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IS TIKTOK A GATEWAY TO POLITICS IN THE BALTICS? FOR NOW, ONLY IN LATVIA

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Latvia is the first of the Baltic states where a TikTok party has been elected to parliament. Before the elections, their star was an unemployed young woman with a high-school diploma, but her videos had received millions of likes. Even though the number of TikTok users is fairly similar in all of the Baltic states, in Latvia the platform is used by populist politicians spreading Kremlin-friendly messages. It doesn't play a role in politics in Estonia and Lithuania yet.

On the day that Re:Baltica is at the parliament building to speak to MP Glorija Grevcova, the TikTok celebrity doesn't have time to talk. With 100 thousand followers, she is way ahead of the most popular parliamentary deputies in Lithuania and Estonia who use the platform. Wearing a black dress complimented by a bright pink nail polish, Grevcova addresses the sitting three times on Covid-19 restrictions, immigration, and the language requirements for Russian-speaking educators. Similar subjects—the struggle for the rights of the simple people and the Russian-speaking population—made Grevcova, who was previously unknown, popular on TikTok. She shares her opinions on the platform daily yet hides from journalists. Re:Baltica is no exception—we're told to send our questions in writing. We do so, but still get no answers.

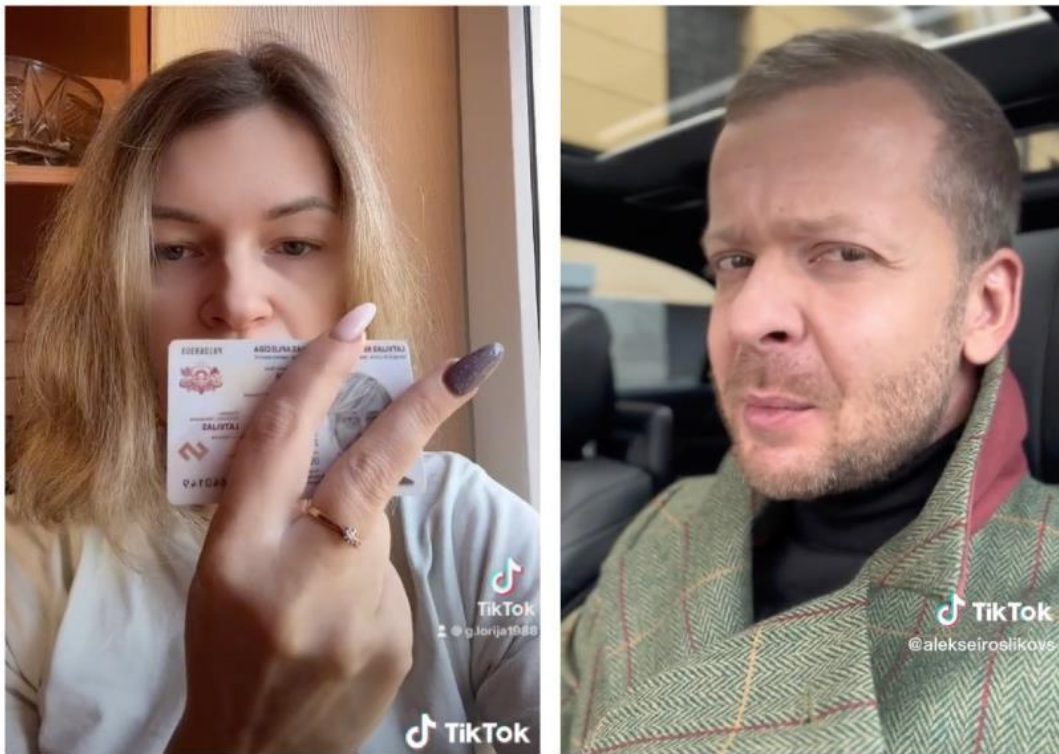
The election of Grevcova's party For Stability! (Stabilitātei!) in parliament is an example of how TikTok has transformed in the last few years. From a platform where young people exchange funny videos, it has become a land of opportunity for populist politicians and conspiracy theorists.

Before the parliamentary elections in October 2022, there was no real political party to speak of—For Stability! was a list of few popular social media personalities followed by names nobody had ever heard of. But there was a responsive electorate that had previously been attracted to the Russian-speaking party Harmony (Saskaņa), which lost a part of their voters when the party condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine. And there were divisions in society that—after the fights over Covid-19 restrictions—have been further aggravated by Russia's war in Ukraine and a rapid increase in the cost of living.

For Stability! had a successful campaign on TikTok and in the micro districts of Rīga. As a result, the party gained 11 from 100 parliamentary seats, mainly thanks to the Russianspeaking voters in Rīga and Latgale.

The leader of the party, Aleksejs Rošļikovs, formerly of Harmony, used to be called the “mini-me” of Nils Ušakovs, the previous mayor of Riga. Before the election, Rošļikovs was regularly posting phone videos where he was criticising the current restrictions of the “regime”, the growing costs of living and the destruction of Soviet-era monuments. He hasn’t condemned Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Grevcova is six times more popular on TikTok than Rošļikovs and she’s especially favoured in the Russian world of TikTok. She hasn’t denounced the invasion either.



In one of her TikTok videos, Grevcova explains that she is a citizen of Latvia and therefore there is no need to send her to Moscow or to [Russian President Vladimir] Putin. “It’s called the opposition, an alternative point of view,” she says. “For Stability!” leader Rošļikovs is six times less popular than Grevcova on TikTok.

In a hand-held video, Grevcova sits on a couch and shares her confusion about why Europe should stop buying gas from Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. “Do you understand what that means for us? Yes, war, that is bad. But we’re the ones who are going to suffer. And for

what?” In a different video she’s telling the president and prime minister of Latvia to “f**k off”, and in another one she’s enthusiastically talking about the fact that the State Security Service (VDD) has asked her to come in for questioning.

For the populists, an invitation from the VDD for questioning is like a medal to show off. The VDD has not made the content of the conversations public, but it is known that both Grevcova and Rosļikovs were warned by the service about giving interviews to the Belorussian and Russian propaganda media.

Grevcova has two ongoing criminal proceedings against her. Both were initiated after she was elected to parliament—one for providing false information on election documents, another one for a denial of the occupation of Latvia. “We looked at everything exhibited and understood—oh, how we are being fooled! If I used to think that there is propaganda here, but then going through this museum you understand what real propaganda is,” she said after visiting the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia.

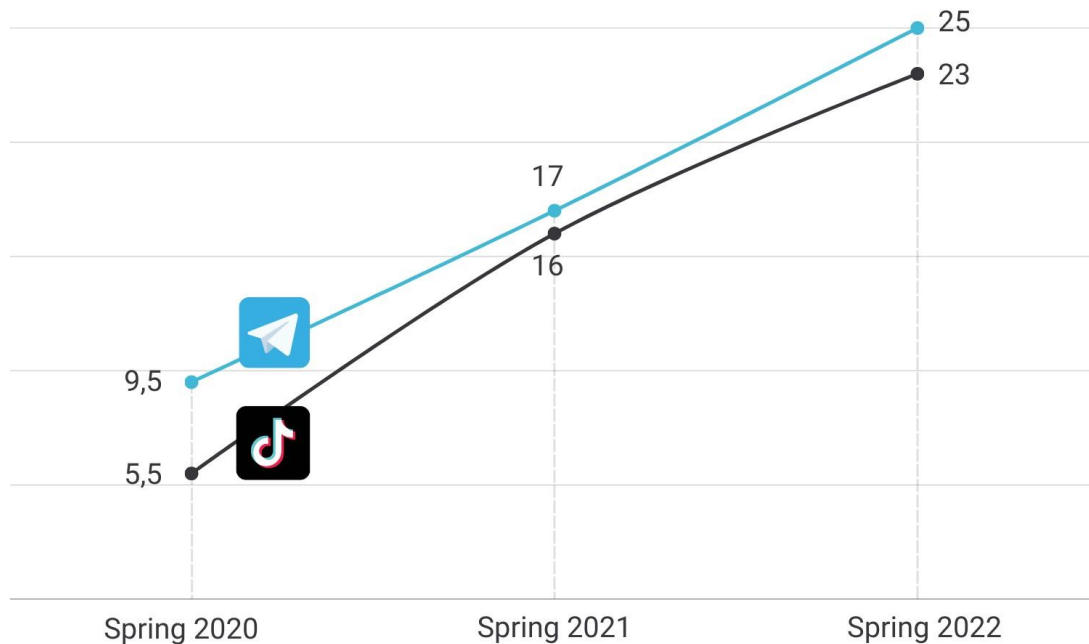
Where did she talk about this? On TikTok, of course.

HOW IS TIKTOK USED IN THE BALTICS?

In the last few years, the number of users on the Chinese-owned social media platform has increased four times and it is used by every fifth inhabitant, Kantar Emor data shows. There’s a similar number of users in Lithuania and Estonia, but the platform is hardly used for political purposes, and if it is, then by the liberal parties.

For comparison: Grevcova’s TikTok content has three million “likes”, while Tomas Vytautas Raskevičius, the most popular MP on TikTok in Lithuania, has 108 thousand likes, and in Estonia—Andres Sutt has 4,3 thousand likes.

GROWTH OF TIKTOK USERS IN LATVIA (%)



Weekly total of internet users aged 16-74 on TikTok.
Source: Kantar Latvia Digital

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In Latvia, unlike in its neighbour countries, TikTok is also intensively used by middle aged people, which makes up around 20% of its users in the certain age group, while in Lithuania and Estonia the number is half, as shown by the Eurobarometer survey.

Facebook is still the most popular platform to reach the electorate in the Baltics.

ONLY THE LIBERALS IN LITHUANIA

In Lithuania, only 8 of 141 parliamentarians have TikTok accounts with more than a hundred followers. The top three accounts are run by deputies from Freedom Party –a political movement with liberal values, which is also the youngest in regard to the average age of its MPs. The most popular TikTokers are MP Raskevičius (108.4K likes), Aušrinė Armonaitė (107.9K likes)–the founder of the party and Minister of Economy and Innovation, and MP Morgana Danielė (49.8K likes).

All three share very similar content: mostly political ads, excerpts from conferences and parliamentary speeches. For example, Raskevičius posted 12 videos in 2022 highlighting

the agenda and values of the party: passing the civil union law, the campaign against bullying and hate speech, the decriminalisation of small amounts of cannabis.

The most popular video of Raskevičius shows him on the parliamentary podium explaining how to pronounce the word for drug addiction in Lithuanian—a response to another MP saying it wrong.

Armonaitė has been even less active on the platform. She has posted eight videos about her governmental work and to show her support for Ukraine. Her most popular video (18.7K views) is of her standing next to Kira Rudik, chairwoman of Ukraine’s Holos Party, and expressing support of Ukraine joining the European Union.

The third most popular politician on TikTok in Lithuania is Danielė who posted 15 times during 2022. Her most popular video has 227.3K views. There she speaks against banning flavoured e-cigarettes arguing that it would lead to additional health risks (the parliament did end up banning them and the ban was implemented on July 1, 2022).

Public relations specialist Liutauras Ulevičius says the trend is not surprising: “Their voters are TikTok users and they want to reach them (..) Politicians don’t really use TikTok to reach the older or elderly voters, because it means putting in more effort than you can get out of it.” The TikTok format—short videos with little text—is meant for emotional outbursts, not for serious discussions, says Ulevičius.

Rugilė Andrejevskytė, a mentor at the youth-founded policy monitoring network I Know What I am Choosing shares this view. “On the one hand, it is difficult for politicians to communicate via TikTok because their content doesn’t easily get a large number of views (..) On top of that, there is the TikTok format itself, which is harder to use than just creating a post on Facebook. You must hit a trend or create it. The [investment] of time and resources to create an engaging video is too high for the number of views gained. In addition, many still feel that the platform is cringe.”

BARELY ANYONE IN ESTONIA

In Estonia, only two of the 101 MPs promote themselves on TikTok. None of them have a large follower-base and they don't work on it actively.

One of the Estonian politicians on TikTok is Andres Sutt from the liberal Reformierakond, liberal party which is currently in the government. He has published 30 videos that explain current political events or why the opposition is wrong. He thinks TikTok is better app to reach the youth than the other social platforms. "Video is also more memorable than text, and it's quite fun to make short videos yourself," he added. In upcoming parliamentary elections, statistics show that his main electorate is in capital, Tallinn. "I also think that my personal election messages, which talk about the state of the economy, cyber security, the business environment and green reform, will speak to young voters. I guess we will see the actual results on election day," Sutt said.

TikTok users in the Baltics



Source: KANTAR Latvia Digital, Spring 2022
Weekly total of internet users aged 16-74 on TikTok.

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Nevertheless, the former Minister of Business and Information Technology stresses that he does not use TikTok on his work devices: "Cyber security is very important to me when using TikTok".

There is also the politician Martin Repinski who used to represent the previous opposition party. He has published only four videos and the last one was about a year ago. Only one of the videos addresses politics. The rest seem to be just for entertainment.

The liberal party Eesti200 is the most active one on TikTok: their official party account has received 23K likes. Eesti200 are not represented in the parliament but recent opinion polls show they might actually take seats in the upcoming elections in March.

CAN THIS BE THANKS TO TIKTOK?

“One of our focuses has been to reach young people. Being on the platforms that are popular and that are used by them is one of the ways to do that,” says Johanna Veeremaa, a Eesti200 party member who runs their TikTok account. “We went into it thinking that it is fun and trendy, not like a tool to get the popular vote.”

Others are catching up too. EKRE, the biggest conservative party in the country, posted its first TikTok last May. In it, the leader of the party put his signature black fedora on a hanger and announced that they’ve now joined TikTok. The video had over 80 thousand views, but the next ones were nearly not as popular (on average 2000-3000 views per post).

By contrast, when their main competitors, Reformierakond, shared their first video in October, it got only a little over 4000 views. The video was of their most popular politicians getting ready for an electoral photoshoot. Nevertheless, their second video shows the prime minister in front of the parliament giving one of the opposition leaders a firm answer on a tax-related question and that got a total of 230 thousand views.

So far, the party has made three videos in total.

* Data collected on January 29, 2023.

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