

# A TREND REPORT ON RUSSIA'S DISINFORMATION TACTICS TARGETING THE BALTICS

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24 of last year has changed Russia's long-term efforts to influence the information spaces of Latvia and the Baltic states with disinformation. The escalation of the war and the resulting widespread backlash against Russia's ruling regime has reinforced the Kremlin's need to break the current relationship to return to the tentative normalcy that existed before February 24. At the same time, it would be wrong to claim that because of the ongoing war, Russia's disinformation would have significantly transformed in messages because Russia's foreign policy attitudes have not changed. However, the war has provided new reasons to try to convey to the audience the messages that have been tested over the years, trying to adapt them to the current situation.

## ***USING THE BALTICS ONLY FOR RUSSOPHOBIA***

During the winter months, pro-Kremlin websites focused on the long-used message about the Baltic states' economic and political decline and the ruling power's short-sightedness, albeit presenting it in a light that has become popular since February 24 of last year. Various statistics are invoked to illustrate the economic woes of our region, mainly consumer price increases and inflation rates. However, this is not done to analyze the data but to make politically charged assumptions about us and our allies. In other words, they try to explain that the Baltic States, as members of the European Union, deserve the economic support of their allies. However, as the authors emphasize, neither the European Union nor the USA will help us. As an example of this, the "Rail Baltica" project is cited, the aim of which is to create a railway connection from the Baltic States to Central Europe. At the same time, the meaning of the project, and therefore the funding, is questioned because the railway will no longer be used to move goods produced in Russia. Accordingly, the question of whether the project will pay off has been opened. And on this basis, the assumption is made that the European Union is neither ready nor interested in providing financial support to the Baltic States because our region is just a place where big countries can get resources for themselves, not develop competition for themselves. In addition, another message is attached to it – about the general crisis in the European Union, that is, economic ties with Russia have been broken, there is no internal unity, and society is dissatisfied with the financial support of Ukraine. In the opinion of the invited expert, this will generally incite even greater divisions in the member states, encouraging individual countries to review their relations with Russia. However, Baltic states won't be among countries always betting on a Russophobic policy. This is also directly

mentioned as the leading cause of all misfortunes - the efforts of the Baltic states to limit Russia and apply sanctions against it.

This is also repeated through other publications, which try to tell that the role of the Baltic states as a Russophobic Cerberus only increased when Russia invaded Ukraine. In the vision of the pro-Kremlin websites, the Baltic states play a particular role in international politics. Our main task is to separate Russia from the rest of Europe in the interests of the United States to prevent Russia's rapprochement with Germany, France, and Italy to the extent that they could compete with the economic power of the United States. That is why, since February 24 of last year, our task has been to "bark" a lot to defame Russia and disrupt its relations with the rest of Western Europe. In short, the Baltic states exist only to destroy Russia and prevent it from existing as much as possible. To demonstrate the subjection of the Baltic region to foreign masters, it is speculated that our region is being prepared as a possible next front in the war against Russia in case Ukraine does not hold out. The authors indicate that this problem will not be solved as "delicately" as it is being solved in Ukraine, and Russia will solve this "problem" within three days.

## ***WESTERN EUROPE IS COMMANDED ONLY BY THE USA***

However, unlike in previous years, pro-Kremlin disinformation is forced to reckon with a change in attitude in Western countries, where the best example of what Russia has "done" is Germany's reaction. Accordingly, in the view of pro-Kremlin websites, the "virus" of Russophobia from the Baltic states as guinea pigs has even spread to Germany. It is accused of repeating the Baltic states' behavior, that is, losing "common sense" and the perspective of economic growth in the name of Russophobia, abandoning cheap Russian resources, and switching to other energy sources and suppliers. In addition, and this undoubtedly confuses pro-Kremlin websites, Germany has planned to divert the funds allocated to the closed coal power plants to the defense budget, which is used as an example that Russophobia is more important than decarbonization. In the footsteps of the Baltic states, they are starting to strangle their economy, reducing the competitiveness of industries and exposing entrepreneurs to the risk of bankruptcy when Russia's cheap energy resources are within reach. All these messages must be penetrated by one fundamental problem - the USA; that is, all these supposedly short-sighted decisions are made in the USA's interests and directly

contribute to strengthening the USA's hegemony. European countries are said to have to pay a high price for this, which contradicts any logic.

## ***DEMILITARIZING THE AGGRESSIVE NATO RUSSIA IN UKRAINE***

However, the content of NATO's message is more aggressive and specific. Experts tend to point out that the purpose of NATO's existence is currently the destruction of Russia, which is indirectly evidenced by the fact that NATO considers not only the sovereign territories of its member states but the whole world as its sphere of activity. Similarly, when confirming NATO's aggressive intentions, there is a tendency to ignore Russia's concerns and needs, for example, referring to Moscow's repeated reprimands to the USA for the deployment of its military infrastructure and combat operations (!) not only in Ukraine, but also in other former "Soviet territories". That is why Russia has already offered the United States to agree to ensure mutual security at the end of 2021. Still, this initiative did not reach anyone, and as a result of which, the current conflict began. To protect Russia, it is proposed not only to give a concrete answer to the USA by continuing the modernization of the Russian armed forces but also to take concrete steps, for example, by destroying the supply routes through which Western weapons are delivered to Ukraine. True, it is also emphasized in this context that the real reason for the anti-Russian policy is precisely the efforts of the US to exhaust Russia's resources and push it to its knees. This same idea is also emphasized in the context of the military support of Western countries to Ukraine, namely NATO, by pumping up Ukraine with its armaments, realizing that the defeat of Ukraine would mean the downfall of NATO. Therefore, according to this logic, NATO is ready to fight to the last Ukrainian. From this, an entirely positive conclusion is drawn, that is, not only Ukraine is being "demilitarized", but also NATO, whose weapons and ammunition warehouses are being rapidly emptied.

## ***LIVING IN WESTERN COUNTRIES IS LIKE BEING IN A CONCENTRATION CAMP***

According to pro-Kremlin websites, the Baltic states are characterized by Russophobia not only in foreign policy, but also in domestic policy, which is proven by the ongoing investigations against persons who think otherwise. Cases have been identified in all three Baltic states where various individuals have shown courage, have not shied away from cooperating with Russia and have freely expressed their opinion about the situation in their home country. The security services of the nation-states have reacted strongly to it, but the arguments of national security „must just be lies“. The authors believe that the countries' political leaders clearly understand their regimes' political instability. For the purpose of intimidation, they engage in showdowns with "people who think differently" to maintain power and deal with the politically disadvantaged. Member of the European Parliament Tatjana Ždanoka also helps to strengthen the message – saying that there is a visible desire to take revenge in the Baltic countries. Germany is also blamed for persecuting those who think differently because the government engages in politically motivated investigations for the people ready to think differently from the official opinion. Of course, parallels are drawn with the history of Germany from the time of the Second World War, suggesting that Germany's current actions are comparable to the past. Likewise, France is accused of persecuting its own citizens simply because certain people are willing not to remain silent.

Of course, a conclusion is drawn from this: there is no democracy in Western countries at all, and the examples mentioned above seem to show how alive and valuable freedom of speech is. Western Europe is compared to an informational concentration camp with leaders ready to use the most dishonest methods in the war against Russia. And this, in the view of the authors, undoubtedly proves that democracy, as well as freedom of speech and thought, are just empty words without real cover.

## ***RUSSOPHOBIA AS THE UNIFYING ENEMY OF RUSSIANS***

All of these messages cover a relatively broad spectrum of topics but are directed towards a common goal and thus can be considered complementary, although disinformation messages, in general, are often in direct conflict with each other. The argument about the pervasive Russophobia characteristic of the Baltic states works on several levels. First and foremost, Russophobia as an idea undoubtedly evokes immediate negative emotions in anyone who associates themselves in any way with Russia. The Kremlin seeks to create and

justify a sense of threat through this. It is understandable that the Kremlin considers itself to be the defender of the Russian "compatriots" of all countries, thus creating a simple logical construction, namely that a particular part of society is deprived of self-respect in its most abstract sense, and Russia is the only one capable of counteracting it. Therefore it is necessary to maintain close contact with Russia. The basis of the problem is that Russia is fundamentally not interested in the processes of social integration in the Baltic States, as they threaten to reduce people's self-identification with Russia.

On the other hand, everyone who identifies themselves to any extent with Russia, in the Kremlin's vision, is a political influence tool for influencing other countries politically. Therefore, Russia aims to conjure up a sense of general threat to sow mutual distrust that would prevent any kind of cohesion, which would weaken Russia's ability to interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign states. Second, accusations of alleged Russophobia are part of Russia's efforts to equate it with human rights abuses, which should, accordingly, trigger a broad international response. Human rights are universal and do not end at the political borders of countries, and through this, the Kremlin hopes to bring shame to Latvia and the Western world as a whole. At the same time, it allows domestic political issues - about education in the national language or an investigation into the possible justification of the Kremlin's aggression and the violation of international sanctions - to be brought into the international light, so that Russia, as the defender of all "compatriots", can intervene in the internal affairs of sovereign countries. For example, part of such a practice is Russia's attempts to push through UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russophobia, requiring countries to respect human rights, which in Kremlin parlance means to stop resisting Russian influence. It is worth noting that sending such accusations toward Germany and France is not a common phenomenon, but it complements the next trend.

Thirdly, the deliberate and tendentious highlighting of human rights issues forms the basis for the Kremlin's argument that life is not better in democracies and that their postulated values - freedom of speech and thought, including in relation to the media, and the inviolability of private space - are just empty words. The reason is the need for authoritarian regimes to justify and legitimize themselves, especially since last year's events, due to which Russia's supporters may doubt the usefulness and competence of the existing power. The Kremlin seeks to denigrate democracies and distort their principles of operation to reduce their

appeal, thus ensuring the stability of its regime. It also helps to discredit pro-democracy supporters, who become complicit in this logic. And in return, the Kremlin likes to claim its contribution to preserving various values and principles as if trying to answer democracies. In addition, in the long term, the Kremlin is also trying to undermine trust in democracy to support local politicians who would "fix" all the problems and advocate conciliatory relations with Russia.

## ***IN RUSSIA, BALTIC INTERESTS ARE A VIOLATION***

At the international level, Russia's informational arsenal often uses a pretext, which is well illustrated by Russia's accusations against NATO, namely about NATO expansion, and the project of the "agreement" proposed by Russia at the end of 2021, which supposedly proves the indifference of NATO, or mainly the United States, to Russian interests. However, this logic already clearly shows the way of thinking of modern Russia, that is, questions about the security of – albeit small but sovereign – countries should, for some reason, be resolved between Russia and the USA one on one. The enlargement of NATO and the EU occurred as sovereign nations voluntarily joined the powerful military and economic blocs. Russia, understandably, considers this to be a neglect of its interests. Still, there are counter-questions about what exactly Russia's interests are here and why a whole series of Eastern and Central European countries have chosen to join NATO. Similarly, the Russian draft "agreement" on military guarantees was Russia's ultimatum, the acceptance of which would mean the death of NATO as an institution and leave the entire region, including Latvia, in real danger.

Although isolated, such a chain of logic illustrates the pro-Kremlin disinformation and also the Kremlin's reasoning in the public space. Someone else is always to blame; none of what is happening is Russia's responsibility. Not surprisingly, the main villain is the United States, which is attributed with extensive capabilities to control the actions of an entire continent. In this way, the Kremlin proactively avoids any criticism, for example, on the issue of the sanctions applied to it, and even on the change of position towards Russia of conciliatory countries, such as Germany. What is happening is not the "merit" of Russia itself but another conspiracy led by the USA to humiliate Russia. In addition, sometimes Brussels is also the lead of the conspiracy. But on other occasions, the Baltic states together or one of them set

the tone for the activities directed against Russia individually. Here, the idea of the supposed mutual benefit of cooperation with Russia is also used unwittingly. It is a campaign to influence public opinion, trying to illuminate the current situation in the most dramatic possible light, appealing to a global conspiracy, which is happening against common sense because, once again, Russia's goal is to review relations with Western countries.

And this tendency – to look for and try to prove conspiracies – is also used to discredit the Baltic States. By occasionally blaming a capital of a Western country for allegedly short-sighted decisions, the Kremlin seeks to illustrate our fickleness and being in a dependent position. It follows from this logic that we, as vassals, are forced to follow the myopic and Russophobic policies of the masters and suffer heavy losses without any help. However, it would be much more profitable for us to take our fate into our own hands or cooperate with Russia pragmatically. It must be admitted that this last point in pro-Kremlin disinformation is not stable because the Baltic countries are often considered the main Russophobes.