



Baltic Engagement
Centre for Combating
Information Disorders

BECID

KREMLIN PROPAGANDA REVIVES AS 'NEUTRAL' YOUTUBE CHANNELS AMID CLAIMS OF BALTIC MIGRATION

**JANUARY
2025**

PART OF D2.3 OF THE EU-FUNDED PROJECT WITH THE ID 118471, COORDINATED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF TARTU (UTARTU).

Inga Sprinģe | Re:Baltica

... in co-creation with Delfi Estonia and Delfi Lithuania

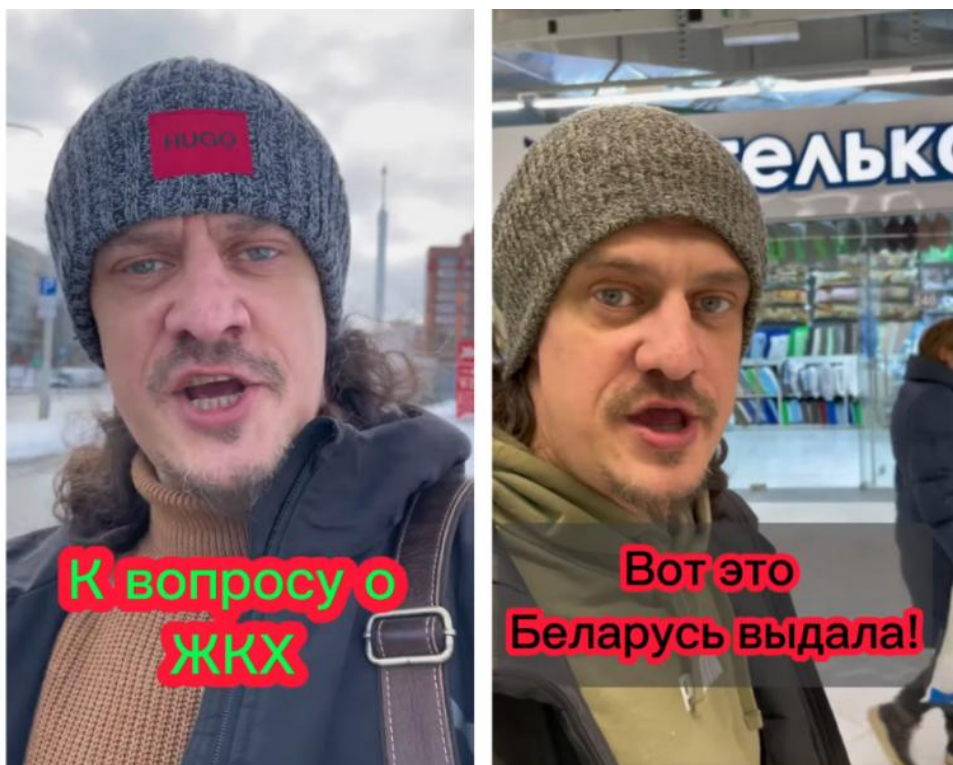


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Since Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, its propaganda has claimed that residents of the Baltic states are fleeing en masse to Russia and Belarus to escape "russophobia." Re:Baltica investigation reveals different truths behind these narratives.

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 walks around Minsk, praising how good life is there. On social media, he regularly repeats Russian propaganda. Source: Rudakov's Facebook.

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.

Since 2022	Latvia	Lithuania	Estonia
Asylum requests in Belarus <i>Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs data</i>	51	7	1
Relocated to Belarus <i>Lithuanian Immigration Service data</i>		116	
Relocated to Belarus <i>Latvian Immigration Service data*</i>	78		
Migrated from the Baltics to Russia <i>"Compatriots Relocation Program"</i> <i>Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs data</i>	1640		
Relocated to Russia <i>Lithuanian Immigration Service data</i>		311	
Relocated to Russia <i>Latvian Immigration Service data*</i>	158		

*LV PLMP data (01.2023.-07.2024.)

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.



In 2024, Stefanov was granted Russian citizenship. In Moscow, he worked for the Kremlin media outlet “Sputnik” and now operates a disguised propaganda channel on YouTube, “Šproti v izgnanii” Source: YouTube channel.

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.



Mamikins fled to Moscow, where he hosts an interview show on YouTube. One of his guests was Edikas Jagelavičius, who fled from Lithuania to Belarus to avoid charges of acting against the state's interests. Source: MamikinTV.

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.

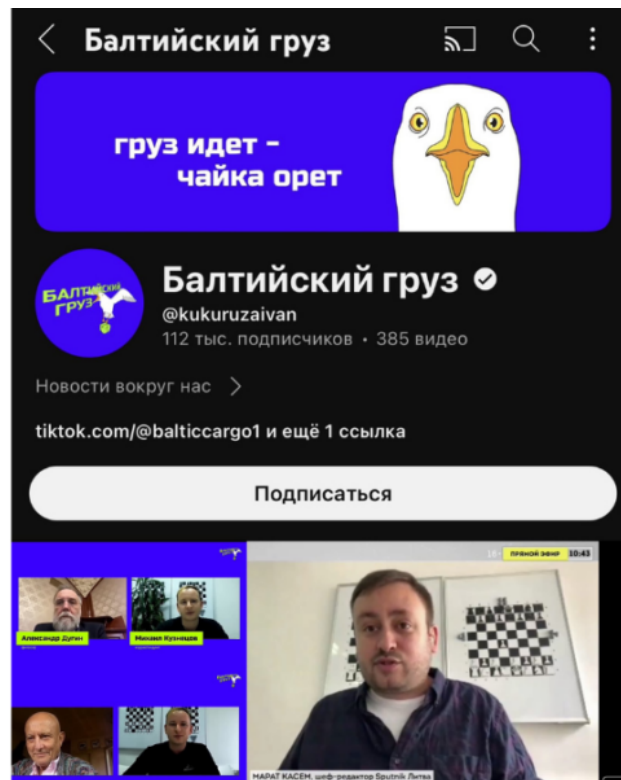
"Your ranks have gained yet another enemy of the Latvian state," Aleksejevs quipped during the broadcast, drawing laughter from the two hosts.



Samuļs hosts a show with exiled Lithuanian propagandist Edikas Jagelavičius. Together, they interview Jurijs Aleksejevs, who also fled Latvia to avoid a potential prison sentence. Source: Samuļs' YouTube channel.

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.



Kasems mentions on his X profile that the “Baltic Cargo” interviews are filmed in the same studio where he once worked as the editor-in-chief of “Sputnik Lithuania”. Source: Kasem’s X profile.

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.”

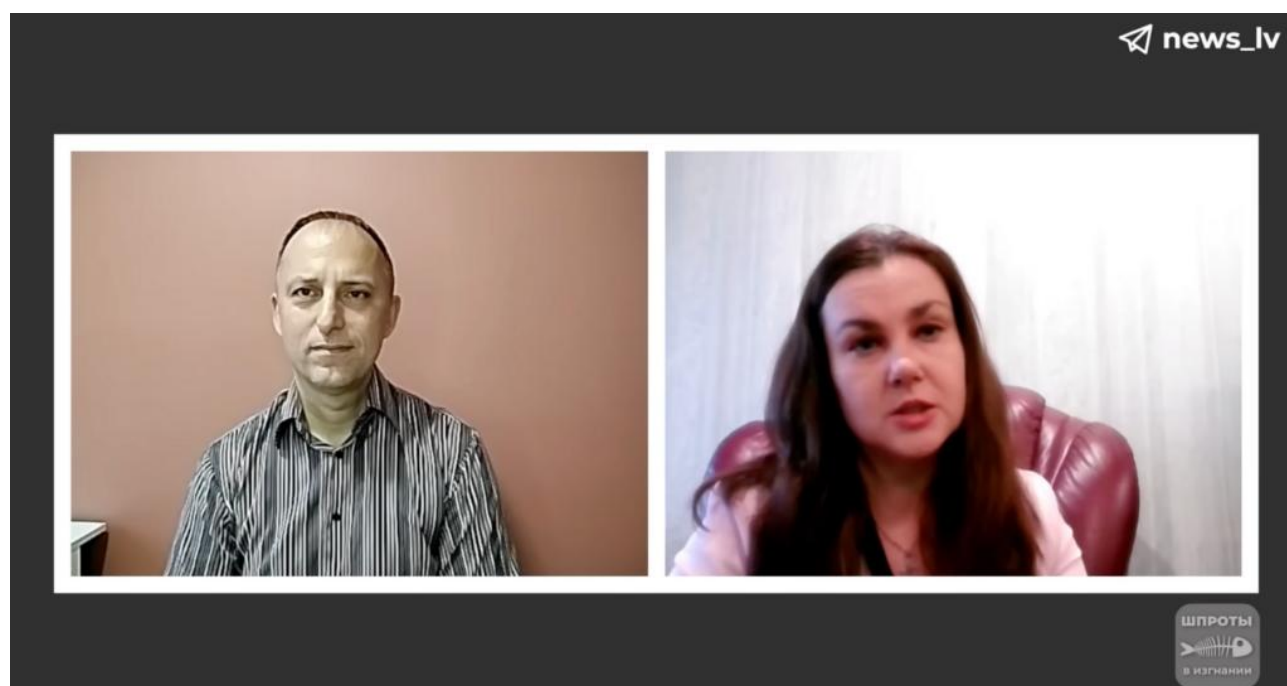
The moment in the spotlight for these lesser-known people is typically short-lived. Upon arriving in their new host country, they are interviewed by YouTubers and official Russian or Belarusian media — and then their show ends.

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 media Delfi 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.



Natalova, on “Šproti v izgnanii”, talks about how good life is in Russia and praises Putin as a great president. However, she has been unable to find work in Russia. Source: YouTube.

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.