



# ALBANY

## Riga NATO Stratcom Dialogue 2022 Summary



# Key themes/insights

## Russia dominated the discussion

- Considering the context, this was to be expected.
- There was particular focus on how the West underestimated Russia and Putin; with Maj. Gen. Pekka Toveri (panel seven) arguing Putin had reached the "dictator's best before date" and required serious reevaluation.
- It was emphasised that the West and Ukraine had had notable successes in the information war, but multiple panelists argued against complacency. They encouraged the audience to be forward thinking in the messaging campaigns that would be required; these conversations were divided between two topics:
  - a. What does victory look like?
  - b. How to handle Russia in defeat?
- The first question was specifically highlighted by Janis Kazocins (panel seven), who questioned whether this entailed a result that most immediately ended bloodshed (which would likely involve Ukraine ceding territory), or whether Russia needed to be driven out of Ukraine completely (including Crimea). Both instances would require a serious persuasion campaign to convince the West to invest in Ukraine's future.
- On the second, there was concurrence across multiple panels that it was important to avoid narratives of humiliation, defeat or weakening of Russia and instead focus on the the idea of accountability.
- These discussions seemed at odds with suggestions by US and some Ukrainian officials.
- It can also be argued that pursuing strategic ambiguity in the end result for the Kremlin may prevent escalation.
- On the other hand, Russia's poor performance in the war has been a direct result of muddled war aims, while maintaining domestic and international unity over Ukraine will require a clear message.

## Debate about what needs to change

- There was frequent agreement across panels that the West needed to be more proactive in its messaging.
  - Maj. Gen. Toveri implied we need to focus on our own resilience first: "your defenses need to be up before you go on the offensive."
  - This contrasted Dr Bildzuikiewcz (panel four), who argued the approach shouldn't be binary between offence and defense but should be pursued in tandem.
- According to Ross Burley (Panel one), the greatest challenge is bringing complex topics to a wider audience and that new initiatives are often hampered by a class of people "resistant to change." He drew directly on the postponing of the Disinformation Governance Board as a prime example:
  - The board announced its upcoming presence in a Tik Tok video, where it received pushback among older generations and lawmakers as "tacky" and "embarrassing".
  - Burley countered that avoiding these spaces effectively created a vacuum for hostile actors to fill.

# Key themes/insights

- This topic of bringing complexity to citizens would be mirrored in the third panel's discussion of how to message about NATO to the average person.
  - Giediminas Jeglinskas opined it was about simple statements, but stressing that situations are complicated and cannot be summarised in 240 characters.
  - Dr Artis Pabriks argued that the Ukraine conflict had crystallised the need for NATO within Europe, but hadn't yet been utilised to project the alliance's benefits beyond there.
    - As evidence he pointed to the fact the Ukraine war was having knock on effects on global food supplies, jeopardising vulnerable states reliant on imports and food programs.
    - It has also eclipsed pressing existential threats like climate change and international terrorism; causing critical delays in addressing these issues. Demonstrating the need for security that NATO provides.
- In his keynote speech, NATO Supreme Allied Commander General Phillippe Lavigne asserted that to remain proactive, NATO must develop "cognitive warfare" capabilities to influence thinking about the alliance. the General's vision of cognitive warfare was threefold:
  - a.Cognitive warfare would only expand in future with technology, therefore countermeasures would require a similar high-tech approach.
  - b.At the core of cognitive warfare countermeasures was that NATO must speak first and speak the truth.
  - c.Lastly, cognitive warfare will be broader than stratcom; being as much about how we're acting as much as what we're saying (the core principle of stratcom)

## Many US audience members focused on the line between combatting disinformation and infringing on free speech

- Generally responses from panelists contained the traditional suggestions of strong safeguards and building resilience among the population so they could effectively fact check themselves and counter fears of government interference.
- The second panel (resilience focused) suggested that it was critical to build "trusted brands", which can be linked to the first panel's suggestion that the winning message is ultimately about the messenger and the presentation of the message.
- In doing so, Natalya Popovich (panel two) argued objective truth becomes a message in and of itself.
- Several members of multiple panels argued that this process needed to be handled by NGOs and private companies who were independent of government control and therefore untainted in partisan eyes.

# Key themes/insights

## Building resilience was a ubiquitous point of discussion

- This was the primary topic of the second panel, but was a running theme throughout the event.
- The second panel discussed the following:
  - Experience-sharing is critical.
    - Ambassador Regev argued a lot could be learned from the successes and failures of his state of Israel, which has been fighting a narrative war for its entire existence.
    - This would be supported by the fourth panel; with Sebastian Bay pointing to the Swedish Election Cooperation Network as evidence of domestic sharing.
    - Similarly, on the seventh panel, Maj. Gen. Toveri pointed to Finland as a case study of creating a homogenous and civics-educated society.
    - The third panel pointed to international sharing as a method of strengthening inner resilience and capabilities, while also shaping overall perceptions of NATO and trans-Atlantic alliances.
  - Ambassador Regev further viewed resilience as resting on three main pillars:
    - i. An abject acceptance of reality, even when not convenient.
    - ii. Knowing who you are
    - iii. Finding hope and solidarity with others (linking back to experience sharing).
  - Lastly, the second panel identified three "areas at a societal scale" that needed targeting:
    - Freedom of speech - Recently, the concept has come under attack from a minority section of the radical/illiberal left wing. Its promotion and protection is critical to avoid giving adversaries ammunition for 'whataboutism.'
    - Education - Although we talk a good game, but the concept has been neglected; we should be teaching people how to think, not what to think.
    - Representation - The West shows a preference for power over policy and neglects messages of compromise that are an inevitable part of politics; this leads to perceptions of broken promises, further polarisation and increases the appeal of populism.

# Key themes/insights

- The fourth panel also discussed a range of measures that bore similarities to Ambassador Regev's pillars and the areas of societal scale:
  - Laura Thornton emphasised the importance of understanding personal vulnerabilities (which can vary according to location, that elections do not occur in a vacuum, the role of NGOs and the impact of "pre-bunking.")
  - There was also concurrence that interferes and their enablers should be "called out", but that this needed to be a societal rather than governmental approach (NGOs, thinktanks, investigative journalists etc).
  - They also discussed civic education, but focused on the importance of tech and apps in this area.
    - Marija Golubeva expressed strong support for such measures, but was also skeptical of how quickly they could be created and suggested development should pursued alongside other instruments.
    - Martyna Bildzukiewicz concurred that apps would be a valuable instrument for civic education, but stressed the focus needed to be on how to think and an exchange of ideas rather than a specific message to avoid politicisation and accusations of propaganda.
- One audience member questioned the fourth panel about how to raise awareness of disinformation and electoral interference without accidentally contributing to the problem (narratives of governments covering up, whataboutism, toxic partisanship etc).
  - Raphael Glucksmann argued that we needed to properly define and publicise our threats in order to prevent Laura Thornton's concerns about the very notion of disinformation being weaponised for domestic political use.
  - This further links back to the first panel's discussion of "trusted brands."
- There was discussion in the third panel about maintaining international and domestic unity over Ukraine, but the panelists appeared not to recognise that societal resilience to state-propaganda also plays a role. As shortages bite, 'abandoning Ukraine' narratives may begin to appeal, particularly if the conflict grinds to a stalemate.
  - Giediminas Jeglinskas insisted that the main focus should be persuading the public that Ukraine represents an existential struggle "there will be pain now, but the future will be worth it [...] there can be no substitute for victory."
  - Dr Pabriks took a more hardline approach; suggesting that narratives of Western values could not be expected to carry weight in future if states re-engaged Russia economically: "Would you have traded with Hitler?"
- In building resilience, Janis Kazocins drew on the lessons of Mission Command:
  - Every soldier knows the objective and aims of the Commanding Officer two ranks above them.
  - A similar process needs to be translated to civilian life where every member of society is aware of their country's international aims and message.

# Notable absences

## China largely came as an afterthought

- This can be viewed as natural in light of Russia dominating the headlines and international concerns, but it is also indicative of the prevailing criticism that the West is far too reactive to crises and fails to proactively engage in long-term messaging strategies.
- Multiple Intelligence Officials have warned that although Russia's aggression is a concern, China remains the most significant threat to the international order, and is playing an active part in spreading Russian disinformation about Ukraine, so it should be viewed as great a priority as countering Russia.
- It can also be argued that the lack of discussion regarding China reflects Mark Laity's statement at Albany's study day that NATO and its partners have a dearth of knowledge about China.

## While there was a lot of focus on what the threat was and the tactics/messages used, there was little discussion of understanding the enemy

- Understanding adversaries and allies is a fundamental principle of statecraft; but those present at the dialogue tended to use the umbrella term of "adversaries" without acknowledging differences in mindset or cultures that influence their operations.
- This is the equivalent of studying the murder weapon and method, but not the motive.
- For example, when China was mentioned, it was frequently lumped in with Russia, despite ample evidence that while there are similarities in tactics, China's overall strategic aims and international information infrastructure are wholly different from Russia and has manifested as differences in messaging.
  - China has begun using disinformation in the Kremlin style, but still focuses heavily on misinformation in order to maintain a veneer of legitimacy.
  - China does not just use its information operations to undermine the image of the West and the international liberal democratic system as Russia does; it actively offers its own alternate model.
- This is a particularly glaring omission considering that Raphael Glucksman (panel four) suggested the West had been too cynical about adversarial narratives - Ukraine had proved that they mean what they say, so it follows we need to be more conscious about the CCP's narratives.

# Notable absences

## Messaging the Global South

- While there was some discussion about India and African states' stance on Ukraine as evidence of the West's and NATO's message not being universal, there was no discussion on how these audiences might be reached.
- This links to the next point below.

## Non-western voices

- NATO is a European alliance, therefore the absence of African, Asian and Latin American voices is understandable.
- However, the challenge posed by China, and the muted response by some nations over Ukraine, has shown that NATO stratcom dialogues need to go beyond the Western bubble.
- Having African, Asian and Latin American voices could have provided critical insights into how to reach their respective audiences and counter adversarial propaganda of the West as an imperialist monolith and NATO as an instrument of conquest.

# Opportunities for Albany

## Importance of non-governmental organisations and techniques

- Multiple panelists referenced that in the current climate of hyper partisanship, it would be civic society and NGOs who would need to be at the forefront of the responses.
- OSINT was also highlighted due to its association with non-governmental bodies, showing its working and therefore becoming more trustworthy than official declassified intelligence. If Albany could partner with OSINT providers we could provide verification and dissemination of information; particularly if Albany emphasised its non-profit arm.

## Building technical and theoretical expertise

- The discussions on resilience lacked formal strategies and even definitions. Combined with the repeated call for NGOs and private business to lead the charge against disinformation, Albany is well placed through its Academy and past programs to fill the current vacuum.
- The acknowledged (if unaddressed) lack of Western narrative traction in the Global South creates an opportunity for Albany to utilise its growing networks in critical regions to carry the Western message outside Europe and compete with adversaries.

## Mapping the threats

- Experts have previously told Albany that NATO remains concerned regarding China, but lacks the expertise to create an effective countering strategy. This view is reinforced by the panelists' tendency to lump China and Russia together despite differences in motive.
- Building China expertise should therefore remain a top priority for Albany despite the increased attention on Russia.
- There is also significant overlap between state sponsored disinformation and VEO messaging (such as Qanon and Russia's allegations of biolabs in Ukraine). Creating opportunities for Albany to branch out projects and create links between different partners.
- Knock-on effects from the Ukraine war (especially in regions with vulnerable food security) will be exacerbated by Climate Change; increasing the need for projects like Albany's UNEP Client Research.

# Opportunities for Albany

## Public awareness

- Multiple politicians, human rights activists and security officials across the Western alliances have called for increased public awareness of hostile influence campaigns to the same level as terrorist threats.
- These calls have only increased in the aftermath of the Ukraine invasion, creating an opportunity for Albany to use its experience in resilience building campaigns

# Annex A: Panels

## Panel One. Under fire: Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the global information space



Amb. Juris Poikāns

Ambassador of Latvia to Poland

SPEAKER



Ms Liubov Tsybulска

Founder of the Centre for Strategic Communications and Information Security under the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine

SPEAKER



Mr Ross Burley

Co-Founder and Executive of the Centre for Information Resilience

SPEAKER



Dr Maxine David

Lecturer in European Studies at Leiden University and Research Fellow at the Global Europe Centre, University of Kent

MODERATOR

## Panel Two. Battlefields in the mind: societal resilience and cognitive defence



Amb. Mark Regev

Senior Fellow, the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) at Tel Aviv University

SPEAKER



Ms Natalya Popovich

Co-founder, Ukrainian Crisis Media Center

SPEAKER



Mr Paul Bell

Country Director, Agenda Georgia

SPEAKER



Ms Elīna Lange-Ionatamishvili

Senior Expert, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence

MODERATOR

# Annex A: Panels

## Panel Three. What strategic communications has to say about NATO's new Strategic Concept



**Dr Artis Pabriks**

Minister of Defence of the Republic of Latvia and Deputy Prime Minister of Latvia

SPEAKER



**Mr Giedrimas Jeglinskas**

Assistant Secretary General, NATO

SPEAKER



**Amb. Julianne Smith**

United States Permanent Representative to NATO

SPEAKER



**Dr Neville Bolt**

Director, King's Centre for Strategic Communications, King's College London

MODERATOR

## Panel Four. Foreign election interference: where we are today



**Ms Laura Thornton**

Director, Alliance for Securing Democracy, German Marshall Fund

SPEAKER



**Dr Marija Golubeva**

Former Minister of the Interior of the Republic of Latvia

SPEAKER



**Dr Martyna Bildziukiewicz**

Head, East StratCom Task Force, European External Action Service

SPEAKER



**Mr Raphaël Glucksmann**

Member of the European Parliament, the Chair of the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation

SPEAKER



**Mr Sebastian Bay**

Team Leader, Election Security, Swedish Election Authority

MODERATOR

## Panel Five. Formulating a rules-based order for the digital age: big tech in the spotlight



Mr David Agranovich

Director, Global Threat Disruption, Meta (Facebook)

SPEAKER



Ms Quinn McKew

Executive Director, Article 19

SPEAKER



Dr Yoel Roth

Senior Director of Safety & Integrity, Twitter

SPEAKER



Mr Felix Kartte

Senior Advisor, Reset

MODERATOR

## Panel Six. How to be smart about Artificial Intelligence



Mr Frantisek Vrabel

CEO, Semantic Visions

SPEAKER



Dr Jean-Christophe Boucher

Professor, School of Public Policy, Department of Political Science, University of Calgary

SPEAKER



Mr Kevin Zerrusen

Chief Operating Officer, Reality Defender

SPEAKER



Ms Nora Biteniece

Consultant, the State Chancellery of Latvia

MODERATOR

# Keynote Speech by General Philippe Lavigne, NATO Supreme Allied Commander Transformation



[General Philippe Lavigne](#)

NATO Supreme Allied Commander Transformation

[KEYNOTE](#)

## Panel Seven. War of the words: military strategy and strategic communications



[Mr Jānis Kažociņš](#)

National Security Adviser to the President of Latvia

[SPEAKER](#)



[Mr Jay H. Janzen](#)

Director of the Communications Division, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe

[SPEAKER](#)



[Major General \(ret.\) Pekka Toveri](#)

Chairman, Finnish Strategic Studies Support Foundation

[SPEAKER](#)



[LtCol \(ret.\) Rita LePage](#)

Strategic Communications Consultant

[MODERATOR](#)