



Baltic Engagement  
Centre for Combating  
Information Disorders

# BECID

## STEP BY STEP: HOW RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA ‘EXPLAINS’ EVENTS IN LATVIA

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**Despite over a year passing since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has yet to achieve its objectives. Ukraine remains resolute, Western nations persist in their efforts to contain Russia and support Ukraine, and NATO has expanded its influence. In this context, pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns aimed at Baltic States, including Latvia, disseminate a variety of messages. Their aim is to influence local audiences and disrupt the current status quo. Notably, pro-Kremlin disinformation maintains a consistent and unchanging message, with both form and content remaining largely unchanged from previous iterations.**

## ***RUSSIA LOOKS FOR CULPRITS***

Russia, in its search for culpability, has focused considerable attention on finding those responsible. Between April and June of 2023, during the ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine, disinformation sources have fixated on this pursuit. They employ Latvia's top officials' statements as a pretext for exonerating Russia. For instance, an interview with the President of Latvia, Egils Levits, given to the German media outlet "Deutsche Welle," emphasized cooperation with Western nations, particularly the United States, in bolstering regional security and supporting Ukraine, including militarily.

Adhering to the Kremlin's position that Russia bears no responsibility for current events, they underscore Finland's NATO membership as a justification for deploying jet missile systems on Finnish soil, potentially within reach of St. Petersburg. This perspective seeks to reinforce the belief in NATO's aggressive intentions, as perceived by Russia [1]. It's worth noting that the U.S.-manufactured HIMARS rocket artillery system, with a maximum range of 300 km, could reach St. Petersburg even from Estonian territory. Furthermore, the West allegedly continues to supply Ukraine with weaponry and mercenaries to perpetuate the "conflict," as some sources label it. This insinuates that Russia could bring an end to the bloodshed sooner if it were not for the support of Western countries. [2]

In the context of NATO's heightened presence in our region and our intensified focus on the defense and security sector, discussions about NATO-related topics are actively unfolding. Notably, there is a recurring emphasis on the calls made by all three Baltic States to increase defense budgets beyond 2% of GDP. Russian critics argue that these investments clash

with the broader socio-economic conditions within these countries. This contention is attributed to the prevailing Russophobia in all three countries and even the activities of counterintelligence authorities aimed at stifling dissenting opinions that diverge from the official state positions.

It is acknowledged that plans to procure advanced weaponry can pose significant challenges to the Russian armed forces. It is, however, essential to note that all countries, including the Baltic States, acquire weapon systems like self-propelled artillery, which may be construed as offensive rather than defensive in nature. It is worth highlighting that, against this backdrop, the permanent presence of NATO allied forces is not viewed as critically, even though it is pointed out that the Baltic States are connected to the rest of the European continent solely by the narrow Suwalki Corridor, which Russia could potentially control in collaboration with Belarus [3.].

## ***DUE TO ITS HATRED, LATVIA IS READY TO SELF SABOTAGE***

Pro-Kremlin sources also attempt to draw parallels between increased defense funding and the state of the Latvian healthcare system, particularly focusing on the admission of Ukrainian soldiers for rehabilitation services in Latvia. According to Kremlin narratives, the defense budget expansion comes at the expense of the entire healthcare sector, resulting in the transfer of medical equipment to Ukraine while medical unions voice concerns about insufficient funding. Furthermore, it is noted that local residents endure lengthy waiting times for medical procedures while Ukrainian defenders supposedly access complex and costly treatments within a mere five months before returning to Ukraine contented [4.].

Pro-Kremlin media consistently criticize any efforts to support Ukraine, its people, and Ukrainian war refugees in Latvia. They contend that the support provided to Ukrainian refugees is solely financed from the state budget, effectively diverting resources from sectors in greater need. This narrative aims to portray the Latvian state as undermining its own fiscal stability, without the prospect of securing international partners for co-financing such initiatives. To amplify these claims, speculation about the refugees' intentions and their willingness to depart Latvia in due course is propagated, implying potential integration challenges [5.].

In a complex web of narratives, messages about strengthening Latvia's defenses and supporting Ukraine and its people are intertwined into a single thread. Within this narrative, Latvia is portrayed as the true culprit, constantly attempting to tarnish Russia's supposedly innocent image. Russia's initiation of war in Ukraine is framed as a necessary action to protect Ukrainians themselves, while Ukraine, under Western influence, is depicted as the aggressor, prepared to wage war against Russia. The West is blamed for obstructing peace agreements [6.].

Additionally, claims of Latvia's aggressive intentions are said to be supported by officials in Minsk, who refer to alleged militant training centers in the Baltic States and Poland, where saboteurs are purportedly trained for terrorist activities in Belarus. The goal of these attacks is allegedly to violently overthrow the regime in Minsk, leading to widespread chaos [7.] [8.].

## ***LATVIA IS ALSO PORTRAYED AS NOT BEING SELF-SUFFICIENT***

During this reporting period, particularly around May 9th, the pro-Kremlin information space saw discussions about Latvia's historical origins and existence. A recurring theme is the attempt to depict Latvia as a dependent nation, existing only through the goodwill and support of others. Messages about the artificial origin of Latvia as a nation and its citizens are reiterated. According to this narrative, Latvia's emergence was only possible due to a historical mistake—the collapse of the Russian Empire—and its independence was maintained solely through support from the Anglo-Saxons, who actively assisted newly formed countries.

Furthermore, it is suggested that the term "Latvians" was imposed from outside, implying that someone else determined this identity. The alleged goal of this external support was not altruism but the creation of a buffer zone around Soviet Russia to contain it. Consequently, it is concluded that Latvia has perpetually been a pawn in politics and history, acting in the interests of others. This perspective is extended to the present day, where Latvia is portrayed as a tool of external policymakers, acting as a buffer for the Russian Federation and obediently following their directives, even at the expense of its own people and those with differing opinions. This narrative serves to justify Latvia's current stance against Russia, the

revision of its history, and the politicization of historical events, all of which are attributed to the influence of Western cultures marked by anti-Russian sentiment [9.].

Within the realm of modern politics, pro-Kremlin media consistently levels criticism at all three Baltic States, relying on a Russia-centric interpretation of history as their foundation. These states are accused of playing a role in the dissolution of the USSR. Pro-Kremlin narratives contend that this outcome should come as no surprise, given the alleged support of all three countries' inhabitants for Nazi Germany during World War II. Furthermore, these states are claimed to believe that their "joining" the USSR was illegal, despite assertions that the referendums held at the time adhered to all established norms.

This historical "explanation" serves as the basis for disparaging contemporary politics in these countries. All three Baltic States are accused of openly fueling Russophobia and nationalism for economic gain. According to this interpretation, the political elites of these states seek to hinder social mobility for individuals who do not represent titular nations, effectively implementing nationwide protectionist policies across all sectors. This alleged Russophobia manifests itself in these countries' efforts to restrain Russia and limit cooperation, despite claims that most of their societies are ostensibly in favor of constructive relations with neighboring nations. Journalists and political activists who dare to express opinions diverging from the official state positions are purportedly met with harsh repercussions [10.]. Importantly, pro-Kremlin sources assert that the discourse surrounding the Baltic States' occupation is merely a smokescreen intended to obscure their involvement in the Holocaust, as evidenced, they argue, by the supposed rehabilitation of Nazism within these states [11.].

Belarusian officials also contribute to this historical discourse, particularly concerning World War II. Vladimir Andreychenko, the Speaker of the lower house of the Belarusian parliament, asserts that descendants of the WWII victors bear an obligation to defend historical justice against Western media outlets that aim to vilify their ancestors. He believes that the Soviet people defeated Nazi Germany, but instead of gratitude, the Western world is pursuing a fascist policy against Russia and attempting to rewrite the history of the heroes. Notably, he includes Belarus in this group of aggrieved parties, asserting that Belarus, alongside Russia, is destined to defend true history and its independence [12.].

## ***LATVIA ONLY RESTRICTS AND DENIGRATES***

In a related context, pro-Kremlin narratives aim to tarnish the Day of the Restoration of Independence of the Republic of Latvia. These narratives assert that the USSR declared Latvia's declaration on the restoration of independence as illegitimate, thereby negating any claims of independence restoration. Instead, this "fictional" celebration is purportedly exploited to foster Russophobia and target local Russians under the guise of statehood protection. The Russian conflict in Ukraine is also cited as a pretext for curtailing freedom of expression [13.]. Belarusian official media echoes these concerns, arguing that Western sanctions against numerous Belarusian media professionals and even the press secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are unwarranted. They contend that these individuals are merely carrying out their work, while international organizations supposedly stand by helplessly as disinformation is directed against Belarus. This narrative seeks to paint Western countries as deliberately suppressing diverse opinions, especially if they deviate from the views of Brussels and Washington, while Belarus is publicly accused of disregarding media freedom [14.].

Similar arguments are leveled against the Baltic States, alleging that they employ retaliatory measures, including unjust sanctions, against journalists advocating impartial journalism [15.]. It's worth noting that in late May, an interview with Latvian national Roman Samul appeared in Belarus, where he provides his perspective on life in Latvia. During the interview, Latvia and its leading officials are criticized for failing to ensure a decent standard of living for the population, and the population is purportedly subjected to propaganda, particularly regarding Russia and Belarus. In this interview, the Minsk regime is portrayed in a positive light, depicting Alexander Lukashenko as a respected and caring leader who looks after his people and country [16.].

The foreign policy pursued by the Baltic States regarding Russia is used to illustrate Russia's purported invulnerability. According to this narrative, Russia sees no merit in cooperating with the Baltic States, as diplomatic relations are practically nonexistent due to the perception that it makes no sense for Russia to engage with Russophobic, history-denying actors. This argument draws a distinction between the local elites, characterized as Russophobic and aggressive, acting in the interests of Western countries, and the local

population, depicted as suffering due to the incompetence and shortsightedness of the elite [17.].

Furthermore, these narratives claim that the Baltic States are beholden to Western countries, which exemplifies their status as political and historical objects. Western countries, in the current confrontation, are allegedly willing to sacrifice all three Baltic States, as evidenced by the severing of relations, including trade, with Russia. This move is portrayed as detrimental to the Baltics, resulting in dwindling revenues and potential job losses, while Russia has alternative routes. This reasoning emphasizes the divide between the Russophobic elites and the local population [18.].

## **SUMMARY**

Pro-Kremlin disinformation exhibits a flexible nature, adapting to exploit local current events, as evident in the topics under scrutiny. These narratives harness the backdrop of the Ukraine conflict to revive notions about perceived threats to Russia and the alleged aggressive intentions of Western nations, primarily the United States, toward Russia. A pronounced focus centers on the Baltic States' endeavors to fortify their defense capabilities, which, according to the Kremlin, represent a genuine threat to Russia. Likewise, the increased NATO presence in the region is portrayed as emblematic of Western imperialism, with an attempt to cast Russia as the "true" victim. These narratives subtly insinuate that Western countries, now including the Baltic States, are the actual aggressors seeking to undermine Russia by acquiring weapon systems with offensive capabilities.

It's important to note that these assertions sidestep the question of when and why these activities commenced, notably coinciding with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and intensifying after its full-scale invasion in 2022. Instead, they endeavor to depict the ongoing situation as even graver, asserting that the expansion of defense budgets is financially disadvantageous and detracts from other essential budgetary priorities. Consequently, the narrative presents Latvia, in collaboration with its allies, as not only actively attempting to threaten and intimidate Russia but also doing so at the detriment of other sectors' well-being. Furthermore, the support extended to Ukraine is framed within this template to dissuade the audience from endorsing such aid, all in the name of safeguarding their own interests.



Continuing with Latvia's relations with our allies, the narrative emphasizing Latvia's perceived lack of independence is consistently promoted. While this narrative is not new, it takes various forms to underscore Latvia's perceived subservience to Western countries. Notably, the argument of subordination is also wielded to highlight the alleged incompetence of local politicians. According to these narratives, these politicians are merely executing orders from abroad that do not align with the interests of local communities.

Moreover, these narratives intersect with military issues, portraying Latvia as a pawn in the confrontation with Russia. Latvia's role as a border state is said to intentionally provoke Russia and absorb its attacks, thereby safeguarding Western countries. This narrative dovetails with the idea that cooperation with Russia would be the most advantageous scenario for Latvia, a choice that Western countries purportedly obstruct. Consequently, the audience is left with the impression that Latvia lacks autonomy in determining its own development and direction. Instead, Latvia and the Baltic States in general are depicted as acting solely in the interests of foreign powers, despite the ostensibly clear and beneficial option of cooperating with Russia being within reach but obstructed by external forces.

It is noteworthy that some publications accentuate the distinction between the political elite and the local population, portraying the latter as supportive of cooperation with Russia. This approach aims to not only underscore the incompetence of local politicians but also to create an illusion of widespread support for Russia within society. The underlying message suggests that society itself could make the "right" choice if not hindered by the powerless local politicians. It's essential to recognize that this tactic aligns with efforts to normalize advocating for Russia and encourage the audience to defend Russia's interests. In essence, there is a subtext suggesting that society possesses the capacity to make the "correct" decision unless obstructed by the political elite. In the broader context, it's worth noting that a similar argumentation, differentiating between the political elite and the rest of society, has been actively employed in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine. This tactic seeks to influence Ukrainian society and diminish support for Kiev's government.

To further cultivate support for Russia, the narrative repeatedly underscores the notion that Russia is virtually invulnerable. This perspective contends that sanctions have negligible effects on Russia, and it has alternative trade routes at its disposal. Moreover, it asserts that the only casualties of Russia's restraint are the entities imposing those sanctions. The



underlying objective of this narrative is not only to showcase Russia's power but also to suggest the futility of attempting to restrain it. According to this line of reasoning, cooperation with Russia is portrayed as a far more profitable and mutually beneficial option.

## ***LATVIA AS A HISTORICAL ANOMALY***

The topic of Latvia's independence and the anniversary of its renewal serves as a vehicle for the Kremlin's longstanding strategy to challenge the very existence of Latvia and the Latvian nation at its core. On one hand, the establishment of a state and a nation is construed as a historical mistake or as the outcome of a Western conspiracy. In this context, this narrative aligns with the earlier depiction of Latvia as a vassal state dependent on others. On the other hand, the existence of Latvia is attributed to the practice of various rituals, the true purpose of which is purportedly rooted in Russophobia. According to pro-Kremlin sources, Latvia's statehood is allegedly founded on the suppression of other nations, the revision of history, and the targeting of those with divergent viewpoints.

Such dramatic narratives serve multiple objectives. Firstly, they seek to influence the local audience by undermining the legitimacy of the Latvian state and its very existence. By casting doubt on the nation's existence, the Kremlin aims to galvanize the local community to push for a change in leadership in a country that, according to this narrative, shouldn't exist at all. Secondly, the frequent emphasis on Russophobia and accusations of human rights violations is directed squarely at the audience that identifies with Russia. This is done to obstruct any form of integration into local societies and countries. The Kremlin's goal is to dictate to the local audience how they "should feel." Following the Kremlin's logic, this subtext implies that Russia is the defender of all Russian lands and a champion of justice, and that cooperation with Russia is the optimal way to safeguard their interests.

## ***BELARUS AS A PROPAGANDA CATALYST***

It's also worth noting the disinformation emanating from the Belarusian information sphere. In many cases, it aligns with pro-Kremlin disinformation, likely due to both countries sharing similar foreign policy positions at the moment and the potential for re-publication. Consequently, the Belarusian sphere contributes to reinforcing the signal of pro-Kremlin disinformation and can amplify its persuasive effect when multiple seemingly unrelated sources produce similar content.

However, it's important to recognize that many Belarus-specific messages, while sharing similarities with Kremlin narratives, have their own distinct focus. A significant portion of Belarusian messaging revolves around justifying Alexander Lukashenko's regime. These messages often reference allegations of prevailing Russophobia and Belorusophobia in Western countries, as well as efforts to rewrite history. These arguments are contrasted with the Minsk regime, which is portrayed as a staunch advocate for justice.

Additionally, there is a consistent effort to point to an external enemy – Western countries, which are accused of attempting to overthrow the Minsk regime. Various spokespersons, whose primary role is to extol the regime and convince the audience that Lukashenko genuinely cares about his people and the country, serve this purpose. Meanwhile, the narrative frequently emphasizes that life in the much-discussed Western countries, where close contacts are maintained by the political opposition in Belarus, is significantly worse. Consequently, the overarching theme in Belarusian disinformation centers on the idea that life elsewhere, primarily in Western nations, is far less favorable. The objective is clear – to rationalize and legitimize the regime, portraying Lukashenko as a legitimate leader, while preemptively discrediting any democratically-oriented forces, as these sources argue that such forces pose a threat to peace and stability.

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