



Baltic Engagement
Centre for Combating
Information Disorders

BECID

“CONFRONTATION WITH RUSSIA LEADS TO POVERTY”. HOW A RUSSIAN TROLL FACTORY PLANNED TO TURN PUBLIC OPINION IN LATVIA AGAINST UKRAINE

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Russian-speaking Latvians should be pitted against Ukrainian refugees, while convincing others that confrontation with Russia leads to poverty. These plans were revealed in recently leaked documents from the Social Design Agency (SDA) — one of the commercialised “troll factories” that worked on behalf of the Kremlin. Latvia is the only Baltic state for which documents are found in this dataset. The planners of the information operations expressed disappointment in Latvia’s Russian speakers for being too negative in their reaction to Russia’s invasion. They called for using social media to build momentum, eventually leading to real-life action.

The extensive SDA archive recently came into the possession of Süddeutsche Zeitung, NDR, WDR, and Delfi Estonia, who shared it with their partners, including Re:Baltica. Thousands of files show how Russia is swaying Western public opinion against Ukraine through social media comments, memes and cartoons, fake news and websites, and even street graffiti.

In Latvia, disinformation researchers noticed the work of the Social Design Agency about six months ago. On the evening of February 23, thousands of bot-generated posts flooded the platform X (formerly Twitter). Using automatically generated profile pictures and names, these bots in broken Latvian called to “respect” the hockey players who were participating in the Future Games in Kazan, Russia, organised by president Putin. A few days later, a specific post, this time in English, was circulated on Facebook. It was shared by 21 pages with names like “Mary House” and “Sarah Coffee.” The post urged support for the hockey players, whose licences had already been suspended by the Latvian Ice Hockey Federation for participating in the games in Kazan. This bot network was controlled as part of the Doppelganger campaign, orchestrated by SDA.

In the recently leaked agency’s archive, there is a document specifically focused on Latvia titled Circumstances (in Russian — обстоятельства). It analyses the situation in Latvia and proposes plans to influence society. The goal is to shift Latvian values in favour of Russia through a “peaceful social revolution.”

LIMITED SUCCESS IN LATVIA

SDA's campaigns are systematic and well-prepared. First, propagandists analyse each country's information landscape, identify key players and messages worth amplifying. Then they create content plans, and the trolls start their work.

The operation in Latvia began in the second half of 2022.

The analysis shows that the idea of the "Russian Spring" – the term used in Russia to describe pro-Kremlin demonstrations in eastern Ukraine in the spring of 2014, followed by Crimea's occupation and Kremlin-backed war in the eastern regions – was initially popular among Latvia's Russian-speaking community. However, now it is supported only by "the poor, uneducated, and anti-vaxxers." The dismantling of the Soviet 'Victory' monument on August 25, 2022 in Riga, is cited as an example — there was little visible resistance.

The document regrettably states that Latvia's Russian-speaking population lacks political leaders. Nils Ušakovs, leader of formerly popular Harmony party, has been "pushed to the margins," after entering the European Parliament, and Harmony, after losing control of Riga, is in decline. On the other hand, Daugavpils mayor Andrejs Elksniņš, who resisted the removal of Soviet monuments, is highlighted as a positive example.

SDA complains that Latvia's Russian speakers reacted "too negatively" to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and news of atrocities, such as the massacre in Bucha. The idea of the "Russian World" is only popular among the older generation, while young people are highly integrated into European space. Russian-speaking youth are one way or another moving along the path of European integration, and upon receiving a citizen's passport, they begin to represent themselves on the European labour market, the document says. Liberal tendencies are even brought by opposition voices who have moved to Latvia from Russia.

Additionally, Latvia's economy is described as a relatively strong organism with low unemployment and an export-oriented production sector aligned with Europe. "Only those who do nothing, like welfare recipients, or those who work in education, healthcare, and internal affairs, can boast of low incomes in Latvia and the Baltics as a whole," the document states. The document complains that rising fuel prices and inflation has not provoked significant conflicts in society.

WHAT WAS PLANNED?

SDA meticulously outlined the messages to be spread during the operation in Latvia. Some of these messages are as follows: “By supporting the West, Latvia is lowering global security,” “Confrontation with Russia will lead to increased living costs,” “Latvians risk freezing due to difficulties preparing for the heating season,” and “There is genocide of Russian speakers.”

First, political strategists suggested stoking hatred among Latvia’s Russian-speaking population toward Ukrainian refugees by emphasising that the newcomers are privileged compared to local Russian-speaking teachers, doctors, police officers and communal service workers who earn very little. This is a major social injustice. In this case, social media is able to configure a fairly powerful wave that leads to action. However, the planners’ disconnect from Latvian reality can be seen from their proposal for a campaign titled “We are refugees too,” where Russian speakers would demand social equality, claiming that they also became refugees after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is not known precisely to what extent the plan was implemented in practice, but Re:Baltica’s fact-checkers have not noticed that such messages about Russian speakers and refugees have gained popularity.

The plan called for using social media to build momentum, eventually leading to real-life action. It started with messages claiming that non-citizens deserve more welfare benefits, followed by engaging the most vocal and aggressive members of the group in activities like petition drives, protests, and letter campaigns to local governments, demanding “fair policies.” The final step would be the slow, methodical involvement of political parties and movements.

Second, the plan recommended monitoring Latvian municipalities for “anti-Russian decisions” and using these incidents to fuel a wave of propaganda within Russia. It would involve showing how Russian speakers are humiliated, how there’s a “language genocide,” and how “memory is desecrated.” The goal was to present the so-called “European policies in post-Soviet countries” as inadequate and immature.

Third, SDA aimed to radically change Russia’s soft power presence in Latvia. It proposed to make Orthodox churches de facto centres for demonstrating the new Russian European

idea. It also called to create a network of “Russian” rhythmic gymnastics schools to change the image of cooperation with Russia at family level.

There was also a plan to “restart Russian-speaking political projects.” The documents are rather unflattering about current efforts, stating that these projects function more as “political elevators” for their leaders’ personal interests, rather than those of their audience. Formerly popular Nils Ušakovs, by organising the well-attended May 9th “Victory Day” celebrations over the years, built the image of a defender of Russian speakers but for his own interests, not “ours.” The pro-Kremlin long-serving Member of the European Parliament Tatjana Ždanoka, who has recently become the subject of an investigation due to alleged ties with Russia’s FSB, is described as a systematic opposition figure, but with “obvious commercial interests.”

A SPECIALIZED OFFICE

As with any serious production operation, SDA’s documents included a work plan. By June 2022, a dedicated project office for Latvia was to be established, based in Russia (although there’s also mention of creating a centre in Kaliningrad to produce disinformation for the Baltic states, Poland and Germany). The disinformation editorial team was to include departments for analysing Latvia’s public sphere, writing texts, creating videos and memes, and distributing content into the information environment. A separate department would be dedicated to maintaining social media accounts.

The troll factory also had specific targets. For example, in July and August 2022, the goal was to create 8–10 social media posts and 40–60 comments daily.

FOSTERING HATRED TOWARD UKRAINIANS

Were the plans executed? Re:Baltica’s investigation suggests that at least in one direction, they were. Websites imitating popular Latvian media were created, publishing fake news. The content was distributed through social media, often via comments on posts by legitimate outlets. The leaked documents include a report on the troll factory’s activities on Facebook.

However, it’s unclear why Latvian-language comments were posted from profiles with English names. The report mentions several dozen such cases. All the comments appeared

under Latvian media stories about Ukraine or the war, fostering hatred toward Ukrainians. Each comment included a link to the same fake news site, which mimicked the biggest Latvian news portal *Delfi* and published false news claiming Poland was preparing to deport Ukrainian men (a lie that Kremlin propagandists actively spread in the summer of 2022).

The comments themselves are no longer available, but several signs suggest that Facebook (FB) may have deleted these profiles. Declassified FBI documents this month reveal that the fake Delfi pages were indeed the work of SDA.

Jānis Sildniks, head of social media at Delfi, told Re:Baltica, that the outlet regularly experiences such campaigns. They all follow the same pattern — a fake Delfi page whose content is promoted through FB ads.

SDA trolls also imitated the citizen's initiative platform Manabalss.lv. The fake page featured an initiative by user Mārtiņš Krusts about military aid to Ukraine, but it included a fake survey where all the response options suggested that supporting Ukraine would drive Latvia into poverty.

Didzis Meļķis, head of Manabalss, remembers this campaign very well. It took place in the summer of 2022, precisely when SDA had planned its influence operation in Latvia. Meļķis tried to get the Liechtenstein-registered domain “manabalss.li” shut down, but neither the European domain registry nor the Latvian police responded to his requests (the police also refused to launch a criminal investigation).

FBI materials contain further proof that at least part of SDA's operation in Latvia took place. SDA reports not only on fake comments and memes they created but also on being exposed. “The collective West is seriously concerned about the project's effectiveness... They are trying to combat our messages,” SDA operatives wrote, attaching several international media and disinformation researchers' articles about Kremlin influence operations as evidence.

WHAT ABOUT ELSEWHERE?

SDA's archive includes a [promotional video](#) intended for clients ordering influence operations. It features political strategist Ilya Gambashidze in military-style attire with a

patch reading “Russian Ideological Army.” He presents the exposure of the troll factory in Western media as a significant victory.

The video boasts about their work — thousands of supposedly journalistic texts and cartoons, fake “RAND Corporation” reports, press releases allegedly from Germany’s Ministry of the Interior or Poland’s Border Guard, and more.

Trolls work on many fronts — campaigns aimed at lifting sanctions, improving the image of the Russian military, and discrediting European politicians and Ukrainian leaders. Employees are instructed to pose as European citizens who oppose their country’s support for Ukraine.

One example: “Write a 200-character monologue from a German citizen who doesn’t want to fight Russians, fears for his country and children’s future, believes the U.S. is responsible for the war in Ukraine, and doesn’t want German and Polish soldiers to fight, calling for peace talks. He feels insecure, fearful, outraged.” Other tasks include simply imitating discontent with the current government: a fake French citizen would be angry about the expensive Olympic Games, a Polish citizen about high food prices, and an Italian woman about the government abandoning local farmers.

The archive contains hundreds of cartoons mocking Western politicians for helping Ukraine, caricaturing Volodymyr Zelensky, and emphasising that sanctions against Russia will come at the cost of their own prosperity.

It has long been known that SDA tries to influence European public opinion and turn it in favour of Russia. A leak of troll factory documents shows they have also worked on influencing the European Parliament (EP) elections.

Propagandists concluded that the main target of attacks should be the “liberal globalists” in Germany, Spain, France, Italy, and Poland since voters in these countries elect more than half of EP members. The methods described include social media commenting, memes, and cartoons, fake news, and even street graffiti.

Key messages: “liberals and globalists make us live in fear of war and climate change,” “they are ready to start wars in the name of gender equality, transgender and sexual minority rights, climate change, and democracy,” “they are causing Europe’s economic

death,” and “this will be the last election because they will cancel them like in Ukraine; we need a peace plan and diplomacy.”