



Baltic Engagement
Centre for Combating
Information Disorders

BECID

WHO IS SPREADING LGBT+ DISINFORMATION IN THE BALTICS?

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Our children will be taught to have sex and become gay at school. Minors will have their sex changed without their parents' consent, and the people enforcing the Istanbul Convention will remove children from their families. In the second half of 2023, the scaremongering about what disinformation spreaders describe as “gender ideology” returned to the political scene in Latvia.

In this quarterly review of the regional disinformation trends, Re:Baltica analyses who is doing it and how.

LATVIAN CASE

In May 2023, the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) which collects the trends all over the EU, reported that LGBT+ issues are one of the most popular and persistent topics of disinformation. Most narratives about the traditional family, which supposedly is under attack, are also relevant in the Baltics.

In Latvia, this time it resurfaced due to two legislative initiatives. Latvia was one of the last EU countries to adopt any sort of framework for civil partnership. Also, after many years of discussions it ratified the Istanbul Convention which aims to prevent violence against women.

These initiatives became a battleground for the political parties advocating for “traditional values”, especially *Latvija pirmajā vietā (Latvia First)*, which actively campaigned on social media platforms. MPs from *Apvienotais saraksts (Joint List)* and *Nacionālā apvienība (National Alliance)* – both of which lost their places in government and ended up in opposition shortly before those laws were adopted – also joined in. Parties were trying to persuade the public that the partnership law will lead to same-sex marriages and their rights to adopt children.

MUCH LESS IN LITHUANIA AND ESTONIA

According to *Delfi.ee* fact-checker Kaili Malts, the Estonian Conservative People's

Party (EKRE)

and some members of the *Alliance for Fatherland and Res Publica* have misled about the

LGBT+ community. For example, the former Estonian Justice Minister Lea Danilson- Järg claimed in June that “gay propaganda” had turned a quarter of the country’s young people homosexual.



Lea Danilson-Järg
@Lea_D_J



Homopropagandas olete ka tugevad, veerand noortest juba kuuluvad LGBT+ hulka. Ega kellelki midagi ära ei võeta ja keegi ei hakka seepärast homoks on ka nüüd juba valena tõestatud - noortest on suur osa juba ära muudetud. Palju õnne! Revolutsioon töötab. Soovahetajaid lisandub.

[Translate post](#)

12:50 PM · Jun 2, 2023 · 294.7K Views

The post says: “You are strong on gay propaganda, a quarter of young people are already

LGBT+.” Source: Screenshot from Twitter.

In Lithuania, some members of opposition parties came out against policies that would make life easier for LGBT+ people, explains Aiste Medute from Lithuania’s *Delfi*. These include Mindaugas Puidokas and Dainius Kепенis from the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens’ Union, and Petras Gražulis from the People’s and Justice Union. However, unlike in the other Baltic States, disinformation has not played a major role in the repertoire of Lithuanian politicians. “Most of the statements about the LGBTQ+ community were insults rather than false information,” Medute explains.

„SCHOOLS WILL BRAINWASH CHILDREN“

The disinformation fire was fuelled in Latvia by scandal regarding sex

education materials about gender identity and trans people. The authority, which is responsible for teaching materials, allegedly by mistake had published online a collection which was meant for teachers, not for the general public or kids. This led to the Minister of Education suspending the head of the authority. However, by exaggerating the content and

potential harm, the defenders of “traditional values” launched a campaign on social media looking for more “evidence” that the government has endangered children and families.

The children’s book *Tur Lejā* (*Down There*) became one such piece. The book included educational materials about such topics as sex, genitals, masturbation and gender identity. Disinformation spreaders lied that the book was teaching materia in schools. *Latvia First* board member Viktors Ščerbatihš said in a popular *TikTok* video that it teaches small children to have sex. As a result of the moral panic caused by the party, a video of the book burning appeared on the internet. The book’s translator received rape threats.



Photo: Ainārs Šlesers, the leader of the Latvia First, in Latvian TV talk show. Source: LSM.lv.

Similar lies were spread in Estonia about the book *How Babies Are Made*. There, too, it was claimed that the book was compulsory educational material, this time for use in kindergartens. This lie was also shared by Alexey Stefanov, employee of Russian state media *Rossiya Segodnya* who used to live in Riga and is active on Telegram.

In Lithuania, a fake document on the “Life Skills” course introduced in schools last September went viral. The document implied that it would teach “standards of LGBT ideology”. Although

the Lithuanian Ministry of Education and Science quickly declared that the document was fake and did not reflect the content of the course, the lie managed to make its way also to Latvian social media.

In Latvia, misinformation about alleged changes in the curriculum was also spread in relation to the Istanbul Convention. The treaty states that member states (if they deem it necessary) may choose to develop teaching programs and materials on violence, gender equality and other related topics. Several misinformers, such as musician Kaspars Pudniķis and columnist Vija Beinerte, claimed that ratification of the convention would force schools to teach about gender reassignment and same-sex relationships. The root of this falsehood was the term “social gender” that is used in the English text of the document.



„CHILDREN WILL BE ALLOWED TO GET GENDER-AFFIRMING CARE ON THEIR OWN“

Medical gender-affirming care for minors is rare in Latvia and other parts of the world. However, this does not stop disinformers from scaring parents into believing that their children will be able to receive it without their consent. For example, the aforementioned *Latvia First* board member Ščerbatihš said that children from the age of 14 are allowed to do so under the recently ratified Istanbul Convention.

It should be noted that in Lithuania, similar lies were told in 2020, when the ratification

of the convention was debated there. At the time, this international treaty was wrongly linked to gender reassignment, for example by a Lithuanian lawyer Daiva Guobiene.

It was also alleged that that convention's monitoring body GREVIO would be able to remove children from their families without a specific reason. In reality, GREVIO has no such right. Misleading claims about withdrawal of custody were mainly spread in Latvia, but also to some extent in Lithuania.

 2023. gada 30. Aprīlis · 

Socialinės tarnybos Vokietijojē iš musulmonų šeimos paēmē vaikā, nes jie nepalaiko LGBT... Bremerhafeno mieste vaikų teisių apsaugos tarnybos paēmē berniukā dēl mokyklos, kurioje jis mokosi, skundo. Šeima jį moko, kad homoseksualumas ir transseksualumas yra nepriimtini jų religijai.... Skatīt vairāk



 40

19 komentāru 204 dalījās

The recording says: “Social services in Germany have removed a child from a Muslim family because they do not support LGBT...” Source: Screenshot from Facebook.

Politicians from *Latvia First* made unsubstantiated claims that this is already happening in California, US. According to them, parents who refuse to pay for their child's sex change operations lose custody rights.

These lies fall in line with the Russian state narrative spread about the “morally rotten” West and “Gayrope” (portmanteau of gay and Europe). For example, the aforementioned lies about California have been popular in Russian media. They also spread misinformation about the West promoting unnecessary sex change for children and the introduction of LGBT+ lessons in schools. Last year, these same falsehoods were also published by Baltic disinformers.



Photo: The headline of the Russian state-controlled media Rossiyskaya Gazeta reads:

“California allows children to change sex without parental consent.”

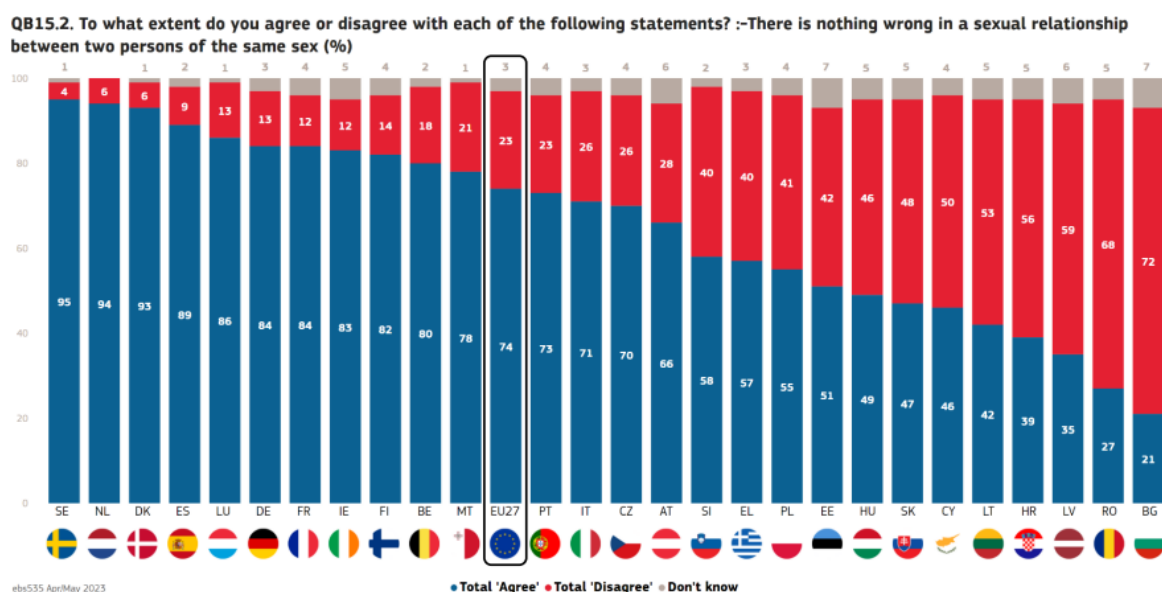
HOW HAVE THE VIEWS OF THE BALTICS CHANGED?

LGBT+ related disinformation is not new, but media experts and human rights organisations have pointed out that it has increased in recent years. For example, as early as 2021, the European Parliament Policy Department for External Relations warned of disinformation campaigns targeting the LGBT+ community, supported by non-EU countries, including Russia. However, despite

such efforts, the Baltic populations are becoming more inclusive.

We cannot yet predict how the campaigns of the last few months, particularly in Latvia, will affect people's views. Possibly, one indicator is the low turnout in the campaign to collect necessary signatures for referendum to abolish the new partnership law. During one month, 35 191 or only 22.7% of the required signatures were collected, and hence the referendum will not take place.

According to a Eurobarometer survey conducted in spring 2023, in recent years, support for sexual minorities in the Baltic states has increased very slightly. Depending on the country, 35–51% of respondents said that same-sex sexual relationships are not a bad thing; slightly fewer supported same-sex marriage and agreed that the LGBT+ community should have equal rights.



Source: Eurobarometer.

This is still significantly lower than in the EU average (where, for example 74% see nothing wrong with same-sex sexual relationships). There are positive trends in two of the three questions. The exception is the question on the rights of homosexual and bisexual people, where last year 10–26% (depending on the country) fewer people answered affirmatively. However, it should be noted that in 2019 the question did not give examples (marriage,

adoption, parental rights) and this may have influenced how people answered and therefore may make the answers incomparable.

Also, the Baltic populations have become more accepting. For example, in 2019, 25% of Latvians said that they would not feel uncomfortable if their child had a same-sex partner. In 2023, the figure was 44%.