



Interview with Siim Kulpas

Siim Kulpas has served as a Strategic Communication Adviser at the Government Office of Estonia since early 2018, focusing on building Estonia's resilience to foreign information attacks. In 2015–2018, he worked in the Ministry of the Interior as a Communication Adviser, covering topics from crisis management and border security to the Estonian Presidency of the EU Council in 2017. Prior to that, he served as a Communication Specialist in Foundation Innove. He received his Master's Degree in Communication Management from the University of Tartu in 2013.

Siim Kulpas (SK): In 2007, we had the infamous Bronze Night riots in Tallinn, when the government decided to move a Soviet statue from the city center to a bit more quiet location. In addition to what happened offline in the streets, this was the first time when another country – Estonia – was being targeted in the cyber field by another country – Russia – on this scale. This set the scene; whenever you hear cyber security experts talking about state sponsored cyber attacks, they often bring up this example.

In addition to the cyber side, there was of course the psychological and strategic communication side of the attacks. It was after those events that the government decided that this is a topic that has to be dealt with on the government level, and they hired a few strategic communication advisers to work on this at the Government Office. For the next 10 years, up until 2017, strategic communication was coordinated by one or two people at the government office. At that time, most of this work wasn't public. Back then, we referred to this as psychological defense.

As you can probably imagine, you can only do so much with one or two people. You can coordinate on a basic level between relevant ministries and agencies and conduct some projects, but that's pretty much it. But then in the end of 2017, our government decided to allocate extra funding to create a dedicated strategic communication team. This team started last March. By now, there are six of us, but by August this year, there will be nine of us in the unit. At the Government Office, the scope strategic communication is limited to the field of defense and security. We have two big goals – bolstering our society's and allies' support to Estonia's defense policies and raising the resilience to foreign information attacks. Our work doesn't only focus on the military side of defense, there is also a softer side to it. Just to bring a few examples of the attitudes we see relevant from the point of view of national security: support to NATO and EU membership; willingness to participate in voluntary work (i.e. becoming a volunteer policeman or a rescuer); trust in democratic institutions; feeling of closeness to the state. So, boosting different attitudes in that field, that's one side, and the other side is building resilience to foreign information attacks. That's where I come in. That's where media literacy comes in.

In building the overall resilience of our society to hostile information attacks – and I'm limiting this to a foreign information attacks – our work can be divided to four pillars.

Firstly, raising the awareness of our people, but also public institutions and companies, about the field of information attacks and media literacy; and build resilience. Secondly, monitoring the information sphere in order to create situational awareness and detect possible information attacks. Thirdly, reacting to the attacks, if necessary, and fourthly cooperating on an international level. When I joined the team, I had no idea how big of an issue disinformation is. It quickly became clear that building resilience to information attacks is a separate policy field. Media literacy has been a policy field for quite a time now in the EU, but it is seen as more urgent now.

Now coming to the first point I mentioned, building awareness and resilience. There I see media literacy and critical thinking more generally as basically one of the two proactive ways we can go about it. The second possible option, that is equally important, is supporting a free and independent media landscape.

I see those two areas as the only credible ways to do something about information attacks before they happen, and that's how I ended up dealing with media literacy even though I didn't expect to on my first day here at this office.

Center for Media Literacy (CML): You've now had time in your job to analyze the situation and how you see the needs. It seems that we have few tools to be proactive in terms of supporting democratic decision making and also helping build that awareness and resilience, and media literacy is one of those tools. How do you see the role of your office to support these goals?

SK: Currently in Estonia, there're quite a few players who are looking at media literacy from very different angles. For starters, we have the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture. Then we have our universities who train teachers and our libraries who work on information literacy. We have movie institutes and a movie museum, and some NGO's and teachers who are really active in media literacy... just today we had a big working group meeting; this group was just established in the last year.

In the past, everybody was pursuing their own path, and that was that. It made so much sense to bring everyone all together. So, this is something I've been slowly working on here. This has been going on in several countries for years or even decades, but in Estonia, this kind of cooperation in media literacy is pretty novel. This year in March we celebrated Estonia's first Media Literacy Week. It was a part of the EU's initiative set out in the Action Plan against Disinformation that the EU Commission and External Action Service put out last December. There they had 10 concrete steps describing how we can go about addressing disinformation on EU level, and one of them was initiating an EU wide Media Literacy Week.

People tend to get a bit allergic when you say that you need a formal working group or a policy for something, so we've taken a pragmatic approach, building partnerships by doing joint projects. That helps to build momentum, to get the habits in place that we come together every quarter, a few times a year, whatever the regularities, but we come

together, we speak, we exchange ideas, we do things together. So, I think when we have that rhythm in place, it's much easier to build something more formal and long-term on that.

CML: What's the role of your office in this work?

SK: Our office has a dual role in this – we coordinate the strategic communication efforts of Estonian ministries and agencies, but we conduct hands-on projects as well. Our office should probably not be central for media literacy work, but it is currently, and will be in the future, one of the main partners in this on the government level. I'm not the right person to say whether the Ministry of Education is the perfect place for this or Ministry of Culture, or an independent media agency, but somebody needs to own it, somebody needs to lead work on this. This is something we are yet to decide in Estonia. Currently there isn't a single ministry or institution whose portfolio is as wide as needed in order to cover the full spectrum of media literacy. Hence the approach of moving forward by doing, by practical steps; to not get tangled in political arguments.

CML: You're basically going through a change management process, where media literacy is seen as a priority. It certainly is part of your portfolio with defense and is essential. We know that when it comes down to it, defense underpins every government function since it's such an essential role of government.

Yet if everybody owns it, nobody owns it. It's the kind of topic that everybody needs to have some input into because it is important in so many different arenas. One thought is that in a sense, media literacy is a 21st century kind of challenge for governments in that governments are organized traditionally according to functional areas, but media literacy is really a topic that spans different functions and underpins different functions. So in a way, you need that networking model that applies to the Internet.

SK: I absolutely agree. For example, at today's meeting with many different stakeholders, we started by discussing practical ideas regarding next year's Media Literacy Week, and we ended up talking – among other things – about child safety online, freedom of speech, cyber hygiene, audio visual literacy et cetera. There are just so many sides to media literacy.

CML: Could you provide some perspective about what you're seeing with neighboring countries, or how media literacy fits into the defense community?

SK: I will focus more on strategic communication's role in defense and security. In the European Union, work in addressing disinformation – and enhancing media literacy as a part of it – really picked up last spring. One of the first major steps by the EU was to put out communication on disinformation, a paper that describes the problem and offers some initial solutions to it.

From there on, the EU picked up speed; for example, the latest addition to address disinformation on the EU level is something called the Rapid Alert System, which was created this March ahead of the European Parliament elections, exactly in order for countries to have a better way to exchange information about information attacks against the EU and our democratic processes.

When we talk about information attacks, you can either react or be proactive. There have been quite a lot of talks on the EU level about reacting: whether we should, for example, debunk, whether we should fact check, whether we should attribute information attacks to the attacker. For some time, the weight was on that side – the side of reacting, I would say – but more and more, I see talks on media literacy and on supporting free and independent media. So, as of last year, no serious discussion about addressing the dark side of disinformation passes without mentioning media literacy, without mentioning critical thinking, without mentioning the importance of free, professional, and independent media.

CML: Everyday citizens can be empowered to act if they acquire some of the critical thinking skills that media literacy offers, in an environment fosters a free media. That's a crucial message in terms of giving people hope.

SK: Media literacy doesn't solve everything. Unfortunately, we see that intelligent and well educated people fall for very simple psychological tricks – that's the way the human mind works. People will never become fully rational beings; we're emotional as well and that makes us vulnerable but human at the same time. But media literacy – having the tools and methods to think critically, to analyze, to ask questions, that's the basis of it all. We need to have that in place. When we don't have that, it doesn't make much sense to talk about any further steps.

CML: Yes, media literacy is foundational. It's like dental hygiene. You're never going to prevent cavities 100%, but certainly if you brush your teeth every day, you increase your chances of avoiding the cavities. Media literacy provides risk management – we're trying to increase people's capacity for increasing the chances of making better decisions.

SK: Yes. When we compare means of reacting to something and means of being proactive, then the reactive means are often politically charged to some extent. But being proactive doesn't necessarily have to be. Building resilience is something everybody agrees with. When we also look at this from a liberal and democratic point of view, then again, when you react to something, it's much more easier to overstep some boundaries, either knowingly or unknowingly, that we actually hold dear. But when building resilience to something, it's virtually impossible to go against the values we hold in such high regard.

CML: To a great extent, this represents the difference between control and censorship and empowerment and choices. The democratic faith, of course, is in the wisdom of the people and in a democratic approach, and also having faith in education as the means through which to help people be empowered to make good decisions. So, it's all kind of mixed in there, but at the same time, there's a big difference between the proactive and the reactive, and I appreciate what you're saying about how the proactive is nonpartisan. It's something that people can definitely get behind regardless of the political spectrum.

SK: It's becoming more and more important, given the changes on the political field in most democratic countries.

CML: It is easy to lose the freedoms and lose those abilities to choose. On the one hand, the technology unleashes a lot of possibilities for freedom of expression, and then voice. On the other hand, it also can foster a lot more censorship and a lot more shutting down of voices, so it's a choice on which way do democratic societies want to go.

SK: When you look at the changes that social media has brought about, then I can imagine how maybe 10 years, 15 years ago, people did not see media literacy as a high priority issue, because it might've seemed as a niche thing. But now, with everything that has happened since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia's meddling in the 2016 US presidential elections and other events in Europe, people see how social media affects each and every one of us and support the need for media literacy.

The era of technological optimism is being substituted with technological realism or even pessimism as more and more people are better aware about the downsides of technology. I think we've reached a golden era for people who work on media literacy, because it's easy to convince people why this topic is relevant, and it's very hard for anybody to seriously argue against the importance of media literacy and critical thinking in these days.

TJ: It's a time of growth and opportunity for the media literacy field. It also is, in a sense, a little bit of a dangerous time because how is media literacy being defined? How is it being used? We have to be careful not to over-promise. It's not the magic bullet, but it is a very important tool. How would you advise people on that cautionary side of how media literacy fits, and what we need to really think about in order to be sure to realize the promise of media literacy without overstepping?

SK: Well, two things pop into my mind. One is rhetorics of course, the way we talk about it. It's crucial to not oversell media literacy. I like to call it a matter of hygiene, and everybody understands this, that basic hygiene is something elementary and it doesn't solve all the problems, but removes quite a lot of risks. With media literacy, I think it should be similar. Quite a lot of media literacy work has been put on hold for too long, and the foundation for media literacy in civil society is missing. Now we're just filling the gaps that should have been filled earlier.

Secondly, finding the balance between just raising awareness and implementing, putting in place long term policies. Let's take the Media Literacy Week for example. It's a good idea, and I think it's something that definitely helps the field move forward, but this isn't an end in itself. It's just a way to draw attention to the topic, but the work itself has to be continuous. What I'm trying to say is, let's have less emphasis on gimmicks and more

