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DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN LITHUANIA

EU DISINFO LAB



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INTRODUCTION

- As Lithuania has a long history of dealing with Russian aggression, it is literally and figuratively on the frontlines combatting Kremlin disinformation and propaganda.
- Lithuania is home to many leading experts, volunteers, NGOs, and other institutions fighting disinformation and is a successful example of how to combat disinformation.
- A majority of the disinformation encountered in Lithuania is Russian in origin and is intended for international audiences to undermine NATO, the EU, and the West in general while promoting Russian legitimacy and authority.

EMBLEMATIC CASES

These cases represent prime examples of Russian disinformation targeting Lithuania, NATO, and the West:

13 JANUARY 1991: THE SOVIET ATTACK ON THE VILNIUS TV TOWER

- On March 11, 1990, Lithuania declared the reestablishment of its independence, but the Soviet Union continued military aggression there in order to destroy hopes of freedom. Mikhail Gorbachev called the Act of Independence illegal. On [January 13, 1991](#), Soviet troops attempted to capture all methods of communication in Vilnius, including the TV tower and the LRT building in Vilnius by force, bringing tanks and armed forces into Vilnius. The Soviet troops beat people, fired machine guns, and drove their tanks into the unarmed crowd. Thousands of people gathered to protect the Parliament building, setting up bonfires and barricades to defend it. The violence of January 1991 became a symbol of freedom and independence in Lithuania. Fourteen innocent people died and many more were injured.
- The Kremlin has since claimed that the 13 January 1991 events were orchestrated by the CIA, American fascists, and local collaborators as a color revolution to destroy the Soviet Union.
- Russia insists the Soviet Union did not have the type of weapons that were used to kill the victims at the TV tower. They claim that Soviet forces did not kill anyone and only fired blank shots, while Lithuanian nationalists fired on their own people. Other claims say that it is unknown who fired the shots.
- Russia further argues that the events were official, legal state duties according to Soviet law since it claims Lithuania was still part of the Soviet Union. The actions of Soviet soldiers at the TV tower were legitimate, as they were protecting the constitutional order of Soviet Lithuania by quelling a coup d'état.

“THE JONAVA GIRL”

- In February 2017, a [false narrative](#) claimed that five German NATO soldiers raped an underage girl in the small Lithuanian town of Jonava.
- An email was sent to the Speaker of the Seimas (Lithuanian parliament), Viktoras Pranckietis, as well as other state leaders. [Fake images of publications](#) on Lithuanian news portals were spread online but later removed. A blog, [Auraspress.wordpress.com](#), was created to spread the story.
- This case is an example of Russia reusing old narratives, as it is reminiscent of the “[Lisa girl](#)” in Germany or the “[Crucified Boy](#)” in Ukraine. This type of narrative exploits emotions and sparks outrage against a particular group. In this case, it was an attempt to undermine the authority of NATO’s overall mission and reinforce the incorrect claim that Lithuania is a failed state who has given its sovereignty to NATO occupiers while also illustrating the supposed moral decline of the West.

LITHUANIA AND THE [MIGRATION CRISIS](#)

- Hundreds of migrants, mainly from Iraq, arrive at the border via Belarus each day after Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko threatened to send “migrants and drugs” to Europe. Officials in Vilnius say Lukashenko’s regime is responsible for enabling irregular migration, calling it hybrid [aggression](#)

to weaken Lithuania's [resolve for sanctions](#). The situation is exacerbated by Lithuania's new [migrant pushback law](#) in response to the crisis.

- One Russian [maintains](#) is that Lithuanian border guards are violating human rights by illegally detaining migrants, denying them food and water, and using violence to force them to leave Lithuania and go to Belarus at gunpoint. They are trapped between Lithuania and Belarus, as border guards on both sides refuse them entry.
- Claims that Lithuania is keeping migrants in concentration camps are false. There are temporary settlements for irregular migrants until their applications are processed, but claims of inadequate conditions and abuse are wrong. Lithuanian citizens and businesses are [helping](#) by sending blankets, clothing, and food.
- The UNHCR [recommends](#) that Lithuania “establish an independent monitoring mechanism to oversee the implementation of the border procedures” and stands ready “to engage with Lithuania to provide guidance and technical assistance to help develop the necessary border procedures in line with Lithuania’s international obligations.” In the same statement, it condemned Lukashenko’s “instrumentalization of refugees and migrants (...) in order to achieve political ends” as it “creates grave risks and only adds to human suffering. All states must uphold their international commitments and respect fundamental human rights.”
- Russia and Belarus use this [case](#) to show Belarus as compassionate and merciful to migrants while accusing Lithuania of violating human rights.

HACKING OF THE BALTIC NEWS SERVICE

- Baltic News Service (BNS) is the only news agency that spans all three Baltic countries, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. It provides reliable, real-time coverage of domestic and foreign news and partners with Reuters, AFP, AP, Interfax, STT, PAP, and APA. It has operated since 1991.
- In [April 2017](#), BNS was the victim of a cyber-attack when a false news story entitled “Syrian Echo in Latvia: US Soldiers were poisoned with mustard gas” was illegally published on its system in both Lithuanian and Russian. The story alleged that American soldiers in Latvia were poisoned, mustard gas was stockpiled at the bottom of the Baltic Sea. Whoever created the story alleged that it was an ecological bomb and that only the Kremlin knows when it will explode.
- IT specialists determined that the BNS system were hacked, and the BNS news agency appealed to the General Prosecutor’s Office with a request to start an investigation into the publication.

NARRATIVES

THE SOVIET OCCUPATION IS A MYTH: AN EXAMPLE OF RUSSIAN HISTORICAL REVISIONISM

- Russia claims that the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States is a myth.
- It asserts that Lithuania (along with Latvia and Estonia) was legally incorporated into the Soviet Union with the consent of their legally elected authorities, consistent with international law. Russia's narrative is that the Baltic states willingly joined (and fought for the right to do so) after being saved from the Nazis, but that today they ignore the events that led to the legal, willing incorporation.
- A narrative exists that Lithuanian independence is illegitimate. Russian politician Yevgeny Fedorov [stated](#) that the decree recognising Lithuania's independence is illegal, as it was "adopted by an unconstitutional body and in violation (...) of the Constitution of the USSR." Russia's Duma (Parliament) is considering [revoking](#) recognition of Lithuania's independence altogether. In May 2023, former Russian prime minister Dmitry Medvedev referred to the Baltic states as "[our Baltic provinces](#)."
- Russia claims Lithuania is simply a fake, replica state with [no political history or tradition](#) of its own.

LITHUANIA IS A FAILED STATE

- Russia claims that Lithuania is a dysfunctional country with an incompetent and unstable government that creates foreign and domestic policies harmful to itself. [A narrative circulated by Sputnik](#) says that Lithuania is a "typical example of a young European democracy slowly dying out in the 'poor but clean' format, which in general, has no industry left." Likewise, it has [perpetuated the idea](#) that Lithuania is doomed without Russian energy.
- A pro-Kremlin narrative states that people are leaving Lithuania en masse, and eventually, no one will be left.
- Russia also spreads the narrative that Lithuania is a poor country with high unemployment (claimed to be above 16%, but is actuality around 9%, just above the EU average of 7.3%) and a low standard of living with a grim economic future. Russia claims Lithuania's economy is crumbling and entirely reliant on the EU budget. However, [according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](#), Lithuania is among the fastest growing OECD economies of the past decade and that according to OECD Acting Chief Economist Alvaro Pereira, it shows "great economic resilience during the COVID-19 crisis, helped by sound financial and fiscal policies. The war in Ukraine is now posing new challenges, but Lithuania is well placed to tackle these, providing targeted support to cushion the impacts of Russia's unprovoked, unjustifiable, and illegal war of aggression against Ukraine while rebuilding fiscal space gradually and looking ahead to strengthen employment and support productivity gains."

LITHUANIA IS OCCUPIED BY NATO AND A PUPPET OF THE WEST

- According to Russia, the west treats the Baltic States as a foothold for anti-Russian war, and that the west is holding it hostage, forcing it to act as commanded. It claims that Lithuania gave up its independence, sovereign policy, and voice to the EU and NATO. As a willing puppet state of the US, they dream of becoming an American base in return for payment, but then they will be destroyed.
- Likewise, it states that NATO has occupied Lithuania, and its forces there are dangerous to the people, as mentioned in the "Jonava girl" narrative. Russia asserts that Lithuania is not independent

and does not have an army of its own and therefore must rely on NATO protection.

- An ever-present narrative is that the West is exploiting Lithuania to undermine Russia with aggressive Russophobic policy.

RUSSOPHOBIA IN LITHUANIA

- [Russophobia](#) or the hatred of Russians, is a term often exploited by the Kremlin to justify its war crimes in Ukraine and paint Russia as the victim of sanctions and oppression abroad. Likewise, it claims that Lithuania is Russophobic for its support of Ukraine.
- Conspiratorial narratives allege that Lithuania is ruled by a Russophobic minority called “Landsbergis’s group” (named after current Minister of Foreign Affairs Gabrielius Landsbergis and his grandfather, Vytautas Landsbergis.) who makes Russophobic policy to oppress ethnic Russians.
- Russia claims the persecution of Russian speakers by Lithuania is limiting the usage of the Russian language. Lithuanian is the recognised state language, but there are no restrictions on communicating or broadcasting in Russian.
- Lithuania has removed many Soviet monuments and iconography since regaining independence. Recent examples include dismantling the monument to the Red Army soldiers at Antakalnis and the removal of a memorial to Soviet soldiers in Klaipeda for the city’s liberation from the Nazis. Russia calls Lithuania’s removal of Soviet monuments the “culmination of the Lithuanian government’s fierce desire to destroy the memory of the heroes who, at the cost of their lives, liberated Lithuania and Europe from Nazism” and that it is a “barbaric mockery of the dead [that] evokes only a feeling of deep contempt and justified indignation in every normal person.”
- [According to the LRT investigations team](#), Russia has responded by preparing efforts to maintain influence in Lithuania by funding pro-Russian NGOs, keeping the Russian language in schools, and opposing the demotion of Soviet monuments.

COMMUNITY

Lithuania has a strong community countering disinformation, including its civil society, media, government, academic institutions, and nongovernmental organisations. The average citizen in Lithuania is resilient to Russian disinformation, but Russia still exploits pro-Kremlin individuals.

DEBUNK.ORG

- A Lithuanian-based disinformation [analysis centre](#), independent think tank and NGO with a wide variety of [activities](#) aimed to research disinformation. It gathers professionals and amateurs to fight disinformation in various fields to be representatives of civil society, media, and state institutions, and runs educational media literacy campaigns.
- Promotes media literacy by teaching how to discern disinformation and misinformation, gain knowledge of narratives, and study the main strategies used in creating false information.
- It developed an operational technological tool used by journalists and members of civil society based on artificial intelligence to identify misinformation and prevent its spread.
- It carries out disinformation analyses in the Baltic Countries, Poland, Georgia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, as well as the United States, and creates over 100 [reports and articles](#) per year with over 200 active volunteers.
- Debunk.org offers two types of courses, including a hands-on eight-hour [crash course](#) for future experts, and a [civic-resilience course](#) to provide university students with the abilities to recognise and understand disinformation.
- It employs the effort and expertise of a team of analysts with varied backgrounds, national institutions in partner countries, IT experts with knowledge of AI tools, and Lithuanian volunteer fact-checker ‘elves.’
- In 2022, Dutch public broadcaster VPRO released a documentary about Debunk.org entitled “[Truth as a weapon](#).”

DELFI LIE DETECTOR (DELFI MELO DETEKTORIUS)

- An independent and open fact-checking unit of DELFI, being the largest internet news portal in Lithuania, the [DELFI Melo Detektorius](#) operates in Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, and other languages.
- It was [nominated](#) as one of the best fact-checking success stories in Europe.
- It [exposed a Russian propaganda network and troll farm](#) disseminating disinformation about the Baltic States and the West. This network had tens of thousands of followers and subscribers that coordinated to spread disinformation, propaganda, and false facts about Baltic countries and the West.
- Part of the [IFCN](#) (International Fact-Checking Network), it is also connected to [EDMO](#) and [EFCSN](#).
- Its methodology is to select facts through meetings, following public comments, press conferences, and use special fact-checking tools. However, it does not check subjective editorial pieces or speculation of future events. After collecting all the necessary, traceable information and evidence about the fact being investigated, an assessment is made to assign the case to a category: “lie,” “partial lie,” “partial truth,” “truth,” or “manipulation.”

- DELFI has a corrections policy, and DELFI Lie Detector distinguishes all added, corrected text indicating the date when the information was updated.

LITHUANIAN “ELVES”

- They are called so because of their “[notorious skills of hunting online trolls](#).”
- According to demaskuok.lt, Lithuanian [Elves](#) are “not mythological or fantastic creatures, but real, civil, and patriotic people who are not limited by national borders. A common goal unites them: voluntarily, by various means, to contribute to the fight against disinformation hostile to Lithuania. Elves are fighters and defenders, hunters of disinformation and propaganda. They are the invisible, indestructible, first and last line of defense of the state in virtual space. Elves are custodians of awareness, civic, cultural, historical, and other values, which strengthen the resistance of Lithuanian society to informational threats and set an example for allies.”
- Elves, individually or otherwise coordinated, follow disinformation sources in online media, TV channels, and social networks and analyse the content of these sources. Elves can alert other Elves, the media community, or government agencies about misinformation they discover. By voting and commenting on the technologically advanced Demaskuok.lt platform, they react, rank articles, and present their arguments, which help to unmask false news.
- According to Demaskuok.lt, “any civic-minded and patriotic person can become an elf, regardless of gender, age, nationality, race, religion, profession, political or sexual orientation. Elves operate virtually and have no formal contracts, obligations, official status, or headquarters. The most important criteria are a person’s reliability, valued by the elf community, the desire to use their abilities, knowledge, experience, or common sense.”
- Likewise, Demaskuok.lt calls elves the “invisible soldiers of [Lithuania], fighting daily on the shadow front. The activities of Elves are based on the principles of voluntarism and confidentiality of personal identity. This is a great opportunity for people who want to help stop disinformation but don’t have the tools or shy away from publicity. Even with a minimal contribution, elves can significantly strengthen the resistance of Lithuanian society to information attacks, and develop personal and public abilities in order to recognise disinformation. Elf activities can be a fun game that strengthens the unity and community of civically motivated people, or vice versa – the exploitation of particular areas, experiences and abilities of a person. Elves can quickly, as a team or individually, achieve the desired result, the impact of which would be seen at the national level and international level. The activities of the elves are voluntary, unpaid but are encouraged and appreciated.”

INVESTIGATION GROUPS IN MEDIA:

SIENA:

- SIENA’s goal is not only to create journalistic research but also to contribute to the development and improvement of the quality of journalism throughout Lithuania. The Centre for Investigative Journalism aims to expose corruption, nepotism, abuse, human rights violations, and other phenomena affecting individuals and entire states. It collaborates with Lithuanian and foreign media to create high-quality journalism.
- SIENA contributed to projects such as the [Pandora Papers](#) and [FinCEN Files](#); research conducted with partners has been nominated and awarded the [IJ4EU impact award](#).

- One example of SIENA's work is a [piece](#) by Šarūnas Černiauskas about hacking.

LRT investigations team:

- LRT (Lithuanian Radio and Television/Lietuvos nacionalinis radijas ir televizija) is a public broadcaster with news on radio, television, and internet news portal. The LRT investigations team researches and analyses socially relevant events. It is a partner of the international journalistic investigative Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP).
- The LRT investigations team uncovered a [Kremlin document](#) outlining Russia's plans for the Baltic states.

15min:

- One of the largest news outlets in Lithuania, is known for its investigative journalism and was a participant in the [Panama Papers](#) project.

DELFI:

- Besides its Lie Detector team, DELFI has a successful investigation team.

LITHUANIAN NATIONAL CRISIS MANAGEMENT CENTRE (NKVC)

- The Lithuanian government has approved the establishment of a [National Crisis Management Centre](#) (NKVC).
- The centre will be the major operational-level institution engaged in crisis management and civil protection. It will include a 24/7 situation centre staffed by field experts monitoring threats to Lithuania's national security. According to the government's [National Security Threat Assessment](#), [Russia's disinformation ecosystem](#) is a primary national security concern in Lithuania.

POLICY

While there are no specific laws against disinformation, the Constitution forbids war propaganda, and the [EU Code of Conduct](#) on countering illegal hate speech online forbids hate speech. These laws serve as the basis to enable Lithuania to block online access to [Russian war propaganda](#).

DISINFORMATION, PROPAGANDA, AND THE LITHUANIAN CONSTITUTION:

[The Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania](#), “prohibits censorship and monopolisation of the mass media... guarantees freedom of expression and lays down the limits of exercising freedom of expression.”

- Chapter II, The Human Being and the State: Article 25 states: “Everyone shall have the right to have their convictions and freely express them. No one must be hindered from seeking, receiving, or imparting information and ideas. The freedom to express convictions, as well as to receive and impart information, may not be limited otherwise than by law when this is necessary to protect human health, honour or dignity, private life, or morals, or to defend the constitutional order. The freedom to express convictions and to impart information shall be incompatible with criminal actions – incitement to national, racial, religious, or social hatred, incitement to violence or discrimination, as well as defamation and disinformation. Citizens shall have the right to receive, according to the procedure established by law, any information held about them by state institutions.”
- Chapter III, Society and the State, article 44: “Censorship of mass information shall be prohibited. The State, political parties, political or public organisations, or other institutions or persons may not monopolise the mass media.”
- Chapter XIII, Foreign Policy and National Defence, Article 135: “In implementing its foreign policy, the Republic of Lithuania shall follow the universally recognised principles and norms of international law, shall seek to ensure national security and independence, the welfare of its citizens, and their basic rights and freedoms, and shall contribute to the creation of the international order based on law and justice. In the Republic of Lithuania, [war propaganda](#) shall be prohibited.”

PUBLIC INFORMATION POLICY

[The Law on the Provision of Information to the Public](#) is the principal law governing public information activities.

- This law establishes the procedure for “collecting, producing, publishing, and disseminating public information and the rights, duties, and liability of activities of producers and disseminators of public information, their participants, journalists and institutions regulating their activities.”
- Under this law, if public information producers fail to submit required data to the Ministry of Culture, they are deprived of their right to receive state support through the Press, Radio, and Television Support Foundation for cultural and educational programs.

PROTECTIONS FOR WHISTLE-BLOWERS: REPUBLIC OF LITHUANIA LAW ON PROTECTION OF WHISTLE-BLOWERS

The [Lithuanian Law on Protection of whistle-blowers](#) ensures several things, including secure channels for reporting about infringements, confidentiality in reporting, prohibition of adverse actions against the whistleblower, the right to be remunerated for valuable information, and the right to compensation, free legal aid, and the exemption from liability.

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