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Dis- and Misinformation about the Ukraine-Russia War: A Case Study of the Baltic Countries

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Abstract: *The ongoing war in Ukraine has led to a rise in disinformation campaigns spread by Russia. These campaigns, which often use a complex machine of both traditional and social media, aim to spread propaganda and certain narratives beyond Russia's borders to weaken trust in government and international institutions, as well as create divisions and unrest. Debunk.org has conducted an analysis of problematic information in Baltic countries (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) and found that while each country was targeted with slightly different narratives, dis- and misinformation were serving Russia's strategic interests. The study monitored the media space of these countries in search of problematic content and found that it can spread through various means, such as Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour (CIB), organic spread, poor journalistic standards, or human ignorance. It should be noted that the disinformation content is often coming from sources that are either supported or affiliated with the Kremlin.²*

Key words: *disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, information warfare, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Baltic states, Russia*

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² Views and opinions of the authors of this paper do not necessarily correspond to views of the Euro-Atlantic Council of Slovenia.



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Introduction

While disinformation has been a powerful tool throughout history, there has been an increasing amount of focus on it in recent years, particularly since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.³ Similarly, Russia's unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has resulted in an increase in disinformation and propaganda materials in the information space. *Debunk.org* has prepared analyses on various topics related to disinformation, including false or misleading information spread by Russia. The Kremlin uses a complex media and social media machine not only to spread propaganda within the country, but also to propagate certain narratives to audiences beyond its borders. This is evident by the increasing amount of funds allocated from the budget to media directed abroad, which in recent years has exceeded funds allocated to domestic media. What is more, at the beginning of 2022 the Russian state budget for mass media has tripled compared to the same period last year⁴.

Since the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, disinformation has been used as a weapon in this conflict. These actions are simply one aspect of information warfare, which has become an integral part of conventional war strategies. False or misleading information is still being spread by outlets supported by the Kremlin or connected to it, as well as various social media channels, which are also often used to amplify this content. In addition to specific content circulating in these information bubbles, various techniques, such as Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour (CIB), using trolls and bot networks, are applied to reach a wider audience. The main goals of Russian propaganda, as evident in the case of the war in Ukraine, are to spread unrest, fear, divisions, and weaken trust in the state, its authorities, NATO, European Union, and the West in

³ As noted in the article 2022 Disinfo Research Highlights, about 5.490 articles were published in 2017 on disinformation (according to Google Scholar), and this number almost tripled in 2020 to about 16.500 articles. This record was broken in 2021, when as many as 23.200 articles on disinformation were recorded. In 2022, the result was slightly lower, but the number of publications was still very high – around 17.800. See 2022 Disinfo Research Highlights, EUvsDisinfo, December 31, 2022, <<https://bit.ly/3lvJuey>>.

⁴ A. Michałowska-Kubś, J. Kubś, *Coining Lies. Kremlin Spends 1.5 Billion per Year to Spread Disinformation and Propaganda*, Debunk.org, August 8, 2022, <<https://bit.ly/3YsSqQA>>.



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general. It is important to remember that the Kremlin's goal is not only to make audiences believe certain pro-Russian narratives, but also to sow the seeds of doubt about those that are incompatible with Moscow's interests. These tasks are well-served by any source that disseminates Russian propaganda.

In the early March, European Commission issued a decision suspending the broadcasting activities of *Sputnik* and *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*) in the European Union⁵. However, the introduction of the ban did not stop the transmission of disinformation, only made it more difficult. On a state-by-state level, internet users were prevented from entering sites known for spreading pro-Russian narratives. However, immediately after the ban, various channels on social media began posting technological tips on how to circumvent the restrictions. In addition, some groups and pages on social media not only continued their activities and spread Russian propaganda but became even more efficient. At the same time, Kremlin-linked media outlets introduced mirror domains on which they continued to share malign information. Some users wanting to reach pro-Kremlin content migrated to social media hitherto characteristic rather of Eastern Europe and Russia, such as the VKontakte or Telegram. However, disinformation on more 'traditional' social media in Europe, like *Facebook* or *Twitter*, also flourished. It is worth mentioning here about networks of disinformation groups and pages on *Facebook*. *Debunk.org*, in cooperation with the Lithuanian National Radio and Television news (LRT) journalists, investigated such a network in Lithuania⁶. In the summer of 2022, *Debunk.org* conducted an in-depth analysis of pro-Russian communications in infospheres in the Baltics – Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

⁵ As the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, stated, "Systematic information manipulation and disinformation by the Kremlin is applied as an operational tool in its assault on Ukraine. It is also a significant and direct threat to the Union's public order and security. (...) We have already put sanctions on leadership of RT, including the editor-in-chief Simonyan, and it is only logical to also target the activities the organisations have been conducting within our Union", *EU imposes sanctions on state-owned outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik's broadcasting in the EU*, Council of the EU, Press release, March 2, 2022, <<https://bit.ly/3XqxTur>>.

⁶ J. Čeponytė, I. Makaraitytė, R. Juknevičiūtė, M. Aušra, *Lithuania's pro-Kremlin disinformation network exposed – LRT Investigation*, LRT, May 26, 2022, <<https://bit.ly/3lwsuwe>>.



Problematic Information about the War in Ukraine Directed against the Baltic States

There are a variety of definitions of disinformation and misinformation. In the scientific community, the concept by Wardle and Derakhshan has gained recognition⁷. The key determinant of the distinction between disinformation and misinformation is intent: the conscious (disinformation) or unconscious (misinformation) transmission of false information. In the context of online activity analysis, unambiguous attribution of intent is difficult. For this reason, we have chosen to use the broader term "problematic information" in our analysis.

Debunk.org analysts monitored the media space of the Baltics in search of problematic information aligned with the pro-Kremlin messaging related to the war in Ukraine. The analysis focused on materials in the national languages of these countries. In this article, we present most popular pro-Kremlin communication threads spread mainly on *Facebook* in the Baltics from June till October 2022⁸. It is worth noting that slightly different messaging was disseminated in each country, tailored to the specific problems and concerns of the public. In other words, pro-Kremlin content is easily adaptable. On the other hand, there were also common threads for all Baltic states.

Lithuania

In Lithuania, the most common message was the claim that Vilnius seeks to escalate the conflict. Throughout the analysed period we have found 38 content pieces containing such information. Considerable attention has also been paid to the transit dispute in Kaliningrad, which was linked to the security agenda. Kremlin-aligned outlets and social media called it a 'blockade' imposed by the

⁷ The researchers created the concept of "information disruption," within which they distinguished three types of harmful activity: disinformation – information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, misinformation – information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm, and malinformation – information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country, C. Wardle, H. Derakhshan, *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*, Council of Europe report DGI(2017)09, p. 20, <<https://bit.ly/41iH17J>>.

⁸ The popularity of problematic content was measured by the number of interactions on social media platforms (e.g. *Facebook*). The study used *Meta's* CrowdTangle analytical tool.



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Lithuanian government. Although the decision was made at the level of the European Commission, pro-Kremlin channels blamed Lithuania for the escalation of the conflict. Also, even though the ban applied only to certain products (such as concrete, wood and alcohol) and included only certain modes of transportation (railroads), problematic messages portrayed it as a threat to ordinary consumers in the Russian enclave and presented as a possible reason for the Russian invasion of Lithuania⁹. For example, in one of the materials that gained a lot of media attention, the author claimed the decision to ban the transit of sanctioned goods to Kaliningrad to be solely made by the Lithuanian government to provoke Russia and this way consolidate NATO powers before the Madrid summit on 28–30 June 2022¹⁰. According to *CrowdTangle*, *Facebook* social media posts with this link sparked more than 11,000 interactions and were shared on 39 public groups and pages.

Another thread focused on criticising Lithuania's aid to Ukraine, such as fundraising for military equipment to support the Ukrainian Armed Forces. In the analysed period we have detected 31 social media posts conveying similar statements. Problematic sources implied either that it was pointless or that it worked to the detriment of local citizens and brought negative effects. Such communication was an attempt to persuade the public that military support and aid for Ukraine threatens Lithuania with becoming the next target of the Russian Federation. Other problematic messages ridiculed organisers of the fundraising campaigns. For example, one *Facebook* post that sparked over 7,000 reactions claimed that Andrius Tapinas, a Lithuanian journalist who coordinated a crowdfunding campaign for buying a *Bayraktar* drone for Ukraine, was immoral as he could instead spend this money for ill children. The post claimed that Lithuanian campaigns for raising funds for Ukraine are futile in the context of the support from bigger countries¹¹. Another example from *Facebook*,

⁹ A. Michałowska-Kubś, J. Kubś, *Posts related to Kaliningrad sanctions targeted by social media bots and trolls*, Debunk.org, September 22, 2022, <<https://bit.ly/3E2XLWH>>

¹⁰ *Respublika.lt*, June 23, 2022, <<https://bit.ly/3K34F1Z>> (archived)

¹¹ *Facebook* post, October 16, 2022, <<https://nimb.ws/5CWEjg>> (screenshot)



which implied that organisations and individuals collecting financial aid for Ukraine might be benefitting from fraud, triggered almost 8,000 interactions¹². Similar social media content pieces were a part of the organised and continued effort to diminish the successful fundraising campaign, which became an example for other neighbouring countries.

Other problematic communications in the analysed period were claims that Ukraine is merely ‘a tool’ in the West’s war with Russia’ (27 Facebook posts) or that it ‘draws its strength from the war’ (21) or that it ‘is part of a global conspiracy’ (20). Apart from that, it was characteristic in Lithuania, as well as in Estonia and Latvia, to present the government’s policy of supporting Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees as detrimental to the interests of the local population. Lithuanian authorities were also targeted with statements that they are using the Russian-Ukraine war to limit democratic freedoms¹³.

The other area of misleading information concerned inflation and the energy crisis, which were shown as being caused by Western or Lithuanian government policies rather than Russian aggression. In one article the author shifted all the blame for rising prices on the Lithuanian government and claimed that it has essentially become a dictatorship. The content piece was shared in 23 Facebook posts gaining more than 6,300 interactions¹⁴.

Problematic information related to the topic of the war in Ukraine was spread in Lithuania mainly by the same group of dubious news outlets (f.ex. musutv.lt, minfo.lt, bukimevieningi.lt) and social media users. In many cases, these were individuals associated with or sympathetic to the ‘March of Families’ movement (Lithuanian: ‘Šeimų maršas’), which were responsible for riots, most notably in the August 10, 2021. In the case of Facebook, it is worth noting that misleading information was

¹² Facebook post, September 9, 2022, <<https://bit.ly/3Y9hxYz>>

¹³ Respublika.lt, August 20, 2022, <<https://bit.ly/3XBwBxN>> (archived)

¹⁴ Respublika.lt, September 12, 2022, <<https://bit.ly/3S2nCnh>> (archived)



posted not only by minor influencers, but also by prominent ‘opinion makers’ whose followers on social media often number in the tens of thousands. This list includes Lithuanian eurosceptic MP Remigijus Žemaitaitis (32,000 followers), lawyer and potential presidential candidate Ignas Vėgėlė (34,000 followers) or jewellery designer Jurga Lago (70,000 followers).

Latvia

In Latvia, misleading information spread in the native language was relatively less observed in the analysed period. This phenomenon could be the result of the Kremlin’s possibly increased interest in non-local language speakers, as the Russian minority in Latvia is significant¹⁵.

The most popular message focused on the impact and harmfulness of the war for the country’s domestic socio-political environment (17 *Facebook* posts). Alongside this, the futility of Western sanctions was stressed several times. An attempt to discourage citizens from helping refugees was noted as well when it was suggested that Ukrainian refugees would undermine the host state’s internal stability and identity or that Latvians are giving too much to help Ukraine and forgetting about themselves. Criticism also included overly high taxes, Western ‘brainwashing’ (gender policies), and the charge that residents who do not support Ukraine are labelled ‘*Putinists*’. One prominent post triggered over 2,200 interactions and was re-published on 10 *Facebook* groups and pages. The estimated reach of the post was over 142,000 users¹⁶.

Some problematic information also conveyed threads of conspiracy theories. In one *TikTok* video, Latvian influencer claimed that local politicians are controlled by ‘*globalists*’ and that is why they will cause even higher levels of inflation in Latvia than before (over 5,300 likes)¹⁷. The reference to

¹⁵ Ethnic Russians constitute 24.2% of the total population. Official Statistics of Latvia, *Population by ethnicity at the beginning of year – Ethnicity and Time period*, 2022, <<https://bit.ly/40B5qVU>>

¹⁶ *Facebook* post, October 29, 2022, <<https://bit.ly/3JS456O>>

¹⁷ *TikTok* video, October 5, 2022, <<https://bit.ly/40IBerU>>



‘conspiracists’ scheming a plan involving war in Ukraine (or Covid-19 pandemic) was one of the frequent threads across Baltics.

Among other Latvian messages fitting into the Kremlin’s views, appeared claims that Ukraine is only a pawn in the geopolitical game. One Latvian user spread several posts in which he claimed that the U.S. and NATO treat Ukraine only as a battleground and do not care about winning the war with Russia. One of the videos was viewed over 7,400 times¹⁸.

Estonia

In Estonia, problematic information often referred to the situation inside the country. The message about refugees from Ukraine was often repeated – in total 60 Facebook such posts were detected. It was suggested, among other issues, that war refugees will affect the stability of the country and pose a threat to the national identity. Such claims constituted about a third of the monitored misleading information in Estonia.

One of the frequent problematic content sources was the outlet linked to the far-right Conservative People’s Party of Estonia (EKRE). In a series of articles, authors suggested that Estonia could not cope with housing war refugees. In one content piece the journalist focused on the conflicts and problems that an influx of Ukrainian refugees could cause in the country¹⁹. The article was re-published on seven *Facebook* groups and pages, generating over 1,200 likes. Journalists disseminating problematic information have often quoted far-right politicians and pseudo-experts claiming that refugees from Ukraine are in fact Russians sympathetic to Putin’s imperialist policies. Their activities could lead to the creation of a ‘fifth column’, threatening its national identity, and at worst – actively supporting the annexation of parts of Estonia to Russia.

¹⁸ Facebook post, October 17, 2022, <<https://bit.ly/3I2CmiQ>>

¹⁹ Uued Uudised, July 27, 2022, <<https://bit.ly/3j2e5zw>>



Another popular message relating to Ukrainian refugees asserted that their interests were put above the interests of residents (13 *Facebook* posts). In one publication an Estonian politician claimed that instead of protecting the nation-state, the parliament had opened its doors to all ‘*so-called Ukrainian refugees*’, but that this would not stop Russia’s aggression in Ukraine and would only lead to a patterning of the level of ‘*Russification in Estonia*’.²⁰ The posts with a link to the article sparked more than 2,000 interactions on Facebook.

Other problematic content pieces highlighted concerns that the actions of the EU and United States helping Ukraine will affect the country’s inflation rate (15 *Facebook* posts). One article claimed that ‘*Estonia is waging a full-scale economic war against its own people*’, arguing that the government is pursuing the criminal globalist policy of the ‘*Great Reset*’, in which soaring electricity prices and the buying up of bank assets by large corporations will lead to a situation in which people will not own private property.²¹ The article triggered over 2,500 interactions in social media, however, the webpage is visited monthly by half million Internet users.

Conclusions

The examples above demonstrate that despite sanctions and limitations, misinformation continues to find ways to reach foreign audiences, specifically in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Problematic information aligned with the Kremlin’s communication is spread by both local sources and through various social media platforms. It is worth noting that new platforms, such as *Telegram* or *Vkontakte*, have emerged as channels for transmitting content that is often censored on other social media platforms, such as *Facebook* or *Twitter*. Despite this, the latter two social media platforms continue to be huge sources of problematic messages related to the war in Ukraine. This highlights the importance of effective strategic communication and appropriate countermeasures, while it is clear that continuous monitoring and refutation of problematic content is crucial. False and

²⁰ Uued Uudised, October 10, 2022, <<https://bit.ly/3DfLoWF>>

²¹ Uued Uudised, September 4, 2022, <<https://bit.ly/3R7dfxT>>



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misleading messages sow doubts, anxiety, and fear, weakening support for organisations such as NATO and the EU, and causing weakness in the sphere being part of an information war. Additionally, providing truthful information, exposing misleading messages is important. If audiences become immune to the tactics and fake news disseminated by pro-Kremlin media, false narratives will lose their relevance. Therefore, countermeasures and counter-narratives should be developed at the national level and disseminated to reach the widest possible audience. Furthermore, it is essential to flag and remove dis/misinformation, groups, and pages to stop spreading lies and blurring the line between the aggressor and the defender.

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