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DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN LATVIA

EU DISINFO LAB



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INTRODUCTION

- With a history of confronting Russian aggression, Latvia stands at the forefront in countering Kremlin disinformation and propaganda, both in practical and ideological terms.
- Within Latvia's borders, a wealth of leading experts, committed volunteers, and reputable NGOs actively combat disinformation, showcasing successful models of countering false narratives.
- Most disinformation encountered in Latvia originates from Kremlin-related sources and is strategically aimed at undermining NATO, the EU, and Western institutions while bolstering Russia's credibility and influence on the global stage.
- In 2021, Latvia became the first Baltic State to convict an individual for spreading false information online.

EMBLEMATIC CASES

While the cases of Russian disinformation cases in Latvia have grown more numerous, especially with the increased use of social media campaigns in recent years, these three examples highlight the persistence of age-old narratives present in Russian disinformation aimed at Latvia, especially its Russian-speaking population.

LATVIA READS MORE HITLER THAN HARRY POTTER

- Originally [reported](#) by Russian language Zvezda (tvzvezda.ru) on 2 April 2018, the allegation was spread that Latvians read Hitler's "Mein Kampf" more than Harry Potter. The claims were based on one used book website, "ibook", which lists popular books of the preceding week.
- The same information was later reported by Russian news outlet [Sputnik](#), which linked the news to information on the march commemorating World War II Latvian Legionnaires, connecting the two reports to further the narrative that Latvia is sympathetic towards Nazis and that there is a revival of Nazism in Latvia.
- The report went viral and was even [investigated by the BBC](#), concluding with the impact and prevalence of Russian information influence campaigns in the region.

RUSSIAN LANGUAGE REFERENDUM IN LATVIA

- On 18 February 2012, Latvia voted on whether or not to amend the Constitution to add Russian as a second state language. [This initiative](#) was brought about by National Bolshevik Party leader Vladimirs Linderman, who gathered enough signatures to bring the topic to the ballot.
- It had the greatest voter turnout since the 3 March 1991 vote on a democratic and state-independent Republic of Latvia, with 70% of citizens voting and 24.88% voting in favour of the initiative.
- The event highlighted societal tensions, with social media campaigns, videos, pamphlets, and widespread concerns about corruption, where donated funds had originated, and spread panic about 'linguistic terror'. Reports of [continued language oppression](#) persist concerning the referendum.
- Reports that, if one went to vote, they would [face dismissal](#) from their jobs were also seen, despite no evidence that that was ever a policy or occurrence.
- Reports that Russian speakers (non-citizens) were banned from voting, but [the mentally ill and prisoners could](#) spread among Russian media. Non-citizens are not permitted to vote in any referendum or election, not just this one. Framed as further oppression of Russians by the 'Latvian elite', this instance involved Russophobia, present-day Nazi sentiments, and the claim that Latvia is a failed state and cannot function without Russians. In 2018, Latvia announced a referendum aimed at phasing out education in minority languages by 2021 (later expanded to 2025), including Russian, adding more tension to the language debate.
- This topic has seen a recent revival as further '[de-Russification](#)' takes place in Latvia with the removal of Soviet-era statues related to Russian aggression in Ukraine. Russian-language media also routinely [refers to the referendum](#) as an example of ruling Latvians being 'elite', as well as the [oppression of Russians](#).

NARRATIVES

REVIVAL OF NAZISM

- One of the most common and widely disseminated narratives, it encompasses elements of anti-semitism, Russophobia, and the failed state narrative, among others. The claim is that, before and since Soviet occupation, Latvia has glorified Nazis, Nazism is alive and well, and even [youth are involved](#).
- Consistent claims that [Latvia protects Nazi criminals](#), the government authorities [align themselves with Nazism and Hitler](#). These claims largely go together with statements from Russian media that the Baltic States were never occupied by the Soviet Union but joined freely and were liberated from fascism by the Soviet Army.
- Claims that Latvia has refused to help Belarus in a case of proving Nazi genocide due to their continued [decades-long Nazi glorification](#) have also been seen in media reports.
- Reports that refusing to celebrate 9 May is a [direct result of Neo-Nazi sentiment](#) have also been seen in recent years. These claims are often founded on allegations of [white-washing World War II history](#) and that the idea of Russian occupation stemmed from Nazi beliefs, allowing for the so-called ‘oppression of Russians’ to be directly linked to Nazi ideology. The increased removal of World War II Soviet monuments has led to an increase in this narrative.

LATVIA VIOLATES THE RIGHTS OF NON-CITIZENS

- Russia claimed that Latvia oppresses its Russian-speaking population by banning media and “outlawing” the Russian language. This was seen countless times with [reports of media oppression](#) and grew after the Latvian state banned RT in 2020 and blocked access to other Russian news websites. Claims of [suppression of free speech](#) are also commonly seen. [Claims of societal segregation](#) and [apartheid](#) are also intermittently seen.
- Claims have also been made that the Baltic States invented the term non-citizen to [oppress further and limit the rights of Russians](#) in the region, also promulgated by Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These claims do not mention the rights afforded to non-citizens and that they can [apply for citizenship](#) at any time, provided they can pass a language test and basic cultural exam. The percentage of non-citizens has fallen to 9.5% as of 2022, down from 29% in 1995. Some non-Latvians have chosen to keep their non-citizen status as it allows for more unrestrained movement to Russia than afforded to citizens.
- It is Latvia’s stance that non-citizens are not stateless, but the category afforded to citizens of the former Soviet Union who did not apply for citizenship after 1990 and were never a citizen of Latvia nor the descendants of one.
- This narrative frequently accompanies one on general [widespread Russophobia](#) in Latvia and the Baltic States, claiming that there is a [linguistic genocide](#) against Russian people, that [economic challenges are a direct result of Russophobia](#), and that COVID-19 was used as a tool to [increase Russophobia in society](#).
- The August 2023 announcement that Latvia would ask thousands of Russian citizens (about 6,000) to leave the country within three months was met with a strong response in Russian-language media, saying that it would [create enemies for the state of Latvia](#). This group is made up of those who have not taken a language exam or applied for temporary residence permits.

LATVIA IS A FAILED STATE

- Largely, the foundation of this narrative is that Latvia (as well as Estonia and Lithuania) [cannot function and exist as a proper state since leaving the USSR](#). The idea is that Latvia cannot survive and thrive on its own without some master, concluding that the fall of the Soviet Union put Latvia at a great disadvantage from which it has not recovered economically or otherwise. Latvia, [nor its leadership](#), form an 'independent state' when it comes to decision making and is instead taking orders from Washington and Brussels, acting as a [puppet of the West](#)'. This also ties into an adjacent narrative that life in the West is generally considered terrible. The EU and its ruling elites are exploitative and harmful to Latvia, along with NATO.
- Latvia would not exist without EU funding and is a ['beggar' of the West](#), highlighting the technological and scientific achievements brought to Latvia during the Soviet Union and the supposed state of decay of the nation today. However, growth and [increased GDP](#), among many other indicators, show the [opposite is true](#).
- Similar to the narrative that Latvia fared better in the USSR is the claim that Latvia cannot keep up with its industry due to breaking ties with Russia and is [suffering more economically](#).

LATVIA WAS BETTER OFF IN THE USSR

- Despite being [debunked](#) many times, there is a persistent narrative, often with elements of nostalgia, that Latvia and the rest of the Baltic States are 'ungrateful' towards the USSR for all the investment into people and infrastructure that occurred during the Soviet Occupation.
- The argument that Latvia and the Baltic States are faring poorly under the EU is easily disproved. However, that does not stop the consistent messaging on the topic, from unilaterally stating that [life was better in general](#) to pointing out that, during the Soviet era, people moved to work in Latvia. Now, there is mass migration, salaries [were higher](#), social protection was greater, and how the Baltics were always [considered a privileged region](#) in the Soviet Union.
- A pandemic-era claim that both praises USSR scientific achievement also asserts that [COVID-19 could have originated in Latvia](#), largely due to the prevalence of great scientists that Latvia had when it was part of the Soviet Union capable of creating such a virus.
- A concurrent narrative is that the Baltic States [entered the USSR willingly](#) and that Latvia could maintain its culture and heritage under Soviet rule. Not only is this seen in Russian language sources but [other languages](#), exemplifying the desire to have the broader international community hear this message, similar to the narrative that Latvia glorifies Nazis.

COMMUNITY

Latvian journalists and non-profit organisations have been actively fighting against the dissemination of false information, countering disinformation, and educating journalists and the general public on media literacy, good reporting practices, and societal resiliency.

THE BALTIC CENTRE FOR INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM, RE: BALTICA

- Since its foundation in 2011, they have produced investigative journalism, including corruption, crime, human rights, and health investigations. The organisation investigates and publishes reports on disinformation efforts in the Baltic states, including social media (an ever-growing hotbed of disinformation). It examines disinformation trends in the Baltic states, as well as Ukraine.
- Re:Check was launched as an initiative under Re:Baltica, engaged in fact-checking and social media research to debunk or investigate posts that may contain misleading or manipulative content.

THE NATO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

- While not involved in public-facing efforts nor falling under the NATO command structure, the centre publishes information about narratives, robotic anti-NATO trolling, and strategic communications threats to NATO in the Baltic States, including disinformation.
- Founded in 2014 and dedicated to enhanced strategic communications between the NATO alliance, it investigates and publishes reports on information operations and manipulation campaigns. Moreover, it regularly publishes information on Russian and other interference in the Baltic information space, including anti-NATO and anti-West narratives.
- The centre's popular series on Robotrolling examines the use of Russian bots in social media manipulation campaigns aimed at Latvia and the Baltic states.

LATVIAN STATE CHANCELLERY

- In 2022, the Chancellery published an e-book titled "Handbook against disinformation: recognise and oppose" (Rokasgrāmata pret dezinformāciju: atpazīt un pretoties) with recommendations for state and local governments, as well as ordinary residents.
- The State Chancellery's Strategic Communications Coordination Department has been the first step in developing the necessary structure and cross-sectoral coordination.
- This office also provides access to monitoring tools and training to train civil servants and acts as a contact point between the state and tech and social media companies.

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH & EXCHANGES BOARD (IREX)

- IREX conducts media literacy training in the Baltics, including the Very Verified open-access online course.
- The organisation conducts youth training with the Learn to Discern program, involved in disinformation identifica-

tion, news analysis, and information verification skills. It also launched a programme at the University of Latvia for students and educators in media literacy.

THE ATLANTIC COUNCIL'S DIGITAL FORENSIC RESEARCH LAB (DFRLAB)

- The DFRLab operates a branch in Latvia that routinely investigates disinformation narratives, debunks, and educates on digital forensic tools that media consumers can use to determine image manipulation and false content.
- They also conduct [social media investigations](#), such as the Telegram operation spreading narratives of Latvia's turn to fascism, uncovering linked accounts and coordinated disinformation campaigns.
- The Baltic Centre for Media Excellence
- The centre trains journalists and newsrooms on best practices for smart, innovative journalism and responsible reporting. It is in public awareness and education campaigns on media literacy.
- The centre also regularly publishes reports on the state of media literacy in the Baltics and Eastern Partnership countries, changes in media consumption, the media environment, and media freedom

NATIONAL ELECTRONIC MASS MEDIA COUNCIL (NEPLP)

- NEPLP trains journalists on best practices and reporting methods, especially during pre-election seasons (local and European Union).
- It [monitors content](#), especially during crises or national emergencies. It establishes priorities and offers specific suggestions on addressing the crisis within the media sector. This is aimed at ensuring public information dissemination and prioritising the safety and well-being of the public during the crisis.
- The organisation has a newly developed [database](#) for media literacy in Latvia, which is a repository of knowledge and an information database, as well as a communication platform in the field of media literacy, updating current information and materials related to the promotion of media literacy in Latvia, to include lectures, educational materials, research, and social campaigns.

POLICY

Article 231 of the Latvian Criminal Law “expressed in obvious disrespect for the public or in dishonesty, ignoring generally accepted behavioural norms,” which include activities involved in disseminating knowingly false content or information that hinder the ‘peace of the people’, institutions, or companies. This is not meant to restrict free speech but is limited to the ‘gross disruption of public order’ by spreading false content. Legal proceedings have been initiated after the enactment of these policies involving banning television broadcasts and websites.

As per Section 13.5 of the Law of Electronic Mass Media, the National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP) is lawfully permitted to make decisions on the banning of or restriction of access to websites that threaten the national security of public order. In August 2022, the NEPLP of Latvia banned 80 Russian media outlets, citing them as threats to national security, [including Dozhd/TV Rain](#) in December.

Currently, Latvian actions include [fining media outlets for misusing words](#) (€8,500 from NEPLP to the Internet news portal tvnet.lv for the alleged misuse of the word “deportation”), mislabelling of maps ([Dozhd \(TV Rain\)](#) received a €10,000 fine for using a map labelling Crimea as part of Russia), and spreading fake news is also identified as [hooliganism](#), disturbing public peace, for which [criminal liability is provided](#). Individuals have also been apprehended and fined for deliberately distributing false content online, most notably social media influencer Niks Endziņš (based on hooliganism and incitement of hatred online) for disseminating false COVID-19 narratives and information. Specific heads of media outlets, such as Sputnik, [have been arrested](#) for espionage and violating Russian sanctions.

The Penal Code may give a person up to two years in prison, community service, or a fine for “a gross disturbance of the public order, which is manifested in obvious disrespect for the public or in insolence.” From 2018-2022, proceedings were initiated against six individuals under this law.

Although criminal proceedings can be initiated for disseminating fake news under Article 231 of the Criminal Code, there are few convictions for this offence. This is primarily due to the lack of a clear reference to the dissemination of fake news in Article 231, making it challenging to establish a criminal offence and thus failing to effectively deter individuals from spreading false information.

There are current and ongoing attempts to reword parts of the law to mention false content or disinformation explicitly. According to the 2023 priorities of the Latvian President, collaboration with the Council of Europe will be fostered to enhance the safeguarding of journalists and media professionals, especially in conflict and wartime scenarios. Additionally, efforts will be made to advance media and information literacy and tackle challenges such as disinformation and online illicit content.

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