

DISINFORMATION TRENDS IN BALTICS: WAR IN UKRAINE, NATO PRESENCE AND CONTROVERSY OVER EDIBLE INSECTS

SUMMER 2023

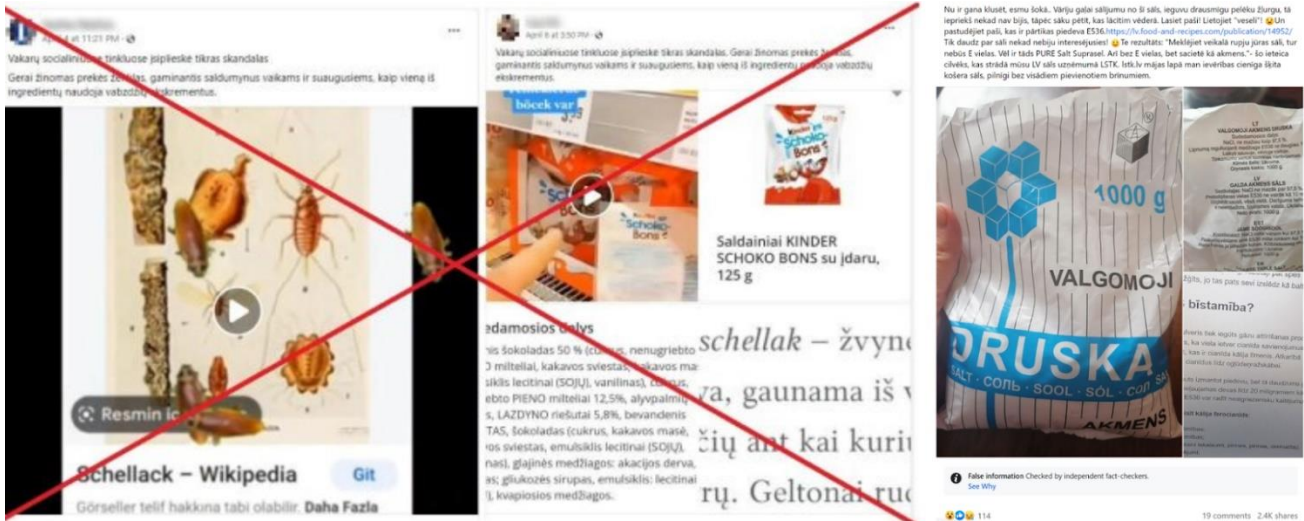
Madara Eihe

During the second quarter of the year the fact-checking efforts in the three Baltic states primarily concentrated on the war in Ukraine and the spread of Russian propaganda about it. The highest level of Ukraine-related disinformation was found in Lithuania, while Latvia and Estonia saw a decline.

Disinformation surrounding Russia's attack on Ukraine aimed to amplify Russia's achievements, undermine local authorities and scare Baltic residents. False claims labeled Ukrainians and Nazis and suggested supporting Ukraine could provoke Russian aggression against the Baltics. Additionally, false stories about Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky's drug use were again spread to disparage Western nations and their leaders.

Non-war related conspiracies and fabricated stories about the health featured heavily in the all three Baltic states. For example, false claims emerged in Latvia and Lithuania that massive earthquakes in Syria and Turkey were deliberately induced by a US-controlled "climate weapon," aiming to tarnish the reputation of US officials, local authorities, the United Nations, NATO and EU.

Health-related disinformation regarding Covid-19 and vaccines was still somewhat present, but a new wave of disinformation arose due to the EU deliberations regarding the consumption of edible insects. This led to baseless suggestions that the EU was forcing its citizens to unknowingly eat insects, resulting in fabricated claims surrounding food safety. The disinformation further expanded to target various products, ranging from candy, salt and milk to beverages like "Coca-Cola" and "Sprite".



Examples of social media posts against modern medicine and with false claims about food safety in Latvia and Lithuania.

TRENDS IN LATVIA

The trend to present Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as failed states has been long present in the disinformation scene. This time the focus is costs of living – posts depict Latvia as lacking resources for its citizens, plagued by rampant corruption, and burdened with the highest utility bills in the world.

Another distinct disinformation trend in Latvia revolves around false information concerning the Istanbul Convention which is aimed to fight gender-based violence. It has come back into political debate due to the brutal murder of a woman by her ex-partner which has shaken the country – and subsequent debate in parliament about the need to ratify the document.

For instance, the MP Ainārs Šlesers, who represents the opposition populist party “Latvia First!”, claimed that the convention would threaten regulations of what marriage is (according to Latvian Constitution, the union between man and woman). The claim was echoed by presidential candidate Uldis Pīlēns (United List), too.

Meanwhile, a popular social media influencer and aide to “Latvia First!”, Maija Armaņeva, claimed that “article 14 of the Convention mandates the inclusion of same-sex relationships and gender as matters of choice in all education programs – including kindergartens and primary schools.”

Pro-Russian Latvian politicians and “usual suspects” in the disinformation scene also engaged in spreading lies surrounding the decision to develop a new military polygon in Sēlija which would enhance the presence of NATO forces in the country. Internet trolls and some local politicians interpreted it as proof that Latvian decisions are dictated by the United States and the decision is proof that Latvia is preparing to engage in military conflict with Russia. These narratives closely resemble messages conveyed by Russian propaganda about the Baltic states.



Latvian fact-checkers from Re:Check/Re:Baltica debunked various lies spread by disinformation superspreaders about the new military training ground. It was promoted by “well known disinformation spreaders Rūdolfs Brēmanis, Aivis Vasiļevskis and Valentīns Jeremejevs, but also parliamentary leader “For Stability!” Alexey Roslikov joined in.

Another theme on Latvian disinformation scene were revived homophobic claims that homosexuality is classified as a disease, prompted by the election of foreign minister Edgars Rinkēvičs as the first openly gay head of state in the EU.

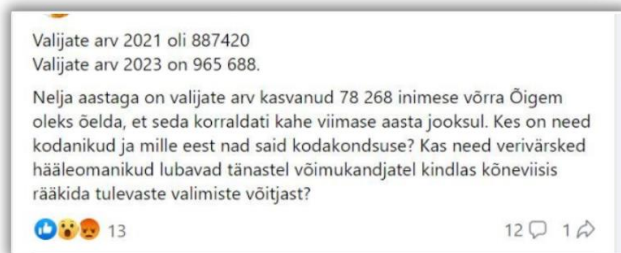
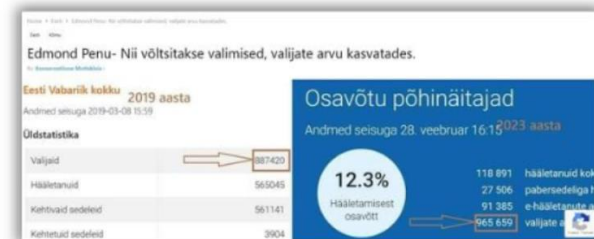
Lastly, climate change denial and the circulation of false assertions concerning the environment have also been significant themes in Latvia. For example, the Latvian Minister

of Agriculture, Didzis Šmits, stated: “It’s not science, it’s religion,” – to discredit the notion of human-induced impact on climate change.

TRENDS IN ESTONIA

In Estonia, disinformation primarily focuses on defaming external actors rather than promoting a failed state narrative. For example, false claims include allegations that bestiality has been legalized in Spain. At the same time, other posts falsely state that “the new principles of the UN alleviate punishments for sex traffickers and allow paedophilia.”

However, there is relatively less disinformation about internal affairs spread about the country itself. After the general elections in Estonia, several posts circulated claiming that the number of eligible voters had changed compared to previous elections and falsely attributed it to Ukrainian refugees who entered the country after Russia attacked Ukraine.



Numerous posts attempted to undermine the election’s legitimacy by using demographic data, falsely implying that the fluctuation in the number of voters resulted from influx of refugees from Ukraine. In reality, the variation in voters’ numbers is influenced by natural demographic processes, such as individuals becoming adults or dying.

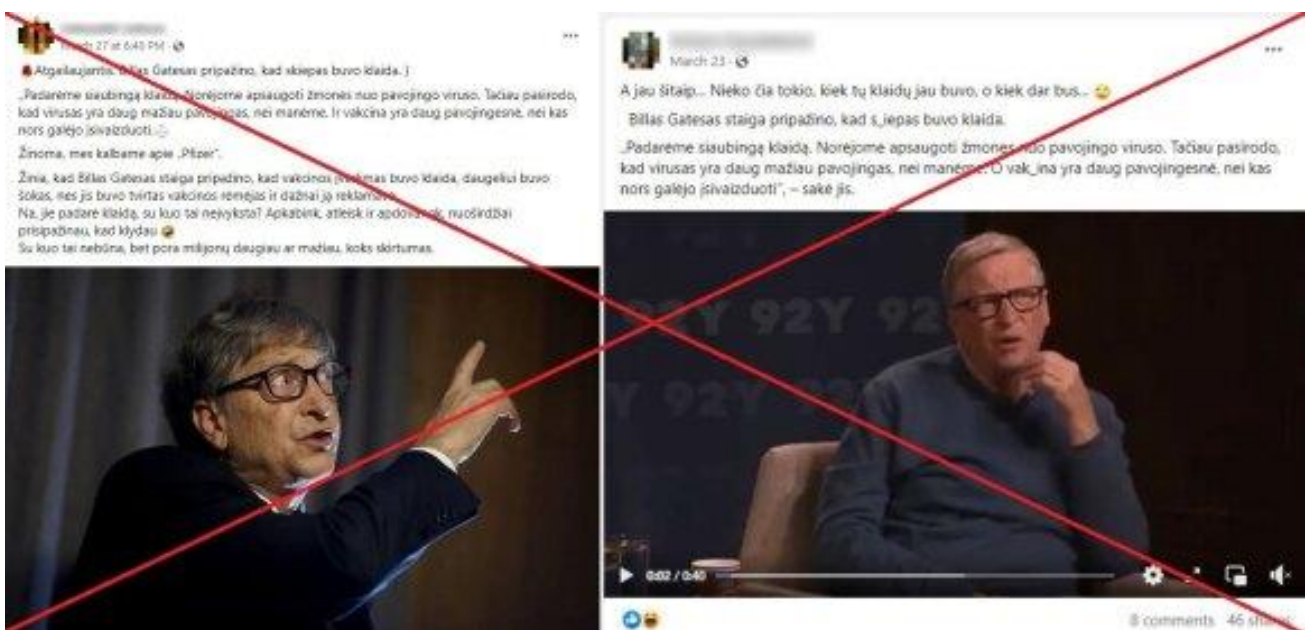
Health-related disinformation is also present in Estonia, covering topics such as C-19 vaccines and fake wonder drugs, posing challenges to public health efforts. For example,

sellers of fake illegal “wonder drug” faked an interview that featured a popular Estonian journalist and a cardiologist. The Facebook post about the interview led readers to a scam page imitating a reputable Estonian news website, where the fraudulent promotion and sale of the so-called miracle drug took place, despite its unavailability in legitimate pharmacies. Neither the journalist nor the cardiologist had participated in the fabricated interview, and they did not endorse the misleading content containing multiple health-related falsehoods that circulated as a result.

TRENDS IN LITHUANIA

During March – June, the disinformation scene in Lithuania was mostly focused on the war in Ukraine and Russian propaganda. False claims targeted groups supporting Ukraine, suggesting they exploit Lithuanian citizens and don’t send collected donations or equipment to Ukraine. There are also narratives portraying Lithuania as incapable of caring for its citizens and prioritizing “greedy” Ukraine.

Regarding climate change, a persistent narrative questions the safety and effectiveness of climate-friendly energy solutions like electric cars and wind turbines, favoring conventional fossil fuel-based alternatives. Additionally, some deny the existence of climate change, arguing that CO2 is beneficial and harmless.



Climate change deniers claim that the government shifts the responsibility of addressing climate related issues onto citizens, while the true culprits behind these problems are Western entities, figures like Klaus Schwab and Bill Gates, and the government itself.

Additionally, there has been a notable increase in the spread of AI-generated content and implausible conspiracy theories in Lithuania. These cover various topics, from hidden evidence of life on Mars to undisclosed archaeological artifacts that are supposed to challenge our understanding of history. Many of these posts and images are shared within Lithuanian groups or individual accounts, mainly from Russian websites or social media accounts associated with mysticism, paranormal and similar.

When analyzing the patterns of disinformation dissemination, a distinct trend emerges where a higher number of posts originate from Russian websites. According to Aistė Meidutė, a fact checker from delfi.lt, there are even citations from books authored by fake Russian experts (such as homeopaths and mystics). These posts contain false claims covering climate, food, health, history and conspiracy theories.

This article is part of a 2nd quarterly review on disinformation trends in the Baltic states, produced by Re:Baltica within the framework of the BECID project. The project brings together fact-checkers from all three countries (Delfi and Re:Baltica), as well as a number of universities and the Baltic Center for Media Excellence.