



Baltic Engagement
Centre for Combating
Information Disorders

HOT REPORT

FEAR STILL SELLS – HOW DISINFORMATION AND FEAR SHAPED LATVIA'S ELECTION CAMPAIGN

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THIS REPORT IS BASED ON RE:BALTICA/RE:CHECK ANALYSIS BY EVITA PURIŅA, **“FEAR STILL SELLS. WHAT MARKED THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN LATVIA”**, PUBLISHED ON 1 OCTOBER 2026, AHEAD OF LATVIA’S 3 OCTOBER PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION.

WHAT’S HOT?

Fear emerged as one of the recurring tools of Latvia’s 2026 parliamentary election campaign. According to Re:Baltica/Re:Check, security, immigration and the Istanbul Convention dominated the campaign. While security concerns reflected Latvia’s geopolitical environment, immigration and the Istanbul Convention were pushed prominently into public debate by political actors, in some cases through unsupported claims, misleading framing and outright disinformation.

The campaign demonstrates that election-related information manipulation does not necessarily focus on voting procedures or claims about stolen elections. Instead, misleading information can be used to define what voters should perceive as the country’s most urgent problems.

The recurring mechanism was simple: identify an emotionally powerful threat, amplify it and connect it with an existing political grievance.

Depending on the political actor and audience, the alleged threat was Russia, Ukraine, immigrants, LGBTQ rights, the Istanbul Convention, the Green Deal, NGOs, the media or political elites.

What Do We See?

1. Russia, Ukraine and the narrative of Latvia as a country seeking war

The analysis found no increased wave of foreign disinformation immediately before the election. Russian and Belarusian propaganda, however, remained continuously present in Latvia’s information environment.

Russian-speaking bloggers operating from Russia or Belarus portrayed Latvia as an economically failed, “Nazi” and Russophobic state abandoned by the EU, wasting its money on Ukraine and transforming itself into a military training ground.

Some of this content originated with the bloggers themselves, while other narratives were recycled from Kremlin information channels. Earlier false claims that Latvia had opened its airspace to Ukrainian drones attacking Russia continued to reappear in different forms.

These narratives were also repeated by some domestic political actors. Re:Baltica identifies Sovereign Power/Young Latvians Alliance and For Stability! as parties repeating Kremlin narratives, while Latvia First echoed some pro-Russian narratives in a less direct form.

The broader narrative is familiar:

**Latvia supports Ukraine → Latvia spends too much on Ukraine → Latvia militarises
→ Latvia provokes Russia → ordinary Latvians pay the price.**

2. Immigration turned into a security threat

Immigration became another major fear-based campaign theme. According to analysis, the National Alliance and several smaller political forces portrayed immigrants from third countries as criminals threatening Latvian women and ultimately the Latvian nation.

Yet the scale of immigration does not support the impression of a massive societal threat. Third-country nationals other than Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians represent around 1.5% of Latvia's population, and Re:Baltica reports that they commit offences less frequently than local residents. Surveys also indicate that Latvians are considerably more concerned about living costs, healthcare and security than immigration.

Nevertheless, fabricated stories about attacks were circulated alongside racist and dehumanising content. One campaign video generated with AI depicted a white man whipping dark-skinned food couriers. The case illustrates how a relatively limited social phenomenon can be transformed into a highly visible political threat through repetition and emotionally powerful examples.

3. The Istanbul Convention linked to LGBTQ fears

The Istanbul Convention – a Council of Europe treaty aimed at preventing and combating violence against women – again became a major symbolic issue. Opponents connected the Convention with broader cultural fears about gender and LGBTQ rights. Latvia First, for example, continued to spread the false claim that the Convention would require Latvia to legalise same-sex marriage.

The political debate therefore shifted away from the Convention's provisions on preventing violence against women towards emotionally charged questions about gender, sexuality and national values. This represents a familiar disinformation technique: attach a complex policy instrument to a socially divisive issue that evokes stronger emotional responses.

4. The Green Deal framed as an economic threat

Although climate policy was less prominent than immigration or security, misleading Green Deal narratives also appeared during the campaign. Sovereign Power/Young

Latvians Alliance continued spreading misleading claims about wind energy and campaigned for “a Latvia without wind farms”. Individual Latvia First politicians also spread misinformation concerning wind and solar energy.

Prime Minister Andris Kulbergs criticised the Green Deal from another direction, arguing that Latvia faced a choice between financing climate policy and defence. He characterises this as a false dilemma.

The underlying framing was again one of threat: **climate policy → excessive costs → less money for Latvia’s real needs.**

5. Media and NGOs portrayed as part of the establishment

Another campaign strategy was to undermine intermediaries that traditionally scrutinise political claims. Latvia First and Sovereign Power/Young Latvians Alliance regularly accused the media of being controlled by the government, ignoring them or producing fake news. NGOs became another target. Prime Minister Kulbergs made misleading claims about the amount of public funding they receive, including suggesting that NGOs collectively receive around €2 billion annually without explaining that much of this money goes to organisations providing public social services on behalf of the state.

This matters for information resilience because attacks on journalism, civil society and fact-checking can weaken institutions capable of challenging misleading political claims.

What Was Surprisingly Absent?

One important finding is what did **not** dominate the campaign. Despite circumstances that could have been exploited – including technical problems with vote counting and controversy surrounding the election platform – the analysis found relatively little disinformation alleging systematic election fraud before election day.

There were isolated claims about authorities being able to access early votes and about young people supposedly being manipulated through election-related critical-thinking education, but no major pre-election “stolen election” narrative had emerged by the time of the analysis. This is important because election disinformation should not be defined narrowly as false information about voting.

In Latvia, manipulation focused much more strongly on **what voters should fear** than on whether the electoral system itself could be trusted.

AI Enters the Campaign – Mostly as “Slopaganda”

Artificial intelligence played a visible but somewhat different role than might have been expected. The analysis did not observe a major wave of sophisticated AI deepfakes or

highly damaging fabricated candidate scandals.

Instead, the campaign produced what the authors describe as **AI slop or “slopaganda”** – cheap, exaggerated and often obviously artificial political promotional content. Latvia First repeatedly published AI-generated videos portraying its leader Ainārs Šlesers in heroic roles, including as an action-film-style figure defeating villains or sitting among powerful world leaders.

For Stability! leader Aleksejs Rošļikovs similarly portrayed himself as Latvia’s future head of government commanding submissive ministers. AI therefore functioned less as a sophisticated deception technology and more as an inexpensive tool for political myth-making and attention generation.

Why Does It Work?

Fear simplifies complex issues. Migration, security, climate policy and international conventions are complicated. Turning them into stories about criminals, war, disappearing national identity or economic ruin makes them much easier to communicate.

Emotional examples overpower statistics. A dramatic story about an immigrant allegedly attacking a woman may influence perceptions more strongly than statistics showing low crime levels among immigrants.

Real concerns provide an anchor. Successful manipulation rarely needs to invent everything. Russia genuinely poses security challenges. Latvia genuinely faces demographic and economic pressures. Migration exists. Climate policies cost money. Disinformation becomes persuasive when these realities are combined with exaggeration, fabricated examples or unsupported causal claims.

Social media rewards emotional content. Short videos depicting danger, conflict or outrage are well suited to TikTok, Facebook and Telegram. The analysis notes that some pro-Kremlin TikTok videos received tens of thousands of views.

Different fears work for different audiences. There was no single dominant disinformation narrative. Russian-speaking audiences could be targeted with stories about Latvia provoking Russia, while nationalist audiences could be mobilised around immigration or gender issues. The common denominator was not ideology but **fear as a mobilisation technique**.

Risk Assessment: HIGH

The principal risk identified by this case is not that disinformation necessarily persuades voters to believe one specific false statement. The larger danger is **agenda distortion**. Repeated emotionally charged claims can make relatively limited issues appear

existential while pushing other concerns out of public debate. Immigration provides a clear example: despite constituting a relatively small share of Latvia's population and ranking below other concerns in surveys, it became one of the campaign's most visible political threats.

A second risk is cumulative institutional distrust. When politicians simultaneously portray journalists as dishonest, NGOs as parasites, the EU as imposing harmful policies and governments as concealing reality, citizens may gradually lose confidence in the institutions capable of verifying political claims.

A third risk comes from normalisation. Racist imagery, dehumanising language and fabricated stories can shift the boundaries of acceptable political communication even when individual claims are subsequently debunked.

How to Respond?

For Election Authorities and Policymakers

- **Monitor narratives, not only election-fraud claims.** Election information integrity should include manipulation concerning immigration, security, minorities and other issues deliberately used to influence the campaign agenda.
- **Prepare factual information before controversies peak.** If immigration is likely to become an election issue, easily understandable information about population numbers, employment and crime statistics should already be publicly available.
- **Separate legitimate political disagreement from factual manipulation.** Parties are entitled to oppose immigration, climate policy or international conventions. The information-integrity problem begins when political arguments rely on fabricated events, incorrect statistics or demonstrably false descriptions of policies.
- **React consistently to dehumanising rhetoric.** Silence from mainstream political institutions can contribute to normalising language that portrays population groups as inherently dangerous.

For Media and Fact-Checkers

- **Fact-check the framing as well as individual claims.** A statement can contain technically correct details while creating a fundamentally misleading impression about the scale of a problem.
- **Always provide scale.** Instead of merely reporting that "immigration is increasing", show how many immigrants there are, what proportion of the population they represent and how this compares with previous years.
- **Follow recurring narratives across parties and platforms.** The same underlying fear may appear through different stories, videos and political actors.
- **Avoid amplifying inflammatory claims in headlines without immediate context.** Repeating a dramatic falsehood can increase its reach even when the article subsequently debunks it.



- **Track AI-generated political content.** The important question is not only whether AI content is deceptive but how it is used to manufacture heroic leaders, threatening enemies and emotionally powerful political identities.

For Educators and Civil Society

- Teach audiences to ask: “**How large is this problem actually?**” A useful media-literacy exercise is to compare campaign rhetoric with statistical prevalence. If social media makes an issue appear omnipresent but data shows it affects a small proportion of the population, this discrepancy deserves attention.
- Teach the difference between **policy disagreement and disinformation**. Someone can legitimately oppose the Istanbul Convention; claiming that it legally requires same-sex marriage is a factual assertion that can be checked.
- Use political advertisements to identify emotional triggers: fear, disgust, anger, humiliation and perceived loss of control.
- Teach people to recognise false dilemmas such as “either defence or climate policy” when more than two policy options actually exist.

For the Public

Before sharing an alarming election claim, ask four questions:

- **What exactly is being claimed?**
- **What evidence supports it?**
- **How common is the problem being described?**
- **Who benefits politically if I become afraid or angry about it?**

A particularly useful warning sign is a message suggesting that a single group – immigrants, Ukrainians, LGBTQ people, NGOs, journalists or “Brussels” – explains several unrelated national problems at once.

Key Takeaway

Latvia’s 2026 election campaign shows that contemporary election disinformation does not have to tell voters that elections are rigged. It can instead manipulate **what voters perceive as dangerous**.

Security fears were mixed with narratives about Latvia provoking Russia. A relatively small immigrant population was transformed into an existential cultural and security threat. The Istanbul Convention was connected to unrelated fears about same-sex marriage and gender. Climate policy was framed as competing directly with national defence. Media and NGOs were portrayed as untrustworthy parts of an establishment. Different political actors promoted different threats, but the communication mechanism was remarkably similar, as can be seen from the following figure:



That is why the central lesson from Latvia is broader than any individual false claim: **fear itself can function as an information-manipulation strategy.**

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.eu

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