

Master's Programme "Disinformation and Societal Resilience"

"The world is made up of four elements: Earth, Air, Fire and Water. This is a fact well known even to Corporal Nobbs. It's also wrong. There's a fifth element, and generally it's called Surprise."

(Sir Terry Pratchett, author of the Discworld fantasy book series)

Surprises come in many forms - the unpleasant ones that threaten our safety and well-being, but also the pleasant ones - the genuine creativity of people with a cause, the communities that come together in times of hardship, and the amazing (academic) adventures we have started here.

The anti-disinfo community has experienced something similar to what coronavirus researchers experienced in 2020: a burst of interest and opportunities. As researchers and teachers of media and information literacies, we welcome the sense of urgency in building information resilience in order to protect democracies. The wicked problem of information disorders will continue to be amplified by bad actors, technological advancements, geopolitical issues, and human cognitive biases being expertly exploited for profit. This is why, in the master's programme "Disinformation and societal resilience", we aim not only to teach but also to empower an international network of professionals who are able to analyse, strategize, plan interventions, and build resilience in those around them. Enforcing the anti-disinfo community with evidence-based tools, interdisciplinary analytical lenses, and knowledgeable students is our contribution towards more information integrity. This exhibition is a close-up of the first wave of the programme's students, their take on the information reality, as well as their personal perception of the world and all of its elements.

Most importantly, don't become evil :)

Maia Klaassen
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UNIVERSITY OF TARTU

Institute of Social Studies

EVA LADVA

Estonia



Describe your studies here in one word.

THERAPEUTIC

Why are disinformation and resilience topics important for society?

Disinformation has always been there and will be there until the end of humankind. We lie and manipulate, and sometimes, it helps us to survive, no doubt. However, disinformation is spread uncontrollably nowadays as technology makes it easy and cost-effective. Building resilience is necessary for trust. All manipulations hurt most painfully trust - both on personal and societal level. Therefore, correcting disinformation and demanding responsibility is very important.

Before and after studying in Tartu – what's changed in you?

I accepted humanity the way it is more. Disinformation stems from us, and most of the time, we are the true victims of our manipulations and misconceptions. The studies helped me to name manipulation techniques I had encountered, but did not know these were actual manipulations, and this was liberating. And I stopped being afraid of Russia.

Your hobbies

Dancing, travelling, reading real books, pottery and knitting and when I have a chance - gardening. I also enjoy being just lazy.

Do you have any guilty pleasures in social media?

I sometimes enjoy reading super dirty/ vulgar comments on Delfi. These just light up a tough day and remind me that nothing and none, including myself, should ever be taken too seriously.

Your first reaction when you see disinformation in social media.

If it's well done then secret admiration, naturally. I also like to read and follow people's reactions to disinformation. We're all too easily fooled, unfortunately.

LILIT BEKARYAN

Armenia

Describe your studies here in one word.

DREAM

Why is it worth coming to study in Estonia?

As a student, you will appreciate the tranquillity of the Estonian environment, which is perfect for enhancing focus and productivity. Never before had I felt as mindful of my intellectual pursuits as I did in Estonia. Imagine studying at one of the oldest universities in Europe, where there is even history behind the cafés in the vicinity.

What advice would you give to future students in this programme?

Some may think that fighting disinformation and building resilience are skills developed over a lifetime rather than subjects you can study at university. Don't be misled by this, as this program offers much more.

The program provides a rigorous academic education. This means engaging in extensive independent research and delving into the fascinating work of other minds in the field. You will also develop versatile academic skills that will prepare you for the challenges of the academic world. Be ready to embrace this journey with all its highs and lows—it's a truly transformative experience or should I say power?



Do you ever hate-watch something?

I guess the only thing I hate -watch is the news programme on the national TV in Armenia. It provides us, Armenian citizens, with such an unrealistic picture of the country and local news that at times I feel I live in a country enjoying extremely high living standards or happiness. Like Switzerland or Norway.

Your biggest challenge while accommodating with life in Estonia.

In Estonia, smiles are reserved for genuine reasons. It speaks of the sincerity and authenticity of the Estonian people. So, if an Estonian smiles at you, take it as a compliment, it means you have earned that smile.

MELITA PHACHULIA

Georgia



Describe your studies here in one word.

RESILIENT

What do you plan to do with your knowledge back in your home country?

Right now, my country, Georgia, is in an existential fight against Russian imperialism. Russia, with the support of an illegitimate pro-Russian regime, is attempting to establish total control over Georgia. The halted EU accession process, disinformation campaigns against the West, rigged elections, brutal violence against peaceful protesters, undemocratic laws, and unconstitutional policies all constitute a declared war against the Georgian people and our aspiration to join the EU and NATO. With my knowledge, the best I can do is raise awareness about Georgia and strengthen the resilience of the Georgian people, which is crucial at this moment. During my studies, I have organised pro-European and anti-Russian protests, film screenings, and discussions about Georgia, and I plan to continue this work in different formats.

What advice would you give to future students in this programme?

Be bold and brave. Enjoy the programme, with its diverse courses, and make the most of it: ask questions, share your thoughts, and create something memorable.

What do you advise to definitely try out while in Estonia.

I recommend visiting Kihnu Island, which is run by women and is recognised by UNESCO for its cultural traditions, offering an authentic experience of Estonia's rural life and folklore.

Favourite places in Tartu

Möku Bar/Genialistide Club

Cruffin, Werner – for coffee, croissants, and cakes.

Lossi 36 – a university building where the majority of my courses take place.

Your first reaction when you see disinformation in social media.

Avoiding an immediate reaction. Analysing first, verifying the source, and always fact-checking information, and reporting or flagging it.

ANNA DANIELYAN

Armenia



Describe your studies here in one word.

EMPOWERING

Why are disinformation and resilience topics important for society?

Having experienced firsthand how disinformation can tear communities apart, I believe that fighting it is crucial for keeping society healthy. When we can't trust what we see and hear, we lose our ability to make good decisions together. As for resilience, it's about how we bounce back from hard times. I've seen how communities that stick together and adapt can overcome almost anything - whether it's war, environmental challenges, or social crises.

What do you plan to do with your knowledge back in your home country?

I want to build systems that actually work - where education helps people understand each other, where we can disagree respectfully, and where decisions are based on solid research rather than gut feelings. I'm especially passionate about making social sciences more accessible in my country. Having faced both conflict and economic challenges, we need good research to make smart decisions, and I want to help create spaces where this kind of work can flourish.

Your hobbies

I have a band called Dreams They Have Stolen where we write and perform our own music. The Estonian music scene has been wonderfully welcoming. Each performance feels like a new milestone as we develop our sound and connect with the local audience.

Your first reaction when you see disinformation in social media.

Over time, I've stopped just focusing on the content itself and started paying more attention to the patterns: how disinformation is framed, who it targets, and what tactics are being used. It's frustrating but also fascinating to see how manipulation works in real time and how easily it can spread.

JELENA MEDAN

Serbia

Describe your studies here in one word.

INTENSE

Why are disinformation and resilience topics important for society?

Coming from Serbia, where disinformation is frequently created and widely used to manipulate public opinion in the entire region of the Western Balkans, societal resilience is critical topic for ongoing democratic processes. In such ethnically diverse region, countering disinformation is vital for fostering mutual understanding and preventing conflicts. Teaching media literacy and encouraging critical thinking is essential for building a resilient society.

Why is it worth coming to study in Estonia?

Studying in Estonia may give you a crisp new knowledge from enthusiastic lecturers, a sense of a safe place where one can rely on the system, and an unexpected pleasure of learning how to cope with the weather challenges. And a stunning dark humour to survive it.



Your hobbies

In my free time, I enjoy reading contemporary literature, writing short fiction, and volunteering locally and intentionally. To ground myself, I usually sing or sew. Or sing while sewing.

Your favourite food and/or place in Tartu.

Barlova, a bar in beautiful Karlova district, truly international and happy place to discuss anything from current politics to the best bicycle route in Central Europe.

JORGEN MATSI

Estonia



Describe your studies here in one word.

HECTIC

Why are disinformation and resilience topics important for society?

The world is governed by/via information. Information is how we make sense of each other and the world at large. In the ever-more globalising digital world, there is strong impetus for wanting to and being able to manipulate information at macro-, meso- and micro levels of society! Hence the topics of media and journalism from the perspectives of ethics of (dis)information become more and more crucial for preservation of open democratic societies with large degree of individual freedom. All those levels of society need skills, motivation and resilience to stand against information disorders!

What advice would you give to future students in this programme?

Prepare for a wild ride - do not plan extracurricular activities for daytimes during studies. You might be able to squeeze in some hobbies in the evenings and weekends but days are for studying. The pace is fast! Also, try to get your internship set as fast as possible AND start your master's project as early as possible - the year will be over way sooner than you think.

Do you ever hate-watch or binge-watch something?

Life's too short for hate-anything. I think I last binged The Boys: Gen V but that was quite a while ago.

Do you have any guilty pleasures in social media?

I enjoy Warhammer 40k lore videos. Don't even feel guilty about it. Escapism at its finest.

ANASTASIA TSALUGELASHVILI

Georgia

Describe your studies here in one word.

PRACTICAL

Why are disinformation and resilience topics important for society?

Living in Georgia, I had long recognized the dangers of disinformation, but the pandemic truly opened my eyes to its pervasive impact. During that time, I came to understand how disinformation targets individuals directly, undermines our confidence in our values and decisions, and ultimately restricts our freedom of thought. It is critically important to build resilience against modern threats like disinformation to ensure a safe everyday life in society. Given that digital threats are here to stay, adapting to these challenges is essential for preserving a true democracy.



Why is it worth coming to study in Estonia?

Much like my fellow Georgians, Estonians face a significant amount of disinformation from our shared neighbour, Russia. For me, exploring information disorders in Estonia goes far beyond the classroom. Living in a country that, despite its small size, population and traumatic history, has managed to develop an exemplary level of resilience against disinformation continues to inspire me to this day.

Your biggest challenge while accommodating with life in Estonia.

My biggest challenge was getting used to white nights and dark days.

What do you advise to definitely try out while in Estonia.

Everyone should visit the sauna while being in Estonia.

Your first reaction when you see disinformation in social media.

I should report it!