



Baltic Engagement  
Centre for Combating  
Information Disorders

# **BECID**

## **THE LATEST STORIES FROM TROLL FARMS: NATO SERVING LATVIA AND THE BENEFITS OF AUTHORITARIANISM**

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**The activities of Russia and Belarus in the information space clearly indicate the significance both regimes attach to specific issues. Despite the ongoing geopolitical tensions, the purpose of disinformation, which is to influence the audience, remains relevant. While the range of topics is extensive, the predominant focus during the review period revolves around various aspects of physical security and protection. This underscores the adaptable nature of disinformation, capable of adjusting to the current situation, even though the messages themselves lack innovation. It's worth noting that the messages from both regimes can complement each other, enhancing the overall signal and creating a multiplier effect.**

In recent months, increased attention has been directed towards events occurring on Belarus' borders with European Union member states. Overall, the consistent message is that the tense situation at the border is the responsibility and perhaps even a provocation by the Baltic States and Poland. The aim is to instill fear in their domestic audience by highlighting perceived threats from Belarus and Russia. This narrative also seeks to explain Lithuania's readiness to close two border crossing points with Belarus in mid-August and to halt freight transportation by rail, effectively cutting off land transit to and from Kaliningrad. It is alleged that the motivation behind such a decision is twofold: to harm Belarus and Russia and to prevent people from Baltic States from engaging in shopping trips to Belarus. According to disinformation, this restriction is advocated to quell the practice where people compare prices of goods and draw conclusions that are unfavorable to the ruling powers of Baltic States and Poland. Additionally, it is immediately highlighted that the primary victim of this restriction on trade relations would be Poland and its economy, purportedly dependent on continuous freight traffic. This is underscored as crucial for the entirety of Europe, as Russia is claimed to be the primary transit route for goods from the People's Republic of China. In one publication, the author does not hesitate to assert that the sole beneficiary of such short-sighted decisions is the United States, currently pillaging the Old World, with Poland unquestioningly following suit. [1]

With the escalation of the border situation, the messaging has evolved. Pro-Kremlin media position Belarus as the only missing link in the sanitary cordon on Russia's western border, alleging that the Baltic States eagerly partake in any anti-Russian adventures. Meanwhile, in Moldova and Ukraine, the West is claimed to have successfully installed its puppets in

leadership positions. This narrative is employed to rationalize the pressure against Belarus, ostensibly actively and even aggressively exerted by the Baltic States and Poland. One author argues that the private army Wagner deployed in Belarus is used as a formal pretext against Belarus, despite Belarus having the right to conduct armed forces training on its territory. It is also emphasized that the Baltic States and Poland are actively modernizing their armed forces, rendering this argumentation duplicitous.[2] The argumentation is further reinforced by Belarusian leader A. Lukashenko's statement that the Baltic States will only be allowed to raise claims about the presence of foreign military personnel in Belarus once foreign soldiers have left the Baltic States.[3] The asserted real reason for closing the borders is supposedly an actual blockade of Belarus to exert economic pressure. By closing the land borders, in essence, the transportation of goods from Belarus, and consequently Russia and the People's Republic of China, to and from European countries is suspended. [4]

It is crucial to note that a different message is regularly intertwined with the discourse on the events at the Belarusian border. To underscore the futility of border closures, it is posited that the Baltic States are attempting to restrict their residents from escaping local information bubbles. According to this line of reasoning, regular travel of people to Belarus and Russia challenges the stereotypes propagated by Western countries about the standard of living and people in authoritarian nations.[5] Consequently, the closure of borders is portrayed as driven by the Baltic States' desire to curtail the freedom of thought of their citizens, preventing them from discovering the actual situation. This narrative seeks to convey the impression that life in authoritarian countries is positive, and there is no basis to trust Western media narratives regarding the challenges and repression faced by individuals in Belarus and Russia.

This ties into the recurring theme of international sanctions imposed on Russia and Belarus. The narrative on sanctions has remained relatively consistent over time, aiming to highlight the difficulties in these countries due to international sanctions. The argument is made that the lives of farmers, poultry farmers, railway workers, and even landlords have become much more complicated because Russian and Belarusian markets are no longer accessible. Particular emphasis is placed on the consideration that, in these unfavorable circumstances, the Ministry of Defence has underscored the necessity to rebuild train tracks

using European standard gauge tracks, requiring additional investment at a time when, as argued, there are already abundant problems. From this, two primary conclusions are drawn. Firstly, ordinary citizens, who are compelled to bear the burden of the disproportionate ambitions of politicians, will have to cover all costs. Secondly, it is asserted as evidence of Latvia's subservience and willingness to unquestioningly follow the European Union-imposed sanctions, regardless of their economic viability.[6]

Criticism is directed towards the Baltic States also for what is perceived as political rather than economic motivations in their plans to disconnect from the BRELL power supply grid, which links them to Russia and Belarus. The fundamental idea is challenged, contending that the European Commission is the primary interested party aiming to create a unified European Union-wide electricity grid. This, purportedly, poses potential problems for the Baltic States, especially concerning energy supply stability and the ultimate cost for consumers. An attempt is made to convey that the Baltic States would become reliant on energy suppliers in the Nordic countries, making their supply vulnerable to technological difficulties. Lithuania, with significantly lower electricity generation capacity compared to Latvia and Estonia, is particularly emphasized. Adjusting the supply system is argued to lead to substantial long-term price increases. Consequently, the overall narrative suggests that the decision to desynchronize from the BRELL grid is ideologically and politically driven, rather than stemming from actual necessity, and will likely create new challenges for the people of the Baltic States.[7]

Moreover, according to pro-Kremlin sites, NATO's presence in the Baltic region and its exercises are portrayed as evidence of NATO's aggressive intentions. In September, the Northern Coasts 2023 military exercises took place in the Baltic Sea off the coast of Latvia and Estonia. The Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson, M. Zakharova, labeled the exercises as proof of NATO's aggressive efforts to turn the once peaceful Baltic Sea into another point of confrontation and tension, with the objective of achieving the full militarization of the alliance's member states.[8] Pro-Kremlin sites interpret the training, officially designed to respond to a possible Russian attack in the Baltic Sea region, as overtly anti-Russian, given that the exercises occur near St. Petersburg and the entire Leningrad region. A broad generalization is drawn from these narratives, asserting that the military modernization programs of the Baltic States and Poland serve as clear evidence of

the aggressive intentions of the entire NATO alliance. Member states are accused of actively procuring various armaments, including tanks and HIMARS missile artillery systems. Moreover, the Rail Baltica project is alleged to lack practical or economic sense, except for facilitating the swift relocation of armed forces. This perspective is further fueled by the reminder that the Baltic States, as frontline countries, would face overwhelming force in the event of a genuine confrontation.[9] Belarus contributes to this narrative by accusing the Baltic States and Poland of slandering Belarus and expanding militarization on this basis. Simultaneously, it is emphasized that the Belarusian armed forces have learned from the war in Ukraine and possess the competence to respond effectively.[10]

Within the context of NATO, a recurring narrative underscores the perceived insignificance of European countries, particularly the Baltic nations. Notably, attention is consistently directed towards the role of the United States in NATO, contending that the alliance merely follows the position of the United States, with other member states lacking autonomy.[11] This message is amplified in Belarus, with claims that, in the interests of the United States, NATO may escalate the war in Ukraine, potentially employing nuclear weapons or provocations to portray Russia as the aggressor. The consolidation of the alliance is depicted as beneficial solely to the United States.[12] Additionally, it is suggested that one of the summit's goals is to portray Russia negatively, justifying NATO's existence and perpetuating the arming of Ukraine — actions deemed to align solely with the interests of the United States.[13] The narrative extends to insinuations that Western countries aim to prolong the war, preventing de-escalation to compel Russia to expend maximum resources.[14] Furthermore, the assertion is made that NATO members disregard threats to Lithuania's security.[15]

Official figures from Moscow, such as the head of the Foreign Intelligence Service S. Narishkin[16], contribute to reinforcing the narrative about the alleged aggressive intentions of the Baltic States and Poland against Russia. Various "talking heads" employ historical arguments, contending that the West is gearing up for a third Eastern conflict, drawing parallels with Napoleon and Hitler. The narrative aims to create the impression that the West, with its material and technical support, intends to mold the Baltic States and Poland into a "Ukraine 2.0." [17] This scenario suggests potential annexation of the Kaliningrad

region or an attack on Belarus. The rapid militarization of the region is portrayed as a Plan B in case of Ukraine's defeat in the conflict against Russia.[18]

Unsurprisingly, accusations of fascism, Nazism, and the implementation of apartheid policies regarding Russian citizens, along with concerns about the use of the official language, are popular narratives. Latvia is accused of mockery and efforts to drive a portion of its population out of the country under the guise of derussification, overlooking the fact that some have lived in Latvia for a lifetime[19]. Similar accusations are directed at other Baltic countries, alleging discrimination against the local Russian-speaking community. These narratives seek to convey the idea that the Baltic States intentionally strive to create conditions where Russian speakers feel compelled to surrender and leave the countries on their own accord. Additionally, the alleged negligence and ineffectiveness of Western and international institutions in protecting Russian speakers are highlighted, while accusations of human rights violations are regularly directed toward Russia and Belarus.[20]

Within the last quarter, the issue of closing borders with Belarus garnered significant attention and was strategically leveraged to achieve several objectives. Primarily, messages highlighting the ineffectiveness and short-sightedness of border closures are infused with the idea that we ourselves are the primary victims of such measures. This narrative suggests that the restriction of transit routes adversely impacts our own manufacturers, leading to the loss of benefits associated with the status of a transit country — a recurring theme from the past. This construction creates the impression that the ongoing situation results from either the incompetence of local political elites or the shortsightedness of local elites adhering to rules dictated by Western countries, which are deemed detrimental to our interests. Subsequently, the narrative emphasizes the importance of neighboring countries cooperating and maintaining friendly relations, arguing that political policies should not interfere with economic cooperation. This theme has gained traction since 2014 and, when combined with the aforementioned points, aims to discredit efforts to restrain Russia and Belarus. It is noteworthy that the regular recurrence of this narrative contradicts its own content. The narrative suggests that the main victims of sanctions or other restrictive mechanisms are European countries, implying that sanctions are unnecessary and their enforcers are short-sighted. However, the sanctions policy's objective is to limit the financial resources available to Russia and Belarus, making it

challenging for them to pursue an aggressive foreign policy. For both nations, the economy serves as an extension of their politics, functioning as a tool to not only generate profit but also exert influence over the decision-making processes of other countries. Consequently, reducing the presence of these countries' resources in the Baltic States is seen as a means to mitigate the risks they pose.

The narrative about people in the Baltic States realizing that life in authoritarian regimes is not as bad as portrayed holds significant sway, serving two distinct audiences with their own targeted objectives. Internally, for audiences in Russia and Belarus, it acts as a tool to remind and complement the message that the standard of living in European Union and NATO countries is not as high as claimed. The argument is that people wouldn't regularly shop in Russia and Belarus if living conditions in Western countries were truly superior. This helps justify decisions made by the authoritarian regimes and reinforces the notion that life under such regimes is at a sufficiently high level. Externally, these narratives cultivate the idea that both in Russia and Belarus, people enjoy a high standard of living. Simultaneously, it indirectly attempts to undermine confidence in news media. The long-term goal is to erode the confidence of Baltic States' audiences not only in decision-makers but also in the media, with the ultimate aim of relaxing or even abolishing restrictive measures against Russia and Belarus, under the pretext that such a move would be better and more profitable for everyone. Within this context, another narrative related to infrastructure investments suggests the necessity to maintain cooperation or dependence on Russian and Belarusian companies, arguing that it would be more cost-effective. However, this reliance on Russian and Belarusian companies, including state-controlled entities, increases vulnerability and indirectly finances authoritarian regimes.

The second set of narratives is linked to the Baltic States' plans for military modernization and NATO's presence in the region, including exercises. Any efforts to improve and modernize national defense are interpreted as evidence of the West's aggressive intentions. These messages disregard the chronology, as discussions on defense capabilities only gained prominence after 2014, particularly after February 24, 2022, as a direct response to Russia's efforts to threaten sovereign states. In our region, Russia stands out as the primary source of security threats, and Belarusian foreign and security policies are largely influenced by Russian intentions. Pro-Kremlin sites often endeavor to

present a misleading image of NATO as an aggressor. For internal audiences, this narrative serves as a tool to reinforce the perceived correctness and ongoing necessity of the Kremlin's chosen foreign policy. Conversely, audiences in the Baltic States are being told that tensions would be absent without NATO's presence, and it would be more beneficial for everyone to foster friendly relations. While this notion holds truth, countries along the Russian border must ensure their own security both independently and in collaboration with allies. Various acquisitions of modern equipment in the region are strategically focused on addressing several issues. Firstly, the lessons learned from the war in Ukraine provide insights into Russia's warfare tactics, offering an opportunity to enhance self-defense capabilities. Secondly, these acquisitions enable countries to replace USSR/Russian armaments with those made in Western countries or to acquire new capabilities, such as rocket artillery, considering the aggressive nature of modern Russia. Therefore, the presence of allies and coordinated exercises in the region is logical, serving not only to develop skills but also to demonstrate readiness to defend oneself and deter Russia. The current military developments in the region directly stem from Russia's foreign policy over the last 16 years, emphasizing the necessity for countries to adapt and enhance their capabilities in response to evolving threats.

The narratives surrounding the NATO summit are not new and continue to echo familiar messages, particularly the notion that NATO acts solely in the interests of the United States, with the assertion that the security of our region is not a priority for the alliance as a whole. The aim of this narrative is evident — to cast doubt on the autonomy of decision-making in the Baltic region or even in Europe as a whole. By promoting these ideas, there is an attempt to discredit the United States, effectively assigning blame for all problems, and to diminish the significance of member states. This, in turn, erodes confidence in national democratic systems. Simultaneously, the narrative downplaying the importance of the Baltic region seeks to reduce trust in both allies and the political leadership of countries that choose to cooperate with these allies. Such narratives also contribute to the introduction of ideas that cooperation with Russia would be more profitable.

On the issue of the Russian language and Russian-speaking people in Latvia, Russia has pursued a strategy to disrupt any processes of societal integration for years. Russia's interest lies in maintaining division between the Latvian and Russian-speaking segments of



society, reducing the likelihood of them coming together and cooperating. In Russia's perspective, anyone identifying with Russia is viewed as a potential political tool and representative of Russia's interests. Integration poses a potential loss of this leverage for Russia in Latvia.

It's noteworthy that while the issue is domestic, Russia seeks to elevate it internationally by invoking various international institutions and drawing parallels with Nazism, fascism, or apartheid. This tactic aims to generate an international outcry about alleged human rights violations, providing a pretext for Russia to interfere in Latvia's internal affairs. The deliberate invocation of international institutions is a strategic move, with pro-Kremlin sites arguing that these institutions do not care about local Russians and Russian -speakers, ultimately suggesting that only Russia is capable of protecting compatriots. This narrative also impacts the Russian internal audience by illustrating how challenging and dangerous life outside of Russia is perceived to be.

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