



Baltic Engagement
Centre for Combating
Information Disorders

HOT REPORT

A KREMLIN PROPAGANDIST IN THE HEART OF TALLINN

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THIS REPORT IS BASED ON THE INVESTIGATIVE ARTICLES BY EESTI EKSPRESS DOCUMENTING THE DISINFORMATION ACTIVITIES OF OLEG BESSEDIN, A PRO-KREMLIN PROPAGANDIST OPERATING OPENLY IN ESTONIA FOR OVER A DECADE. LINKS TO THE ARTICLES ARE IN THE FURTHER READING SECTION.

WHAT'S HOT?

Oleg Bessedin ran one of Estonia's most influential Russian-language Facebook pages, Tallintšõ, with over 55,000 followers. Over the span of three and a half years, he published nearly 10,000 posts, of which 80% echoed Kremlin disinformation narratives. His work targeted public opinion, undermined trust in Ukraine, NATO, and the EU, and portrayed Estonia as a failing, repressive state. Despite repeated warnings from Estonia's internal security service (KAPO), Bessedin received funding and contracts from the Centre Party-led Tallinn city government.

What Do We See?

- **Systematic Kremlin Narratives:** Bessedin framed Ukraine as corrupt and controlled by the West, Russia as a peace-seeking victim, and EU sanctions and refugees as threats to European economies.
- **Massive Content Output:** Nearly 10,000 posts in 3.5 years – up to nine per day – many of which used sarcasm, pseudohumour, and disinformation to spread doubt and division.
- **Strategic Partnerships:** He cooperated with known Russian influence agents, produced propaganda for Russian state media (VGTRK, Sputnik), and collaborated with the pro-Kremlin movement KOOS.
- **State-Backed Support:** Despite national security warnings, Bessedin received approx. €800,000 from the Tallinn city budget and produced campaign content for Centre Party politicians including Mihhail Kõlvart and Jana Toom.
- **Media Ecosystem Exploitation:** He built a loyal YouTube following (over 200,000 subscribers), and gained influence by filming local events, sometimes with exclusive city access.

- **Public Platforming of Propaganda:** Bessedin disseminated distorted historical narratives (e.g. Bronze Soldier riots), minimised Russia's aggression in Ukraine, and actively pushed the "foreign agent" narrative to discredit dissent.

Why Does It Work?

- **Blurring Legitimacy:** By working through municipal contracts and presenting himself as a local documentarian, Bessedin blurred the lines between civil journalism and foreign influence.
- **Exploiting Official Support:** Institutional endorsement from city leadership (despite repeated KAPO warnings) gave Bessedin legitimacy and resources.
- **Targeted Messaging:** His content was tailored for Estonia's Russian-speaking community — using cultural symbols, emotional appeals, and economic grievances.
- **Social Media Savviness:** Understanding platform dynamics, Bessedin's videos often went viral, some reaching over a million views.

Risk Assessment: CRITICAL

- **National Security Breach:** Bessedin's activity highlights a severe lapse in countering hybrid threats within domestic institutions.
- **Political Enabling:** Long-term collaboration with Tallinn's Centre Party weakened Estonia's resilience to disinformation.
- **Democratic Erosion:** Propaganda presented through local funding networks undermines public trust in governance and fuels division.
- **Foreign Influence Operations:** Bessedin served as an effective asset in Russia's broader hybrid warfare strategy in the Baltics.

How to Respond: Practical Guidance for Strengthening Democratic Resilience

For the General Public

Become an informed media consumer. Check the source and funding behind viral posts or video content. If a Facebook page or YouTube channel claims to represent "local concerns," look at who operates it and what narratives it pushes. If you see a post that criticises Estonia as "a failed EU state" or glorifies Russia as a peacekeeper, ask: *Who is saying this? What do they gain from it?*

Use cross-checking tools. Use fact-checking platforms like EUvsDisinfo, Propastop, or

Melo Detektorius. Install browser plug-ins (e.g., NewsGuard) that rate the credibility of news sites.

Understand emotional manipulation. Be cautious of content that stokes fear, nostalgia, or outrage, especially around elections or polarising issues (like migration, war, or energy policy). A meme saying “Wind farms will kill your children” or “Ukraine brings Nazis to Estonia” is likely emotional manipulation, not fact.

For Journalists & Educators

Teach disinformation detection. Use real case studies like Tallintšõ to teach how foreign propaganda can infiltrate local discourse. Compare headlines and language between Tallintšõ posts and trusted media. Identify signs of bias, unverifiable claims, or manipulation.

Cover the mechanics of influence. Report not just what was said, but how the narrative was structured, and why it appeals to certain groups. Show how Bessedin used humour, memes, and “street interviews” to frame disinformation as entertainment.

Create collaborative content. Partner with digital creators and community leaders to produce counter-content that is credible, accessible, and relatable. Short videos debunking viral myths or podcasts featuring Russian-speaking Estonians who explain how they fact-check the news.

For Policymakers & Local Government

Implement disinformation risk audits in public contracting. Require background checks and transparency declarations for city-funded media projects. Review past contractors (like Bessedin) who were flagged by security services, and develop vetting mechanisms going forward.

Close regulatory loopholes in hybrid influence. Amend municipal procurement laws to exclude individuals/entities under national security advisories (e.g., flagged by KAPO or RIA). Clarify how foreign-aligned content funded by public money constitutes a breach of democratic integrity.

Promote local media literacy initiatives. Fund **media literacy workshops** in Russian-speaking communities. Support **community journalism** that fosters trust and resilience without relying on polarising narratives.

For National Security Agencies & Platform Regulators

Monitor and disrupt coordinated disinformation campaigns. Work with tech platforms

to flag high-output disinformation nodes (e.g., 10,000 posts in 3 years, as with Tallintšõ). Collaborate with EU Rapid Alert System to detect narrative crossovers between countries.

Push platforms for stricter enforcement. Demand more than automated responses when disinformation or hate speech is reported. Latvian stress tests showed platforms failed to remove flagged content. Thus, advocate for human review protocols in politically sensitive regions.

Strengthen community reporting mechanisms. Create safe, anonymous channels for reporting suspected information operations, not just for citizens, but also for civil servants, teachers, or media workers.

FURTHER READING

- Article in Eesti Ekspress: "[He Was One of Estonia's Most Influential YouTubers – and a Tool of the Kremlin](#)"
- Article in Eesti Ekspress: "[VIDEO | 80% Pure Propaganda: Bessedin's Tallintšõ Group Systematically Pushed People Toward the Kremlin](#)"
- Research article in Social Media + Society "[Quantifying Networked Influence: How Much Do Disinformation Spreaders' Networks Drive Their Public Engagement Outcomes?](#)" Key takeaway: findings suggest that any effective disinformation prevention effort needs to incorporate plans aimed at disrupting networks, rather than solely focusing on notable individuals.

What is BECID?

BECID – the Baltic Engagement Centre for Combating Information Disorders – brings together expertise in fact-checking, media literacy, and journalism across the Baltics. We conduct fact-checks in collaboration with Delfi/Delfi Meedia, monitor disinformation narratives and campaigns under the leadership of investigative journalism organisation Re:Baltica, and promote media literacy through the Baltic Centre for Media Literacy (BCME). We also develop methodologies to effectively counter disinformation. Learn more: becid.ut.ee

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