



Baltic Engagement
Centre for Combating
Information Disorders

HOT REPORT

OLEG BESSEDIN – HOW A YOUTUBE INFLUENCER BECAME PART OF RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE INFRASTRUCTURE IN ESTONIA

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THIS REPORT IS BASED ON AN INVESTIGATION OLEG BESSEDIN'S SECRET NETWORK: RUSSIAN INTELLIGENCE FIGURES WERE BEHIND THE ESTONIAN YOUTUBER'S SUCCESS AND WEALTH BY DELFI/EESTI EKSPRESS.

WHAT'S HOT?

Oleg Bessedin was one of the most influential Russian-language online personalities operating from Estonia. His interviews with prominent Russian propagandists accumulated more than 40 million views, while his YouTube channel attracted hundreds of thousands of followers. According to the investigation, his monthly YouTube revenue reached €5,000–7,000 and sometimes more.

The investigation shows that Bessedin was not simply a pro-Kremlin content creator. He operated within a wider ecosystem connecting Russian state institutions, propaganda organisations and people linked to Russian intelligence services. These contacts helped provide interview subjects, amplify his content and connect him to organisations involved in Russian influence operations.

In September 2026, Bessedin admitted guilt in non-violent activities directed against the Republic of Estonia and in violating international sanctions. A court approved a seven-year prison sentence.

What Do We See?

- **Influence without traditional recruitment:** According to the investigation, Bessedin did not have a conventional handler directing his every move. Prosecutors and security officials described a model in which he promoted Kremlin-friendly narratives largely because they aligned with his own views, while actors connected to Russian institutions helped facilitate and strengthen his activities.
- **Intelligence-linked networking:** One important contact was former Russian diplomat Sergei Nalobin, whom Ukrainian OSINT organisation Molfar has identified in a leaked list of alleged Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) personnel. According to prosecutors, Nalobin provided Bessedin with useful contacts and helped promote interviews. Their communications also showed Bessedin asking him for guidance on future activities.
- **Access to otherwise difficult-to-reach sources:** The network enabled Bessedin to interview prominent pro-Kremlin figures and people connected to Russian state and security structures. This gave his channel both exclusive content and authority among its audience.



- **Connections to Kremlin influence infrastructure:** Nalobin introduced Bessedin to contacts at ANO Dialog, an organisation operating under the Russian presidential administration and sanctioned by the EU for its role in propaganda and influence operations. Bessedin also showed interest in its Global Fact-Checking Network, which presents Kremlin-friendly content in the format of fact-checking.
- **Cooperation with the Institute of CIS Countries:** Bessedin provided technical support for events organised by an institution that produces material supporting Russian narratives about neighbouring countries. One event was titled “Ethnocide of Russian Compatriots in the Baltic States” and featured claims portraying Estonia and Latvia as hostile “Russophobic” regimes preparing for war.
- **Recurring narratives rather than isolated opinions:** Delfi analysed 23 interviews and found recurring themes: Russia is presented not as an aggressor but as reacting to NATO, Ukraine and the Baltic states; Russian speakers in Estonia are supposedly systematically persecuted; Ukraine is controlled by the “collective West”; and European governments are sacrificing their populations and economies.
- **Artificial intelligence used for propaganda production:** Investigators recovered thousands of ChatGPT prompts. According to Delfi’s analysis, Bessedin instructed AI tools to adopt a more radical, Russia-oriented perspective and used generative AI to create promotional imagery depicting Estonia negatively and Russia positively.
- **Monetisation through Western platforms:** The investigation highlights an important paradox: Russian actors did not necessarily have to finance Bessedin directly. YouTube advertising revenue monetised the large audience generated by his content.
- **Sanctions circumvention:** Bessedin also secretly sold three documentary films to Russian state media outlet Rossiya Segodnya for a total reportedly approaching €15,000. Such transactions were prohibited under sanctions.

How Did the Influence Model Work?

The Bessedin case illustrates an influence model that is more decentralised than the classic image of a foreign agent receiving orders and payments from an intelligence officer.

The apparent chain was closer to:

Russian state and intelligence-linked ecosystem → access to contacts and propagandists
→ locally based influencer → professionally packaged interviews and videos → YouTube recommendation and monetisation systems → large Russian-speaking audiences.

This structure matters because the public-facing actor can appear to be an independent journalist, blogger or commentator while benefiting from access provided by actors embedded in a foreign influence infrastructure.

The content can therefore remain formally “independent” while repeatedly reproducing narratives strategically useful to the Kremlin.

Why Does It Work?

- **Trust comes from proximity:** A Russian-speaking personality operating inside Estonia may appear more relatable and credible to local audiences than Russian state television.
- **Interviews create an appearance of journalism:** Kremlin narratives can be presented as expert discussion rather than overt propaganda.
- **Platform algorithms reward engagement:** Provocative geopolitical content can generate views, subscribers and advertising revenue regardless of who benefits politically.
- **Financial incentives reinforce ideological incentives:** A creator does not necessarily need direct Kremlin payments if attention itself produces substantial platform revenue.
- **Networks provide credibility and content:** Access to prominent Russian political figures, propagandists and supposed experts allows a creator to continuously produce material unavailable to ordinary influencers.
- **Repetition normalises narratives:** Claims about “Russophobia,” NATO aggression, persecution of Russian speakers or inevitable conflict become familiar through repeated interviews with different guests.

Risk Assessment: HIGH

The Bessedin case demonstrates the potential effectiveness of locally embedded influence actors. According to Estonia’s Internal Security Service, Bessedin was unusually influential within Estonia’s Russian-language information environment; its deputy director described him as having systematically worked to damage Estonia’s independence.

The risk extends beyond one individual. The case shows how foreign influence can operate through a combination of ideological alignment, privileged access, social-media distribution, commercial monetisation and networks linked to state institutions.

Particularly important is the absence of a simple “Kremlin pays propagandist” relationship. A platform-based influence actor can become financially self-sustaining while the foreign influence network supplies access, narratives, contacts and amplification.

How to Respond?

For Policymakers and Security Institutions

- **Look beyond direct foreign financing.** Investigations of influence operations should examine access, coordination, source provision, amplification and organisational links, not only money transfers.
- **Map networks rather than individual accounts.** A creator’s relationships with diplomats, political organisations, sanctioned entities, propagandists and other intermediaries may reveal more than individual videos do.
- **Distinguish protected political speech from coordinated hostile activity.** Pro-Kremlin opinions alone are not evidence of illegal activity; assessments should focus on documented conduct, coordination, sanctions violations and assistance to hostile influence structures.
- **Improve communication about influence cases.** Explaining how networks operate can help the public understand why a case concerns more than controversial political opinions.

For Platforms

- Examine monetisation of accounts repeatedly distributing content originating from sanctioned or state-linked influence networks.
- Increase transparency about coordinated amplification and the provenance of political content.
- **Assess networks, not only individual posts.** A single interview may not violate platform rules, while a systematic pattern of coordinated access and distribution may reveal a broader influence operation.

For Journalists and Fact-Checkers

- **Follow the source chain.** Ask not only “Is this claim false?” but also: Who supplied the speaker? Who arranged the interview? Which organisations amplify it? Who benefits from its circulation?
- **Analyse patterns across content.** Twenty interviews repeating variations of the same geopolitical narratives may be more informative than fact-checking one statement in isolation.
- **Investigate the business model.** Advertising revenue, sponsorships, subscriptions and content licensing can explain why propaganda-like content remains economically sustainable without obvious state financing.
- **Avoid describing every sympathetic or pro-Russian commentator as an “agent”.** The Bessedin case shows why documented connections and specific activities matter.

For Media Literacy Educators and the Public

- **Do not equate an interview format with independent journalism.** Consider who selects the guests, which perspectives repeatedly appear and which perspectives are consistently absent.
- **Check the guest's institutional background.** A person introduced simply as an “expert” may also work for a state-controlled organisation or an entity connected to influence operations.
- **Look for recurring framing.** If dozens of apparently separate discussions consistently reach the same conclusions — Russia is reacting rather than attacking, the Baltics persecute Russian speakers, NATO provokes conflict — consider whether they form part of a broader narrative ecosystem.
- **Remember that popularity is not evidence of reliability.** Millions of views demonstrate reach, not accuracy.

Key Takeaway

The Bessedin case provides a useful example of how contemporary foreign influence can work without a traditional command-and-control relationship.

An ideologically sympathetic local influencer can receive valuable contacts and access from actors connected to Russian state and intelligence-linked structures, package their narratives as interviews and commentary, distribute them through a Western social-media platform, and earn substantial commercial revenue from the resulting audience.

The result is an influence system in which propaganda can become simultaneously decentralised, locally credible and financially self-sustaining.

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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