IV**).

Although there is only one official language in Estonia, Estonian (The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, chapter I, § 6), *ERR* provides online news in Russian (and also in English), radio news on *Raadio 4* in Russian, and in 2015 established the TV channel *ETV+* for the local Russian-speaking audience (Jõe-*saar*, 2022). The *ETV+* was established as a response to the influence of Russia's state media disseminating pro-Russian narratives (Jõe-*saar*, 2022). As a result,

almost all Estonian participants claimed daily monitoring of the news on *ERR*'s channels in Russian (and, from time to time, Estonian) and mostly trusted them (**STUDY III**).

CyBC TV channels broadcast news in Greek, Turkish, and English, although only the first two are official languages (The Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus, art. 3, § 1). As a result, only a small part of the Russian-speaking audience in Cyprus who speaks Greek fluently claimed that they regularly watch the *CyBC* news (**STUDY IV**). At the same time, they expressed criticisms towards the coverage of the political issues on *CyBC* TV channels (**STUDY IV**). The absence of *CyBC* outlets in Russian may be explained by the **historical context** of the Russian-speaking community's young age, including mostly first-generation immigrants (Ryazantsev, 2015; Stamouli, 2022).

The participants in Estonia actively read domestic private news media outlets in Russian (mostly news portals), as did the interviewees in Cyprus. However, some participants in Cyprus declared no interest in Cyprus news, which was explained by their living in different **cultural, economic, and political contexts**, as a rule, related to their state of origin, business, or job. The audiences in Estonia and Cyprus expressed both praise and criticism regarding certain aspects of the domestic private media, including the framing of the political news in favor of one party or ruling coalition and the wide use of clickbait (**STUDIES III–IV**).

Both audiences actively read and watch news provided by Russia's news outlets: state and private media, which includes pro-government, neutral, and opposition media (in exile since 2022). Although both audiences were skeptical about the reliability of Russia's media platforms, the participants in Cyprus were more skeptical and expressed a deeper distrust of all of Russia's media outlets (**STUDIES III–IV**).

The Cyprus-based audience blamed Russia's state, private, and opposition (in exile) media for their one-sided and biased coverage of the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War and other Russia-related issues. The interviewees in Cyprus often explained their attitude to the changed **political context** due to the beginning of the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War, where most (or all) of the news media started to provide a certain perspective. That was often the reason why the participants in Cyprus began to read and watch news about the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War from Ukraine's media outlets in order to understand Ukraine's perspective. However, most expressed a lack of complete trust in Ukraine's news sources due to the dissemination of biased information (**STUDY IV**).

Both audiences claimed they regularly watch and/or read foreign Western media from the US, UK, and EU, for example, *CNN*, *Fox News*, *BBC*, *Euronews*, and *Deutsche Welle*. Both questioned the credibility of the news in the US and the UK media, accusing them of politically biased and imbalanced news coverage. The audience members in Estonia trusted *Euronews* and *Deutsche Welle*, but Cyprus-based participants showed a more critical attitude towards them (**STUDIES III–IV**).

Thus, based on the above, Russia's news media is only one part of the broad media repertoire of the Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia and Cyprus,

which, as a rule, also includes domestic and foreign Western media outlets (STUDIES III–IV). These results correlated with the findings in previous studies on Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia (Jõesaar, 2020; Kaprāns & Mieriņa, 2019; Kantar Emor, 2020). There are no studies to compare the media preferences or media repertoires of the Russian-speaking audience in Cyprus as, to the best of my knowledge, that audience was studied for the first time in STUDY IV.

Both audiences expressed the lack of expert and unbiased news on politically sensitive and globally important topics in the media. However, they faced difficulties identifying the creator of the biased information, i.e., the setter of valenced frame (STUDIES III–IV).

Interviewees in both countries also emphasized the widespread information disorder in the coverage of the coronavirus pandemic, including the framing of COVID-19-related issues in the news. However, both audiences' experience with detecting the misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation in the media during COVID-19 has improved their media literacy, particularly information search and fact-checking skills (STUDIES III–IV).

The information disorder in the coverage of the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War in the news (Bachmann et al., 2023; Geissler et al., 2023; Solopova et al., 2023) has become a new challenge for the Russian-speaking audience in Cyprus (STUDY IV). The audience accused and criticized all the media they used – domestic, Russia's, Ukraine's, and foreign Western media – of one-sidedness in their coverage of it, framing events in favor of one side of the conflict or a third actor (STUDY IV). This widespread framing of the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War has been explored in previous studies (e.g., Moses et al., 2023; Selvarajah & Fiorito, 2023; Ji et al., 2024; Arcangeletti & Zunino, 2023; Ononiwu, 2024; Özoflu & Arató, 2023). The information disorder in the coverage of the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War deepened the distrust of the media among the studied Russian native speakers in Cyprus, but it broadened their media preferences and provided a fruitful experience in the detection of the misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation in the news, including the news frames (STUDY IV).

The participants in Cyprus actively used alternative information sources from social media to learn about the Russo–Ukrainian War. They watched the news regularly from *YouTube* vlogs and news reviews (managed by personalities mainly from Russia, Ukraine, and the UK, with various political views); however, they most often read and watched news from *Telegram* news sources. The *Telegram* news sources used by the Russian-speaking audience in Cyprus included *Telegram*-based news channels, channels created by well-known personalities from different countries with distinct views, and official *Telegram* channels of the media outlets. The *Telegram* news sources were considered safer, more independent, reliable, and user-friendly (STUDY IV).

More so than interviewees in Estonia, participants in Cyprus expressed an extremely critical attitude to the news, primarily due to the different **political contexts** of crucial topics in Cyprus: the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically its stricter lockdowns and longer social restrictions compared to Estonia; and the

commencement in 2022 of the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War, which was not covered by the research in Estonia (**STUDIES III–IV**).

In summary, the broad and diverse media preferences and the experience with detecting the elements of information disorder (misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation) in the news of both audiences support their ability to detect the news frames (**STUDIES III–IV**).

The primary basis for assessing the credibility of the news considered by both audiences is their **personal prior knowledge** of the covered topic; they rely on their prior knowledge in detecting biased information in the news, including the news frames (**STUDIES III–IV**). Hence, if the news frames conflict with their prior knowledge, they may be rejected (**STUDIES III–IV**), which correlates with previous findings on fake news and confirmation bias. For example, according to Stibel (2018), “if the new information is contrary to what we already know, we’re most likely to discard it in order to maintain cognitive consistency”. Wagner and Boczkowski (2019) also found that audiences rely on personal experience and knowledge, among other factors, when dealing with fake news. In the same vein, the news framing researchers Lecheler and De Vreese (2019) state that the news frames interact with individuals’ prior knowledge and predispositions, affecting the perception of covered issues and events.

The audience in Cyprus also often relies on the knowledge of the personal trusted contacts residing or working at the place of the covered event (**STUDY IV**).

In addition, both audiences seek out and assign more reliability to the news supporting their **frames of reference** (**STUDIES III–IV**). For example, if the news or specific Russia-related news frame contradicts the audience member’s frame of reference, they may consider this news unreliable (**STUDIES III–IV**). On the other hand, if new information confirms an audience member’s existing beliefs, he or she is likely to agree with it and hence to share it (**STUDIES III–IV**), which correlates with previous studies on the topic (e.g., Stibel, 2018).

One more basis to assess the credibility of the news is also related to the **frame of reference** of the audience member when it includes a highly critical or negative attitude towards the media in general, specific media outlets, their host country, strategic agents covered in the news, or particular aspects of the covered event. Based on the above, the participants sometimes accused journalists of setting the valenced frames, which were sent by the media but actually were set by the prominent information source cited in the news. Hence, the audiences faced difficulties in distinguishing between the frame-setter and frame-sender (**STUDIES III–IV**).

In summary, the differing **frames of reference** of Russian-speaking audiences, including somehow distinct **socio-cultural backgrounds** (despite the joint and uniting characteristic of Russian as a native language or one of the native languages) and differing **contexts** in which they read, watch and/or listen to the news in Estonia and Cyprus, have impacted their perception of the news frames (**STUDIES III–IV**).

Both audiences demonstrated skills to recognize the elements of information disorder, including the news frames, and showed their techniques and own strategies for verifying information. The studied audiences paid attention to the following elements of the news that influence its credibility: references to the sources, active links (in the online news), citations, dates, actors, clickbait headlines and subheadlines, logic and tone of the news content, content, one-sided coverage, and emotive language (**STUDIES III–IV**). Although many of these elements – such as actors (Matthes, 2009), clickbait headlines and subheadlines (Kaushal & Vemuri, 2021; Kanižaj et al., 2022), logic and tone of the news content (Saleem, 2007; Kokurina & Khoretskaya, 2018), one-sided coverage (Moses et al., 2023), and emotive language including tropes and figures (Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Franzosi & Vicari, 2018) – can be used for the framing, several participants in Cyprus also mentioned in their own words the valenced framing separately as an element of poor credibility (**STUDY IV**).

Hence, the audiences demonstrated an understanding of the manipulative potential of the news frames, highlighted in previous studies (e.g., Entman, 2010; Moses et al., 2023; Kokurina & Khoretskaya, 2018), while constructing the image of Russia aimed by the domestic media, Russia’s media, and foreign Western media to achieve certain motivated behaviors of the audiences (**STUDIES III–IV**).

The audience in Estonia **took the negotiated position rather than the opposing or dominant position** regarding most of the cases of framing Russia, which they mentioned from their own experiences with the news and which were presented to them among stimulus materials during the interview. The interviewees mostly detected the frames and at least partially accepted the frame-setter’s (encoder’s) thoughts, but also had their own views regarding the framed subject: the event or issue related to Russia. They considered the framing in clickbait-style neutral and showed their knowledge of how and why it works in the context of the attention economy. However, they named the frequent use of clickbait annoying over time, thus reducing their trust in news media (**STUDY III**).

The fact that the Russian-speaking interviewees in Estonia operated in the **negotiated** code relates to their frames of reference and the contexts in which they perceived the news about Russia. Firstly, the frames of reference of most participants in Estonia include the balanced attitude towards the media in general, certain media outlets, and journalistic work. Secondly, the socio-cultural background of most participants in Estonia as a part of their frames of reference is more strongly related to Estonia than Russia. This fact, together with the cultural and historical contexts of the long history of the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia and the political context of the access to quality news in the domestic news media in the Russian language, explains the rather balanced and constructive attitude to the domestically produced news about Russia. The participants in Estonia felt more integrated into Estonia’s information space as part of the Western information space (**STUDY III**).

However, in some cases, the participants in Estonia took the **dominant** position when they completely accepted the frame-setter's (encoder's) thoughts and intentions. As a rule, they showed this kind of behavior regarding the news produced by well-trusted media outlets, which aligns with their personal attitudes and beliefs, i.e., personal frames of reference. Hence, even when the participants in Estonia understood that their favorite media outlet produces single-sided news with valenced frames, they accepted these news frames as appropriate. The cultural, economic, and political contexts of the free access to quality public service media in the Russian language in Estonia also supported the taking of the dominant position (**STUDY III**).

Sometimes, Russian-speaking participants in Estonia also operated in the **opposing** code: they rejected the frame-setter's intended meaning of the news frames and created their own. This most critical attitude was, firstly, connected to the frame of reference of the individual when the participant considered a news outlet as non-trustworthy, or the participant felt deep distrust towards the news media in general, or if the journalist's frame of reference completely contradicted the audience member's frame of reference. Secondly, the adoption of the opposing position regarding the usually clearly valenced news frames was also supported by the political context of the coronavirus pandemic that increased the tensions between Russia and Estonia (in combination with the bitter historical context of Estonian–Russian relations) during the research period (**STUDY III**).

The Cyprus-based Russian-speaking audience **operated mainly in the opposing rather than dominant and negotiated codes** regarding most Russia-related frames, which they encountered in the news before participating in the research and which were presented to them in stimulus materials during the interview. Many participants claimed that their frame of reference regarding the news and news media has changed from positive or balanced to more critical or highly critical in the context of the biased media coverage of the coronavirus pandemic and, to a greater extent, the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War. As a result, they considered many specific media outlets or the media in general as non-trustworthy. The participants in Cyprus claimed the regular detection and rejection of Russia-related valenced frames in the news on the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War in the domestic, Russia's, Ukraine's, and foreign Western news media (**STUDY IV**).

It can be stated that the attitude that the media coverage of the war is always biased and one-sided has become deeply rooted in the frame of reference of many Cyprus-based Russian speakers. The latter put them in search of information on the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War from alternative news sources, most often from *Telegram* (**STUDY IV**).

The deep critical attitude of the Russian-speaking audience in Cyprus towards the news shaped by the biased coverage of the coronavirus pandemic and the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War has spread to the coverage of other topics on Russia and even unrelated topics. Hence, the Russian-speaking participants in Cyprus

rarely took the **dominant** and **negotiated** positions regarding the news frames (STUDY IV).

Many Cyprus-based participants emphasized the clickbait-type framing of the news on Russia-related and other topics, but they mostly considered those frames neutral. They demonstrated a clear understanding of the economic context of clickbait use in the attention economy. However, they claimed that the overly frequent and wide use of clickbait has made their attitude towards the news media more negative (STUDY IV).

Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia and Cyprus were not interested in creating and disseminating news content about Russia on social media (STUDIES III–IV). They understand that audience members now have an opportunity to create and disseminate framed news because of direct access to information sources through the Internet (STUDIES III–IV), as was stated in previous studies (e.g., D'Angelo, 2017; Fisher, 2018; Liu et al., 2021). However, most of the participants prefer to read and/or watch the news, both from the news media and social media, not to produce and publish their news content or post comments to the news published by the news media or directly by prominent information sources on their accounts on social media (STUDIES III–IV). Several participants admitted that they avoid publishing their news content or posting comments due to possible negative feedback or self-censorship in the case of sensitive issues, e.g., the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War. Hence, framing in the opposite direction – from the audience to the media and prominent information sources – occurs rarely, and its flow is narrower than that of framing from the media to the audiences (STUDIES III–IV).

Instead of commenting online, both audiences preferred to discuss the dubious news, including news with the frames, to check their reliability, i.e., decoding them, with the people who are important to them and whom they trust. Both avoided discussions with people with different views (STUDIES III–IV).

Finally, Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia and Cyprus had difficulties defining the frame-setter. In many cases, they considered the news media outlet a frame-setter, even if it was the sender of the frame created by the prominent information source. This caused more criticism regarding the media in general in the case of the dissemination of valenced news frames (STUDIES III–IV).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

My dissertation aims to explore the interaction between the media, as a creator of the news messages, and the audiences of these news messages when both agents participate in the process of the construction of social reality, contributing to constructing and sending Russia-related news frames and/or acceptance, partial acceptance, or rejection of them. My contribution to the field includes the studies of framing Russia in the news media in several EU countries, the US, and China, and the studies of the perception of the Russia-related frames by Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia and Cyprus, states with different cultural, economic, political, and historical contexts connected to their relations with the USSR and Russia. In the following section, I will discuss the results of my studies, answer the four research questions, and draw conclusions.

5.1. What Russia-related news frames prevail in the news media of various countries with different contexts of relations with Russia, and who are the frame-setters?

The framing analysis revealed that the valenced – dividing and uniting – Russia-related news frames, instead of neutral (ambivalent) news frames, prevail in the news published on the news portals in Estonia, Bulgaria, Germany, Latvia, Finland, the US, and China during the research period. Russia-related events and issues often cause an assessment in the media of the abovementioned countries since Russia is an important and active actor in geopolitics and international relations and does not leave their media indifferent, especially if Russia is a neighbor. Hence, my decision to study Russia-related news frames on the news portals of different countries was appropriate (**STUDIES I–II**).

Not surprisingly, most of the dividing and uniting news frames in the media of the countries covered corresponded to the more general attitude of their societies (the public) towards the event or issue related to Russia, including the state and/or regional authorities' point of view, particularly when they were used as information sources (**STUDIES I–II**). This correlates with the framing's relation to political power (see Entman, 1993, 2010; Rees, 2001) described earlier. Hence, valenced Russia-related news frames often represent the relations between the media's host country and Russia. Studying valenced Russia-related news frames allows researchers to collect and analyze information on the nuances and pitfalls of the relations with Russia and define the influential agents that set valenced frames: the media or prominent information sources (**STUDIES I–II**). I take a closer look at this issue below.

The dividing effect of many dividing news frames (including similar dominant dividing frames), which prevailed in the news media in Estonia (public service and private), Bulgaria (private), and Germany (public service), were often connected to certain topics, sensitive to the entire world or the media's host country.

For instance, in the news about the dangerous explosion of the new weapon with victims and radiation release or provocative activities in international affairs (also detected in Latvian public service media), Russia's actions or omissions were framed as condemnable. Or, as another example, the specific dominant frame in Estonian media emphasizing Russia's inactivity in the issue of ratification of the border treaty between Estonia and Russia had the effect of dividing the two countries and societies. This issue has caused tensions in Estonian society, which are represented in dominant dividing news frames. However, the relations between Russia and the countries whose news portals were covered by the framing analysis have many dimensions that often cause the variability of dividing and/or uniting Russia-related news frames (**STUDIES I–II**).

The lack of uniting news frames in **STUDY I** can be explained by the selection of topics. The first event – an explosion – has a naturally negative character, often causing critical assessments from the media. The second event – the Eastern Economic Forum – was less covered, and the coverage was often connected to the citations of the Forum's leading participant, the President of the Russian Federation, who provided comments on various issues, including those unrelated to the event (**STUDY I**). His surname was used as a clickbait type news frame by all explored news portals in Estonia, Bulgaria, and Germany, and in most cases, these frames were neutral (**STUDY I**). However, framing Russia through the prism of its leader in the studied media in **STUDIES I–II** (supposedly except Chinese state media) changed to negative after the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War that began on February 24, 2022, and this topic is worth a new specific study.

Several other uniting frames on border issues in **STUDY II**, specific to one country or similar for different countries (even for those with tense relations with Russia), promoted the necessity and usefulness of mutually beneficial cooperation in specific fields and/or at the regional level, having a clearly uniting effect. For example, the prevalence of the uniting Russia-related frames about cross-border cooperation in the public service news media in Finland is explainable by the strong interest (as of 2021) of the Finnish state and regional authorities and society in the development of, above all, economic and cultural relations (**STUDY II**). This intense interest correlated with previous studies on the special Finnish–Russian relations (e.g., Gordon Dickinson, 2003).

The common frame-setters in the news in the considered media of Estonia, Bulgaria, Germany, Latvia, and Finland were prominent information sources. Depending on the topic covered, they could include news agencies (both Western and Russian), other media (both Western and Russian), officials, politicians, influential organizations, researchers, and Russian speakers (occasionally or indirectly). However, journalists also contributed to the framing of Russia. Firstly, journalists were responsible for selecting the information sources: domestic, Russian, foreign, Western, or any other information source whose news included the Russia-related frame(s). Secondly, during the editing of the news content of the prominent information source, journalists in some cases modified the frame set by the source by adding new elements such as clickbait headlines, tropes, figures, visuals, special graphical solutions, etc., thus making the frame more

powerful. Thirdly, journalists have constructed Russia-related news frames by writing articles in opinion, editorial, or commentary genres. The Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia and Cyprus also highlighted the abovementioned contribution of domestic journalists to framing Russia (**STUDIES I–IV**).

The prevalence of the uniting frames on border issues in the news of public service media in the US state of Alaska is mainly connected to the regional context of Indigenous people living on both sides of the Bering Strait and Russians as respected native nations of the State of Alaska. The use of the regional news media for the framing analysis was based on the results of preliminary research, which showed that US news media with broader coverage did not publish any news on Russia-related border issues during the study period. The frame-setters in Alaska's news were more often the authorities and experts from the US (and nobody from the Russian side), but also journalists, who framed Russia-related issues positively. The predominately uniting framing of Russia-related issues by US regional authorities, experts, and journalists in Alaska contradicted political tensions between Russia and the US. However, this could be explained by a special good-neighbor attitude at the regional level, which was represented in the Russia-related news frames (**STUDY II**).

In summary, the framing of Russia in the Western information space in 2019–2021 was not strictly dividing but rather multidimensional, usually including both dividing and uniting news frames (depending on the covered event or issue) and sometimes also neutral news frames (**STUDIES I–II**). However, I argue that the study of Russia-related news frames in the covered EU member states and US news media must be continued in light of increased “hostility and mistrust”, which “will likely dominate Russia–Western relations in the foreseeable future” (Tsygankov, 2024, p. 287). I assume that further study may show new patterns in framing Russia based on large-scale changes in Russian–Western relations.

The Chinese state news media, as was assumed, framed Russia-related events only positively, according to the official foreign policy regarding the large neighbor as “more than an ally” (*MID KNR*, 2021). However, this pattern should be analyzed more deeply in light of the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War and increasing tensions between the West and China in recent years (Lucenti, 2024; Cheng, 2021). The frame-setters, who used only uniting frames regarding Russia-related events, were Chinese and Russian authorities (governmental and regional), other influential and expert speakers in the connected fields, and journalists (**STUDIES I–II**).

The impact of the journalist's frame of reference was also researched in **STUDIES I–II** based on the news content by detecting the framing elements that reflect the journalist's attitudes to the covered event or issue. This type of journalistic framing, which is based on the author's frame of reference, has occurred most clearly and often in articles presented as opinions, editorials, and commentaries that included the news content (**STUDIES I–II**). The opinion, editorial, or commentary expressed the author(s)'s attitude toward the subject; hence, when these articles included frames, they could be considered as related to the author(s)'s frame(s) of reference (**STUDIES I–II**).

However, based on the analysis of **frame-setters**, the most common setters of the frames detected in the news in Estonia, Bulgaria, Germany, Latvia, Finland, the US, and China are **prominent information sources**. They contributed more to the construction of the Russia-related frames in these countries than journalists, who played the role of **senders of the frames** (set by the prominent information sources) in most cases. In addition, journalists use prominent speakers' social media posts in the digital age as information sources. This way, the frames created by these prominent information sources can be spread unchanged (e.g., as reposts and screenshots) (STUDIES I–II).

However, as the gatekeepers of information (Stern et al., 2020; Fisher, 2018) and final arbiters of the frames (D'Angelo, 2017), the journalists were able to modify the frames set by the prominent information sources and make them more powerful. Hence, the contribution of journalists to framing Russia was limited, but it cannot be underestimated (STUDIES I–II).

5.2. How do the contexts of the various countries, including the contexts of their relations with Russia, impact the construction and sending of Russia-related news frames in their news media?

The dividing and uniting frames that were detected are strongly influenced by the context connected to Russia and its relation with the country in whose media the news with Russia-related frame(s) was published. Hence, contexts do impact the process of constructing and sending the Russia-related news frames in the explored countries, but how they impact is summarized below (STUDIES I–II).

Constructing and sending the frames reflect the **cultural, economic, political, and historical contexts** in which the news frames are constructed and sent, and each context may become a field for the frames with different valence (STUDIES I–II). Below, I summarize and discuss the impact of the contexts on framing Russia in the news media in Estonia, Bulgaria, Germany, Latvia, Finland, the US, and China.

The **cultural context** is realized in the uniting frames detected in Latvia, Finland, and the US. The uniting effect of the news frames occurred regarding the cultural contacts and cooperation between the media's host country and Russia and their people. The cultural collaboration was considered valuable and positive, and that consideration manifested itself in framing supporting this collaboration. As a result, if there is close cultural cooperation between countries – Russian culture is visible in the country and/or the respective country's culture is visible in Russia – the influence of the cultural context is also visible in the news frame. For instance, such cultural exchange is visible in uniting news frames found in the news media of Finland (e.g., “Russian schoolchildren learn Finnish in border regions”) and the US (e.g., “Russia brings Russian and US people together”), which correlates with the previous studies and realized projects on cross-cultural cooperation in

the border regions between Russia and the abovementioned countries (e.g., see Kolossov & Scott, 2012; Niazi, 2022). No matter who set the frame based on the cultural context – a prominent information source, a speaker of the media’s host country or Russia, or a journalist – the detected frames were similarly uniting (**STUDY II**).

In addition, in some cases, journalists tried to simplify the complexity of social reality by using Russia-related frames for the audience members with a concrete cultural background (e.g., Russians) to make the news easily decodable for them (**STUDY II**). For instance, Russia and China were framed by the Chinese state media as the closest of friends with ideal mutual relations. The latter simplification can make an attentive and well-educated reader doubt, especially considering territorial disputes between countries and the armed border conflict in 1969 (see Sidorov, 2014; Kharybin, 2017) (**STUDY II**).

Moreover, despite the complicated **cultural context** in the Russian Far East – the “ticking bomb” of the fast growth of the Chinese diaspora in this region (Kogan, 2019) – it was not reflected negatively in the framing in the Chinese state media (**STUDY II**). This may be explained by the strict state control over the Chinese state media (Rohrhofer, 2014), which avoids the coverage of any tensions between China and Russia.

In summary, the Russia-related news frames based on **cultural context** have a rather uniting effect, serving as bricks to maintain the cultural bridges between countries and their people (**STUDY II**). However, more research in connection with the latest changes in the cultural relations between Russia and the West is required, especially in light of canceling Russian culture in the West (see Askew, 2022; Khrushcheva, 2022; Friedersdorf, 2022) after the beginning of the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War.

The impact of the **economic context** on framing Russia was considered in two dimensions.

The first dimension was directly connected to the economic relations beneficial to the media’s host country or mutually beneficial to the media’s host country and Russia (**STUDY II**). When countries had good economic relations, and the economic interaction was considered from the viewpoint of framing, the frames were predominantly uniting (**STUDY II**). For example, the issues of the special relationship between Russia and Finland (Gordon Dickinson, 2003), above all in the economy, were framed in 2021 as uniting despite increasing tensions between Russia and the West (**STUDY II**). Russia was an important economic partner for Finland during the study period: “Even if its significance as a trading partner has faded in recent decades, Russia was still an important trading partner for Finland in 2021” (Simola, 2024). Issues related to Russian tourists in the border regions were positively framed in both Finland and Estonia (**STUDY II**). The framing of Russia based on the **economic context** could change after the beginning of the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War and the implementation of the new sanctions against Russia by the West and counter-sanctions by Russia. However, the framing of Russia-related economic events and issues in the Chinese state media could stay uniting because “their economic relationship has blossomed

in the face of Western sanctions against Russia as Moscow shifts trade away from Europe” (Fong & Maizland, 2024).

The second dimension of the economic context is related to the change of the business model of commercial media itself, which has become more precarious (Chadwick, 2017). For this reason, media outlets have to resort to techniques that also impact news frames. Under the new conditions of the attention economy (Lugtu, 2023), the private news media started to widely use clickbait solutions (García Orosa et al., 2017), which also frame events by selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient while silencing others (Entman, 1993; Hall, 1997; Hajimichael, 2023). However, using clickbait can reduce trust in the news media (Kaushal & Vemuri, 2021; Kanižaj et al., 2022). Based on the results of **STUDIES I–II**, I concluded that excessive use of clickbait solutions for framing Russia might negatively impact the audiences’ perception of that framing and decrease their media trust, which was confirmed by the results of **STUDIES III–IV**.

The **political context** may depend on different factors, one being **historical context**. If, for example, the media’s host country has had historically tense relations with Russia, this is also evident in today’s politics. For example, a long-standing historical territorial dispute and still not ratified (by Russia) border treaty between Estonia and Russia caused the use of predominantly negative frames in related news. In general, the news media often framed Russia according to the widespread and accepted political and historical attitudes towards Russia in the media’s host country, and mainly from the authorities’ point of view (**STUDIES I–II**).

The **political context** could also be closely connected to the **economic context**. For instance, if the country has very close economic cooperation with Russia, as China does, then this also affects the country’s policy towards Russia (Fong & Maizland, 2024; Lukin, 2021) and hence may be reflected in the news frames. As a result, despite the complicated **historical context** of Russian–Chinese relations full of territorial disputes (see Kharybin, 2017; Sidorov, 2014; Volodin, 2012), it was not reflected in the framing of Russia in the Chinese state news media. Russia is framed, at least in the period of study, in a way that corresponds to the official position of China’s authorities that Russia is “more than an ally” (*MID KNR*, 2021) (**STUDY II**).

Hence, according to the results of **STUDIES I–II**, the framing of Russia could be based on the **political and historical** and **political and economic contexts**, and these findings correspond to the strong relation of the framing to political power (Entman, 2010; Rees, 2001) when the frame is an “imprint of power” (Entman, 1993: 55). However, new questions arise based on the results above: 1) do the abovementioned contexts always have a combined influence on framing; 2) can the political context have an impact independently of other contexts; 3) could the cultural context impact in combination with political, economic, and historical contexts? To answer these questions, further research must be conducted with broader coverage of news topics.

Finally, the context changes over time, and consequently, the influence of the context on the framing of Russia should be monitored and analyzed over time (STUDIES I–II).

5.3. How do the Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia and Cyprus respond to the Russia-related news frames?

The studied Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia and Cyprus have a common experience with Russia-related frames in the news and have shown their skills in recognizing them. As a rule, participants perceived how the framing was manipulating them. In many cases, the participants emphasized the connection of framing to political power, highlighted by Entman (1993, 2010) and Rees (2001), especially within the production and dissemination of political news. Participants considered valenced Russia-related frames in political news to be unacceptable in most cases (STUDIES III–IV).

The decoding of the frame(s) in a news message depended on the position taken by the participant regarding this news message with the frame(s) – dominant, negotiated, or opposing, according to Hall’s encoding/decoding model (1973, 2006). The negotiated position, rather than the opposing and dominant one, prevailed among the interviewees in Estonia. The opposing position, rather than the negotiated and dominant one, prevailed among the participants in Cyprus, especially in the case of framing a full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War (STUDIES III–IV).

The neutral, Russia-related clickbait-type news frames were perceived with understanding due to the prior knowledge of the working mechanism and function of the clickbait (STUDIES III–IV). However, participants claimed that clickbait is becoming more annoying to them over time, reducing their trust in the news media (STUDIES III–IV). Other studies have also concluded that clickbait solutions significantly reduce the credibility of the news and the audience’s trust in the news media (see Kaushal & Vemuri, 2021; Kanižaj et al., 2022).

The Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia and Cyprus were not engaged in reacting to the Russia-related frames by leaving comments on social media (STUDIES III–IV). Hence, they were not actively producing and publishing their own content on Russia-related topics and, thus, the Russia-related frames. This correlates with previous studies, which found that although most news readers leave comments on social media, only a small percentage post comments on the news (e.g., Stroud et al., 2016). Avid news audience members aged 16 to 40 “share, text, talk about, email, or comment on the news daily, but that behavior is declining” (The Media Insight, 2022). The lack of desire to express their opinion on Russia-related topics publicly in online media or social media was at least partially connected to the fear of possible negative feedback from other users or to self-censorship in the case of sensitive issues such as the Russo–Ukrainian War (STUDIES III–IV). Some Cyprus-based participants felt the need to self-

censor due to fear of possible negative consequences or sanctions from the authorities of the state of origin (e.g., Russia, Ukraine, Belarus) (**STUDY IV**).

As a rule, Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia and Cyprus did not distinguish sufficiently between the frame-setter and the frame-sender when the frame-setter was a prominent information source. In these cases, the participants often attributed the role of the frame-setter to the frame-sender – the media outlet publishing the news. However, some more attentive participants who defined the actual frame-setter correctly commented that the media outlet contributed to modifying the original frame (**STUDIES III–IV**).

5.4. What factors influence Russian-speaking audiences' acceptance, partial acceptance, or rejection of Russia-related news frames in Estonia and Cyprus?

The three main factors that impact operating in the concrete code were defined in **STUDIES III–IV**: the participant's **prior knowledge**, **frame of reference** (including **socio-cultural background**), and **cultural, economic, political, and historical contexts** (see Figure 1).

Prior knowledge, or, in other words, pre-existing knowledge, on Russia-related topics and the media varied from one participant to another depending on the interviewee's level and field of education, personal interests, and contacts with professional journalists. The more educated and broad-minded – highly interested in Russia-related topics – participants perceived Russia-related frames from different points of view, trying to go deeper in their analysis of the framed news by defining the frame's cause and goal and the creator. In addition, the personal contacts with active journalists claimed by the few participants in both samples helped them to understand how the media works and why journalists use framing (**STUDIES III–IV**).

Hence, broad **prior knowledge** of Russia-related topics and the media may ensure the required competence to detect Russia-related news frames. However, the lack of prior knowledge or erroneous knowledge may lead to the rejection of the frame (if it was detected) as conflicting with prior knowledge (**STUDIES III–IV**). These findings correlate with previous studies on information disorder and confirmation bias mentioned above (e.g., Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019; Stibel, 2018), where prior knowledge occurs as one of the bases for detecting fake news. The abovementioned findings confirm the necessity of improving knowledge on the topic (events in Russia and Russia's activities) and improving the media literacy of Russian-speaking news audiences.

The personal **frame of reference** that includes the individual's attitudes, beliefs, previous experiences (Grawitch, 2021), and **socio-cultural background** (Zabihzadeh et al., 2022) was different from one participant to another, except the joint native Russian language (or Russian as one of the native languages for the few bilingual and trilingual interviewees) (**STUDIES III–IV**). **STUDIES**

III–IV were not focused on the detailed description of all the aspects of the frames of reference of each participant; the goal was to explore their attitudes, beliefs, and experiences regarding 1) the coverage of the Russia-related topics by the news, 2) the news media they read, watched and/or listened to in the country of residence, Russia, the EU and beyond, and 3) media in general.

The **socio-cultural background** of the participants, considered cultural identity in cultural studies (Chen, 2014), was also somehow different due to their different origins from Estonia, Cyprus, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Latvia, or Moldova (**STUDIES III–IV**). However, the detailed information was not noted to ensure the anonymity of the participants (**STUDIES III–IV**). Some other characteristics of the socio-cultural background of participants in Estonia and Cyprus were noted, but the studies were not focused on their identities (**STUDIES III–IV**).

I understand the importance of researching audience identity, so my next research will focus on this aspect as well. The identity and media preferences of the Russian-speaking audiences were studied in Estonia and Latvia before the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War (e.g., Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2023; Kaprāns & Juzefovičs, 2019; Vihalemm et al., 2019). Hopefully, the new research project, which started in 2024² and aims to study the Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, will provide deeper information about the Russian-speaking audiences because we add an identity dimension to it. Moreover, I plan to fill the gap in my studies of the identities of native Russian speakers in Cyprus in collaboration with my Cypriot colleagues.

In summary, the members of the Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia and Cyprus perceive Russia-related frames in the news through their distinct personal **frame of reference**. If the news frame completely corresponds to the personal frame of reference, the frame will be accepted. If the news frame conflicts to some extent or in some aspect with the personal frame of reference, the frame will be partially accepted. If the news frame completely contradicts the personal frame of reference, the frame will be rejected. Hence, the frame of reference adds subjectivity to the perception of the news frames (**STUDIES III–IV**).

The third, but equally powerful, factor that affects the perception of Russia-related frames by Russian-speaking audiences is **context – the cultural, economic, political, and historical** (**STUDIES III–IV**).

The comparative analysis in **STUDY IV** revealed that the different **cultural and historical contexts** of the emergence and growth of the Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Cyprus is reflected in their distinct attitudes towards the news, including the news with Russia-related frames, in domestic media. The more balanced and constructive attitude to the domestic news media in Estonia is

² “The Baltic Russophone identity in flux: Political behavior, boundary making, and media practices after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine”, 2024–2026. Project leaders: Mārtiņš Kaprāns (University of Latvia) and Jānis Juzefovičs (Riga Stradiņš University). The author is participating in the project as an Estonian expert at the University of Latvia.

also explained by the favorable political context when the domestic public service media provide quality news in Russian and thus integrate the local Russian-speaking audience into the Western information space (**STUDY IV**). The Russian-speaking minority in Cyprus, which includes mostly first-generation immigrants (Ryazantsev, 2015; Stamouli, 2022), does not have the same opportunity. However, the bitter historical context of Estonian–Russian relations (e.g., Haltzel et al., 1981; Aunin, 2024; Gromilova, 2016) supports the opposing perception of some Russia-related news frames – the rejection of them as biased modalities (**STUDY IV**).

The sensitive and turbulent **political context** of the coronavirus pandemic for both audiences and the complicated political context of the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War for the audience in Cyprus (the audience in Estonia was interviewed earlier in 2020–2021) has led to the rejection of Russia-related news frames, especially in the case of the war frames (**STUDIES III–IV**).

Both audiences highlighted the influence of the **economic context** regarding the widespread use of clickbait in the news. Although the audiences clearly understand the reasons behind the use of clickbait, they prefer to condemn it. However, they do not always reject the clickbait type frames, but instead treat them indulgently (**STUDIES III–IV**).

The crucial role of the context of a particular society or country in the perception of information disorder by audiences living in this context has been explored in previous studies on the perception of the information disorder (e.g., Ciofalo et al., 2024; Tully et al., 2021; Giomelakis et al., 2024; Hameleers et al., 2023). However, to the best of my knowledge, the perception of the news frames by the audiences in a specific context has not been explored by other researchers in the last decade. Hence, further research is needed.

All three factors – **prior knowledge**, **frame of reference** of the audience member, and **context** – that influence the perception of the frames by the audience change over time. The changes are the most abrupt and significant in the case of large-scale events of high interest for the concrete audience, such as large-scale Russia-related events for Russian-speaking minorities in EU member states (**STUDIES III–IV**).

5.5. Conclusions

My dissertation has aimed to explore the interaction of the media and audiences contributing to the process of construction of social reality by constructing, sending, and perceiving news frames: media as a creator of news messages and audiences who read, watch, and/or listen to these created news stories. I have studied the Russia-related frames in news media and their acceptance, partial acceptance, or rejection by Russian-speaking audiences. My research has revealed that the following factors are crucial in the framing of Russia and perceiving Russia-related frames.

Firstly, the analyzed interaction is strongly influenced by the context in which Russia-related news frames are constructed, sent, and perceived. Suppose the researcher knows the cultural, political, economic, and historical contexts in which news frames are constructed, sent, and perceived. In such a case, this is the starting point for the effective detection and analysis of the new frames based on certain contexts, and it ensures a more effective studying of their acceptance, partial acceptance, or rejection by the audience that reads, watches, or listens to the news in the same context. On the other hand, the ability of valenced news frames to represent relations with Russia in certain countries' contexts may give researchers more knowledge on the nuances and pitfalls of these relations and the influential information sources that set valenced frames. This allows researchers to discover who is actually behind the Russia-related frames and, hence, who exerts an influence (**STUDIES I–IV**).

Secondly, the impact of journalists' frames of reference on constructing Russia-related frames is limited; journalists are more commonly frame-senders (**STUDIES I–II**). However, as gatekeepers of information, they can modify the frames they send, set by the prominent information sources (**STUDIES I–II**). They may use this opportunity with the following purposes: a) to simplify the social reality of the covered event for news audiences; b) to make the news more attractive for the audience by using clickbait (considered by the audiences as “annoying” over time, but neutral framing) or by adding newsworthiness to the news; c) to make the news frame, set by the prominent information sources, more powerful in its impact on the news audience (**STUDIES I–II**). In summary, journalists have the power to make Russia-related news frames more influential (**STUDIES I–II**), acting “as the final arbiters of the frames that reach the public” (D’Angelo, 2017: 2). The question is, how do they use this power from the viewpoint of ethics, and do they take into account the audience’s attitudes to the framing? This could be the topic of the next study on Russia-related news frames. However, based on **STUDIES III–IV**, it is worth recommending that journalists producing news about Russia use framing with the utmost care, remembering that it can negatively affect audience trust in concrete media outlets and media in general.

Thirdly, the decoding of the Russia-related news frames using dominant, negotiated, or opposing code by the Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia and Cyprus, in addition to the context, is strongly influenced by the prior knowledge and frames of reference of the audience members (**STUDIES III–IV**).

STUDIES III–IV revealed the following gaps in prior knowledge of the members of Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia and Cyprus about media. First of all, participants experienced difficulties detecting frame-setters. As a result, they often accused the media outlets of constructing the valenced frames that the audiences have decoded using the opposing code as unacceptable. Based on the misunderstanding of who the actual frame-setter is, the abovementioned perception caused deeper distrust of the media on the part of the studied audiences. In addition, not all the participants knew how the media works and their role in forming media content. They criticized the widespread use of clickbait head-

lines by the media without realizing that in this way the media adapts to the tastes of the audiences who value sensational news (see Davis & McLeod, 2003; Hendriks Vettehen & Kleemans, 2018). The members of the studied audiences who admitted that they have friends among active journalists were aware that behind falling trust in the media and behind biased news is also the audiences' behavior; the media produces what the audience demands (**STUDIES III–IV**).

In addition, the increasing spread of media criticism is observed among the frames of reference of the studied Russian-speaking audiences. The frequent decoding of the valenced Russia-related news frames (which are perceived as biased) from the opposing position by the studied audiences (especially in the case of the perception of news on the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War by the audience in Cyprus) decreased their trust in media, which may lead to a refusal to use the media. This has a negative effect in the long term on the significant Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Cyprus, as well as societies as a whole (**STUDIES III–IV**).

Finally, based on the frequently detected opposing decoding in combination with a misunderstanding by audiences who the actual frame-setter is, their sensitivity to Russia-related topics, and their specific socio-cultural background, the Russian-speaking participants in the abovementioned countries often perceive the media as responsible for the valenced framing with all possible consequences (**STUDIES III–IV**). Hence, I conclude that Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia and Cyprus need to expand their knowledge about the media and improve their media literacy. Moreover, I believe that it is the duty of media researchers, lecturers, and professional journalists (as much as they can) to provide Russian-speaking audiences with advice and support along the way.

The approach of this dissertation based on the developed and tested model (see Figure 1), which includes the adapted Hall's encoding/decoding model, may be used for research on framing and perception of the news frames in other countries where Russian-speaking audiences or any other language audiences live.

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SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Venemaad käsitlevate uudisraamide konstrueerimine ja edastamine erinevates meediakanalites ning nende tajumine erinevate auditooriumide poolt

Me elame geopoliitilise ebastabiilsuse (COVID-19 pandeemia, rändekriisid, Venemaa-Ukraina sõda, sõjakonfliktid Lähis-Idas jne) ja infohäirete ajastul (Wardle, 2020), millega me kõik igapäevaselt kokku puutume. Näeme, et sellistes tingimustes leiavad mõned ideed ja sõnumid ühiskonnas viljakama pinnase ja mõned mitte. Näiteks kui vaatame, millised ühiskonnad või riigid mõistavad hukka Venemaa ekspansionistliku poliitika Ukraina suhtes ja millised mitte, näeme erinevusi nende ühiskondade või riikide kultuurilises, majanduslikus ja poliitilises arengus. Samamoodi näeme erinevusi Venemaa ja Ukraina vahelise konflikti meediakajastuses nendes riikides (nt Ji et al., 2024; Liu, 2024; Arcangeletti & Zunino, 2023). Selliste kajastuste kujunemine on keeruline kombinatsioon ajaloolistest, sotsiaalsetest ja kultuurilistest teguritest ning käesolevas doktoritöös püüdsin sellele valgust heita, lahutades selle protsessi meedia ja auditooriumi interaktsiooniks. Doktoritöö põhineb sotsiaalse konstruksionismi paradigmat – ma uurisin meedia ja auditooriumi interaktsiooni raamistamise (Entman, 1993, 2010; Entman & Usher, 2018) ja uudisraamide tajumise vaatenurgast, kasutades Stuart Halli retseptsiooniteooriat (1973, 2006).

Eesmärgiks oli uurida meedia ja auditooriumi interaktsiooni sotsiaalse reaalsuse konstrueerimise protsessis, mille käigus ühelt poolt konstrueeritakse ja edastatakse Venemaad käsitlevaid uudisraame ja teiselt poolt aktsepteeritakse neid täielikult või osaliselt või lükatakse tagasi. Minu töö hõlmas kahte Venemaa raamistamise analüüsi, mis tõid esile Eesti, Bulgaaria, Saksamaa, Läti, Soome, USA ja Hiina uudismeedia raamid, ning intervjuusid Venemaad käsitlevate uudisraamide tajumise kohta venekeelsete auditooriumite poolt Eestis ja Küprosel.

Püstitasin doktoritöös neli uurimisküsimust, millele vastamiseks kasutasin järgmisi uurimismeetodeid: Venemaaga seotud uudiste raamistamise analüüsi ning venekeelsete osalejate stiimulmaterjalidega poolstruktureeritud personaalseid intervjuusid ja nende transkriptsioonide refleksiivset temaatilist analüüsi. Doktoritöö koosneb neljast uurimistulemusi tutvustavast teadusartiklist, mis on tähistatud Rooma numbritega. Allpool esitan lühendatult peamised tulemused uurimisküsimuste järgi struktureerituna ja tulemuste lühikokkuvõtte.

1. Millised Venemaaga seotud uudisraamid prevaleerivad erinevate riikide uudismeedias, mille suhted Venemaaga on erinevad, ning kes on uudisraamide loojad?

- Läbiviidud raamistamise analüüs näitas, et Eesti, Bulgaaria, Saksamaa, Läti, Soome, USA ja Hiina uudisteportaalides avaldatud uudistes on neutraalsete (ambivalentsete) asemel ülekaalus **valentsed – lahutavad ja ühendavad** – Venemaad käsitlevad uudisraamid (UURINGUD I–II).

- Enamik hõlmatud riikide meedias lahutavaid ja ühendavaid uudisraame vastas nende avalikkuse üldisemale suhtumisele Venemaasse, peegeldades sealhulgas ka riigivõimu ja/või kohalike omavalitsuste esindajate seisukohti, eriti kui neid kasutati infoallikatena. Seega representeerivad valentsed Venemaad käsitlevad uudisraamid sageli meedia asukohariigi ja Venemaa suhteid (**UURINGUD I–II**).
- Venemaa raamistamine Eesti, Bulgaaria, Saksamaa, Läti, Soome ja USA ehk Lääne inforuumi uudismeedias aastatel 2019–2021 ei olnud rangelt lahutav, vaid pigem mitmedimensiooniline, hõlmates reeglina nii lahutavaid kui ka ühendavaid uudisraame (sõltuvalt käsitlevast sündmusest) ja mõnikord neutraalseid uudisraame. Hiina riiklik uudismeedia raamistas Venemaad ainult positiivselt, lähtudes riigi ametlikust poliitikast (**UURINGUD I–II**).
- **Raamide loojate** analüüsi põhjal on uudistes avastatud raamide kõige levinumateks loojateks prominentsed infoallikad, näiteks uudisteagentuurid (nii Lääne kui ka Venemaa), muu meedia (nii Lääne kui Venemaa), ametnikud, poliitikud, mõjukad organisatsioonid, teadlased ja Venemaa kõneisikud (aeg-ajalt või kaudselt). Nad panustasid Venemaa-ga seotud raamide loomisse rohkem kui ajakirjanikud, kes mängisid enamikul juhtudel prominentsete infoallikate loodud **raamide edastajate** rolli. Lisaks kasutasid ajakirjanikud infoallikatena nende samade allikate sotsiaalmeedia postitusi – nii said prominentsete infoallikate loodud raamid levida muutmata kujul (nt ekraanipiltide kujul). Seejuures erinesid tekstid ka žanri poolest, st selgemalt avaldus autori **taustsüsteemist** – tema hoiakutest, veendumustest, kogemustest (Grawitch, 2021) ja sotsiaal-kultuurilisest taustast (Zabihzadeh et al., 2022) tulenev ajakirjanduslik raamistamine uudissisu sisaldavates arvamustes, juhtkirjades ja kommentaarides. Samas ajakirjanikud võisid muuta prominentsete infoallikate loodud raame ja teha need võimsamaks. Ehk ajakirjanike panus Venemaa raamistamisse oli piiratud, aga seda ei tohi alahinnata (**UURINGUD I–II**).

2. Kuidas mõjutavad erinevate riikide kontekstid, sealhulgas nende Venemaaga suhete kontekstid, Venemaaga seotud uudisraamide konstrueerimist ja edastamist nende uudismeedias?

- Venemaad käsitlevate lahutavate ja ühendavate uudisraamide konstrueerimine ja saatmine peegeldab meedia asukohariigi **kultuurilist, majanduslikku, poliitilist ja ajaloolist konteksti** suhetes Venemaaga. Neid kontekste aktualiseeritakse erinevate sündmuste puhul erinevates kombinatsioonides ja erinevates riikides erinevalt (**UURINGUD I–II**).
- Lätis, Soomes ja USAs tuvastatud uudisraamide **kultuurilise konteksti** ühendav mõju ilmnis meedia asukohariigi ning Venemaa ja nende inimeste väärtuslike ja positiivsete kultuurikontaktide ja koostöö rõhutamise kaudu. Kui riikide vahel oli tihe kultuurikoostöö – Venemaa kultuur

oli riigis nähtav ja/või vastava riigi kultuur oli Venemaal nähtav – oli kultuurilise konteksti mõju nähtav ka uudisraamis. Sealjuures polnud tähtis, kes oli kultuurilisel kontekstil põhineva raami looja – prominentne infoallikas, meedia asukohariigi kõneisik, Venemaa kõneleja või ajakirjanik – tuvastatud raamid olid ühendavad (**UURINGUD I–II**).

- Ajakirjanikud kasutasid raamistamist ka eesmärgiga kohandada informatsiooni sündmustest – lihtsustades sotsiaalse reaalsuse keerukust – konkreetse kultuuritaustaga auditooriumide (nt venemaalaste) jaoks, püüdes teha uudised hõlpsamini arusaadavamaks ja dekodeeritavaks (**UURING II**).
- **Majandusliku konteksti** mõju Venemaa raamistamisele uurisin kahes dimensioonis. Esimene dimensioon oli seotud majandussuhetega, mis olid kasulikud meedia asukohariigile või vastastikku kasulikud meedia asukohariigile ja Venemaale (**UURING II**). Kui riikidel olid head majandussuhted ja raamistamises tuli majanduslik koostöö esile, olid raamid valdavalt ühendavad (**UURING II**). Teine dimensioon oli seotud kommertsmeedia ärimudeli muutumisega tähelepanumajanduse tingimustes, mil erameedia hakkas laialdaselt kasutama klikimagnetitest raame (**UURING I**). Klikimagnetite sagedane kasutamine võib aga vähendada usaldust uudismeedia vastu, mis leidis kinnituse **UURINGUTES III–IV**.
- **Poliitiline kontekst** võib sõltuda erinevatest teguritest, millest üks on **ajalooline kontekst**. Kui meedia asukohariigil on olnud ajalooliselt pingelised suhted Venemaaga, siis ilmneb see nii kehtivas poliitikas Venemaa suhtes kui ka uudisraamides. Üldiselt raamistas uudismeedia Venemaa sageli vastavalt meedia asukohariigis laialt levinud ja aktsepteeritud poliitilistele ja ajaloolistele hoiakutele ning peamiselt võimalolijate vaatenurgast (**UURINGUD I–II**).
- **Poliitiline kontekst** võib olla tihedalt seotud **majandusliku kontekstiga**, nt kui riigil on Venemaaga tihe vastustikku kasulik majanduskoostöö, nagu Hiinal, siis mõjutab see riigi poliitikat Venemaa suhtes ja kajastub positiivsetes uudisraamides (**UURING II**).
- **UURINGUTE I–II** tulemustele toetudes võib öelda, et Venemaaga seotud uudissündmuste raamistamine võib põhineda **poliitilisel ja ajaloolisel ning poliitilisel ja majanduslikul kontekstil**. Ent siinkohal tekivad uusi uuringuid väärt küsimused: 1) kas ülalnimetatud kontekstid mõjutavad raamistamist alati ühiselt, kombineeritult; 2) kas poliitiline kontekst võib mõjutada ilma muu kontekstita; 3) kas kultuurikonteksti mõju võiks olla kombineeritud poliitilise, majandusliku ja ajaloolise kontekstiga?

3. Kuidas tajuvad Eesti ja Küprose venekeelsed auditooriumid Venemaaga seotud uudisraame?

- Uuritud Eesti ja Küprose venekeelsetel auditooriumidel on kokkupuuteid Venemaad käsitlevate uudisraamidega, nad tunnevad uudisraamid ära ja reeglina tajuvad, kuidas raamid püüavad neid kui vastuvõtjaid mõjutada. Sageli rõhutasid osalejad raamistamise seost poliitilise võimuga, mida kirjeldasid Entman (1993, 2010) ja Rees (2001), eriti poliitikateemaliste uudiste puhul. Osalejad pidasid valentseid Venemaad käsitlevaid raame poliitikateemalistes uudistes enamikul juhtudel vastuvõetamatuks (**UURINGUD III–IV**).
- Uudissõnumis sisalduvate raamide dekodeerimises tuli Stuart Halli retseptiooniteooria (1973, 2006) eeskujul esile vastuvõtja domineeriv, kokkuleppeline või vastanduv positsioon uudissõnumi suhtes. Intervjuueeritute seas Eestis prevaleeris pigem kokkuleppeline kui vastanduv ja domineeriv positsioon. Küprosel osalejate seas prevaleeris pigem vastanduv positsioon kui kokkuleppeline ja domineeriv, eriti täiemahulise Venemaa-Ukraina sõja raamistamise puhul (**UURINGUD III–IV**).
- Osalejad olid teadlikud Venemaaga seotud klikimagnet-uudisraamide töömehhanismist ja funktsioonist ja mõistsid neid pigem neutraalsetena (**UURINGUD III–IV**). Osalejad väitsid siiski, et klikimagnetid on muutumas tüütumaks ja vähendavad usaldust uudismeedia vastu (**UURINGUD III–IV**), mida ma oletasin **UURINGUTE I–II** põhjal.
- Eesti ja Küprose venekeelsed auditooriumid ei postitanud kommentaare sotsiaalmeediasse Venemaaga seotud uudistele ehk ei tootnud ega avaldanud aktiivselt oma sisu Venemaa teemadel ja seega ka Venemaad käsitlevaid raame (**UURINGUD III–IV**). Viimane korreleerub varasemate uuringutega, mille kohaselt vaid väike protsent uudistelugejaid postitab uudistele kommentaare (nt Stroud et al., 2016). Soovi puudumine avaldada arvamust Venemaa teemadel uudismeedias või sotsiaalmeedias oli vähemalt osaliselt seotud hirmuga võimaliku negatiivse tagasiside ees ja enesetsensuuriga tundlike teemade puhul (**UURINGUD III–IV**). Osa Küprosel elavatest osalejatest väitsid enesetsensuuri vajadust, sest kartsid päritoluriigi ametivõimude (nt Venemaa, Ukraina, Valgevene) võimalikke negatiivseid samme nende suhtes (**UURING IV**).
- Reeglina ei eristanud venekeelsed auditooriumid Eestis ja Küprosel raami loojat ja raami saatjat, kui raami loojaks oli prominentne infoallikas. Nendel juhtudel omistasid osalejad raami looja rolli sageli raami saatjale ehk meediakanalile. Kuid mõned tähelepanelikumad osalejad, kes tuvastasid tegeliku raami looja õigesti, märkisid, et meediakanal aitas kaasa algse raami muutmisele (**UURINGUD III–IV**).

4. Millised tegurid mõjutavad Venemaad käsitlevate uudisraamide aktsepteerimist, osalist aktsepteerimist või tagasilükkamist Eesti ja Küprose venekeelsete auditooriumide poolt?

- Kolm peamist tegurit, mis mõjutavad toimimist konkreetses koodis on: osaleja **eelteadmised**, isiklik **taustsüsteem** (sealhulgas **sotsiaal-kultuuriline taust**) ja **kontekstid** – **kultuuriline, majanduslik, poliitiline ja ajalooline (UURINGUD III–IV)**.
- **Eelteadmised** Venemaaga seotud teemadel ja meediast erinesid sõltuvalt intervjuueeritava haridustasemest ja -valdkonnast, isiklikest huvidest ning kontaktidest professionaalsete ajakirjanikega. Haritumad osalejad, kes olid ka väga huvitatud Venemaaga seotud teemadest, tajusid Venemaad käsitlevaid raame erinevatest vaatenurkadest, püüdes raamistatud uudiste analüüsimisel süveneda, määratledes raami põhjuse, eesmärgi ja looja. Mõnedel osalejatel on isiklikud kontaktid aktiivsete ajakirjanikega, kes aitavad neil mõista, kuidas meedia toimib. Kui osalejal puudusid eelteadmised kajastatud sündmuse kohta või need olid ekslikud, võis see viia raami tagasilükkamiseni.
- Kokkuvõtteks võib öelda, et Eesti ja Küprose venekeelsete auditooriumide esindajad tajuvad uudistes Venemaad käsitlevaid raame läbi oma isikliku **taustsüsteemi** prisma. Kui uudisraam vastab täielikult isiklikule taustsüsteemile, võetakse raam vastu; kui mingil määral või aspektis vastuolus, võetakse raam osaliselt vastu; kui täielikult vastuolus, lükatakse raam tagasi. Seega lisab taustsüsteem uudisraamide tajumisele subjektiivsust (**UURINGUD III–IV**).
- Kolmas, kuid mitte vähem oluline tegur, mis mõjutab venekeelsete auditooriumide arusaama Venemaad käsitlevatest raamidest, on **kontekstid** – **kultuuriline, majanduslik, poliitiline ja ajalooline**.
- **UURINGU IV** võrdlev analüüs näitas, et Eesti ja Küprose venekeelsete vähemuste kujunemise erinevad **ajaloolised ja kultuurilised kontekstid** peegeldusid ka nendest riikidest uuringus osalejate suhtumises Venemaad käsitlevatesse uudisraamidesse. Tasakaalustatum ja konstruktiivsem suhtumine Eesti meediasse on seletatav ka soodsa **poliitilise kontekstiga**, mille tulemusena pakub avaõiguslik meedia kvaliteetseid venekeelseid uudiseid ja toetab seeläbi venekeelse auditooriumi integratsiooni Lääne informuumi. Küprose venekeelsel vähemusel, kuhu kuuluvad enamasti esimese põlvkonna sisserändajad, pole sama võimalust. Samas Eesti–Venemaa suhete kibe **ajalooline kontekst** soodustab mõnede Venemaad käsitlevate uudisraamide tajumist lahutavatena – nende kui kallutatud konstruktsioonide tagasilükkamist (**UURING IV**).
- Koroonaviiruse pandeemia tundlik ja turbulentne **poliitiline kontekst** mõlema riigi venekeelse auditooriumi jaoks ning täiemahulise Venemaa–Ukraina sõja keeruline poliitiline kontekst Küprose venekeelse auditooriumi jaoks (intervjuueeritud pärast täiemahulise sõja puhkemist) on

viinud Venemaad käsitlevate uudisraamade tagasilükkamiseni, eriti sõjaraamade puhul (**UURINGUD III–IV**).

- Mõlemad auditooriumid tõid uudistes esile **majandusliku konteksti** mõju seoses laialt levinud klikimagnetitega. Kuigi auditoorium mõistab klikimagneti kasutamise põhjuseid, ei kiida nad seda lähenemist heaks; kuid nad ei lükka klikimagneti tüüpi raame alati tagasi, koheldes neid paindlikult (**UURINGUD III–IV**).

Ülaltoodud tulemuste põhjal tegin järgmised järeldused.

Esiteks mõjutab analüüsitud interaktsiooni tugevalt kontekst, milles Venemaad käsitlevaid uudisraame konstrueeritakse, edastatakse ja tajutakse. Kultuuri- lise, majandusliku, poliitilise ja ajaloolise konteksti teadmine, kus konstrueeritakse, saadetakse ja tajutakse uudisraame, on lähtepunkt uurijale uute raamade tõhusaks tuvastamiseks ja analüüsimiseks nende kontekstide põhjal ning tagab nende tajumise tõhusama uurimise. Teiselt poolt vaadates võib valentsete uudisraamade võime representeerida suhteid Venemaaga teatud riikide kontekstis anda teadlastele rohkem teadmisi nende suhete nüansside ning mõjukate infoallikate kohta, kes loovad valentseid raame. Viimane võimaldab uurijal avastada, kes on tegelikult Venemaad käsitlevate raamade taga (**UURINGUD I–IV**).

Teiseks on ajakirjanike isiklike taustsüsteemide mõju Venemaad käsitlevate raamade konstrueerimisele piiratud – ajakirjanikud on sagedamini raami edastajad (**UURINGUD I–II**). Informatsiooni värvavahtidena (Stern et al., 2020) ja raamade viimaste arbiitritena (D'Angelo, 2017) saavad nad aga muuta saadetud raame, mille loovad prominentsed infoallikad (**UURINGUD I–II**). Nad võivad seda võimalust kasutada järgmistel eesmärkidel: a) käsitletava sündmuse keerukuse lihtsustamiseks uudiste auditooriumi jaoks; b) muuta uudised auditooriumi jaoks atraktiivsemaks, kasutades klikimagnetit või lisades uudistele uudisväärtust; c) muuta prominentsete infoallikate loodud uudisraam võimsamaks auditooriumi paremaks mõjutamiseks (**UURINGUD I–II**). Küsimus on selles, kuidas nad kasutavad seda võimu eetika seisukohast ja kas võtavad arvesse auditooriumi suhtumist raamistamisse. **UURINGUTE III–IV** põhjal tasuks siiski soovitada Venemaa kohta uudiseid tootvatel ajakirjanikel kasutada raamistamist ülima ettevaatusega, pidades meeles, et see võib negatiivselt mõjutada auditooriumi usaldust konkreetsete meediakanalite ja meedia vastu üldiselt.

Kolmandaks, Venemaad käsitlevate raamade dekodeerimist domineerivast, kokkuleppelisest või vastanduvast positsioonist Eesti ja Küprose venekeelsete auditooriumide poolt mõjutavad lisaks kontekstile tugevalt ka auditooriumide esindajate eelteadmised ja isiklikud taustsüsteemid (**UURINGUD III–IV**).

UURINGUD III–IV tõid välja järgmised lüngad Eesti ja Küprose venekeelsete auditooriumide eelnevates teadmistes meedia kohta. Esiteks kogesid osalejad raskusi raami loojate tuvastamisel. Seetõttu süüdistasid nad meediakanaleid sageli valentsete raamade konstrueerimises, mille on vastanduvast positsioonist dekodeerinud mitteaktsepteeritavana. Viimane on põhjustanud osalejate sügavat usaldamatust meedia vastu. Lisaks ei teadnud kõik osalejad, kuidas meedia toimib ja nende enda rolli meediasisu kujundamisel. Nad kritiseerisid klikimagnet-

pealkirjade laialdast kasutamist, mõistmata, et sel viisil kohaneb meedia sensatsioonilisi uudiseid hindava publiku maitsega (vt Davis & McLeod, 2003; Hendriks Vettehen & Kleemans, 2018). Seejuures teadsid meedia toimimise kohta rohkem osalejad, kelle tutvusringkonnas oli ka ajakirjanikke – nemad teadsid, et meediausalduse languse ja kallutatud uudiste taga on ka auditooriumi käitumine – meedia toodab seda, mis on nõutud (**UURINGUD III–IV**).

Lisaks on uuritud venekeelsete auditooriumide taustsüsteemide hulgas täheldatud meediakriitilisuse suurenemist. Valentsete Venemaad käsitlevate uudisraamide (mida tajutakse kallutatuna) sagedane dekodeerimine uuritud auditooriumide vastanduvast positsioonist (eriti pärast täiemahulise Venemaa-Ukraina sõja algust intervjueeritud Küprose auditooriumi puhul) vähendas nende usaldust meedia vastu, mis võib viia meedia kasutamisest keeldumiseni. Viimasel on pikas perspektiivis negatiivne mõju märkimisväärtetele venekeelsetele vähemustele Eestis ja Küprosel ning riikide ühiskondadele tervikuna (**UURINGUD III–IV**).

Lõpuks, tuginedes sageli esinevale vastanduvale dekodeerimisele koos tegeliku raami looja tuvastamise raskustega Eesti ja Küprose venekeelsetel auditooriumidel, nende tundlikkusega Venemaaga seotud teemade suhtes ja spetsiifilisele sotsiaal-kultuurilisele taustale, tajuvad nad meediat sageli vastutavana valentse raamistamise eest koos kõigi võimalike tagajärgedega (**UURINGUD III–IV**). Siit järeldan, et üldnimetatud riikide venekeelsed auditooriumid peavad laiendama oma teadmisi meedia kohta ja parandama oma meediapädevust, ning meediauurijate, õppejõudude ja professionaalsete ajakirjanike roll on pakkuda selles nõu ja tuge.

PUBLICATIONS

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Selected publications

Kremez, M., & Hajimichael, M. (2024). Two small EU states in the face of information disorder: A comparative analysis of Russian-speaking media audiences in Cyprus and Estonia. *Zealos: Studies in the Humanities, Social Sciences, Arts and Design*, 2, 149–167.
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