



BECID

ANALYTICAL REPORTS ON BALTIC DISINFORMATION TRENDS

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Sanita Jemberga | Re:Baltica



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INTRODUCTION

This document contains ten Baltic disinformation quarterly reviews produced by Re:Baltica, involving Estonian and Lithuanian fact-checking partners as appropriate, in the framework of BECID project. They either dealt with the regional trends in respective quarter, or the unique phenomena which touched the Baltic countries or wider Europe. This documents consists of both summaries and the full texts of the investigations, as well as links to the original material. It does not contains illustrations and graphs which can be found in the links to the original materials.

Originally, reviews were published in English on Re:Baltica and BECID website. For further international distribution, they were republished on EDMO website. Locally, the project partners Delfi.EE and Delfi.LT adapted and republished some of them Estonian, and Lithuanian. Re:Baltica translated and published them in Latvian on own website and on public broadcaster. They are available without the paywall and every media organisation is free to republish them.

To reach the wider audience, some of them were later turned into ten podcasts, which were transmitted either on Delfi.EE website in Estonian or by Re:Baltica on Latvian public broadcaster. Re:Baltica prepared broadcasts in Latvian and Russian to reach the older generation who do not use Internet as their primary source of information.

Dissemination note at the end of the document lists all the relevant links were quarterlies were republished to the best of our knowledge.

SUMMARY OF EACH QUARTERLY REPORT

TIKTOK AND POLITICS IN THE BALTICS

Re:Baltica explored how TikTok became a platform for pro-Kremlin narratives in the Baltics. In Latvia, the State Security Service opened criminal cases for spreading hate and Russian propaganda, while Estonia and Lithuania took softer approaches. A range of influencers—from a manicurist to a construction worker—disseminated disinformation driven by motives like money, influence, and personal conviction. Despite denying Kremlin affiliation, many TikTokers echoed Russian propaganda, whether by promoting conspiracy theories or protesting state actions like monument removals. Estonia's Koos political group and Lithuanian fringe accounts also mirrored Kremlin messaging, while Lithuania saw less TikTok traction overall compared to Facebook.

DISINFORMATION TRENDS IN Q2 2023

This volume outlines disinformation narratives in the Baltics during spring–summer 2023, focusing on Ukraine and conspiracy theories. In Latvia, falsehoods circulated about the Istanbul Convention, NATO activities, and climate denial, often promoted by populists. Estonia experienced less internal disinfo but saw false claims about sex trafficking laws and COVID cures. Lithuania had the highest Ukraine-related disinfo, with false narratives undermining the state and climate-friendly policies. Conspiracies about insect consumption and environmental manipulation by global elites also trended, showing how fringe actors co-opt EU initiatives for fear-mongering.

TELEGRAM AS A PROPAGANDA TOOL

Telegram emerged as a key platform for Kremlin disinformation in the Baltics due to its lack of moderation and user privacy. Channels like "Voice of Mordor", "Baltnews", and "IMHOClub" coordinated content to create a sense of consensus and amplify anti-Baltic and pro-Russian sentiment. These groups often cross-posted and exaggerated support, with some posting calls to join Russian forces or incite hate. While small in number, their content reached wide audiences due to networked amplification. Disinformation researcher Mārtiņš Hiršs explained that motivations ranged from belief to personal gain, and Telegram's setup uniquely supported both.

CLIMATE CHANGE MISINFORMATION

Climate disinformation in the Baltics grew in prominence, promoted by politicians, influencers, and international groups with fossil fuel ties. Narratives included denying human-driven climate change, misrepresenting renewable energy impacts, and accusing climate policy of being a globalist control tactic. In Latvia and Estonia, conservative politicians and parties like EKRE fueled denialism. Facebook and Telegram were key channels, with foreign content often repackaged in local contexts. Disinformers claimed green policies would ban wood heating or force insect consumption, while mocking activists like Greta Thunberg to delegitimize environmental advocacy.

LGBTQ+ DISINFORMATION SURGE

Amid debates over civil partnership laws and the Istanbul Convention in Latvia, a wave of LGBTQ+ disinformation spread. Opponents claimed that schools would teach children to become gay or that minors could change gender without parental consent. These narratives,

amplified by politicians and populist parties like Latvia First, echoed Kremlin-style rhetoric portraying the West as morally corrupt. Similar misinformation surfaced in Estonia and Lithuania, though with less political traction. Disinformation often targeted educational materials, such as sex-ed books, and falsely claimed international treaties would erode parental rights or promote same-sex adoption.

MATRYOSKA AND LATVIAN ICE HOCKEY

In February 2024, a massive bot campaign in Latvian targeted public reaction to athletes participating in a Putin-endorsed sports tournament in Kazan. Bots promoted hashtags like #NoPoliticsInSport, defending players criticized for representing Latvia at the event. Investigators linked the campaign to the Kremlin-linked Doppelganger network. Facebook ads and petitions followed, attempting to sway public opinion. Experts believe it was a test-run for influencing upcoming European Parliament elections. The campaign highlighted how quickly coordinated disinformation could escalate, blending emotional appeals with bot-driven amplification.

DISINFORMATION AHEAD OF EU ELECTIONS

In the run-up to the 2024 European Parliament elections, Baltic disinformation focused on green policies, migration, and EU governance. In Latvia, populists falsely claimed the EU would ban old cars, force higher retirement ages, and mandate firewood heating bans. TikTok and clickbait sites were central in spreading these messages. False allegations about rigged elections also resurfaced, often led by populist figures. Lithuania saw fewer election-related lies, though fake documents still circulated. Estonia's EKRE pushed voter manipulation narratives. The disinformation echoed Kremlin themes of Western collapse and impending war.

FEAR OF WAR & MILITARY MOBILIZATION

Summer 2024 saw increased misinformation suggesting the Baltics were preparing for war with Russia. In Lithuania, discussions about sending instructors to Ukraine were twisted into claims of sending combat troops. Estonia saw similar narratives, falsely accusing the government of preparing conscription and troop deployments. Latvia remained relatively unaffected, though some TikTok users and politicians suggested that bomb shelters were replacing playgrounds. Disinformation about Ukrainian President Zelensky and nuclear escalation also gained traction. Across the region, fake news leveraged Macron's comments and defense reforms to stoke public fear and undermine NATO support.

INSIDE RUSSIA'S TROLL FACTORY

Leaked documents revealed how Russia's Social Design Agency (SDA) coordinated efforts to turn Latvian opinion against Ukraine. Their strategy involved using bots, fake media sites, and memes to manipulate public sentiment, particularly among Russian speakers in Latvia. The plan targeted social divides, attempted to create a "peaceful social revolution," and advocated exploiting local grievances. Despite detailed planning, much of the campaign failed to gain widespread traction. However, it highlighted how Russian propaganda adapts and localizes its content, using soft power tools like churches and schools to push long-term influence.

PROPAGANDA ABOUT MIGRATION TO BELARUS

Kremlin propaganda has fabricated stories about Baltic citizens fleeing to Russia or Belarus to escape "russophobia." Re:Baltica found these narratives to be exaggerated, driven by a

small number of propagandists like TikToker Konstantīns Rudakov. Professional disinformers, including former journalists, rebranded Kremlin outlets like Sputnik into “neutral” YouTube channels. These narratives falsely portray life in Belarus as safer or freer, often masking the propagandists’ political or financial motivations. Despite the stories of mass exodus, data shows only a few thousand have relocated, mostly to exploit media platforms or avoid prosecution.

Summaries prepared with assistance of AI.

FULL TEXTS

1. OVERVIEW OF ROLE OF TIKTOK IN BALTIC POLITICS

1.1 Disinformation on TikTok: Latvian police open criminal probes, while the police in Estonia ask to delete

By Inga Sprinģe, Re:Baltica

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Latvian State Security Service has started seven criminal investigations for supporting Moscow on TikTok or using the platform to spread ethnic hatred. Who are the voices from the Baltics that mirror Kremlin narratives there? And why is Lithuania and Estonia taking it easier?

Konstantin Rudakov is a sailor by trade and a TikToker in his free time. In his own words, he uses the platform to deconstruct “various myths”. For example, is that Latvia is an independent country. Or that European mercenaries are fighting the war in Ukraine. It's not a lie—news about the existence of the International Legion of Ukraine is not a secret. But in the context of the Kremlin propaganda, they become a part of the story of how Moscow is fighting NATO in a war that it itself started.

We do not know which video prompted Latvian State Security Service (VDD) to contact Rudakov (this is not first brush with law enforcement—in 2021 Rudakov was convicted of cigarette smuggling in Ireland). Agents called first when he was at sea and then the second time when he was at home. “I went down [to the backyard]. There were two polite men. Asked all the same questions that you are asking now. Why do I do this and what is my motivation,” Rudakovs told Re:Baltica. When asked whether this experience made him think more carefully about what he says on TikTok, Rudakovs responds that he always does: “I grew up in a neighbourhood where you were held accountable for what you said.”

He says that the questioning didn't lead to any real consequences, but since the beginning of the war the VDD has started seven criminal investigations for supporting Russia's war or for incitement of hatred on TikTok. In a written response to Re:Baltica, the VDD states that every day they come across hundreds of comments expressing support to Russia on social media, but the decision to start investigation is based on “individual's motivation, how systematically and how often it is done, and what are the consequences”.

A sailor Konstantin Rudakov was visited by Latvian State Security Service once. “There were two polite men. Asked all the same questions that you are asking now. Why do I do this and what is my motivation,” Rudakovs told to journalist of Re:Baltica

There are no such similar criminal cases in Estonia and Lithuania regarding content posted on TikTok.

In Estonia, police had identified four problematic accounts which were calling to deport the Baltic government, asked Russia’s president to help to kill the Estonian Prime Minister, praised Russia’s actions in Ukraine and insulted Ukrainians, as well as demeaned Estonians. However, Estonian police classify it as “misdemeanors” and the only punishment is to delete the videos in front of the police officers.

In Lithuania, police do not specify whether there have been any cases of disinformation or hate speech detected on TikTok or other platforms. Police representative Ramūnas Matonis explained that the cases of disinformation are very difficult to prove. Report about each incident has to be sent for evaluation to the Inspectorate of Journalists’ Ethics and only when police get confirmation that it can be evaluated as disinformation, it can act upon it.

A security guard, a construction worker, a manicurist and others

Due to the fact that it is not possible to analyse TikTok content in an automated way (meaning easily obtaining information on what accounts are most popular in which regions), we asked our social media followers to send in links to accounts that spread political content and/or promote Kremlin’s narratives. As a result, we created two lists of the TOP7 most followed accounts on TikTok in Latvian and in Russian, as well as looked into the ways in which disinformation is spread on the platform in Lithuania and Estonia.

Disinformation researcher Mārtiņš Hiršs explains that people on social media are driven by three things: money, influence and popularity, or conviction. Often the motivating factors overlap. “Imagine if your name reaches 10-100 thousand people. That makes many people feel good,” Hiršs says.

A kindergarten security guard, a construction worker, a manicurist, an industrial engineer and well known disinformation spreaders —on TikTok, political events in Latvia are assessed by a diverse group, Re:Baltica’s analysis shows.

Money

Making money on TikTok with straightforwardly political content is hard. One needs to spend several hours on a livestream during which the viewers can buy presents for the owner of the account.

Product promotion is a better shot at success.

This is what Ilja Černogorods does, selling air fresheners for cars or his course on creating content online. He can afford it, because his account in Russian has four million likes. In professionally produced videos, he regularly criticises the government, amplifying the claims that in many cases have been proven to be false by fact checkers.

Even though Černogorods likes to present himself as a successful entrepreneur, Re:Baltica found no evidence for it. The last annual report of his company in Latvia shows losses and a tax debt of 800 euros. In a TikTok video Černogorods says that he has registered a company in Estonia because “there they treat you differently. At the tax authority agency, they speak Russian.” Re:Baltica didn’t find a company registered to his name in Estonia. Why so? It remains unclear—Černogorods didn’t give any substantive answers to our questions.

Conviction

In interviews with Re:Baltica the TikTokers claim that they’re trying to show the problems in Latvia with a little bit of humour. However, often it looks like an attempt to protect oneself from a criminal probe since the laws and law enforcement’s attitude towards freedom of speech has hardened since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

“My content is humorous, I joke, I am fun,” a woman who in the TikTok world is known as Psycho Olya claims to voice message to Re:Baltica. Her profile contains several videos with Russia’s symbols, Vladimir Putin, soldiers being given medals, all with a patriotic soundtrack in the background. Another video features TikTok accounts with the Russian flag and the caption: “Europe and the whole world has risen. We are against delivering arms to Ukraine.” Psycho Olya’s account has a million likes.

Information found online proves that Olya took part in the protests against the removal of the Victory Monument in Rīga. For Latvians the monument was a symbol of the occupation, but for a part of the Russian population it signified Russia's victory in the Second World War.

Olya's profession and real name are unknown to us—she refused to give an extended interview to Re:Baltica, as she does not trust the media and is afraid to lose the job.

“We were spit upon. We were humiliated. We were shown once again that here we are second class,” concludes Jevgēņija Šafraneka, a former freelancer of Russian editorial office at the Latvian public broadcaster. Šafraneka says this in a TikTok video that she made after the municipality of Riga removed flowers from the Victory Monument with a tractor after the controversial May 9 celebrations, an event that caused outrage in the Russian population. In another video she expresses her discontent as to why the Latvian state will provide rehabilitation to injured Ukrainian soldiers while “my best friend's child with a disability has been waiting for rehabilitation for three years. Three f*****g years!” In another video, she points out that in Russia, Navalny was sentenced “not as an opposition journalist, but for financial machinations. In Latvia this wouldn't be possible at all. The existence of someone like Navalny wouldn't be possible at all. They would close it very fast.”

When she receives a call from Re:Baltica, Šafraneka is receptive and categorically denies that she supports the Kremlin: “It is wrong to think that everyone who defended the monument, are automatically kremlins.” She says she was born in Latvia and felt offended that at the beginning of the war high-ranking officials said that “our Russians are not Russians from Russia, but afterwards it was like, oh, let's change the rhetoric.” She says she uses TikTok to inform people on what is happening in the country.

Hiršs points out that the problem is not in content being critical, but with cases where the information is one-sided: “Latvia—as any country—has its pluses and minuses. Latvia is not black and white.” In his words, when the opinion that everything is purely bad is extensively spread, distrust in state institutions appears, and that creates even more space for Kremlin's propaganda to enter the conversation.

Even though in almost every TikTok account we analysed there were stories from Kremlin's propaganda, people themselves claim they are not spreading it intentionally. "For the influencers, Kremlin's propaganda makes great content—sensational, emotional, shocking. It works well on social media because the Kremlin has given thought to how to sell these stories," Hiršs concludes.

Popularity

For Svetlana Šimane, who advertises manicure services on her Instagram, TikTok profile is a mix of various things. A joy for her watermelon harvest in one video, cursing politicians for large salaries increase in another, with bits and pieces of Kremlin's propaganda in between. She posts a Russian army representative stating that Kyiv is planning provocation – to use nuclear weapons and then blame Russia. And Latvian government just cannot get anything right.

Šimane's account has accumulated almost a million likes. When Re:Baltica calls her, she is dismissive, says her TikTok account has humorous content and she intends to change it substantially soon. In a video posted on TikTok the following day she sings a different tune: "F**k, these journalists, who are they? Who are these people who stick their nose into our accounts?"

Šimane is worried that Re:Baltica could shut down her account. This is not true because content can be deleted, or an account can be closed only by the platform itself. According to the TikTokers, this is a regular occurrence. TikTokers speak of content regulation as a fight against the bad government that censures its opponents, but it's a myth. Piotr Żaczko, the Communication Manager at TikTok CE, explained to Re:Baltica that the platform deletes videos that are not in line with its content policies. They can also be removed at state institutions requests, but in the case of Latvia that hasn't happened. From the Baltic states, content has at the request of state services.

Estonia's Russian friends

Since the beginning of the war, the political group Koos (Together) has been gaining popularity on Estonian social networks. It is run by two men—Aivo Peterson and Oleg Ivanov (who has been mentioned as a "person of interest" in an annual report of the

Estonian Security Service). Along with the Facebook groups and Telegram chats that they run, in August Koos created a TikTok account and have posted on it almost every day since. In other countries 46.1K likes (from February 2023) might not seem much, but in the context of TikTok in Estonia, it is a lot.

Leaders of the political group “Koos” -Aivo Peterson and Oleg Ivanov.

Koos gained attention with their announcement that Estonia and Russia should retain good relations. They also invited people to help clean the Russian embassy when it was covered in protest signs against the war. The message of Koos is that they are fighting Russophobia and stand for peace—reiterating the same narrative that the Russian propaganda uses. Slogans like “We are for peace”, “Let’s clean up this mess” (in regards to the removal of protest signs from the Russian embassy in Tallinn) and “End sanctions against Russia” are used repeatedly. Spreading lies is not beyond them: for example, the group has claimed that Estonia plans to draft children to fight in the war.

Key members of the group are running in the upcoming parliamentary elections in March, but have failed to form a political party (a cause that they asked people to donate money for). Consequently, about 25 members of the group joined the Eesti Vasakpartei (Estonian Left Party) list, but the latest opinion polls show that they do not have enough support to get elected.

Depends on the language

From the seven most popular disinformation accounts in Estonia that we identified by manual search and thanks to recommendations from our readers, only two were in Russian. Regarding content, the main difference was their focus on the way that the government lies to people and makes their lives worse on purpose.

Janar Koddo runs one of the most popular accounts in Estonian. Koddo, a personality that the Estonian public hardly knows, has more than a million likes for his videos. On the surface, his account seems light-hearted and fun, but it contains a mix of anti-vax sentiments and hate towards “the system”. “It’s all good entertainment on daily topics,” Koddo said when asked about his activity on the platform.

The format he uses is the same as plenty of similar accounts—standing in front of a camera and filming himself talking about something topical. Funnily enough, the trend of filming oneself in a car (which might or might not be moving), while popular among disinformation spreaders in Latvia, has not caught up with influencers in Estonia.

Still on Facebook

Comparing the social media networks commonly used in Lithuania, platforms such as Facebook still play a bigger role in spreading disinformation than TikTok accounts, which are limited in their number and popularity in advancing similar aims and promoting Kremlin propaganda to the Lithuanian public.

The account spreading Kremlin propaganda and targeting selected Lithuanian politicians (mostly individuals known for their liberal views) that has gained most traction has been the unidentified user BlackCatNews with 426.1K likes.

Next in line is Saulius Gintautas, a well-known political and public figure from the Rokiškis municipality, who has several accounts to spread Russian propaganda and anti-western sentiment. The account he runs in Russian (306.7K likes) is more popular than the three that we found in Lithuanian (with 19.1K likes).

Saulius Gintautas, a well-known political figure in Lithuania, runs several accounts on TikTok.

Other well-known pro-Russian figures in Lithuania, such as Vaidas Lekstutis and Laurynas Ragelskis, also have TikTok accounts. Although they don't have a large following on the platform, they are active on all social media platforms and have their own websites—bukimevieningi.lt and ldiena.lt.

Information warfare expert Nerijus Maliukevičius says that organisations monitoring and researching disinformation don't pay much attention to TikTok because, comparatively, the platform is not as popular as other social media are.

“On the other hand, there are no convenient tools to analyse TikTok apart from “pure” human resources directly observing the [information] traffic (..) The discussion becomes more complicated when we realise that TikTok is a social network from an authoritarian

country, that is, China,” Maliukevičius adds. “I think the biggest threat is the one posed to those immersed in TikTok algorithms—young people and the Russian-speaking public. However, attention should be paid to monitoring and, ultimately, regulating this tool if it is aggressively used to spread disinformation.”

Source: <https://en.rebaltica.lv/2023/02/dealing-with-tiktok-disinformation-latvian-police-opens-criminal-probes-estonian-simply-asks-to-delete/>

1.2 Is TikTok a Gateway to Politics in the Baltics? For Now, Only in Latvia

By Inga Sprinģe (Re:Baltica), Aistė Meidutė (Delfi.lt) and Kaili Malts (Delfi.ee)

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 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 Russian-speaking 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 conversation's 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 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 Vytutas Raskevičius, the most popular MP on TikTok in Lithuania, has 108 thousand likes, and in Estonia—Andres Sutt has 4,3 thousand likes.

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 regarding 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 many 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.

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 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 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.*

Source: <https://en.rebaltica.lv/2023/02/is-tiktok-a-gateway-to-politics-in-the-baltics-for-now-only-in-latvia/>

2. OVERVIEW OF MAIN DISINFO TRENDS IN THIS QUARTER

2.1 Disinformation trends in Baltics: War in Ukraine, NATO presence and controversy over edible insects

By Madara Eihe, Re:Baltica

During the second quarter of the year the fact-checking efforts in the three Baltic states primarily concentrated on the war in Ukraine and the spread of Russian propaganda about it. The highest level of Ukraine-related disinformation was found in Lithuania, while Latvia and Estonia saw a decline.

Disinformation surrounding Russia's attack on Ukraine aimed to amplify Russia's achievements, undermine local authorities and scare Baltic residents. False claims labeled Ukrainians and Nazis and suggested supporting Ukraine could provoke Russian aggression against the Baltics. Additionally, false stories about Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky's drug use were again spread to disparage Western nations and their leaders.

Non-war related conspiracies and fabricated stories about the health featured heavily in all three Baltic states. For example, false claims emerged in Latvia and Lithuania that massive

earthquakes in Syria and Turkey were deliberately induced by a US-controlled “climate weapon,” aiming to tarnish the reputation of US officials, local authorities, the United Nations, NATO and EU.

Health-related disinformation regarding Covid-19 and vaccines was still somewhat present, but a new wave of disinformation arose due to the EU deliberations regarding the consumption of edible insects. This led to baseless suggestions that the EU was forcing its citizens to unknowingly eat insects, resulting in fabricated claims surrounding food safety. The disinformation further expanded to target various products, ranging from candy, salt and milk to beverages like “Coca-Cola” and “Sprite”.

Trends in Latvia

The trend to present Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as failed states has been long present in the disinformation scene. This time the focus is costs of living – posts depict Latvia as lacking resources for its citizens, plagued by rampant corruption, and burdened with the highest utility bills in the world.

Another distinct disinformation trend in Latvia revolves around false information concerning the Istanbul Convention which is aimed to fight gender-based violence. It has come back into political debate due to the brutal murder of a woman by her ex-partner which has shaken the country – and subsequent debate in parliament about the need to ratify the document.

For instance, the MP Ainārs Šlesers, who represents the opposition populist party “Latvia First!”, claimed that the convention would threaten regulations of what marriage is (according to Latvian Constitution, the union between man and woman). The claim was echoed by presidential candidate Uldis Pīlēns (United List), too.

Meanwhile, a popular social media influencer and aide to “Latvia First!”, Maija Armaņeva, claimed that “article 14 of the Convention mandates the inclusion of same-sex relationships and gender as matters of choice in all education programs – including kindergartens and primary schools.”

Pro-Russian Latvian politicians and “usual suspects” in the disinformation scene also engaged in spreading lies surrounding the decision to develop a new military polygon in

Sēlija which would enhance the presence of NATO forces in the country. Internet trolls and some local politicians interpreted it as proof that Latvian decisions are dictated by the United States and the decision is proof that Latvia is preparing to engage in military conflict with Russia. These narratives closely resemble messages conveyed by Russian propaganda about the Baltic states.

Latvian fact-checkers from Re:Check/Re:Baltica debunked various lies spread by disinformation superspreaders about the new military training ground. It was promoted by “well known disinformation spreaders Rūdolfs Brēmanis, Aivis Vasiļevskis and Valentīns Jeremejevs, but also parliamentary leader “For Stability!” Alexey Roslikov joined in.

Another theme on Latvian disinformation scene were revived homophobic claims that homosexuality is classified as a disease, prompted by the election of foreign minister Edgars Rinkēvičs as the first openly gay head of state in the EU.

Lastly, climate change denial and the circulation of false assertions concerning the environment have also been significant themes in Latvia. For example, the Latvian Minister of Agriculture, Didzis Šmits, stated: “It’s not science, it’s religion,” – to discredit the notion of human-induced impact on climate change.

Trends in Estonia

In Estonia, disinformation primarily focuses on defaming external actors rather than promoting a failed state narrative. For example, false claims include allegations that bestiality has been legalized in Spain. At the same time, other posts falsely state that “the new principles of the UN alleviate punishments for sex traffickers and allow paedophilia.”

However, there is relatively less disinformation about internal affairs spread about the country itself. After the general elections in Estonia, several posts circulated claiming that the number of eligible voters had changed compared to previous elections and falsely attributed it to Ukrainian refugees who entered the country after Russia attacked Ukraine.

Numerous posts attempted to undermine the election’s legitimacy by using demographic data, falsely implying that the fluctuation in the number of voters resulted from influx of refugees from Ukraine. The variation in voters’ numbers is influenced by natural demographic processes, such as individuals becoming adults or dying.

Health-related disinformation is also present in Estonia, covering topics such as C-19 vaccines and fake wonder drugs, posing challenges to public health efforts. For example, sellers of fake illegal “wonder drug” faked an interview that featured a popular Estonian journalist and a cardiologist. The Facebook post about the interview led readers to a scam page imitating a reputable Estonian news website, where the fraudulent promotion and sale of the so-called miracle drug took place, despite its unavailability in legitimate pharmacies. Neither the journalist nor the cardiologist had participated in the fabricated interview, and they did not endorse the misleading content containing multiple health-related falsehoods that circulated as a result.

Trends in Lithuania

During March – June, the disinformation scene in Lithuania was mostly focused on the war in Ukraine and Russian propaganda. False claims targeted groups supporting Ukraine, suggesting they exploit Lithuanian citizens and don’t send collected donations or equipment to Ukraine. There are also narratives portraying Lithuania as incapable of caring for its citizens and prioritizing “greedy” Ukraine.

Regarding climate change, a persistent narrative questions the safety and effectiveness of climate-friendly energy solutions like electric cars and wind turbines, favoring conventional fossil fuel-based alternatives. Additionally, some deny the existence of climate change, arguing that CO2 is beneficial and harmless.

Climate change deniers claim that the government shifts the responsibility of addressing climate related issues onto citizens, while the true culprits behind these problems are Western entities, figures like Klaus Schwab and Bill Gates, and the government itself.

Additionally, there has been a notable increase in the spread of AI-generated content and implausible conspiracy theories in Lithuania. These cover various topics, from hidden evidence of life on Mars to undisclosed archaeological artifacts that are supposed to challenge our understanding of history. Many of these posts and images are shared within Lithuanian groups or individual accounts, mainly from Russian websites or social media accounts associated with mysticism, paranormal and similar.

When analyzing the patterns of disinformation dissemination, a distinct trend emerges where a higher number of posts originate from Russian websites. According to Aistė Meidutė, a fact checker from delfi.lt, there are even citations from books authored by fake Russian experts (such as homeopaths and mystics). These posts contain false claims covering climate, food, health, history and conspiracy theories.

Source: <https://en.rebaltica.lv/2023/07/disinformation-trends-in-baltics-war-in-ukraine-nato-presence-and-controversy-over-edible-insects/>

3. OVERVIEW OF ROLE OF TELEGRAM IN PROPAGANDA IN BALTICS

3.1 Kremlin's propaganda in our pockets. How disinformation thrives on Telegram

By Anastasija Tetarenko – Supe, Re:Baltica

By banning Kremlin's TV and online propaganda in the Baltics, the access to such resources has become more challenging only for those whose primary source used to be television. Now social media platforms have taken up that space, among which "Telegram" stands out because it does not share data with governments and does not moderate disinformation and lies.

In the Baltics, the most popular channels directed towards local Russian speakers are not having the big following in numbers, but that is not the point: their main role is to amplify each other's content and create the impression that many people think alike. "Telegram" played a particularly significant role during the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Main pro-Russian channels about the Baltics

Various activists, both well-known and new, have joined forces on "Telegram" to popularise pro-Kremlin messages. This overview focuses on the most popular/active groups reporting about the Baltics in Russian.

Voice of Mordor

The largest pro-Kremlin channel, which also pays reasonable attention to the Baltic states, is "Golos Mordora" (Voice of Mordor), with around 170,000 subscribers. This channel

presents itself as sharing real news, but those news pieces are emotionally and ideologically charged, clearly identifying the “good” and the “bad.” An interview with one-popular singer among Russian speakers, Laima Vaikule, is used to highlight Russia’s/USSR’s role in improving the well-being of many people. A call from the State Language Center to refer to Kaliningrad by its historic name Karaļauči, is used on the channel to evoke memories of specific Latvian place names during the Soviet occupation, seemingly hinting at the potential repetition of history. Although information about the operators of “Golos Mordora” is minimal, the channel is widely quoted on various Russian news websites.

Baltnews

This “Telegram” channel frequently shares content from a website of the same name (formerly a Russian-sponsored news site, which is now blocked in Latvian territory). “Baltnews” is also one of the “Telegram” channels that follows court cases against former journalists of Latvian Russian-language media and activists of the Latvian Russian Union, who are accused of violating EU sanctions by accepting money from the sanctioned Russian propaganda outlet “Rossiya Segodnya.” (It is referred to as the “14 Journalists Case” in Russian propaganda).

Time, Forward! (kind of)

“Время, вперёд!” channel is run by Degi Karayev, an activist and regular participant in Russian-speaking protests. The channel, with 2.1 thousand subscribers, now focuses on the fate of Latvian Russian-speaking activists involved in criminal proceedings.

IMHOclub.lv

The operator of the banned Latvian website IMHOclub.lv, Yuri Alekseyev, manages a “Telegram” channel with the same name (the website itself is accessible with the .org domain; only the LV domain is blocked). It is presented as an independent public and political analytical resource. On their account, IMHOclub shares links to websites that cannot be reached in Latvia without using a VPN. Some of the channel’s posts match word for word with those of pro-Kremlin activist Vladimir Linderman on “Facebook”. Linderman himself has his own “Telegram” channel with nearly 1.5 thousand subscribers.

Baltic “antifascists”

The so-called Baltic antifa channel, created in November 2022, has gathered nearly 9,000 followers. Its creators justify their activities by describing Baltic Russians as “completely disoriented” and encouraging as many people as possible to join, claiming that “together we will be an information force.” The channel was initially created to facilitate the coordination of “antifascists” in the Baltic region, assisting “OUR PEOPLE [emphasis retained] under the fascist occupation.”

The most active participants in the channel’s chat are mainly anonymous. This practice is encouraged, with followers being asked to buy new SIM cards if they want to join the group. This is recommended if a person wants to travel to the EU or USA, indicating that the group’s creators are aware of the presence of security services in the chat, but at the same time exaggerating it to give the group more significance than it naturally has.

Although initially positioned as a coordination platform, the channel has become more of a chat room. It occasionally includes calls to actions related to dismantling of Soviet monuments. One of the administrators had also posted vacancies for the Russian private military company “Wagner,” and in one of the latest videos, activists encourage moving to Russia and promise to assist in enlisting in the army. The channel has also published information about Latvians fighting on the Ukrainian side, as well as collected information about “de-Russification” activists and individuals blamed for the removal of Soviet monuments.

State Security Service (VDD) has opened a criminal proceeding against the channel’s administrators describing it as a criminal organisation. In total, six individuals are involved in VDD’s case, three of whom have been detained—Tatyana Andrijea, a young activist of the Latvian Russian Union, as well as Kremlin’s sympathisers Alexander Zhgun and Stanislav Bukains, as recently reported by LTV.

One of the channel’s administrators identifies herself as Viktorija Matule, who gained some recognition with her performance at the Victory Monument on May 10, 2023, standing next to a young man waving Russia’s flag. After that she fled to Belarus and later to Russia.

Sprats in exile (and others)

Almost all of “Telegram” channels reviewed for this publication have shared content from Alexey Stefanov’s channel. Stefanovs used to live in Riga and worked in the local Russian press but then moved to Russia and works in the Kremlin’s propaganda media outlet “Sputnik.” His channel, with 7.6 thousand subscribers, seeks out news and views that align with the Kremlin’s narrative.

ПОЛИТNews

The channel “ПОЛИТNews” is run by Riga’s resident Alexey Gulenko. Little is known about a man. A person with the same name is listed on LinkedIn as the owner of a yacht and boat supply company. He is included in Ukraine’s “Mirotvorets” list for spreading Kremlin propaganda and supporting Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Unable to compete

Most of the pro-Kremlin news groups on “Telegram” disseminate information in Russian. Some are also available in Latvian, but the language and style suggest that the content is either fully translated or the creator is not a native Latvian speaker. However, no local channel dedicated to the Baltics can compete with pro-Kremlin propagandists in terms of popularity.

Propaganda hub

While authors on other social media platforms strive to create unique content to attract their audience, pro-Kremlin “Telegram” channels do not stand out in terms of diversity. On the contrary, these groups have become similar to aggregators, compiling related content and displaying it or providing links to it. They share each other’s content, creating the impression that a particular opinion is popular because, look, it is being discussed elsewhere too.

This is evidenced by the quotability statistics of these channels. Some posts from specific channels reach an audience that exceeds the number of their subscribers. This means that channel posts are seen by those who are not subscribers to that channel. This practice is more commonly observed in channels that not only mechanically replicate news aligned

with the general sentiment but also promote the exchange of user opinions through emotional remarks.

Out of approximately 20 “Telegram” channels examined in more detail, the engagement level (ERR) of two channels – “Трибалтийские Вымираты” and “Антифашисты Прибалтики” – exceeds 100% in terms of reach.

Beliefs and benefits

Mārtiņš Hiršs, a disinformation researcher and doctor of social sciences, explains that not all pro-Kremlin propaganda messages come directly from the Kremlin itself. “Yes, the Kremlin – Putin, Lavrov, and others – sets the tone or the main messages that are repeated in Russia and resonate emotionally with the audiences through Kremlin-controlled media. At the same time, the Kremlin directly controls many influencers and trolls who repeat the necessary messages on social networks.” Hiršs emphasises that pro-Kremlin messages are also disseminated by ordinary people who believe in Kremlin narratives about the world or gain some personal benefit from them.

These people can be opposition figures and media outlets in the West who want to criticise the official position. They can also be local oligarchs who have economic interests in Russia, conspiracy theorists who do not believe in the “official story” of government institutions and are willing to believe in any alternative. They are also influencers who benefit from Kremlin propaganda stories by gaining more views.

Pavel Durov, a former IT entrepreneur who left Russia, created an app that is unique in its refusal to comply with government demands to disclose private user data and moderate or block content. As a result, “Telegram” serves as both a refuge for independent media in countries where they are censored and as the main propaganda channel for “Z bloggers” or supporters of the Russian army. “Telegram” allows for the exchange of messages between individuals and the joining of interest groups (channels). More than 700 million people worldwide use “Telegram” daily, with the majority in Asia. But the app is also popular in European countries, particularly in Russia and Southern Europe. In the annual report of the Latvian State Security Service (VDD), “Telegram” appeared for the first time in 2021 when the service acknowledged the increasing significance of the app in the dissemination of Russian disinformation.

Source: <https://en.rebaltica.lv/2023/07/kremlins-propaganda-in-our-pockets-how-disinformation-thrives-on-telegram/>

4. OVERVIEW OF CLIMATE CHANGE DISINFORMATION IN BALTICS

4.1 Pants on fire – how climate misinformation is spread in the Baltic states?

By Ronalds Siliņš, Re:Baltica

Whether their goal is to amass a following, oppose environmentally friendly policies, or resist what they perceive as “totalitarian global control”, a diverse group of disinformation spreaders has shifted its focus to the topic of climate change. Who comprises this group? Where do they source their talking points? And have they successfully deceived the Baltic population?

Who is spreading climate change misinformation in the Baltics?

During the last century fossil fuel companies started disinformation campaign about climate change. With the help of well financed think tanks, “experts” and politicians, they set out to confuse the public about the scientific consensus and the facts surrounding climate change. With the rise of social media, misinformation spread even further and now has been taken up by those outside the fossil fuel sphere, but who still aim to personally benefit from it. For various social media “freedom fighters”, climate change denial is yet another opportunity to increase their following and flaunt their opposition to the establishment, the “West” or fictitious shadow organizations.

“I would call them “superspreaders” – no matter what topic is currently being discussed, they always spread misinformation about that,” says Delfi.ee fact-checker Kaili Malts, while Lithuanian journalist from Delfi Aiste Meidute describes them as routine spreaders of disinformation.

In Latvia, examples include Aivis Vasiļevskis who was previously jailed for justifying Russian war crimes in Ukraine, and the anti-government activist Valentīns Jeremejevs, as well as various anonymous disinformers whose posts are regularly shared by several hundred people.

Unlike in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have a fair share of politicians that mislead about climate change. Notably, Latvian MPs Aleksandrs Kiršteins and Jānis Dombrava and affiliated with Nacionālā apvienība, a longstanding political party that was excluded in the most recent government reshuffle, have consistently denied human influence on climate change. In a similar vein, during his tenure as minister of agriculture, politician Didzis Šmits (Apvienotais saraksts) referred to the scientific consensus on climate change as “religious” and “arrogant”.

In Latvia, misleading about climate change appears to be done by individual party members, while in Estonia it’s a common tactic for the Estonian Conservative People’s Party (EKRE). According to fact-checkers from Delfi.ee, in the first two summer months alone their members posted false information related to climate change more than 30 times.

Where is disinformation posted and what are its sources?

When last summer Re:Check compiled three years worth of fact-checking, we found that climate change didn’t even crack the top five most popular topics. But with the pandemic winding down and the global energy crisis on most people’s minds, climate change and related policies have emerged as a hot topic for disinformation.

According to fact-checkers from all three Baltic countries, the most popular platforms for climate change disinformation are Facebook and Telegram. Despite Meta’s cooperation with independent fact-checkers, every day false information about climate change reaches hundreds of thousands of Facebook users. Occasionally it’s also spread on clickbait websites or conservative media, such as NRA.lv and LA.lv (Latvia), Uued Uudised and Objektiiv (Estonia).

Often the misleading content is translated or paraphrased from articles published in English. This is not surprising because – as researchers from University of Bristol note – fossil fuel companies, together with conservative US think-tanks, have set up a well-funded disinformation network that spreads scientifically unsound information and seeks to cast doubt on the credibility of academic literature.

Usually, disinformers don’t list their sources, but on the rare occasion they do its never scientific literature. Sometimes they quote Clintel – a climate skeptic organization founded

by the former Shell employee Guus Berkhout – or the CO2 Coalition, which for years has received donations from foundations associated with the oil tycoons, Koch family.

While not popular in the two other Baltic countries, the international activist group Creative Society has taken a foothold in Lithuania and is one of the most cited sources for climate denial. The organization, which often hosts video conferences on climate change and religious topics, regularly spreads lies and has repeatedly been caught manipulating videos to give the impression that scientists agree with their positions.

Climate change lies are similar in all three countries, but they don't all become popular at the same moments in time. For example, the misleading document titled "Climate Change Declaration", which supposedly is signed by over 1200 experts, went viral in Lithuania this September, but Re:Check wrote about its misleading content as early as December 2022. In other countries, news of the declaration started circulating even earlier – in September 2022.

"Humans have no impact on climate change"

Almost all climate sciences and their studies confirm that the dramatically fast rise in global average temperatures over the last 150 years is the result of human activity. However, the climate is also changing naturally, and it is this fact that climate skeptics use to mislead that humans have no impact.

Instead, they put blame on solar activity or volcanic eruptions alone. On several occasions this false opinion has been repeated, for example, by the previously mentioned Latvian MP Kiršteins.

Sometimes justification or proof is eschewed completely. For example, the former Latvian minister Šmits claimed that his opinion on man's supposedly negligible impact on climate is just "common sense".

Climate misinformation goes hand in hand with ignoring long-term data. For example, how can we be constantly breaking yearly temperature records, if some summer days were cold and it was raining hail? What about Niagara Falls that froze over this year? Where was global warming there? Similarly in July remarked the Estonian MP Monika Helme (EKRE) – what is all this talk about climate change when it is +12°C outside.

In Lithuania in particular, ridicule and defamation of activist Greta Thunberg is very popular. Allegedly, instead of the planet she wants to save banks, this year she's predicted the end of the world, is transgender and has gained loads of weight. For years personal attacks against her have been used to discredit the threat of climate change.

“Green energy isn't really green”

Another deception tactic is to convince the wider public that policy makers are lying and that green electricity is particularly harmful to the climate and environment in general.

Quite the opposite, climate researchers have concluded that, compared to renewables, the extraction and use of fossil fuels produces more greenhouse gasses and therefore warms the planet more. However green energy is not perfect as well; it also harms the environment. Those who oppose greener energy policies tend to present this information in a one-sided way and avoid mentioning the far greater impact of fossil fuels.

A popular example are the social media pictures of birds who've perished by running into wind turbine blades. Although there are such cases, a far larger harm to birds comes from the extraction and use of fossil fuels, which kill almost 20 times more birds per gigawatt hour of energy produced.

In the Baltic countries, it is also often claimed that renewable energy is neither –cost efficient, nor efficient. For example, the previously mentioned Creative Society alleges that over their lifetime wind turbines recoup only 78% of the invested resources. The organization does not provide any evidence and does not even mention which country they're talking about. However, naming a specific number gives the impression it's a result of serious research.

“Climate change is a conspiracy for public control”

This narrative is shared mainly by the super-spreaders, who find evil intentions in almost every initiative or policy. According to them, governments, media and researchers lie about climate change to control humanity. For example, to force it to eat insects or to introduce so-called climate lockdowns. Most likely the use of the word “lockdown” isn't accidental but meant to conjure memories of COVID pandemic restrictions.

In the Baltic States, as elsewhere Europe, such delusions became popular in the first half of this year when the media started talking about the so-called 15-minute cities. What conspiracy theorists see as a tool of ultimate control, instead is an urban planning concept that should provide easy access to everyday services, reduce traffic and make the cities more environmentally friendly.

Climate policy is also baselessly called a way to reduce the world's population. It is supposedly aimed at destroying agriculture, forcing people to eat insects, and making them weak, sick and docile. "These powerful elites, like [Klaus] Schwab and others, want to control the world. They want to control everyone. What do they want now? They want fewer people," a Lithuanian user wrote on Facebook, sowing fears of greener climate policies.

What's been done to combat this?

Re:Check asked the Latvian Ministry of Climate and Energy whether it is planning any counter measures to counter climate misinformation or to raise public awareness of popular misconceptions. The ministry called these one of the "most important tasks at the current moment" and pointed to upcoming and already approved project proposals aimed at raising public awareness of "the importance of climate neutrality and resilience".

Despite the best efforts of disinformers and some politicians, most people in the Baltic states take climate change seriously. The latest Eurobarometer survey (published in 2023) shows that 76–92% see it as a major problem. Compared to the previous survey in 2021, concerns about climate change have risen slightly in Latvia and Lithuania, but in Estonia they have moved in the opposite direction.

In all three Baltic countries, more than half of the respondents support more public funding for transitioning to what's called clean energy and see tackling climate change as a priority for improving public health.

Source: <https://en.rebaltica.lv/2023/10/pants-on-fire-how-climate-misinformation-is-spread-in-the-baltic-states/>

5. Overview of LGBTQ+ disinformation in the Baltics

5.1 Who is spreading LGBT+ disinformation in the Baltics?

By Ronalds Siliņš, Evita Puriņa, Re:Baltica

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.

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 Ščerbatihis 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.

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 Pudņiks 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 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.

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.

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.

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%.

Source: <https://en.rebaltica.lv/2024/01/who-is-spreading-lgbt-disinformation-in-the-baltics/>

6. OVERVIEW OF "MATRYOSHKA" OPERATION IN BALTICS

6.1 When pro-Kremlin bots start speaking Latvian

By Inga Sprinģe, Re:Baltica

Latvia's social media users recently encountered an unprecedented attack of bots. During it thousands of accounts suddenly started to speak rudimentary Latvian and defend hockey players who had played tournament in Russia despite the ban. This was the first operation of such scale in one of the Baltic languages and has led to speculation that it could be a test-run before European Parliament elections.

The wave of bot activity on X (formerly Twitter) kicked off a day after Latvian social networks erupted in outrage at the hockey players who had participated in a tournament in Kazan, Russia, in the middle of February, 2024. Latvia has banned its national teams from participation in any competition where Russian and Belarussian teams are taking part.

In this case the outrage was even bigger as the hybrid event where part of the tournament takes place in ice ring, and another part via online games, was opened by Russia's president Vladimir Putin whom majority of Latvians consider a war criminal.

Tournament's "Games Of The Future" website states that eleven players were part of "Baltic Select" team. Latvian fans were upset to see the country's flag displayed at the opening of games which they see as Russia's propaganda. The Latvian Ice Hockey Federation suspended the licenses of two players.

Bots swiftly joined the conversation in the late afternoon of February 23. Over the next two days, thousands of bot messages criticized the federation's decision as "unprofessional" and asked to "respect players' choices."

These messages were accompanied by hashtags #NoPoliticsInSport, #FairSport, #westandwithBalticSelect, and others.

NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, which is based in Riga, estimated that over thousand unique bots were tweeting these messages in Latvian.

“We have been analyzing so-called ‘robotrolling’ on Twitter for seven years, and this is the first time we have observed such a massive campaign in the Latvian language,” Sārts, the head of NATO StratCom Center said to Re:Baltica.

Researchers from the Bot Blocker (antibot4navaly) project, which focuses on monitoring Russian bot operations on X, reached a similar conclusion. They estimated that almost 200 000 bot retweets were made over two days, reaching nearly 800 000 impressions.

The representative of Bot Blocker project, who provided Re:Baltica with the methodology of their estimates, said that “very likely” pro-Kremlin Doppelganger bot network was behind this operation.

“This is the first time Doppelganger has targeted Latvia, and it is the second largest episode in terms of effort and reach achieved on Twitter since October 2023, when we started monitoring the network,” representative of Bot Blocker told Re:Baltica.

The first massive operation had been retweeting the memes in which Putin and China’s leader are pictured on New Year’s greeting cards wishing happy new year and hinting at a new world order. The cards were distributed on Dec 31, 2023, and resulted in 879 000 views and 209 000 retweets.

Cheap shot

“I cannot comment on who was behind this hockey campaign, but whoever it was, the campaign was cheap,” Jānis Sārts said to Re:Baltica.

StratCom regularly conducts experiments for research purposes by purchasing bots for X to analyze how easily specific messages can be spread. Recent analysis indicates that pro-Kremlin accounts are employing more advanced techniques, such as benefiting from the X paid verification system (“blue checks”), which allows them to gain more reach and earn from ads.

“If this is their level, then we are safe,” Sārts remarked with a hint of irony.

He sees two potential reasons why bot campaign was activated – either whitewashing and promoting games inaugurated by Putin, or test run before European Parliament elections in June, 2024.

Rihards Bambals, the head of the strategic communication unit at the State Chancellery, shares Sārts’s opinion. “This can be seen as a test of our state institutions and society. It’s an examination to see how we react, how quickly, through which channels, and with what messages,” Bambals told Re:Baltica.

A week after “hockey bot” event most of the accounts which were established in December and participated in the campaign had remained active, Re:Baltica observed. However, the new accounts, established in February and used primarily for retweets, were marked as “restricted”. Bot Blocker’s previous findings show that these accounts eventually get suspended.

Doppelganger constantly tests X systems which are meant to catch abuse and inauthentic behavior. For example, noticing that posting bot tweets at the same speed in English from the US or EU country, the accounts located in Europe get suspended faster, Doppelganger in the EU started posting fewer tweets in the same time span. As a result, it took more time for the X abuse-catching system to identify them.

“From this we can conclude that X treats different languages/target countries differently regarding abuse protection. Second, the bad actors learn from experience and tailor its operation for each language individually,” Bot Blocker stated.

“Remove these idiots“

Shortly after the surge of bots on X, 21 pages sharing the same line emerged on Facebook. All posts were paid – promoted, targeting citizens of Latvia.

This time it was in English. “Latvian sportsmen have been deprived of future medals!” the authors of the posts cried and called to “remove these idiots from hockey management” who had suspended players’ licenses in Latvia.

The post included a link to a petition supporting the suspended players. It was created by Brazilian Renato Sa Neto who had participated in the same tournament as member of “R10 Team”. Re:Baltica reached out to him via X and asked for e-mail address to send questions. After receiving them he went silent.

Facebook ad library shows that the message targeted Latvians aged 18-65, with each post reaching an average of 20 000 individuals. However, FB quickly identified the behavior as inauthentic and it led to the deactivation of the pages.

Facebook declined to provide further comment to Re:Baltica.

Requesting signatures for petitions to engage larger audience is a common tactic employed by the Doppelganger network.

The term “Doppelganger” for this pro-Kremlin bot network was coined by international NGO exposing disinformation campaigns – the EU DisinfoLab in 2022. They exposed the use of multiple “clones” of authentic media to target users with fake articles, videos, and polls.

According to META report, among the “fake” media pages was also the most popular Baltic news site – Delfi. As a result of investigation META took down a network of over 60 websites impersonating legitimate news organizations. It revealed that the network was controlled by the Russian IT companies National Technologies and Social Design Agency which are now under EU sanctions. The ultimate owner of National Technologies is Rostec — Russia’s state-owned defense conglomerate headed by former KGB agent Sergey Chemezov, a close friend of Vladimir Putin, as reported by independent Russian media, The Insider.

Hockey bots network which was targeting Latvians remains active. A week later another wave of posts was launched. This time it was to support the same sports games in Kazan. According to Bot Blocker, the reach of this wave was 780 000 views.

Sārts cautions against underestimating the significance of these campaigns. “The recent events in Latvia may seem primitive, but they represent just the tip of the iceberg,” he said. “The next phase could involve more sophisticated tactics, such as integrated ChatGPT, making tweets appear even more authentic. We must remain vigilant.”

Source: <https://en.rebaltica.lv/2024/03/when-pro-kremlin-bots-start-speaking-latvian/>

7. OVERVIEW OF DISINFORMATION BEFORE EP ELECTION

7.1 Old cars, immigrants and war – how EU related misinformation is spread in the Baltics?

By Evita Puriņa, Re:Baltica

If you wish to discredit the EU in the Baltic states, spread green lies and half-truths – for example, that the EU will immediately force everyone to drive electric cars, stop old cars from being repaired and ban heating with firewood.

Ahead of the upcoming European Parliament elections, these have been among the most popular deceptions in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. But in general, this period has passed quietly and without major disinformation scandals.

It would have been even more peaceful if politicians themselves did not create various lies to mobilize voters. In Latvia in particular, several parties including most popular with voters have been actively spreading disinformation about the Green Deal, EU migration policy and the work of the government. This is largely done through TikTok, where the amount of active parties and candidates has increased compared to local parliamentary elections just a few years ago.

“EU will not let you drive old cars”

In recent years, environmental protection in Europe has become one of the main topics of deception, alongside Covid, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, LGBT+ rights and various conspiracy theories. The Baltic states are no exception. In the run-up to the elections, these falsehoods have been reinforced in the context of the EU Green Deal.

In all three countries, myths surrounding electric cars are expressed in different ways.

Social media deceivers and anti-green politicians are accompanied by clickbait sites. In Latvia, one of them published an article at the end of May with the headline: “We will not be allowed to drive internal combustion engine cars by 2030”. The article does not give any

reason for this – it only implies that the author attributes this to the supposedly huge taxes that people will not be able to pay.

Meanwhile, one of the parties currently not represented at the parliament – the New Conservative Party – published an promotional poster with the slogan “Time to put the brakes on the Green Deal”. The poster also states that “older cars will be allowed”, as if there had been plans to ban them. The party’s number one candidate, Talis Linkaits, was Latvia’s transport minister four years ago and at the time was himself pushing for higher taxes on older cars.

The EU has no plans to ban the use, repair or sale of old cars. Member states have only agreed that effective 2035, new cars with internal combustion engines will no longer be sold.

In addition to these locally produced deceptions, fact-checkers have reported about electric car myths that circulate from country to country. For example, that the electric police vans in France or charging stations in Australia are actually powered by fuel generators.

In Estonia and Lithuania, the rumor about the repair ban was accompanied by conspiracy theory that it’s part of a EU plan to encourage people to buy new, more eco-friendly vehicles. This theory was also popular elsewhere in Europe. Estonian Delfi fact-checker Kaili Malts notes that Estonia is currently trying to introduce a new car tax, and such misleading information may give the impression that this is being done under pressure from the EU. However, this is not true. Malts believes that in some parts of society there is resistance to green ideas and many people do not distinguish between the EU and Estonian initiatives.

“Thou shall not burn wood”

In Latvia, shortly before the elections, another popular myth about the Green Deal made a comeback. It was claimed that due to the EU policies it [will be illegal](#) to heat homes using firewood, briquettes and wood pellets. About a year ago, the Latvian Forest Owners’ Association [spread](#) this myth to pursue its own business interests.

In 2023, one of the proposals in the EU Renewable Energy Directive was to limit support for using wood at large boiler houses that run on woodchips. The proposal was not supported. The use of firewood for heating is not prohibited by the Directive or by Latvian law.

This became a hot topic in Latvia, because it is one of the [most forested](#) countries in the EU and one of the leaders in the use of wood for heating. Before the EP elections, several populist parties ran with this narrative, flooding social media with one false claim after another.

The loudest among populists is Latvia First, which, a few years ago under the leadership of former oligarch Ainārs Šlesers emerged as an anti-vaxxer advocate and which until February 24, 2022 had been calling for closer friendship with Russia. Now, its representatives, among whom there is no shortage of conspiracy theorists, regularly tell their tens of thousands of followers that the Green Deal is dangerous, it will drive Latvia into bankruptcy and many of its residents into poverty. Several parties also use the old myth that Latvia is the greenest or one of the greenest countries in Europe and therefore does not need any EU green policy. It should be noted that the story of Latvia being the greenest country in the EU, according to Yale University and Columbia University's Environmental Performance Index (EPI), was true 12 years ago, but not anymore.

“10,000 immigrants a year”

In Latvia, before the election, populist parties also tried to scare the public with stories about migrants. Only recently, a candidate of the National Alliance, which had become an opposition party after many years in government, said on TikTok that “it looks like Europe will be destroyed not by war, but by another disaster”, namely, immigrants. Later, other candidates spread the claim that the recently adopted EU Migration Pact could result in Latvia having to take in 10,000 immigrants or pay 200 million euros a year (in fact 99 people or EUR 2 million). This unsubstantiated claim was repeated by the party Latvia First.

“Unfair elections”

As usual, disinformators, some of whom are now also election candidates, tried to raise suspicion that the EP election results would be falsified. In Estonia, the conservative populist party EKRE has been spreading rumors that the elections are not fair. It argued

that the party's popularity ratings reported by the media were lower than they should be. In Latvia, one of the main disinformation actors Rūdolfs Brēmanis called not to participate in early voting, claiming that according to the insider information the votes would be falsified. Brēmanis is one of the anti-vaxxers who gained popularity during the pandemic. Now, like other such populists, he considers himself a politician and runs for election. Meanwhile he has also been slandering the state, spreading various conspiracy theories and Kremlin disinformation.

Across the border, Lithuanian populists tried to sow doubts about the legitimacy of the Lithuanian presidential election. They compared Lithuania with North Korea and Russia because there were no observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) present. The presidential election, which concluded after two rounds at the end of May, probably stole the attention away from the EP elections. According to Aistė Meidutė from Delfi Lithuania before the European elections there wasn't more EU-related disinformation than usual.

“EU pushes for higher retirement age”

In early May, Latvia was swept by yet another EU-related topic of misinformation. Several well-known populists alleged that the EU, together with other international organizations, was asking Latvia to raise the retirement age to 75. This was not the case, and Latvia itself has no plans to raise the retirement age (currently 65). This is a particularly sensitive issue in a country with one of the shortest life expectancies and one of the lowest pensions in the EU. This is probably why the lie quickly became viral on Facebook and TikTok, where posts and videos with this claim reached a total of at least 300,000 people. The original source of this lie was the aforementioned Bremanis.

“Europe is dragging us into war”

Kremlin disinformation is rife in the Baltic states. Kaili Malts from the Estonian Delfi points out that it mostly consists of claims about the West joining the war in Ukraine. For example, in Estonia, the Russian Foreign Ministry's [lie](#) that the country has sent almost 200 mercenaries to Ukraine has recently been circulated. Similar allegations were made about the French army. Also, the [old lie](#) about the US bio-labs in Ukraine is not going away. In both Lithuania and Estonia, the Kremlin's long-established disinformation about Ukrainian

President Volodymyr Zelensky and his family has also garnered a lot of attention. The Ukrainian leader is said to be a [drug addict](#), so his wife Olena Zelenska will run for election instead, while Zelenska's charitable foundation is accused of [running](#) a pedophile network that supplies orphaned Ukrainian children to the rich people in the West.

In Latvia, such obviously fabricated lies are rarely popular. However, other claims, such as that Russia's war in Ukraine was staged by the West or that Ukraine is weak, corrupt and has no chance of victory, are still being circulated, especially on *TikTok*. In Latvia, party *For Stability!*, a supporter of the Kremlin narrative, that claims there is only one choice in these elections – war or peace – has a good chance of winning a seat in the EP. It openly tells voters that the EU means losing independence, and the union's current leaders are trying to drag us into a new arms race which has no room for welfare concerns.

To the surprise of many, a few years ago this party [was elected](#) to the Latvian parliament through savvy use of TikTok. It didn't go unnoticed, and this time there were many more politicians active on TikTok – especially those representing the more radical parts of the society. Their messaging there is quite different from what they say, for example, in public broadcaster debates.

Source: <https://en.rebaltica.lv/2024/06/old-cars-immigrants-and-war-onward-to-the-european-parliament-through-scaremongering-and-lies/>

8. OVERVIEW OF DISINFORMATION TRENDS ABOUT UKRAINE AT THAT POINT IN TIME

8.1 Army preparing to enter Ukraine, politicians leaving the country – how fear of being dragged into war is spread in the Baltics

By Annija Petrova, Re:Baltica

Organizations that contributed to this investigation: Re:Baltica (Re:Check), Delfi (Estonia), Delfi (Lithuania)

This summer, misinformation that those in power are trying to drag the Baltic countries into a war against Russia intensified, especially in Lithuania and Estonia. Governments are allegedly considering sending troops to Ukraine, in Lithuania the foreign minister and his

family are leaving the country, while Latvia is provoking its eastern neighbour with threats of a nuclear war. In this article, we explain who and how in the Baltic countries are spreading these falsehoods.

“Lithuania to send 100 troops to Ukraine”

In the spring of this year, French President Emmanuel Macron repeatedly [said](#) that under the right circumstances NATO troops could be sent to Ukraine. This was followed by a [wave of disinformation](#) in a number of European countries, both [about Macron](#) and about Russia-related plans that NATO countries allegedly have. This is also what happened in Lithuania. Following Macron’s statements, Lithuanian politicians, including Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė and Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis (both represent the *Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats*), started discussing the possibility of sending Lithuanian instructors to Ukraine to train the country’s soldiers. Almost all statements by senior Lithuanian officials regarding the possible training mission were interpreted as calls for war, according to Aistė Meidutė, fact-checker for the Lithuanian website *Delfi*. Politicians’ insistence that the country would not initiate such a mission, as it would require involvement of larger countries such as France, was ignored.

“However, disinformation spreaders re-interpreted these claims in a different light claiming that Lithuanian politicians are ready to send Lithuanian troops directly into the warzone,” Meidutė explains. For example, one of the fake news websites [said](#) that Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico had supposedly confirmed that Lithuania and other countries would send troops to Ukraine. Even though Fico said that several EU and NATO member countries were considering this possibility, he did not mention any specific country.

Shortly after that, it was falsely [claimed](#) on Lithuanian social media that the Lithuanian parliament, Seimas, had secretly decided to send 100 troops to the Ukrainian front lines. The originator of the news was Valdas Tutkus, a former chief of defense and a candidate for Lithuania’s president. It was him who posted to social media that the Seimas had voted in favour of sending Lithuanian troops to Ukraine.

In reality, Seimas adopted a decision setting the number of troops that could be deployed on international operations and missions. The resolution establishes that up to 100 soldiers and civilian staff may take part in a training operation in Ukraine.

“Estonian mercenaries are already at war”

Estonian *Delfi* fact-checker Marta Vunsh explains that in Estonia the narrative that Baltic countries or Estonia are allegedly preparing to go to war with Russia is intertwined with messages of ceasefire, “we want peace” and “not supporting Ukraine is better for Estonia”.

In Estonia too, various misconceptions spread after French President Macron’s remarks. Portal *Eestinen* claimed that France had [decided](#) to move its troops to Ukraine and start a war with Russia. This led to speculation that Estonia had similar plans to send its troops to the front line.

This narrative was [pushed](#) in the past as well. For instance, an article was published on Estonian fake news website *Telegram*, saying that the country’s Defence Forces could send troops to the battlefield in Ukraine. The website had become popular during the *Covid* pandemic. This time, the misleading news story referred to an [article](#) by *Postimees*. However, the article did not mention Ukraine: it was about a proposed plan to involve volunteer reservists in other foreign operations. On social media, this lie was reinforced by posts saying that Estonian men would be sent to the “Ukrainian meat grinder”. Estonian *Delfi* fact-checkers found similar messages in at least eight social media posts.

In the meantime, Estonian social media users [shared](#) a false table from the Russian Defense Ministry describing the numbers of “mercenaries” allegedly sent from different countries to Ukraine.

But the fact is that neither Estonia, nor Latvia, nor Lithuania is sending troops to Ukraine. When Baltic nationals fight in Ukraine, they do so voluntarily.

“Latvia is ready to take part in the big war”

In Latvia, claims about the supposed plans to send residents to fight in Ukraine have not gained much traction and have not been shared all that much on social media. However, such attempts to scare people do exist. Shortly before the European Parliament elections, Andrejs Kozlovs, a MEP candidate from the party For Stability!, went on TikTok to claim the following in Russian: “A high-ranking Latvian official declared a few days ago that Latvia was ready to take part in a big war and use its army.” In the video he also pointed to a

children's playground in the background and says that "many Latvian politicians want to turn these into bomb shelters." In the video, Kozlovs did not provide any evidence. He did not respond to Re:Check's phone calls or text messages.

"The youth and women are being prepared for war"

[Statements](#) by Chief of Defense of Latvia Leonīds Kalniņš that both men and women should be compulsorily drafted into the National Armed Forces were also accompanied by frightening slogans. Currently, women can serve on a voluntary basis. The opposition party's *For Stability!* official *TikTok* page and its leader's Aleksejs Rošļikovs *Telegram* channel posted claims in Russian that "girls" in the army would help with using the funds. "The politics of war is too attractive and our elite is all in," one such video says. Another video posted to *TikTok* and *Facebook* said that the matter had already been decided. He said that "now they will forcibly draft girls and prepare them for the front lines, for war."

Meanwhile, the number of fake news stories in Lithuania increased after the country's parliament [approved a military service reform](#). It establishes compulsory conscription of young people after they graduate from high school. Following this decision, [rumours began to spread](#) on Lithuania's social media that Lithuanians would have to fight in Ukraine.

"Lithuanian minister and his family preparing to leave the country"

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Landsbergis became a target of Russian disinformation. Lithuanian MP Aurelijus Veryga (Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union) asked him rhetorical question about where the minister and his family were planning to move. Afterward rumours swirled on social media that the Landsbergis's wife was selling her private school business and planning to leave Lithuania. Even though the company's spokeswoman denied the rumours of a possible sale of the business, this claim was picked up by Kremlin disinformation outlets, which kept saying that "rats were leaving the sinking ship" and that Lithuania would eventually be dragged into the war or get attacked by Russia.

TikTok spreads fear of war in Estonia

In Estonia, pro-Russia TikTok accounts scaremonger about the country's involvement in war. One now-suspended TikTok user presented an alleged quote by former Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, that Estonia did not want peace talks with Russia and that Estonia wanted war and victory. Kallas had said no such thing; what she stated was that Ukraine must win this war.

Estonian journalists also [conducted an experiment](#) by creating a new *TikTok* account. Estonian *Delfi* fact-checker Vunsh explains that in just one hour, the *TikTok* algorithm offered them almost a hundred fake posts, Russian war propaganda, and war-mongering videos to spread fear. For example, one of the posts asked: "Will you go to war if there is a war in Estonia?" The video became quite popular in Estonia garnering more than 46,000 views.

Nuclear weapons or "is Latvia choosing death?"

In Latvia, fake news peddlers and pro-Kremlin activists were trying to make people anxious by raising the alarm about a signature drive on the public initiative platform Manabalss.lv. The website allows Latvian citizens to submit their legislative proposals, and, if one is signed by 10,000 or more, it has to be considered by the Latvian parliament, Saeima.

The authors of this particular initiative propose to call on allies to deploy nuclear weapons in Latvia. At the time of writing, only 400 people [had signed](#) the initiative. This though did not stop the criminal organization *Baltic Antifascists* from claiming on their *Telegram* channel that "Latvians were signing a nuclear suicide petition". Last year, The Latvian State Security Service [turned to the prosecutor's office](#) and asked to prosecute six persons for running *Baltic Antifascists* and participating in crimes committed by the organization. The State Security Service determined that they were illegally collecting classified information about the developments in Latvia in order to hand it over to the Russian secret services, as well as praising and attempting to justify Russia's war in Ukraine, and raising funds to support the Russian army in Ukraine. The *Telegram* channel has more than 20,000 followers. Meanwhile, another social media user's comment about the initiative on *Facebook* says: "Is Latvia choosing death?" *TikToker* Ilja Černogorods also known as Magnuss, who has 4.5 million likes, also weighed in on the issue. A short video posted by

the blogger, titled “NATO nuclear weapons in Latvia”, criticises the authors of the initiative for causing controversy. Magnuss offers instead to “live peacefully for a change”. This video has more than 56,000 views on *TikTok*. The blogger [regularly](#) criticizes the government by reposting refuted content made by opposition parties for the Russian-speaking audience.

In summary, there is no reason at the moment to claim that the Baltic governments are preparing to send their armies to Ukraine or otherwise wage war against Russia. Nevertheless, fake news sources, including pro-Kremlin bloggers, are using every bit of information to scare the public into believing that this is exactly what will happen.

Source: <https://en.rebaltica.lv/2024/09/army-preparing-to-enter-ukraine-politicians-leaving-the-country-how-fear-of-being-dragged-into-war-is-spread-in-the-baltics/>

9. OVERVIEW OF INNER WORKINGS OF RUSSIAN TROLL FACTORY TARGETING THE BALTICS

9.1 “Confrontation with Russia leads to poverty”. How a Russian troll factory planned to turn public opinion in Latvia against Ukraine

By Olga Dragileva, Re:Baltica

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 Melķis, 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. Melķis 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.

Ilya Gambashidze in promotional video of SDA.

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.”

Source: <https://en.rebaltica.lv/2024/10/confrontation-with-russia-leads-to-poverty-how-a-russian-troll-factory-planned-to-turn-public-opinion-in-latvia-against-ukraine>

10. OVERVIEW OF PROPAGANDA CLAIMS ABOUT BALTIC PEOPLE MIGRATING TO BELARUS EN MASSE

10.1 Kremlin Propaganda Revives as ‘Neutral’ YouTube Channels Amid Claims of Baltic Migration

By Inga Sprinģe, Re:Baltica

Since Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine, its propaganda has claimed that residents of the Baltic states are fleeing en masse to Russia and Belarus to escape “russophobia.” Re:Baltica investigation reveals different truths behind these narratives.

Two years ago, sailor Konstantīns Rudakov was still living in Latvia. In his free time, he created TikTok videos criticizing life there and spreading disinformation about the war in Ukraine. In one video, he stated, “European mercenaries are currently fighting over Ukraine, and anyone who tells me otherwise can go to hell.” While it is true that volunteers from European countries are fighting in Ukraine, Kremlin propaganda uses such cases to claim that Russia is at war with NATO forces.

Rudakov’s activities caught the attention of Latvia’s State Security Service, which warned him to stop. Undeterred, Rudakov continued until security officers searched his apartment. Following the raid, he moved to Belarus, a close ally of Russia, where he began posting TikTok videos praising life in Minsk.

Rudakov’s case is part of a broader propaganda campaign featuring “ordinary people” who supposedly relocate from the Baltics to Russia or Belarus due to “russophobia” or “political persecution.”

In recent years, Russia has actively promoted these stories to create the illusion of mass migration. The narratives often feature claims of “rescuing children from gay propaganda,” fleeing “Baltic fascism,” or escaping the “NATO buffer zone.” Other recurring themes include assertions that military buildups in the Baltics threaten Russia and Belarus or that Baltic elites unnecessarily stoke fears of a Russian invasion.

Data compiled by Re:Baltica reveals that while the number of people moving from the Baltics to Russia and Belarus has increased since 2022, it hardly qualifies as a mass exodus. Various sources estimate that approximately 1,700 people have moved to Russia, while only a few hundred have relocated to Belarus.

Rihards Bambals, a strategic communications expert from Latvia’s State Chancellery, explained to Re:Baltica that Kremlin propaganda targets two distinct audiences. One is the Russian domestic audience, which has been fed negative stories about Europe to divert attention from Russia’s own economic struggles. According to Bambals, the other includes Baltic and international audiences to discredit the Baltics globally through narratives about “russophobia, economic failure, and a resurgence of Nazism.”

With Kremlin media channels blocked in the European Union, stories of those who have “fled” are actively propagated on social media. These stories come from individuals seeking attention, like sailor Rudakov or professional propagandists posing as independent content creators.

Circumventing EU Sanctions

One of the most popular YouTube and Telegram channels promoting stories of Baltic emigrants is, in fact, a rebranded former Kremlin mouthpiece, Sputnik.

“I, Aleksey Stefanov, voluntarily and consciously accept Russian citizenship and swear... to remain loyal to Russia.” This is an excerpt from a video posted a year ago on the YouTube channel of Stefanov, a former journalist from Riga who is now a Russian citizen. His YouTube channel, Šproti v izgnanii (Sprats in Exile), has nearly 57,000 subscribers, with an additional 10,000 followers on Telegram.

It is one of the four most prominent social media channels propagating stories of those who allegedly fled the Baltics. Three target Russian audiences, while one focuses on Belarus.

Despite claiming to present neutral news, Šproti v izgnanii is run by Stefanov, a former employee of the Kremlin-backed Sputnik. According to Latvia’s State Security Service (Valsts Drošības dienests, or VDD), following the EU’s sanctions on Russian state media, journalists from Rossiya Segodnya outlets like Sputnik and Baltnews began actively using social media platforms. Stefanov’s channel is one such effort.

The VDD noted in its 2022 annual report that the channel “systematically justified the killing of Ukrainian citizens and the destruction of cities.”

“I remember how we decided to proceed. It was necessary to create something that wouldn’t be associated with Sputnik,” Marat Kasem, the former editor-in-chief of Sputnik Lithuania, told Re:Baltica. At the time, he was working in Moscow. After EU sanctions took effect, Sputnik’s websites were also blocked on Facebook and YouTube, necessitating the creation of new channels with no overt ties to Kremlin-affiliated media.

Born and raised in Latvia, Kasem built his career at Sputnik and even hosted a weekly radio show featuring Maria Zakharova, the spokeswoman for Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Six months after Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, Kasem returned to Latvia, where he was charged with aiding a foreign country in actions against the state. Speaking to Re:Baltica, he admitted that the war had made him rethink his role in the propaganda machine. "To be honest, I never thought it would go this far. Before the war, it all seemed like a game, played by both sides. Then I realized Russia was using it to invade other countries," Kasem said.

After his arrest in Latvia, Kasem spent nearly four months in jail while awaiting trial and was ultimately fined €15,500. The relatively lenient sentence sparked protests among some Latvians and led to discussions between the President of Latvia and the Prosecutor General. Meanwhile, propagandists who had fled to Russia speculated that Kasem had provided intelligence to Latvia's security services in exchange for avoiding a harsher punishment.

Since his release, Kasem has regularly used his social media accounts to debunk Russian propaganda. According to Kasem, Russia developed Šproti v izgnanii for the Latvian audience, Revizor for Lithuania, and left Baltnews to target the entire Baltic region. These new propaganda channels were hosted on Telegram, YouTube, and TikTok.

Relocate to Moscow For Financial Gain

Kasem believes that former Latvian journalist and European Parliament member Andrejs Mamikins also receives Kremlin funding for his YouTube channel. Mamikins moved to Moscow, claiming to escape Latvia's "Nazi regime." Latvian prosecutors have charged him with glorifying Russia's war crimes in Ukraine. Before his relocation, Mamikins appeared on Belarusian television, spreading Kremlin falsehoods that the Baltics and Poland, allegedly provoked by the U.S., were trying to drag Belarus into a military conflict.

Mamikins' YouTube channel boasts nearly 150,000 followers. He frequently interviews local Russian propagandists and pro-Kremlin activists who have left the Baltics. Recent guests include Russia's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, described by Mamikins as "one of the brightest personalities in Russian diplomacy," and a pro-Kremlin activist deported from Estonia in 2023 for threatening state security.

According to Kasem, Mamikins' ties to Kremlin media are evident from where he records his shows — a studio belonging to the RT media group in Moscow, on Borovaya Street 3. Kasem, familiar with the space, stated, "I've been to that studio multiple times myself." Re:Baltica confirmed that this address is listed as RT's official location.

In a written response to Re:Baltica, Latvia's State Security Service noted that "pro-Kremlin activists" such as Stefanov and Mamikins have relocated to neighboring Russia to continue their activities in service of Kremlin interests for financial gain. The agency stated that propagandists like Mamikin can no longer operate in Latvia due to international sanctions and widespread public condemnation.

Mamikins denies it. In his response to Re:Baltica, he writes: "I haven't taken any money, I haven't been to Borovaya [address of RT studio], and I've never been a member of United Russia. But I suppose you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Stefanovs did not respond to Re:Baltica's questions.

TikTok Blocks Propagandists' Accounts

Another promoter of stories about those who have left is Roman Samuļs, a Latvian propagandist who now targets a Belarusian audience. His YouTube channel boasts nearly 60,000 subscribers. He also co-hosts a show on Belarusian state radio alongside Edikas Jagelavičius, another propagandist who runaway from Lithuania to Belarus.

In one of their recent broadcasts, the two exiles interviewed a fellow émigré who, too, had fled accusations — pro-Kremlin activist Jurijs Aleksejevs. He is currently on trial in Latvia for actions allegedly aimed at undermining the country's sovereignty. According to the prosecutor handling Aleksejevs' case, his portal ImhoClub allegedly received funding from Russia intending to increase its influence in Latvia.

"Your ranks have gained yet another enemy of the Latvian state," Aleksejevs quipped during the broadcast, drawing laughter from the two hosts.

Samuļs denies receiving any money from the Belarusian government for hosting program on state radio. He tells Re:Baltica that he earns his income from working on a collective farm, where he claims to be paid for "hard labor like everyone else." He also generates

revenue from his YouTube channel. He was evasive about his work on Belarusian radio, saying only that anyone could distribute his content. According to Samuļs, around 2,000 people from the Baltic states now live in Russia and Belarus, and he plans to form a Latvian “political party or movement from abroad” in the future.

Stories of exiles also appear on another popular YouTube channel, Baltijskij Gruz (Baltic Cargo), which has 114,000 subscribers. Former Sputnik editor Kasem believes this channel is linked to the Kremlin because it features individuals posing as journalists who previously worked for Baltnews, another Russian propaganda outlet. Videos from this channel show interviews conducted in the same studio where Kasem used to host guests.

All the mentioned channels also operate on Telegram. However, as Re:Baltica observed, their TikTok accounts have been blocked. Profiles for Mamikins, Šproti v izgnanii, and Baltijskij Gruz are no longer accessible on TikTok.

Performing Their Roles to the Fullest

The actors featured in the channels above can be divided into two groups: ordinary citizens and professional propagandists who runaway from legal proceedings in the Baltics.

Their roles differ. Latvia’s State Security Service explains that the more aggressive, anti-Latvia narratives are crafted by “long-standing pro-Kremlin activists,” while the “ordinary citizens” confirm these narratives by “sharing their personal experiences.”

The moment in the spotlight for these lesser-known people is typically short-lived. Upon arriving in their new host country, they are interviewed by YouTubers and official Russian or Belarusian media — and then their show ends.

Participants often cite similar reasons for leaving. Discontent with the transition to teaching in national languages in Baltic schools is common. Some fail or refuse to pass the Latvian language exam, now mandatory for Russian citizens in Latvia to renew residence permits. These personal grievances are blended with Kremlin-planted stories of rising russophobia in the Baltics and a retreat from “Western gay propaganda” to Russia’s “traditional values.”

For instance, French teacher Jelena Natalova, who moved from Estonia to Russia last summer, praises Vladimir Putin on social media as “the best president in the world” and

celebrates patriotism in Russian kindergartens. She claims that in Estonia, she felt like a “third-class citizen,” lost her teaching job, and was forbidden to speak Russian with students.

However, Estonia’s found that Natalova’s position wasn’t eliminated — she left voluntarily after struggling to maintain classroom order. The school had requested that teachers not speak Russian with children, as for many, the school was the only place to practice Estonian. Natalova is still searching for work in Russia, living off savings and providing private Estonian lessons.

Delfi noted that while a teacher’s gross monthly salary in Estonia is €1,800, in Russia, it ranges from €300 to €500.

Starting a new life in Russia is challenging, as evident from comments by Anatoliy Bublykov, head of the Putj domoj (The Way Home) organization. Bublykov, who relocated from Germany to Russia with his family, now assists others in doing the same. According to the VDD, Putj domoj and the Pskov-based organization Nashi are closely linked to the Kremlin.

Bublykov explains that finding housing and employment in Russia requires at least six months and \$1,500 monthly for a family. Processing the necessary paperwork can take up to six months. Temporary accommodation is offered in border regions like Kaliningrad and Pskov, where relocation centers have been established. Expatriates must also resort to risky financial schemes to transfer money from property sales in the Baltics to Russia, as bank transfers are impossible.

The VDD notes that one requirement of Russia’s voluntary relocation program is registering with local military commissariats.

Professional propagandists fleeing the Baltics, however, enjoy a more privileged status.

Former Sputnik editor Kasem reveals that the Kremlin fully utilizes these exiles.

The typical sequence begins with a press briefing by Zakharova, who highlights the alleged “brutal russophobia” in Europe. “She can speak for half an hour about a single case,” Kasem says. Interviews with the defectors then appear in controlled online media outlets.

Once the person has been “prepared,” they begin “working off their loyalty,” participating in Kremlin media broadcasts and attending conferences with foreign guests.

Re:Baltica’s analysis shows that these professional Kremlin mouthpieces increasingly echo precise propaganda narratives. For example, *Shproty v izgnanii* features Oleg Ivanov, a propagandist who fled Estonia and founded the pro-Moscow KOOS party. He claims that Estonia plans to build a military base near Russia’s border “designed to deploy strike weapon systems right under St. Petersburg’s nose.”

Similarly, Lithuanian propagandist Edikas Jagelavičius agrees with Belarusian state TV host, stating that Lithuania’s militarization poses “a threat to Belarus. It is a major challenge for Belarus, but President Alexander Lukashenko handles everything correctly and diplomatically.”

Former Sputnik Lithuania editor Kasem explains that once Baltic exiles agree to join Kremlin propaganda “roadshows,” there is no turning back.

“They cannot object. If you don’t perform, where will you live? They are offered state apartments. I lived in one, too, only paying for utilities,” Kasem says. Successful propaganda work also enables faster access to Russian citizenship, which is otherwise much harder to obtain due to bureaucratic hurdles.

Source: <https://en.rebaltica.lv/2025/01/kremlin-propaganda-revives-as-neutral-youtube-channels-amid-claims-of-baltic-migration/>

DISSEMINATION NOTE

EDMO (as separate publication or part of wider review)

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- <https://lr1.lsm.lv/lv/raksts/labriit/recheck-maldinosi-apgalvojumi-par-zalo-kursu-eiropas-parlamenta-.a190932/> (podcast, LV)
- <https://latvijasradio.lsm.lv/lv/lr/arhivs/?adv=1&d=24&m=4&y=2024&d2=&m2=&y2=&channel=4&keyword=Petrova+Annija%2C+Re%3ABaltica> (podcast, RU from 13:00)
- <https://lr1.lsm.lv/lv/raksts/labriit/partneribas-regulejums-vai-pozicijas-un-pozicijas-argumenti-ir-b.a183969/> (podcast Latvian)
- <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/06.02.2023-recheck-parbauda-dezinformaciju-socialajos-tiklos-par-ek-lemumu-laut-partika-lietot-kukainus.a495010/> (podcast LV)
- <https://latvijasradio.lsm.lv/lv/lr/arhivs/?adv=1&d=8&m=2&y=2023&d2=&m2=&y2=&channel=4&keyword=Petrova+Annija%2C+ReBaltica> (podcast, RU from 12:00)