



The impact of media use on security perceptions: Insights from focus groups of Latvian and Estonian border residents

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates how the media shape perceptions of security in the European Union's border regions, focusing on Latvia and Estonia, both of which share a border with Russia. Drawing on media dependency theory, it examines the relationship between media use and perceived threats under conditions of social instability and uncertainty. Two research questions guide the analysis: (1) how risk perception relates to goals of mass media use and (2) how border residents choose different information sources regarding potential military threats. The focus group discussions indicated that respondents' goals of media use closely aligned with dependency relations under conditions of perceived risk and uncertainty: maintaining a sense of safety and being informed, protecting family members and property, reducing uncertainty, distinguishing credible information from misinformation, and sustaining psychological stability. The risk perception and media use were mutually reinforcing: the media not only provided information but also regulated emotions, fostering both preparedness and fatigue. Differences between Latvian- and Russian-speaking audiences in Latvia and Estonia highlighted how competing narratives influenced stress levels and perceptions of security. The findings suggest that border residents having opportunity to live in different media spaces (or systems), lay on the media content they trust more, and have opportunity to compare sources and adopt protective behavior. In this context, media dependency extends beyond information-seeking to include emotional management and action-oriented responses during times of crisis

Keywords: media dependency, media use, security, risk perception, threat, focus groups, border

INTRODUCTION

State security concerns have been intensifying on the Eastern border of the European Union, in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, due to the escalating aggression of neighboring Russia. The ongoing full-scale war launched by Russia against Ukraine, the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the migration crisis on the Lithuanian border with Belarus create a feeling of threat and insecurity among populations. The mentioned circumstances have begun discussions about the risk of military and cyber threats, intensifying attention to the border areas that are historically, geographically, linguistically, or technologically proximate to Russia, e.g., the border region of Latgale in Latvia or the border City of Narva in Estonia. The border regions that consist of a high number of Russian-speaking populations who are a target of propaganda from the regimes of neighboring Russia and Belarus are raising ongoing concerns about the resilience of the information environment there.

State Chancellery (2023) on current problems in Latvia found that support for Ukraine in the fight against Russian aggression, as well as trust in national institutions and in information supplied by the media of Latvia and Western countries, was expressed significantly less often (less than 40%) by ethnic minorities and Latvians living in Latgale. In mid-2022, the views of the residents of Latgale regarding the responsible party in the events in Ukraine differed significantly from the views of residents of other statistical regions of Latvia. In Latgale, 39% considered Russia to be the guilty party, while in other statistical regions, more than half of the respondents did so (Saeima, 2023).

Relying on the specific context of these border areas, the research article first provides insight into how media usage is related to feelings of security and insecurity and presents the empirical situation in the Latvian and Estonian border regions. Second, the article tests media dependency theory (MDT) (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Despite the shift toward social media and its decades of creation and development (1970s-1990s), the theory remains significant in this case, as it provides a relevant theoretical foundation for understanding the influence of the social environment and, accordingly, the problems of cognitive information. MDT explains when and why the media have a strong influence. The theory sets up intervening conditions between the media and dependency:

- (a) the ambiguity and the degree of threat present in individuals' social environment,
- (b) the activities of the media system,
- (c) the activities of interpersonal networks, and
- (d) the structural locations of the individual and their membership groups (Ball-Rokeach, 1985).

Influence intensifies when individuals' goals are tied to media information and when society is unstable, making the media the central resource for orientation, understanding, and action. Thus, the social environment of Latvia and Estonia may become ambiguous in the sense of being uninterpretable because of large social processes, such as conflict, change, crises, instability etc. When such a problem occurs, individuals will seek information from whatever sources are useful and available (Ball-Rokeach, 1985).

Accordingly, the following research questions (RQs) were raised:

RQ1. How are the risk perception and goals of mass media use related?

RQ2. How do inhabitants of the border area choose and use different media sources to meet their information needs about potential military threats?

THE CASE OF LATVIA AND ESTONIA

The Media Landscape

The Baltic States have many similarities in their media landscapes. However, their approach to ensuring the resilience of media systems differs significantly (Köuts-Klemm et al., 2022). In the following section, we will highlight the main differences between Latvia and Estonia.

In both Latvia and Estonia, media consumption is closely linked to residents' mother tongue. Russian-speaking residents tend to favor Russian-language outlets, often choosing them over content produced in the national language (Saeima, 2023; Vihalemm & Leppik, 2018). In Latvia, both Latvian- and Russian-speaking residents expressed interest in consuming Latvian media content in Russian. Overall, slightly more than a third (36%) of the surveyed residents indicated such interest, as Russian language media constitutes an integral component of Latvia's overall media system (Rozukalne, 2016). Among Russian-speaking individuals, nearly three-quarters (72%) expressed interest in consuming local media in Russian. A large number of people interested in consuming media content in Russian was also observed among the residents of Latgale (NEPLP, 2024).

Over the past decade, online news portals, social media, and video platforms have become central sources of information and entertainment in both countries, while newspapers have steadily lost relevance (Ministry of Culture, 2020; NEPLP, 2024). However, in areas such as the region of Latgale and the City of Narva, a considerable number of local newspapers are still in demand.

The media landscape of Latgale is characterized by a large proportion of regional outlets. This both broadens the regional environment and makes it fragmented. Latgale has several equally strong players providing content in Latvian and Russian: 16 internet news portals, nine press publications, six radio stations, and two regional television stations. The cities of Latgale-Daugavpils and Rezekne have several media outlets working exclusively in Russian (KANTAR, 2022). Compared with Latgale, Narva's media environment is less diverse, but local outlets still play an important role. Narva has five Russian-language newspapers. Across the wider region of Ida-Virumaa, which includes Narva, there are 13 newspapers that are published in Estonian or Russian (Kõuts-Klemm, 2024).

And while these media platforms primarily focus on regional developments, they also provide broader news content. Although official statistics are lacking, observations since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine suggest that more Russian-speaking individuals in Latvia and Estonia have turned to less regulated or unregulated platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Telegram. This shift likely reflects a desire for additional perspectives and independent assessments, with many now seeking content not only in Russian but also in English and/or Ukrainian. The trend may also be linked to the decision made by both states in February 2022 to prohibit the retransmission of television channels and websites originating from the Russian Federation in order to limit the spread of Russian propaganda (NEPLP, 2022; Whyte, 2022).

Despite these similarities, Latvia and Estonia have taken notably different paths in shaping their media policies toward Russian-speaking audiences. Latvia has moved toward integrating Russian-language speakers into Latvian-language media. This is most visible in public broadcasting, where the planned discontinuation of Russian-language content by 2026 reflects a broader strategy to protect the national information space, strengthen Latvian-language media, and promote high-quality local content (SEPLP, 2024). Although the decision has sparked criticism from Latvian private Russian-language outlets, which argue that removing Russian-language media may reduce access to reliable information for older audiences and increase their vulnerability to Russian propaganda. The debate remains unresolved, with both sides citing national security as a key concern (Ministry of Culture, 2023; NEPLP, 2024; State Chancellery, 2024a).

Estonia, on the other hand, has opted for a dual-language approach. A central development was the launch of the Estonian-Russian language public television channel ETV+ in September 2015. The decision (Šein, 2021) was strongly influenced by Russia's unlawful annexation of Crimea in March 2014, which violated Ukraine's sovereignty and endangered international security. Although ETV+ initially struggled to attract a wide audience and faced skepticism from Russian-speaking viewers, its credibility and viewership have grown over time (Kantar Emor, 2025). In February 2022, the Estonian government allocated additional funding to the Ministry of Culture for 2022-2025, with the explicit aim of supporting private Russian-language outlets. By providing financial support to independent Estonian Russian-language media, the state seeks to ensure that the Russian-speaking population is well-informed through credible channels, thus reducing susceptibility to propaganda (Kõuts-Klemm, 2024).

In Latvia, including in the field of commercial media, integration and the fight against propaganda take place on the basis of the Latvian language. This means that Latvian Russian language media can apply for support from the Media Support Fund to produce and offer content in Latvian (Society Integration Fund, 2025).

Identifying the risk perceptions of residents living near the border with Russia is an important task for predicting future governmental actions in Latvia, as well as for contributing to quality media practices and a secure information environment both in Latgale and Latvia as a whole. Similar concerns have been observed in Narva, where the local population living directly on the border with Russia faces comparable challenges of information security and social cohesion. In both cases, targeted measures could help to reduce the spread of propaganda and disinformation, mitigate social divisions, and prevent the emergence of prejudices or stereotypes.

A Sense of Security

Military threats are among the most immediate and tangible factors shaping society's perception of security. In the social sciences, security refers to a state's ability to safeguard its core values and protect society from both visible and invisible threats, including intimidation and violence (Tu et al., 2024). Barry Buzan's

theory (Buzan et al., 1998), later developed by the Copenhagen and Paris schools, broadens the concept of security beyond the military sphere to include political, economic, societal, and environmental dimensions. This makes it a valuable framework for examining how the media shape public perceptions of security.

The 2024 study on Latvia showed that the formation of threat perception and a sense of security in society was closely linked to ethnic identity, media consumption, and regional context. Threat perception and the sense of security did not necessarily always appear together or in only one form—the same person might perceive an external threat but still felt safe. For example, those Latvians who trusted NATO and Latvia's defense capabilities felt secure even when they perceived Russia as a threat. In contrast, the Russian-speaking population had less trust in Latvia's defense capabilities. The study also revealed that the consumers of Russian-language media also perceived Russia as less of a threat, and threat perception was lower in regions with a higher proportion of Russian-speaking population (Pupcenoks et al., 2024).

Modern security is not viewed solely through a military lens. It encompasses a broader range of elements, requiring the coordination and integration of military, political, economic, environmental, social, cultural, and judicial sectors (Lejiņš & Bleiere, 1996). The media can play a central role in this process by framing certain issues, such as terrorism, migration, cyber threats etc., as matters of security. The core of securitization theory remains relevant, offering a framework for understanding how ordinary issues become securitized as threats, and conversely, how security issues may be normalized or desecuritized (Andžans, 2023).

Since regaining independence from the USSR in 1991, the Baltic States have been primary targets of Russian information influence campaigns. Over the decades, these efforts have included persistent attempts to discredit the countries internationally, manipulate historical narratives, and exert influence over business, the economy, media, and politics (Jurāns, 2024; Juurvee & Mattiisen, 2020). Concerns of security began consciously shaping their integration policies, partly to mitigate potential security risks. These risks were often linked to the presence of the Russian-speaking population in both countries, which was sometimes perceived as a potential "fifth column" capable of undermining national stability (Juurvee & Mattiisen, 2020).

Research shows that prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, securitization of Russia in Latvia was predominantly executed by security-related entities, state institutions, and politicians, and remained relatively moderate (Andžans, 2023). Since February 2022, securitization has markedly intensified, with a much broader spectrum of actors involved, including media organizations, private enterprises, and members of civil society; in both the media and politics, framing has emerged that suggests some members of the Russian-speaking population may not be loyal to the Latvian State (Schulze & Pupcenoks, 2025). In this context, issues such as language of instruction in schools, removal of Soviet war monuments, and media consumption have come to be treated as security issues. For example, a legislative amendment now requires residents who are citizens of Russia and Belarus to prove their proficiency in the Latvian language to extend their residence permits.

In Estonia, similar trends can be observed. The Estonian state has removed Soviet war monuments from public spaces (Tralla et al., 2022) and initiated a transition to Estonian-language of instruction in schools started in 2024. By 2030, all levels of education are planned to be conducted only in Estonian (Nael & Wright, 2022).

Over these years, academic research on securitization has grown. In Latvia, research was made on threat perception by Latvian residents (Bērziņa, 2016, 2018), subjective security perception (Ozolīna et al., 2021), as well as the impact of media consumption on threat perception and security perceptions (Pupcenoks et al., 2024).

In Estonia, research has been regular on the public opinion and state security (starting from 2001, financed by the Ministry of Defense and resulting in a number of publications), there are several research institutions that monitor the situation constantly (Kasearu et al., 2024).

THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Risk Perception and Media Use

One of the foundational works on the media and risk perception states that risk perception means to subjectively assess the possibility of danger in uncertain situations (Sjöberg et al., 1998). One of the core

arguments of risk perception is that of an inherent part of thinking. An efficient risk-estimating cognitive system is thus an important part of an evolutionary successful psychological setup (Wahlberg & Sjöberg, 2000). Media coverage plays a critical role in these debates, influencing public opinion, risk perceptions, and acceptance (Balli & Sebi, 2025). Importantly, risk perception is the final determinant of behavior, which explains why most studies focus on perceived risk rather than actual risk (Zhang et al., 2022). Researchers found that risk consists of both cognitive and affective dimensions: perceived susceptibility and severity fall under cognitive risk perception, while affective risk perception concerns individuals' worry or anxiety of a risk happening to them (Loewenstein et al., 2001; Shim & You, 2015; Zhang et al., 2022). Perceptions of information draw heavily upon persons' already existing views (Wahlberg & Sjöberg, 2000). This indicates that our understanding of information is significantly influenced by our pre-existing beliefs. Emotional reactions and threat perceptions could be strengthened or weakened by the specific characteristics of the threat itself and the way it is communicated. The characteristics such as perceived threat intensity, influence, and familiarity are among the most important characteristics. Media, e.g., newspapers, radio, and television, serve as a bridge between scientific, public, and political realms, amplifying perceived risks and shaping public debates (Bally & Sebi, 2025). Perceived threat, coping style, and misinformation influenced media use and distress more than direct exposure, with higher threat perceptions driving social-oriented media use and stronger negative emotions (Vozab et al., 2023).

Many studies have discussed the role of the media in perception of risk in the context of the social amplification of risk, which entails the process of intensifying or attenuating signals during the transmission of information (de Brito et al., 2020; Xu, 2021). Research shows that higher familiarity may produce an undervaluation of the risk because of the normalization of its presence in people's lives. Similarly, higher dread might cause an overvaluation of a threat by eliciting instinctive and negative emotional reactions (Vacondio et al., 2021). Individuals are more likely to perceive risks as lower if they trust the media that cover security issues. Conversely, mistrusting the media can lead to higher risk perceptions (Xu, 2021). One of the latest research studies on risk theory argues for the use of the term risk information because risk only arises from the human mind, thus risk information plays a crucial role in helping individuals to pursue benefits while avoiding harm, weigh opportunities against potential threats, and make well-informed decisions amid uncertainty. The presence of risk not only influences how people think but also significantly shapes their actions (Lu, 2025).

Media Dependency Theory and Trust in the Media

This study focuses on security risk perception associated with behavior impacted by MDT (Ball-Rokeach, 1985, 1998; Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976), which posits that the influence of media on individuals intensifies with their reliance on media to fulfil informational, social, or emotional needs, thus regulating and impacting perceptions and beliefs about themselves and society upon media exposure. MDT argues the original tripartite audience-the media-society is divided into macro (i.e., structural dependency relations between audiences, the mass media, political systems, and other social institutions) and micro (i.e., an asymmetrical effect from individuals' needs and goals being controlled by social and media institutions) levels. Ball-Rokeach identifies three types of media dependency, each with two subtypes, arguing that reliance on media grows when environmental ambiguity increases (Ball-Rokeach, 1985).

In behavior studies, prior research has shown a positive relationship between media attention and behavioral change. The results show that a frequent media exposure-independent of how dependent individuals claim to be-correlates with greater engagement in protective behaviors (Ho et al., 2015). Media messaging can shape self-protective actions by triggering emotional reactions (such as fear or anxiety) as well as cognitive processes, including how people assess risk. The informational media use is an instance of how people achieve the understanding goal: they use media to understand the world around and make decisions accordingly (Zhang & Zhong, 2020). Emotional responses have been found to drive important health-related protective behaviors (Garfin et al., 2022). Researchers have stated that for media and war studies, mostly gratification theory and media dependency are used during war situations (Lowrey, 2004; Melki & Kozman, 2019; So, 2012; Vincent & Basil, 1997). It should be noted that dependency on the media and usage of the media have been shown to be empirically distinct. They correlate positively but are explained by different sets of factors (Jung, 2017; Morton & Duck, 2001). In this research, media dependency could be especially valuable

for exemplifying the structural determination of media use in contexts where people have access to different media systems (e.g., minority communities or people living in border areas between two culturally distinct countries).

Nowadays, MDT is used to explore information seeking, collection development, and service dissemination in information science, recognizing the importance of interdisciplinary links (Mehrad & Yousefi, 2018), such as relying on mobile social media to exchange crisis-related information; for communication in crisis situations (Wang et al., 2024); how dependency on social media affects information verification behaviors and why adolescents might be more susceptible to misinformation during crisis events (Irwanto, 2025); as well as in various contexts, including mental and physical health, such as how the situation surrounding the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic influenced people's media dependency and the likelihood of sharing information, opinions, and feelings on social media (Jung et al., 2025).

Ball-Rokeach (1985) delineates three major goals that define individual media use. The goal of understanding is oriented either towards the social world (understanding and learning about social world or community) and the self (learning about the self). The goal of orientation refers to getting information for specific tasks and behavior: action orientation refers to gaining information for decision making and practical actions in everyday life, while interaction orientation refers to getting information on how to behave or talk to other people in various situations (e.g., how to behave on a job interview). The goal of play refers to escapism, entertainment, or relaxation, which can be either social or solitary (Vozab et al., 2023). It further assumes that the impact of media messages on audience perceptions is a function of how dependent audiences are on mass media as sources of goal satisfaction (Gong, 2021).

Melki and Komzan (2019), examining the theoretical frameworks of media dependency and selective exposure during the Syrian war, have used MDT by emphasizing that as uncertainty in one's environment intensifies—whether due to conflict, crisis, or instability—individuals are more likely to turn to the media for guidance. Reliance grows as people seek to reduce ambiguity and threats, making media a key resource in crises.

Research shows that shocking war coverage heightens threat perceptions early on, but over time people become desensitized, developing threat fatigue and compassion fatigue. This raises questions about the media's ability to meet public needs during prolonged conflict (Melki & Kozman, 2019). Therefore, media dependency should not be understood solely as an interaction between individuals and media systems; rather, it is constituted and conditioned by the broader structures and dynamics of the social system.

METHODOLOGY

The present study used two methods: focus group discussions, supplemented by a questionnaire survey on risk perception. The focus groups were guided by MDT focusing on structural dependency as an important determinant of individuals' media dependencies as capacity of individuals to attain their goals upon the information resources of the media system (Ball-Rokeach, 1985): thus leading to *cognitive* (opinions and attitudes toward media and media consumption), *affective* (perceptions of security threats, risk interpretation, and feelings of fear and insecurity in border areas), and *behavioral* effects (actions taken in response to media exposure) of media use.

The theory of securitization was considered, paying attention to securitization actors and functional actors. In addition, the focus group members also completed a survey in which they were asked to evaluate security risks addressed in media content and information evaluation.

The method of focus group discussion has been selected for the research because it allows for qualitative in-depth information. Latvia's border cities and towns were selected for the research (Daugavpils, Rezekne, and Zilupe), since the study assumed that in the border areas of the neighboring aggressor, war can be perceived in more existential terms. The places were chosen taking into account the distance of the exact location from the border, see [Table 1](#): one town near the border of Russia, and the others approximately 30-40 km from the Russian or Belarusian border.

Table 1. Distance from the border

Focus group discussion place	Distance to the Russian or Belarusian border
Zilupe	3 km from the border with Russia
Daugavpils	35 km from the border with Belarus
Rezekne	38 km from the border with Russia

Five focus group discussions were conducted (in total 5-7 respondents in each group) among residents from urban and rural areas in Latgale region, with the respondents with Latvian as the main spoken language in the family and those with Russian as the main spoken language in the family. It was important to include both language groups, as this allows for a more precise understanding of the role of the media, since different language groups tend to use different media. The discussions for each group were implemented separately. The focus groups included 32 participants (17 women and 15 men), aged between 18 and 65, to capture a diverse range of life experiences. Factors such as age, gender, ethnic background, language, and occupation were considered to ensure maximum social and demographic diversity.

The focus group discussions were coded using the MAXQDA program, applying structural coding to extract data relevant to the specific RQs, which were structured based on the determinants of individuals' dependency on the media system. According to the structural coding analysis, in which segments of data were preceded by a particular RQ from the study and followed by its related structural code (Saldaña, 2009), the main concepts of focus groups were highlighted: *a sense of security, goals of media use, and its impact, information sources about security, and the role of the media in building trust in the media and government.*

After the focus group discussions, the respondents were asked to fill in a questionnaire. Using the Likert scale and answer options from totally agree to totally disagree (1-7), the respondents assessed statements on risk perception based on cognitive and affective criteria: information gathering and the need for media content on security issues at local, national and international level; trust to government officials in the context of security issues and evaluation of risk perception of potential military threat. But as the correlations were not significant, the decision was not to use the data in this research article as supportive data, except for the data on perception of the external threat.

Comparative insights are given based on Estonian data that were derived from the interviews with inhabitants of the border City of Narva from the first few weeks of the start of the full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022. It allows us to show the complexities of the war perceptions in border areas, obtained from Russian-speaking minorities in Europe. The data were collected in the framework of a research project analyzing Estonia's Russian-speakers' perceptions of the war and willingness to defend the country (Kasearu et al., 2022).

RESULTS

Perception of Security

In the interviews, Latvian participants from border regions named state and political security as the most important security concepts associated with security, which was characterized by the concepts of stability and secure borders, emphasizing the role of state institutions and international organizations in ensuring security, for example, NATO and the European Union. Security is also understood as an aspect of broader human freedom—a democratic state system and freedom of speech, compared with other countries.

Personal security and internal stability—physical security, mental security, and personal protection—are associated with being physically in a safe environment; the safety of family and children is also important, especially when outside the home. Family security is considered an important component of the overall sense of security. However, social and economic security is associated with stability, economic security, work, and income; thus, economic security is important both individually and nationally.

The issue of security is brought up when thinking about the global situation and external threats, where the focus is on pandemics and war. The threat is associated with a lack of information and ignorance: *Security is at risk if it is not clear how to act in a crisis situation* (R5). However, the role of state institutions is to provide a sense of security: *security exists when state institutions operate effectively* (R1); *the presence of the police creates a sense of security* (R4).

The interviews with residents in the Estonian border City of Narva were conducted immediately after the start of the war in Ukraine. However, security was not manifested as a topic in the interviews. The unexpected start of the war caused confusion among the interviewees and difficulties to label the event: *if it is a war, I am against the war (O5), a dictator invaded the Ukrainian territory, nobody knows why (O13); there was a domestic war; but it was silly to intervene for Russia; if it was necessary to intervene, it has to be done even earlier; however, Putin needs to be stopped because there will be other countries as the next (O1)*. The cautious expressions about the event were explained by the merging of information sources from Russia's media, domestic sources, and international news providers. Even after the real start of the war, the feeling of insecurity or safety was not actualized among the interviewees from Narva (Kasearu et al., 2022).

Structural Dependency Relations

Focus group participants consistently distinguished among several categories and determinants of media when discussing their goals of media use. These included

- (a) public service media, such as Latvian public service media (LSM), commercial news outlets (e.g., Delfi.lv and Tvnet.lv), and social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube),
- (b) local and regional media (e.g., Gorod.lv and Chayka), and
- (c) foreign-language and foreign-origin media, including Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian sources.

These distinctions were articulated in relation to participants' goals in seeking information in mass media. Respondents emphasized several key goals underlying their media use: maintaining a sense of safety and being well informed; protecting family members and property; reducing uncertainty in situations of heightened risk; distinguishing credible information from misinformation; and preserving psychological stability.

The focus group participants mentioned various types of media and specific platforms to obtain information—public media (mainly television programs) and commercial media (mainly news websites). An important source for information (for security issues as well) was local media—local news websites in Latvian and Russian. Other typical sources for information about security issues were social media: TikTok and Facebook, official information on the Defense Ministry website, informative e-mails from state and educational institutions, information from colleagues, and personal contacts. Thus, media are relied upon for security-related information, crisis clarification, and institutional guidance (e.g., e-mails from schools, municipalities, and state bodies). In contrast, social media are perceived as emotionally charged and prone to misinformation, for example,

R6 (Daugavpils, Russian): On social media, I'd say there's more, let's say, social tension there. There's a divide, yes, along linguistic lines, along political lines. It's very visible there. Even Ukrainian comrades are participating in the discussions. It's very visible. Tension.

No alternative information system fully replaces the functions of public and commercial media, particularly in crisis contexts.

Public service media were characterized as of high quality, especially by the groups of ethnic Latvians:

R1 (Rezekne, Latvian): When I felt threatened, felt threatened that something could happen, I guess the first thing I did was just plainly looking in the search engine, put in these keywords, yeah, and then it also took me to some LSM information, then it was probably the same Facebook, yeah, some kind of current platform.

At the same time, a respondent in Russian said that:

R6 (Daugavpils, Russian): I would also like to add that if we take the public media, then they are initially, let's say, focused on a certain point of view of conveying government information, yes. That is, you can no longer expect 100% objective information there.

The analysis of focus groups interviews showed that basic drivers for media dependency were described in the context of two media systems: Latvian and Russian. And thus, interest in how the specific topic is presented in the context of different media systems.

Participant R5 (Rezekne, Latvian) said that:

And usually, I have looked into these Russian-produced programs out of interest, and they are usually very, very aggressive, very pushy with information. And then those people who use this information, they then report that there will be danger soon, Latvia will soon fall, something will soon attack there.

R6 (Daugavpils, Russian): I do, but I'm just interested in it. I go through Delfi every day. I watch Russian news. Well, it's just interesting. Well, it doesn't always take a lot of time. Well, to form some kind of, I don't know, impression of the situation.

R2 (Rezekne, Latvian): When I also have to deal with people who directly use this information not from Latvia. Yes, unfortunately, I have to admit that when, yes, the concerns there are different. And, yes, of course, the presentation of that information is also completely different, in a different way.

Respondent R1 and respondent R2 demonstrates a comparative goal of media use: although they primarily identify with the Latvian media environment, they report deliberate, interest-driven exposure to Russian-produced news content to understand its framing and effects.

This practice reflects the broader context of Latvia's media system, which is similar in Estonia—it has developed as a democratic, values-based journalistic environment following the transition from state-controlled Soviet media to a pluralistic media system.

Also, other participants point on structural context: access to both Latvian and Russian media persists even with avoidance, and when audiences are dissatisfied with this media system, they increasingly turn to social media as an alternative source of information, for example, R4 (Daugavpils, Russian):

I have generally stopped, probably, concentrating so much and watching, reading some political media, because if you cannot influence this situation, well, it is like unnecessary frustration and so on. Basically, the information that comes in regarding politics is found through TikTok. But I look, and different, that is, and the difference is very, very noticeable. In Latvian and in Russian, the same article is presented differently (...).

This structural condition highlights how media dependency in both countries is shaped not only by individual choice but also by historically embedded media infrastructures and linguistic pluralism—widespread availability of cross border broadcasting, and the pervasive role of media content in national languages and Russian; Russian-language content remains structurally accessible regardless of intentional media avoidance.

The affective and behavioral consequences of media dependency are particularly evident in participants' accounts of emotional reactions and precautionary actions triggered by media messages. For instance, R2 (Daugavpils, Russian) describes experiencing intense anxiety and restlessness in response to media coverage, which directly prompted concrete preparatory behaviors, such as stockpiling essential items. This illustrates how emotionally charged information can translate into behavioral responses aimed at reducing perceived risk.

For example, R2 (Daugavpils, Russian):

Since I am an emotional and very restless person, all these messages have a very strong effect on me. I worry, and I am anxious, and I grab the same boxes and candles, and matches, and so on. That is, it has a very strong effect on me. Well, negatively, let's say, in a negative way.

Similarly, R7 (Daugavpils, Russian) reflects on divergent patterns of media reception within their social environment, noting that uncritical acceptance of alarming messages contributes to heightened nervousness

and collective anxiety. These accounts demonstrate how media narratives not only shape individual emotional states but also influence the broader social atmosphere, reinforcing perceptions of insecurity:

R7 (Daugavpils, Russian): Some don't take it into account, some analyze everything, understand, and some listen and believe that yes, indeed, everyone is sick, yes, indeed, everyone will go to war, yes, and something else. Well, and therefore the surrounding environment, yes, it becomes nervous and, of course, it mainly affects, of course.

When asked whether the media accurately reflects the reality of security conditions, a respondent who lives very close to the border states that

S1 (Zilupe, Latvian): I think not, because I hope that the state is worried about our emotional state, and therefore does not tell the whole truth, so as not to create unnecessary reasons for anxiety.

The statement of respondent S1 reflects the perception of the media system as a normatively regulated system of social action, in which the provision of information on security issues is perceived as consciously controlled. The assumption that the state "does not reveal the whole truth" to protect the emotional state of society indicates the perception of the media as a tool not only for informing, but also for emotional regulation.

At the same time, a critical attitude towards the media system, questioning its ability to accurately reflect reality and possible political or economic influence on media content:

V1 (Zilupe, Russian): It does not always reflect the reality of the situation. Again, everything is bought!

Similarly, respondents stress tiredness of using media to get information and confirm opposite media effects over time, initial high dependency during crisis followed by fatigue:

R3 (Rezekne, Latvian): When the Russian invasion started, I took it very painfully. I tried to watch all the news as much as possible, but it was half a year, a year at most. After that, I started to get tired of it.

Guided by MDT, the coding and categorization of responses focused on identifying the main goals of media use, as well as perceptions of threat within the media system context, thereby revealing respondents' access to and engagement with both Latvian and Russian media systems. Participants reported daily routines of consuming various media sources, including Russian outlets, to stay informed about potential military threats. These routines reflected goal-oriented media behavior, driven by a desire to remain aware and to compare perspectives across media systems. Interviews with border city residents in Estonia revealed clear relationships between media trust and support for defense policy, where the Russian-speakers who followed and trusted the media published in Estonia perceived the threat from the Russian Federation similarly to the Estonian language population and supported the aims of Estonian defense policy (Kasearu et al., 2022).

Evaluation of Risk of External Threat

After the focus group discussions, the participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire to evaluate the risk of external threat. It needs to be mentioned that annual public opinion surveys in Estonia asking about the external threat have been showing that the external threat derives from different sources for different language groups—while Estonian-speakers have been perceiving Russia as the main threat to their security, for Russian-speakers it has been hard to believe that any threat derives from the Russian Federation (Kasearu et al., 2022) (Table 2).

The Latvian data reveal a nearly even split between the respondents who perceive a high likelihood of an external threat and those who do not. Specifically, 47% of the respondents expressed some level of agreement (either total, full, or partial) with the statement. Conversely, 44% expressed disagreement (partial, full, or total). A small proportion (9%) remained neutral, indicating uncertainty or ambivalence. It is important to stress that the largest proportions of responses were clustered in the moderate categories: "partially agree"

Table 2. Likelihood of an external threat for the respondents from border regions in Latvia (N = 32)

	Valid percentage (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)
Totally agree	9.4	9.4
Agree	12.5	21.9
Partially agree	25.0	46.9
Neither yes nor no	9.4	56.3
Partially disagree	25.0	81.3
Disagree	15.6	96.9
Totally disagree	3.1	100
Total	100	

and “partially disagree” (each comprising 25%). This suggests that, while there is concern among the population, it is often tempered and not held with extreme certainty.

It is important to add that when threats are discussed without being linked to media use, their likelihood is evaluated neutrally; however, once media coverage is introduced into the discussion, the perceived risk increases immediately.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

People tend to become more dependent on the media when they face high levels of uncertainty or ambiguity, or when other sources (e.g., interpersonal communication and institutions) are insufficient to meet their goals for information. The study showed that media dependency was not uniform but was shaped by structural conditions, personal goals, and emotional needs. Residents of the border area have access to domestic and neighboring media provision, reinforcing structural media dependency through continuous access to different information.

The focus group discussions confirmed the MDT view that structural conditions, such as geographical location, state institutions, and the socio-economic environment, define the boundaries of the security concerns that people may connect to media use. In other words, these broader political and social frameworks shape which risks are perceived as possible, relevant, or pressing when people think about the media and security. This means that individual dependency on the media depends less on personal traits and more on structural dependency—the interconnectedness between the media and other social systems.

Findings from focus group discussions from the border region context support the assumption that structural media dependencies directly and indirectly affect societal processes like mechanisms of control, emotional and social stability, adaptive change, and individual cognitive development. Access to multiple media systems (mainly Latvian and Russian) shapes not only information practices but also everyday social interactions, emotional responses, and strategies how to avoid conflicts.

However, a more sophisticated analysis is needed to determine what types of media people rely on. Those living in border areas and exposed to content from multiple media systems and information spaces demonstrate distinct patterns of risk perception linked to media use.

Answers to Research Questions

RQ1. How are the risk perception and goals of mass media use related to each other?

A survey conducted in 2024 found that concerning military threat, 36.1% of the respondents felt safe because Latvia is protected by NATO. Significant aspects that strengthened the respondents’ sense of security were the belief that Latvia was not under direct military threat (28.3%) and the fact that Latvia invested in defense and security (24.3%) (State Chancellery, 2024b).

The same low level of safety was perceived among the Estonian population, as the risk of having war in the country was increasing year by year, according to public opinion (Kantar Emor, 2025). The population saw the Russian Federation as the main aggressor, while it differed between Estonian-speakers (77% perceived it as a clear threat) and Russian-speakers (32%) (Kantar Emor, 2025).

The influence of the mass media on the perception of military threats is not direct but mediated and contextually and structurally determined. Perception is structured by the individual's social environment, life experience and ethical belonging.

Across discussions, respondents emphasized goals closely aligned with dependency relations under conditions of perceived risk and uncertainty: maintaining a sense of safety and being informed, protecting family members and property, reducing uncertainty, distinguishing credible information from misinformation, and sustaining psychological stability.

These goals initially resulted in high media dependency during the early stages of crisis, when uncertainty was greatest. Over time, however, prolonged exposure to threatening and repetitive information led to dependency fatigue, reflected in emotional exhaustion and selective avoidance of news. This research showed that, because the participants in the focus group discussion lived near the Russian or Belarusian border in Latvia, the common attitude to the potential threat risk was not rated as high, and supported the results of a survey made in 2024. The threat risk was perceived as present but not having a direct impact on border area residents.

The interviews carried out in the Estonian border City of Narva revealed a clear difference in stress levels between those who consumed only Russia's media compared with those who also consumed Western media, including Estonian media (Kasearu et al., 2022). The second group of interviewees was more confused, since different media provided controversial narratives, as Russia's media wrote about the special operation for the denazification of Ukraine, while other media channels stressed the illegitimate war against an independent state.

In the context of war, societal division based on affiliation with the Latvian and Russian media information systems becomes particularly significant. Differences between Latvian- and Russian-speaking audiences in Latvia and Estonia demonstrate how competing narratives significantly influenced stress levels and perceptions of security, thereby deepening polarization within the information space. In addition, individual differences affected dependence on information and the media. Thus, the use of the media, especially with sensational or negative content that challenged the identities and integrity of media users, intensified the perceived threat.

RQ2. How do inhabitants of the border area choose and use different media sources to meet their information needs about potential military threats?

Overall, the research demonstrates how access to multiple media systems results in divergent threat perceptions, reinforces social polarization, and influences everyday communication practices. It also underscores the role of the media system in structuring how reality, risk, and national security are interpreted at the local level. Importantly, the study shows how media use extends beyond individual consumption and shapes collective discourse. Focus groups showed that individuals who rely on Russian-produced information reproduce narratives of potential danger, such as the idea that Latvia is under immediate threat or facing collapse.

Participants articulated cognitive, affective, and behavioral goals. At the same time, many reported emotional fatigue and weariness toward media (especially, news) consumption, a response that is important in the context of the prolonged crisis following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Despite this fatigue, participants continued to engage in behavioral strategies like as maintaining readiness and preparing for worst-case scenarios.

These findings support MDT in relation to how audiences choose and use media to satisfy their goals; in this case, the media amplifies threats, prompting the audience to take protective behavior, as well as realizing some specific way of interaction with the media content. The research carried out innovates the media dependency approach, bringing it into the context of the most serious crime against humanity that a war definitely is. The war context and geographical location–border area–indicate several nuances that MDT has to take into consideration to be empirically valid.

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