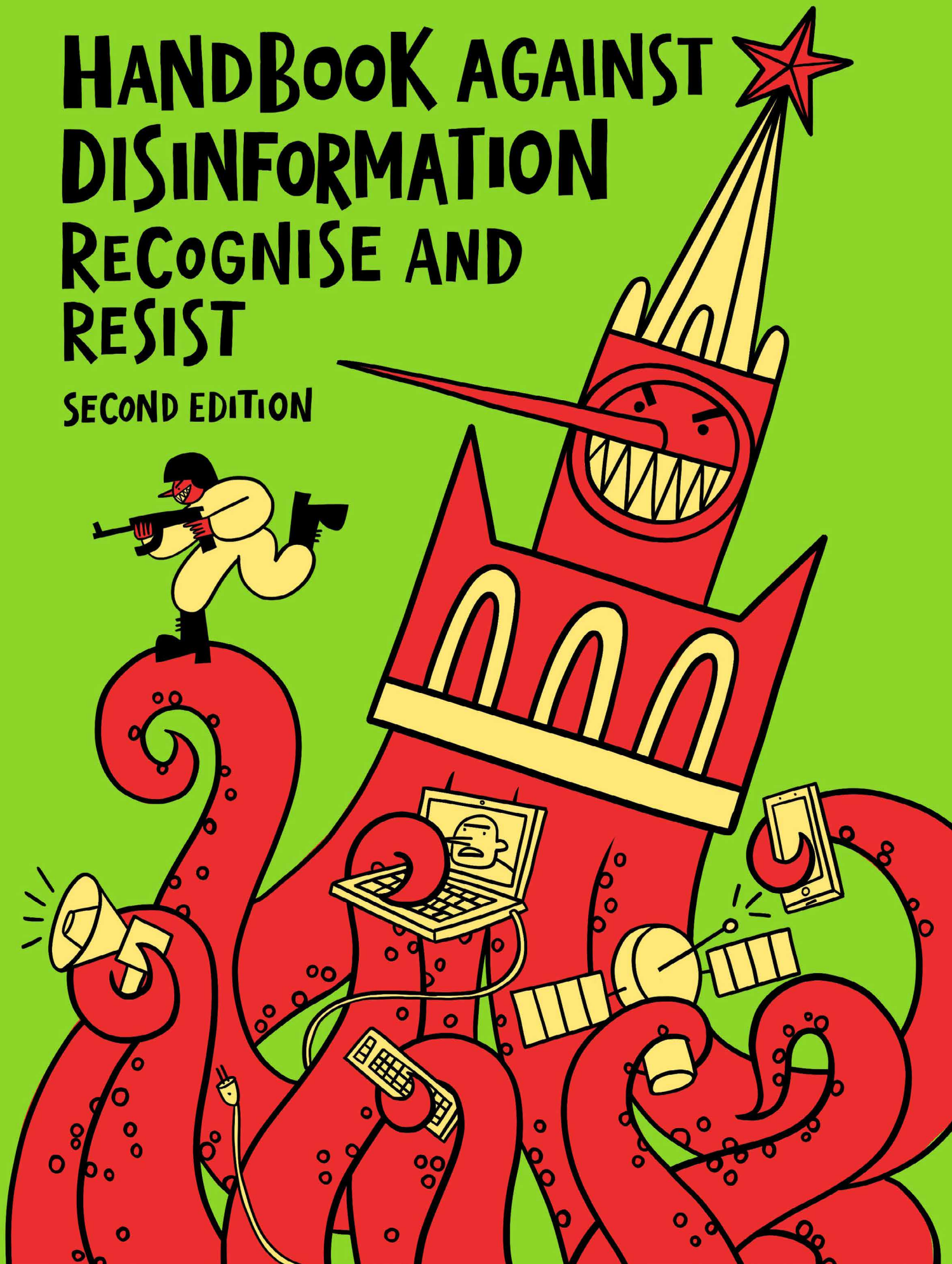
HANDBOOK AGAINST DISINFORMATION

RECOGNISE AND RESIST

SECOND EDITION



State Chancellery

Handbook on Countering Disinformation: Recognise and Resist

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Foreword

I am pleased to offer readers the second edition of the "Handbook Against Disinformation: Recognise and Resist." This time, the handbook is being published simultaneously in Latvian and English under an open license. This will enable the translation and dissemination of the handbook's knowledge to new audiences, including far beyond Latvia's borders, fostering understanding of Russia's disinformation and propaganda machinery, while pre-emptively countering and debunking the pro-Kremlin lies directed against Latvia.

Experience shows that in life, things do not always go according to plan. For example, this handbook was never supposed to reach readers. Initially, there was no plan to write a handbook or to share it with readers – certainly not beyond the confines of Latvia's public administration.

The origins of this handbook date back to the end of 2021. At that time, at the peak of the pandemic, we, for the first time at the state level, truly recognised the enormous negative impact of disinformation on the minds and hearts of society. Despite the achievements of global science in creating vaccines against the pandemic in a short time, and despite their widespread availability, a large part of Latvia's population had, in nearly as short a time, come to believe in disinformation and conspiracy theories about mind control through microchips in vaccines and other nonsense. Because of disinformation, we lost precious human lives, suffered economic losses, and saw a significant erosion of trust in state institutions, the media, science, and reality grounded in verifiable facts.

To develop communication solutions to address the growing problem not only in health, but also in other areas, we gathered the most frequently observed disinformation narratives in the information space and asked recognised experts in Latvia to prepare concise debunks for them. Over time, this collection of materials reached a critical mass that led to the creation of the handbook. At that point, however, we still envisioned it as a methodological resource intended solely for those working in Latvia's public administration, primarily communication professionals. With this audience in mind, the first edition of the handbook reached readers in July 2022.

However, after the publication of the first edition, there was unexpectedly high interest from various non-governmental, educational, and other institutions and sectors. As a result, in October of the same year, we released a digital version of the handbook, making it available to everyone. In the past couple of years, through meetings with foreign partners and monitoring Latvia's presence in the international information space, we identified the need for an English-language edition. Thus, without any plan for a handbook in the beginning, we have now reached its second edition, including an English version.

Much has changed since the first edition of the handbook.

At the international level, despite sanctions, isolation, and Western pressure, Russia has been able to continue its full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, shifting to a wartime economy and devoting substantial resources to propaganda and information influence operations. Belarus has also continued to carry out smear campaigns against Latvia, which, although primarily aimed at the Belarusian audience, nonetheless reach and harm audiences in Latvia and globally. Our task - to continue supporting Ukraine and strengthening our defence, including in the information space, against the manifestations of aggression by authoritarian regimes – however, remains unchanged.

Since the first edition, the European Union has enacted the Digital Services Act, Digital Markets Act, and Artificial Intelligence Act, which impose obligations on social media platforms to ensure greater transparency of their data and to implement measures to protect users, including from harmful and illegal content across the EU. Although the regulatory framework has improved, the actions of social media platforms often do not reflect greater responsibility. On the contrary, in some cases, the situation has worsened, placing even greater responsibility on member states' governments to strengthen regulation, as well as education and communication efforts aimed at promoting media and information literacy.

At the national level, in recent years, Latvia has taken significant steps to protect and strengthen its information space. The State Chancellery, in cooperation with more than 25 institutions, developed, and in 2023 the Government approved, the first National Concept on Strategic Communication and Information Space Security (2023–2027). This is the first policy planning document of its kind in Latvia, and one of the first in Europe and globally, that commits to protecting the national information space by proactively and preventively strengthening the resilience of society and state institutions against disinformation and information influence operations. The handbook serves as a visible part of the concept's implementation, providing methodological materials and, based on them, carrying out training and communication activities that bolster the resilience of public administration and wider society against malicious foreign influence in the information environment.

This handbook has been designed for broad application. First, it will be useful to anyone working in public administration and local government to understand and recognise the Kremlin's most frequently used disinformation methods and narratives against Latvia, so they can identify and counter them. Second, the material can be used in educational institutions and pedagogical work to discuss these issues in subjects such as History, Social sciences, Latvian language and others. The handbook is complemented by audiovisual materials created within the communication project "Black on White" (www.melnsuzbalta.lv), including video tutorials, educational articles, podcasts, and social media content. Finally, the handbook will certainly be useful to the broader public – both those living in Latvia and members of the diaspora abroad – to equip themselves with practical knowledge in times of geopolitical uncertainty, to share this information within their networks, and to actively engage in discussions and efforts to protect the information space.

In the second edition, all chapters of the handbook have been updated and expanded. As with the first edition, this time the team of authors consists of ten professionals representing five Latvian universities and various sectors – from political science, history, and economics to computer science and law. In the first chapter, Dr Mārtiņš Hiršs explains the most commonly used pro-Kremlin disinformation methods, providing examples of each case and describing the patterns by which to recognise information manipulation. In the second chapter, the handbook's editor, Dr Rihards Bambals, together with Nora Biteniece, explains the information manipulation terminology and offers a disinformation break-out scale adapted to the Latvian context, which allows anyone to better identify the significance of disinformation cases and make decisions on whether and how to respond. They also provide recommendations on proactive and reactive measures to respond to disinformation and information influence operations at the individual, institutional and national level. Finally, in the third chapter, Dr Kaspars Zellis, Dr Arnis Sauka, Dr Gatis Krūmiņš, Dr Māris Andžāns, Dr Toms Rostoks, Ieva Miļūna provide concise and evidence-backed debunks to more than 50 of the most frequently used pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives against Latvia. Recommended literature and information sources for further knowledge on each topic are also provided. The team of authors hopes that every Latvian resident will use these rebuttals in their daily lives, daring and not being afraid to stop lies about our country from sources both in Latvia and around the world.

Not everything always goes according to plan. Disinformation, internet troll attacks, and smear campaigns most often strike unexpectedly. Surprise, time pressure, human emotions, cognitive biases, social media habits, and other elements are exploited to deliver shocks and negatively impact the reputation, credibility, and overall image of individuals, institutions and even the states. To be ready for the unknown and the unexpected, one must equip oneself pre-emptively with knowledge. For small countries to resist the information influence operations of great powers and win in the information wars, they must choose strategies with wise allocation of limited resources. In Latvia's case, such strategy is based on the comprehensive national defence concept – to win not individually, but together as one united team. Therefore, strengthening our institutions, leaders, civil society sector, entrepreneurs, and society as a whole becomes all the more crucial. Armed with the knowledge in this handbook, we will be stronger and more prepared for the unexpected. Let this serve as a plan for situations that do not go according to plan!

Dr. Rihards Bambals
Editor

Chapter I

The most common pro-Kremlin information manipulation methods

Dr Mārtiņš Hiršs

In an ideal world, every statement would be clearly explained and backed by strong evidence. However, not all beliefs and claims are grounded in reality. In cases where solid evidence is lacking, various manipulation techniques are used to distract from the absence of proof or to replace evidence with appealing but empty statements. Constructive discussions with people in the media, and in international relations cannot take place if one side uses fabricated information and other manipulation tactics to gain an advantage over the opponent. Yet various attempts to manipulate information are all around us.

The digital information world has fundamentally changed the way information spreads. Using the internet and especially social media, anyone can now reach a wider audience than ever before. Every day, an unprecedented battle for people's hearts and minds takes place on social media. Some individuals, radical groups, and even states have turned information into a weapon to achieve their goals and gain personal advantage. Therefore, understanding information manipulation methods is a fundamental part of media and information literacy skills that every person needs in order to navigate the digital world of the 21st century.

This chapter examines the most commonly used manipulation methods employed by the Kremlin. These methods were not invented by the Kremlin, nor are they unique to it. They have long been used by other peddlers of falsehoods - populists, conspiracy theorists, promoters of pseudoscience, and alternative medicine fraudsters. However, unlike others, the Kremlin possesses a vast arsenal of tools for conducting effective information influence operations. Since Vladimir Putin came to power, the Kremlin has consolidated control over all major media outlets in Russia. It has also built an international network of loyal media outlets, many of which operated freely in Western countries, including Latvia, until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The "Internet Research Agency" and the "Social Design Agency" are troll factories run by the Kremlin that use bots and trolls to actively spread disinformation on social media. Pro-Kremlin agents and "useful idiots"- individuals who have fallen victim to the Kremlin's influence operations - echo Kremlin narratives in Western countries. These tools allow the Kremlin to systematically weaponise information in pursuit of the Putin regime's goals.

The Kremlin's principles of information influence

- **Dismiss** accusations and attack the critic.
- **Distort** information by omitting important details or context.
- **Distract** by spreading conspiracy theories and accusations against others.
- **Dismay** opponents to discourage them from taking action.

The Kremlin's information influence strategy relies on **four principles**: **dismiss** accusations and attack the critic, **distort** information, **distract** attention from criticism, and **dismay** opponents[1]. Each of these principles encompasses several specific information manipulation techniques, which are examined in more detail in this section of the handbook. Each technique is explained and illustrated with examples. In some cases, the Kremlin uses each method separately; in others, it deploys a combination of several methods. Moreover, the Kremlin uses these methods both in individual information operations and systematically over the long term to implant values and attitudes favourable to itself in people's minds.

The Kremlin's principles and methods of information influencing			
Dismiss	**Distort**	**Distract**	**Dismay**
• Personal attack	• Forgery	• Whataboutism	• False dilemma
• Mockery	• Information distortion	• Straw man	• Slippery slope
• Setting unrealistic demands	• Fake experts	• Conspiracy theories	
	• One-sided information	• Flooding	

Many of these Kremlin techniques are offensive, aimed at Western political elites and societies. Their purpose is to

shift attention away from criticism of Kremlin's actions toward the critics themselves, attempting to discredit them and, by extension, their criticism. Other techniques aim to confuse the broader public and undermine its ability to understand unfolding events. Others seek to divide the opponent's society and political elite. Therefore, understanding the Kremlin's principles of information influence and manipulation techniques is vital to recognising when the Kremlin tries to weaponise information for its own ends, and to defend against it effectively.

Dismiss

Discredit and demean the critic, thereby the criticism itself.

Attempts to reject criticism can be summed up as: "Don't listen to the critics because…", followed by a personal attack, mockery, or questioning the quality of the critic's evidence. The goal of these manipulation techniques is to shift attention from the actual criticism to the person making it. It is also an attempt to discredit critics in order to undermine the credibility of their accusations, or even to silence them altogether. These tactics can be used against individuals, organisations, or entire states.

When noticing such manipulation, it is important to recognise it as a deliberate effort to change the subject and divert attention from the original criticism. One should not take the bait or go on the defensive. Instead, it is more effective to continue communicating and addressing the original issue directly.

Personal attack

Attacking the critic to shift attention from the criticism.

NATO's accusations about Russia's so-called aggressive actions are just another example of Russophobia.

Attacking the critic's image, character, appearance, or personal traits is a common technique used to divert attention from the criticism itself. By using emotionally charged language, the critic can be portrayed as driven by malicious motives, implying that their criticism is irrational or unfounded. Loud and provocative accusations help shift focus away from the accused and place the critic under the spotlight, forcing them to defend themselves against personal attacks rather than discussing the actual issue. This approach also serves to intimidate, silence, and discourage the critic from continuing to voice dissenting or critical opinions.

'Russophobes' and 'fascists' are among the emotionally charged insults the Kremlin uses to discredit critics. Accusing critics of hating Russians or being fascists can force them into defending themselves, stating they are not what they are accused of being. Provoking this defensive reaction is exactly the aim of such accusations. Accusations of fascism cannot be countered by calmly explaining the historical meaning of fascism in Italy or Nazism in Germany. This tactic seeks to paint the target as absolutely evil with little connection to history or reality. If these accusations are taken seriously, and become the topic of discussion, the Kremlin has successfully diverted attention from the original criticism directed at it.

Pro-Kremlin 'news' portals accuse of Russophobia[2]:

- Latvia's politicians;
- Latvia's legal acts;
- Latvia's 'language police';
- Other Baltic States;
- Poland;
- Ukraine;
- Germany's former chancellor;
- United Kingdom;
- United States;
- European Union;
- NATO;
- Other international institutions;
- Wider Western society;
- 'Global elite';
- Others.

Scan the QR code to watch a video tutorial on the personal attack technique (in Latvian).

Mockery

Mockery and caricature can discredit and demean the critic, making them appear lacking in seriousness, and thus undermining the credibility of their facts and criticism.

US President Joe Biden looked half-asleep at the conference and even seemed to doze off for a moment.

Jokes and satire can be more than harmless, funny entertainment. Humour can also be used as a powerful weapon to mock opponents, discredit them, and demean them. Criticism and facts lose their impact if they come from a source perceived as ridiculous or foolish. Moreover, mockery can be part of a long-term strategy of discreditation. By systematically portraying an opponent as laughable and incompetent, this image becomes entrenched in people's minds. If someone believes, for example, that the US president is laughable and incompetent, this undermines the credibility of US criticism towards Russia. The Kremlin uses humour so often that there is even a special term coined for it – 'hahaganda'.

The pro-Kremlin outlet 'Baltijas Balss' systematically portrayed the US as incompetent and mocked it up until 2022. Serious, objective news about US domestic or foreign policy was virtually absent from this site. Articles mocked "US intelligence for incorrect Photoshop use", reported that American diplomats in Vienna developed mysterious rashes, claimed that President Joe Biden was unconcerned when called the "reincarnation of Satan" and similar stories – all helping to construct an image of the US as incompetent and ridiculous in the eyes of readers.[4] Such prolonged and systematic discrediting of the US can create a cynical attitude among readers, causing them to view any US action or statement as foolish or unreliable.

Humour attracts attention and encourages people who are not connected to Kremlin information operations to share it. Various funny images and videos can spread widely on social media. Thus, humour can be a much more effective tool for shaping attitudes than dry official statements from Russian state institutions or stories in traditional media.

Pro-Kremlin actors often use humour in combination with other manipulation methods. For example, radical statements can be wrapped in humour. When faced with criticism of these radical ideas, it is easy to dismiss concerns by saying it was "just a joke."

An image of unclear origin, accompanied by jokes suggesting that NATO soldiers drink excessively, has been repeatedly circulated in pro-Kremlin media and on social media since 2015. The aim is to mock NATO troops stationed in Estonia, Latvia, and elsewhere, portraying them as undisciplined and unprofessional.[3]

Scan the QR code to watch a video tutorial on the 'hahaganda' technique (in Latvian).

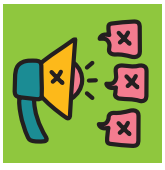
Setting unrealistic demands

Criticism can be dismissed by claiming that the evidence is insufficient and arguing that the bar for what counts as 'real evidence' should be set much (or even unattainably) higher.

The fighters ('green men') in Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014 were not Russian soldiers because they were not wearing official Russian military uniforms.

Setting unattainable standards for critics regarding their accusations and the evidence they present allows any claims made by critics to be dismissed as insufficiently substantiated and therefore false. Demanding stronger evidence also makes it possible to argue that, due to a lack of proof, the criticism expressed is merely the opponent's opinion. If the requested evidence is provided, it can be discredited again by demanding even stronger proof. This endless bar-raising is a rhetorical tactic to deflect attention and undermine criticism, rather than a genuine demand for evidence. No amount or quality of proof will change the initial stance that the accusations are unfounded, because stronger and better evidence can always be demanded.

When the so-called "little green men" began to appear in Ukraine in the first half of 2014, no evidence was enough to make Russia admit its armed forces were involved in the conflict. When Western observers presented evidence that Russian soldiers were operating in Ukraine - since they were wearing Russian military uniforms without insignia - Putin denied it. He rejected the West's evidence, claiming that many uniforms in the post-Soviet space look similar, and that "local self-defence forces" could have simply bought such uniforms in a store.[5] When NATO presented images and evidence showing that Russian military equipment was being used in eastern Ukraine, Russia once again denied it[6], arguing that the equipment lacked official Russian military markings and could have been seized from Ukrainian armed forces. This kind of raising the bar for evidence can be endless, as it does not indicate a lack of evidence. Rather, it is attempting to reject criticism by shifting the discussion to what does or does not count as strong evidence.



Distort

If the facts do not align with the desired narrative, they may be selectively interpreted, exaggerated, or even fabricated to support it.

Everything can be distorted - documents, images, stories, audio, and video materials can be forged or manipulated. Moreover, sometimes there is no need to fabricate anything at all. One can simply select fragments of facts that support the desired narrative, embellish them, and present reality from a distorted, favourable perspective. The goal of such distortion is to create confusion and sow doubt about the credibility of a story, to deny or discredit facts, legitimate information, individuals, and organisations.

Misinformation and disinformation are nothing new in world history. However, the rise of social media has fundamentally transformed the way information spreads globally. Such content is often sensational and shocking, which makes it highly effective at capturing people's attention, provoking strong emotions, and encouraging reactions, comments, and shares. As a result, false and emotionally charged information tends to spread rapidly on social media, reaching wider audiences than ever before.

Forgery

The presentation of artificially created information that is not based on reality, as if it were real.

Disinformation is false or misleading content that is disseminated with the intent to deceive or to gain economic or political advantage, and which can cause harm to society. It can involve the forgery and leaking of documents or emails, the filming of staged videos with actors presented as real events, or the creation of fake media - websites or video segments that mimic legitimate news outlets by copying their design, presentation style, and sometimes even adopting similar names. Social media accounts can also be artificially created to impersonate individuals or organisations, alongside various other deceptive tactics.

Pro-Kremlin media outlets use fabricated images and videos to present events in a favourable light or to discredit their opponents. During Russia's war on Ukraine, pro-Kremlin social media accounts have circulated videos featuring scenes from realistic war-themed video games, falsely claiming they depict real events in Ukraine. These videos are often blurry, low quality, or dark, making it harder to distinguish computer-generated content from actual footage. Typically, they portray dramatic battle scenes that appear to show Russian armed forces in a positive light, successfully carrying out military operations against Ukrainian forces.[8]

In the original photograph (below), North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un is not smiling while shaking hands with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. However, in a fabricated image shown in a report by the Russian TV channel "Rossiya 1" (above), Kim has suddenly been made to appear smiling.[7]

If someone is caught spreading blatantly fabricated disinformation, it is worth debunking it and calling out the source. However, outright false disinformation is rarely so obvious, easily detectable, or simple to refute. Much more common are the techniques described below, which are often subtler and not as easy to identify or counter.

Information distortion

Adding or removing text, photo, video, or audio content and context in order to distort the original message.

Disinformation often involves a mixture of facts with partially true or entirely false claims. There is a wide range of techniques through which information can be distorted. Some of these are outlined below.

Quoting out of context or misattributing the source. This can also include resurfacing true but unflattering information at an unrelated and sensitive moment, such as just before an election, to spark a scandal over a candidate's inappropriate remarks made 20 years earlier.

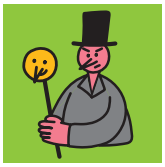
Misleading headline. While the facts and statements within the article may be accurate, the headline distorts their meaning or frames them in a different light. Sometimes, the introduction or conclusion of the article can also be misleading. For example, an objective, fact-based article about NATO's military exercises might end with the claim that everything mentioned in the article once again proves NATO's malicious and aggressive plans against Russia. Such a conclusion reframes the entire content of the article in a negative and manipulative way.

The Kremlin emphasises that NATO has violated its commitment under the NATO-Russia Founding Act, citing the clause that states the alliance will "carry out collective defence and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces." However, Kremlin statements omit the beginning of this sentence: "In the current and foreseeable security environment…".[9] Since Russia started a full-scale war of aggression in Ukraine, it has also deployed additional weaponry to Kaliningrad and conducted large-scale military exercises near the Baltic borders, altering the "security environment." In response to these changes, NATO has strengthened its military presence in the Baltics and Poland. By omitting this crucial detail from the treaty text, the Kremlin attempts to portray NATO as the violator of the agreement, and therefore as the aggressor.

The use of 'loaded' words or inaccurate metaphors can distort the meaning of what is being said. There is a fundamental difference between referring to Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia as the 'Baltic States' versus calling them 'Pribaltika' - a term meaning 'the region by the Baltic Sea.' 'Pribaltika' was commonly used during the Soviet era to describe the Baltic Soviet republics. According to analyses of Russian newspaper content, this term remained in use until 1996, when it was largely replaced by the more neutral 'Baltic States'. However, with Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 2000, Russian newspapers increasingly reverted to using 'Pribaltika'. Since 2008, it has become the dominant term in Russian press discourse.[10] The term 'Pribaltika' downplays the fact that Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia are real, independent states. Moreover, it can carry broader negative connotations. It frames the Baltic region as peripheral, underdeveloped, or even fascist.[11]

Drowning facts in emotion. Strong emotions are present in nearly all of the Kremlin's manipulation techniques. Intense emotional responses can be triggered by the use of terms like 'Pribaltika', accusations of fascism or russophobia, or distorted images falsely attributing war crimes during armed conflict. The goal is to overwhelm the audience's reasoning with emotion, shutting down critical thinking and the ability to evaluate information rationally.

Scan the QR code to watch a video tutorial on the method of information distortion (in Latvian).



Fake experts

Presenting an unqualified individual or institution as a reliable source of information.

The portrayal of individuals or institutions as legitimate and recognised experts, despite their lack of credibility or recognition in the West. These may include people whom pro-Kremlin media label as "experts," or heads of organisations with impressive-sounding names that exist only on paper. These "experts" often claim to be independent, yet consistently repeat narratives that align with Kremlin interests. They may be Kremlin-funded individuals or so-called "useful idiots" – naive or gullible people who have themselves fallen for Kremlin disinformation and go on to repeat it in the media.

An interview on 'Russia Today' features 'an American political analyst' commenting on the West's 'hysteria' following a speech by Putin. In reality, this so-called "analyst" sells CDs of his own music, postcards, and soap on his personal website. He occasionally publishes his views on fringe websites such as 'Truth Unleashed' and 'Wanderer of the Third World'.[12]

Assembling **a group of fake experts** to create a misleading impression of consensus is a similar tactic. Quoting multiple pseudo-experts helps generate the illusion that there is broad agreement on a false narrative. For example, a common strategy in the pro-Kremlin media talk shows is to invite several participants who represent a pro-Kremlin position, alongside one weaker participant who represents the Western or Ukrainian viewpoint. This creates the appearance that one side's arguments are significantly stronger and more widely supported than the other's.

A related manipulation tactic involves presenting the opinion of a single individual, organisation, journalist, or expert **as if it represents the official position of an entire country or the consensus of its society**. Pro-Kremlin media often highlight select Western organisations that are critical of Western policies and portray their views as representative. For instance, in a report about NATO, a pro-Kremlin outlet may interview representatives of Western pacifist or anti-war organisations who oppose NATO activities, thereby creating the false impression that this viewpoint reflects the broader stance of Western societies.[13] These may well be real organisations offering legitimate criticism of NATO. However, such a misleading majority does not reflect the full spectrum of views on NATO. This group of experts is deliberately selected to present a one-sided, critical perspective that aligns with Kremlin interests. When media consumers are repeatedly exposed to such selectively presented one-sided opinions, they may come to believe that a negative stance toward NATO is widespread in the West.

Scan the QR code to watch a video tutorial on the false expert technique (in Latvian).

One-sided information

Selecting and emphasising only those facts that support the desired position, while omitting or concealing all other relevant information.

Providing one-sided information is a particularly dangerous technique, because the information presented may in fact be true, based on facts and real events. Instead of offering balanced and objective arguments, evidence, and data, manipulative tactics can be used, such as:

"Cherry-picking" data – selecting only those facts and statistics that support the desired position, while ignoring all other information that contradicts it;

Anecdotal evidence – using subjective personal experiences or isolated, out-of-context examples to support a claim.

One-sided content can appear to be high quality, objective journalism—especially to audiences lacking advanced media literacy or in-depth knowledge of the topic. However, this technique is just as dangerous as the previously described ones, as it creates a distorted perception of reality.

Blatantly fabricated disinformation is rarely found in the content of many pro-Kremlin media outlets. Instead, these outlets tend to select one-sided information that supports narratives favourable to the Kremlin's position on the West and Russia. Crucial information is deliberately omitted or ignored, key facts are left out, or stories are presented without accurate and necessary context.

Simple fact checking is often powerless against such manipulation techniques, because the facts themselves may be technically accurate. However, the conclusions drawn, while ignoring significant evidence and context, are misleading and incorrect.

In July 2021, the pro-Kremlin media outlet 'Baltijas Balss' did not publish any outright fabricated articles about the United States or the European Union. However, this does not mean the content met the standards of high quality, objective journalism. During this period, positive coverage of the US and EU was extremely rare, while negative information was presented systematically. For example, while climate change was portrayed as turning "California from paradise into hell" and "Europe preparing for a global catastrophe" Russia was framed as a solution, with headlines suggesting that "Russia's forests will help solve" the climate crisis.[14] The EU was portrayed as plagued by infighting and internal problems, while the US was caricatured and mocked. In contrast, Russia was depicted as a serious and responsible state, actively engaged in addressing various international issues. Moreover, 'Baltijas Balss' featured no criticism of Russia's foreign policy. Such one-sided and contrasting framing creates an overly idealised image of Russia, which stands in stark contrast to the consistently negative portrayal of the West in the outlet's content.

Scan the QR code to watch a video tutorial on the cherry-picking technique (in Latvian).

Disctract

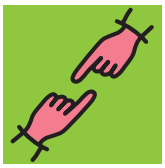
Redirecting attention to others in order to avoid addressing an uncomfortable topic.

If a subject is inconvenient or potentially damaging, various rhetorical techniques may be employed to redirect attention and avoid direct engagement. One common strategy is to deflect criticism by shifting focus onto the critic's own actions or statements, thereby reframing the issue as a matter of personal hypocrisy or inconsistency. Another tactic involves drawing misleading parallels with unrelated issues, steering the discourse away from the original topic.

A related technique is the deliberate oversimplification or distortion of an opponent's argument, allowing one to respond not to the actual critique, but to a weakened or exaggerated version of it - a form of straw man argumentation. The opponent may also be delegitimised through character attacks, such as portraying them as malicious actors with hidden agendas or by invoking conspiracy theories.

In some cases, overwhelming the public with an excessive volume of contradictory or confusing information - commonly known as "information flooding" or "cognitive overload" - can serve to paralyse critical thinking and dilute the impact of legitimate critique.

The overall goal of these strategies is not to refute the criticism through reasoned argument, but rather to divert attention, discredit the critic, or undermine the clarity and coherence of public discourse.



Whataboutism

Rejecting criticism by drawing parallels to a similar, but unrelated issue and claiming that others are doing exactly the same as you.

The occupation of Crimea? What about the U.S. occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan?

An attempt to portray two different things, events, statements, or actions as identical or similar—by emphasising a few shared features while ignoring fundamental differences - is a rhetorical technique aimed at presenting them as seemingly equivalent. In simplified terms, it is akin to comparing apples and pears.

1. Exaggerate the similarities.
2. Overstate the importance of the similarities.
3. Ignore the differences.
4. Disregard the difference in scale.

This technique also serves to steer the discussion toward an unrelated issue, diverting attention from the main topic by accusing the opponent of hypocrisy, suggesting that they have acted in the same way. When the opponent raises a concern, the response becomes: "But what about..." followed by a reference to the opponent's behaviour in a vaguely similar context.

The aim is to discredit the opponent's accusations by implying they are hypocritical, as the opponent has allegedly engaged in comparable conduct. Simplified, the message becomes: "Perhaps our actions were wrong, but others do the same, or worse."

When the Kremlin seeks to avoid an uncomfortable question or Western criticism, it often redirects attention to Western actions and accuses the West of hypocrisy. During Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, pro-Kremlin media claimed that Western criticism was hypocritical, arguing that NATO had allegedly secured Kosovo's independence from Serbia in the same way. According to statements made by Vladimir Putin, Russia was merely mirroring the West by using lethal force to defend human rights in Ukraine, just as, he claimed, the West had done elsewhere.[15] Putin, however, failed to acknowledge the differences and the vastly different scale of the events. NATO countries did not annex Kosovo, as Russia did with Crimea. In Kosovo, Serbia had carried out ethnic cleansing, which compelled NATO to intervene. In contrast, the referendum on Crimea's "independence" took place only after Russian Armed Forces had taken control of the region and organised the vote themselves. Often, as in this case, such false equivalence is created in matters involving complex values, where there are no clear-cut answers and it is easy to muddy the waters. The goal is not to genuinely compare, but to blur distinctions, cast doubt, and undermine legitimate criticism.

Accusing others of actions that one is, in fact, perpetrating oneself is a rhetorical strategy closely aligned with projection. This technique not only shifts attention away from the speaker's own behaviour but also serves to undermine the legitimacy of criticism. When the accused attempts to refute the charge and, in turn, highlight the accuser's identical actions, the exchange can easily be reframed as a mutual accusation, diminishing the clarity and moral weight of the original critique.

This dynamic often resembles a deliberate obfuscation tactic, reducing complex ethical or political issues to what appears to be a symmetrical conflict or petty dispute. It mirrors the logic of deflection common in early socialisation scenarios, such as a child in a classroom pointing to others to avoid blame, yet in political or media discourse, it can have far-reaching consequences by neutralising accountability, sowing confusion, and fostering cynicism among the audience.

When Russia illegally annexed Crimea in 2014, Vladimir Putin claimed that "self-defence forces" were operating in the region, forces that, according to him, had not been trained by Russia (despite the reality that Russian military personnel were directly involved). At the same time, Putin accused the West of doing precisely what Russia itself was doing in Crimea and later in eastern Ukraine. He alleged that the Maidan protesters in Kyiv had been organised and trained by Western actors: "...look at how well-prepared the people operating in Kyiv were. As you know, they were trained in advance at special bases in neighbouring territories: Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine itself. Instructors were training them for a long time... They acted according to a plan, with well-developed communication systems. Everything worked like clockwork. Did you see how they operated? Absolutely, professionally, like special services."[16]

To counter this rhetorical technique, it is essential to keep two key principles in mind. First, the burden of proof lies with the one drawing the alleged parallel. If the Kremlin claims equivalence between its actions and those of the West, it must provide credible evidence to support that claim. Often, these parallels are built on weak or unsubstantiated evidence, which can be relatively easy to refute. The response should involve demonstrating that the similarities have been exaggerated, oversimplified, or misrepresented. It is important to highlight the differences and explain why these

differences are more significant than any apparent similarities. One can also offer a genuine comparison based on clear criteria - such as legality, proportionality, context, or international response - to show that the cases are not equivalent. Establishing such criteria helps to reveal the flaws in misleading comparisons and expose the manipulation.

Second, it must be recognised that this is a deliberate attempt to shift attention away from the present issue. Even if the Kremlin raises legitimate concerns about Western actions in the past, such claims should not be allowed to deflect from current violations - such as ongoing human rights abuses or war crimes. The discussion must be firmly redirected back to the immediate situation at hand, resisting the tactic of changing the subject.

In summary, effective rebuttal involves both factual correction and discursive discipline: challenging the false equivalence on its merits while refusing to be distracted from the original, critical issue.

Scan the QR code to watch a video tutorial on the "whataboutism" technique (in Latvian).

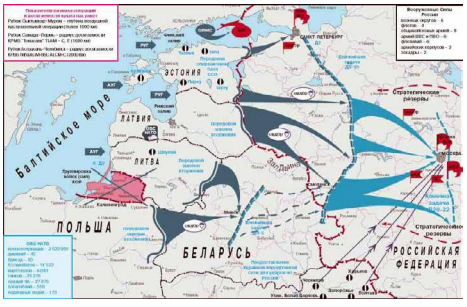
Straw man

Diverting attention by exaggerating or oversimplifying an opponent's statements in order to make them easier to refute is a classic rhetorical technique.

NATO is preparing a staging ground in the Baltics for an invasion of Russia.

Putting words into the opponent's mouth. Exaggerating, distorting, or otherwise misrepresenting the opponent's criticism in order to make it weaker or even absurd - and therefore easier to refute. Attributing statements or positions, the opponent never actually expressed, in order to twist the truth and turn them into an easy target for criticism. These techniques allow one to fight not against strong arguments, but against a self-created, imaginary scarecrow made of straw.

The Kremlin highlights the fact that NATO is increasing troop numbers in the Baltic States and exaggerates this as evidence that NATO is preparing to attack Russia. Such dramatic attempts to portray NATO as the aggressor and Russia as the victim serve to divert attention and allow pro-Kremlin media to ignore NATO's criticism of Russia and its explanations that the enhanced military presence in the Baltics was introduced only after Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine.



For years, pro-Kremlin media outlets, such as the Russian TV channel 'Rossiya 1', have claimed that NATO intends to use Baltic territory as a launching pad for an attack on Russia.[17]

A similar technique is **"making a mountain out of a molehill"** by inflating a minor aspect of the opponent's criticism. This involves identifying the weakest argument within the opponent's position and focusing solely on it in order to divert attention or cast doubt on the stronger, more substantive claims.

When confronted with this manipulation technique, it is important not to start defending the exaggerated or distorted position that has been falsely attributed. Doing so shifts the discussion away from the original, well-founded arguments toward debating an overstated claim that was never actually made, and which cannot reasonably be defended. Any concession or retreat from the exaggerated position may be interpreted as an admission of error or defeat, allowing the opponent to discredit and dismiss the original criticism altogether. The most effective response is to calmly reject the misrepresentation, restate your actual position clearly, and return the focus to the original argument.

Conspiracies

To fabricate conspiracy theories out of thin air and promote conspiratorial thinking.

The United States created COVID-19 in a laboratory.

Conspiracy theories explain events as the secret actions of malevolent and invisible - yet powerful - forces. They simplify the world into a binary of "us versus them" "good versus evil". The villains in these narratives are typically portrayed as seeking to kill, enslave, or oppress others, and crucially, as hiding these intentions. This dualistic worldview helps unite the "good" and innocent victims of a conspiracy against a supposedly purely evil external enemy.

Such framing allows conspiracy theorists to present themselves as martyrs, someone bravely fighting against overwhelming odds, like Don Quixote battling windmills. They claim to have "discovered the truth" and portray criticism or pushback as evidence that this truth is being deliberately suppressed.

According to "Russia Today"[18], the U.S.:

- orchestrated the ousting of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych in 2014;
- sparked unrest in Ukraine;
- had NGOs fabricate evidence to justify the wars in Libya and Afghanistan;
- secretly tests drugs on human subjects;
- is building a "corporate fascist global government";
- and so on.

The Kremlin portrays Russia as locked in a struggle against the United States' alleged attempts to defame, conquer, or otherwise destroy it. According to this narrative, Putin's regime is the only force capable of protecting the Russian people from the sinister plans of the evil West. Western media, experts, and international organisations are all depicted as blindly following the U.S. lead and conspiring against poor, innocent Russia. These sweeping accusations of malicious global conspiracies serve not only to reinforce the image of Russia as a victim and Putin as a protector, but also to discredit the United States and its foreign policy in the eyes of domestic and international audiences.

Immunity to evidence. Conspiracy theories are often constructed in a way that makes them resistant to criticism and immune to disproof. Any evidence that contradicts the conspiracy can be dismissed as part of the conspiracy itself. Anyone who questions or criticises the theory, be it the media, experts, or foreign governments, is accused of being either complicit or bought off. Furthermore, the absence of evidence is not seen as a reason to doubt the conspiracy. On the contrary, the lack of proof is interpreted as proof in itself – evidence that the conspiracy is so powerful and well organised that it has successfully concealed all traces of its existence.

The slogan of "Russia Today" (RT), "Question More" sounds like good advice and a sign of critical thinking. However, in RT's interpretation, "Question More" is taken to the extreme: question everything you hear, and trust no one.

The goal of conspiracy theorists is to cultivate **conspiratorial thinking** in people – to instil a mindset that something is always being hidden, that conspiracies definitely exist, that official sources are concealing the truth, that everyone is lying, and that no one can be trusted. Conspiracy theorists attempt to cast suspicion on anyone who disagrees with or criticises their claims. This tactic allows them to discredit not only accurate information but also those who disseminate it, reinforcing a worldview of universal deception and mistrust.

Scan the QR code to watch a video tutorial on the conspiratorial thinking method (in Latvian).

Firehose of falsehood

To paralyse minds by flooding the information space with fabrications, distortions, or facts that are unrelated to the topic at hand.

Flooding traditional and social media with contradictory information serves to obscure facts and suppress the truth. The sheer volume of incoherent noise in the information space becomes so overwhelming that the truth gets drowned out.

This tactic can overload opponents with an unmanageable amount of content–far too much to mentally process, let alone fact-check or refute. Increasing the "noise" also aims to overwhelm and confuse audiences. Delving into complex issues takes time and effort; if the topic is deliberately made as convoluted as possible, it requires even greater expertise to understand what is truly happening. The more complex the issue, the fewer people will invest the effort to engage with it critically.

According to the pro-Kremlin news[19], the atrocities in Bucha (Ukraine) were:

- Perpetrated by Ukraine itself;
- Staged by Washington, London, or Brussels;
- Faked using actors;
- Carried out only after Russian forces had withdrawn;
- A false story, that it never happened at all;
- The bodies were pro-Russian that Ukrainians killed by Ukrainian forces upon entering the city;
- The bodies were pro-Russian that Ukrainians killed elsewhere and then moved to Bucha by Ukraine to discredit Russia.

At the end of March 2022, Russian forces lost the battle for Kyiv and were forced to retreat, including from the occupied town of Bucha. When Ukrainian troops and media representatives entered the town, they uncovered brutal atrocities committed by Russian soldiers - dead civilian bodies were found in the streets, some executed with their hands tied behind their backs. Since the massacre, several independent investigations, including a detailed UN report[20], have confirmed Russia's responsibility for these crimes.

Scan the QR code to watch a video tutorial on the "drowning in lies" or "noise amplification" method (in Latvian).

Dismay

Using threats and intimidation to deter opponents from taking action.

Exaggeration and oversimplification are used to distort events by dramatising them. This tactic is often employed in discussions about future steps in foreign policy. Its aim is to raise a false alarm about a potential action by an opponent, an action the alarmist disapproves of.

Intimidation serves to portray undesirable moves as catastrophic, attempting either to deter the opponent from taking such steps or to discredit them in the eyes of the broader public.

The Kremlin seeks to intimidate its opponents by warning that any actions displeasing to Russia will bring catastrophic consequences upon those who take them. For example, Kremlin-affiliated media have claimed that the anti-tank missiles purchased by the Estonian Defence Forces could explode if stored improperly, triggered by international terrorist activity, forest fires, or actual combat. This was one of the reasons cited by the Kremlin propaganda outlet Sputnik to conclude that only "inexperienced and naive" countries would buy such missiles.[21] The goal here was to frighten readers and convince them that Estonia's steps to enhance its own security not only antagonise Russia - but actually endanger Estonians themselves.

False dilemma

Presenting only two possible future scenarios – one portrayed as beneficial, the other as catastrophic.

In the referendum, Crimea must choose between fascism or security as part of Russia.

Portraying the world in black-and-white terms by offering only two possible future actions or outcomes is a classic false dilemma. If one option is not taken, the other—typically far worse - will supposedly occur. These scenarios are usually presented as complete opposites. The preferred scenario is depicted as vastly superior to the alternative, thus pressuring the audience toward a specific choice. However, the world is rarely black and white. Reality exists in many shades of grey, and there is usually a wide range of potential developments, solutions, or responses beyond the two extremes being offered.

Since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the dictator Vladimir Putin has repeatedly warned Western countries and Ukraine that military action must remain confined to Ukrainian territory. If Ukraine or the West were to violate Russian sovereignty, he claimed, it would lead to nuclear war[22]. Despite these and other threats from the Kremlin, no nuclear strikes followed Ukraine's incursion into Russia's Kursk region in early August 2024. This manipulation tactic in the Kremlin's arsenal is typically a bluff.

A propaganda billboard displayed before the illegitimate 2014 referendum on Crimea's annexation to Russia manipulatively offered Crimean residents only two options: fascism or Crimea as part of Russia.

Scan the QR code to watch a video tutorial on the false dilemma method.

Slippery slope

To intimidate by claiming that a particular action will lead to escalation - and that such escalation will result in catastrophic consequences.

Military aid to Ukraine will lead to an ever-widening conflict between the West and Russia, ultimately ending in a World War III.

Catastrophising the consequences of an action in order to discourage it. The argument suggests that taking even a seemingly harmless first step will inevitably trigger a chain reaction of complications and escalation, ultimately leading to disaster. Therefore, it's better not to take the action at all. Typically, the first step is benign, but a fantasized chain of future events presents it as the catalyst for catastrophe. Claims that such a slippery slope exists often lack any real evidence that the action will in fact lead to disastrous outcomes. Instead, the goal is to evoke strong emotions – anxiety, fear, panic, that can override critical thinking and make the apocalyptic prediction seem believable.

This tactic can be countered by pointing out the lack of justification for the escalation scenario. One can also ask: If the imagined future steps were so catastrophic, why would anyone logically take them in the first place?

The Rail Baltica railway project, which will connect the Baltic States with Europe, will in fact lead to nuclear war in the Baltics. The Russian media outlet Svobodnaya Pressa begins its article by claiming that the Rail Baltica project is not economically beneficial for the Baltics, but instead has a military purpose. NATO is allegedly planning to develop the railway network in the Baltics with "the goal of transporting its tanks to the Russian border." Rail Baltica is described as one of the most important elements of the "military infrastructure in the Baltics" through which the West is "preparing for war with Russia." Furthermore, "Washington is actively exploring how to launch the so-called small wars against Russia,

including nuclear wars." The article concludes with the question: Do the Baltic States "want to become a testing ground for nuclear war?"[23]

Scan the QR code to watch a video tutorial on the slippery slope method (in Latvian).

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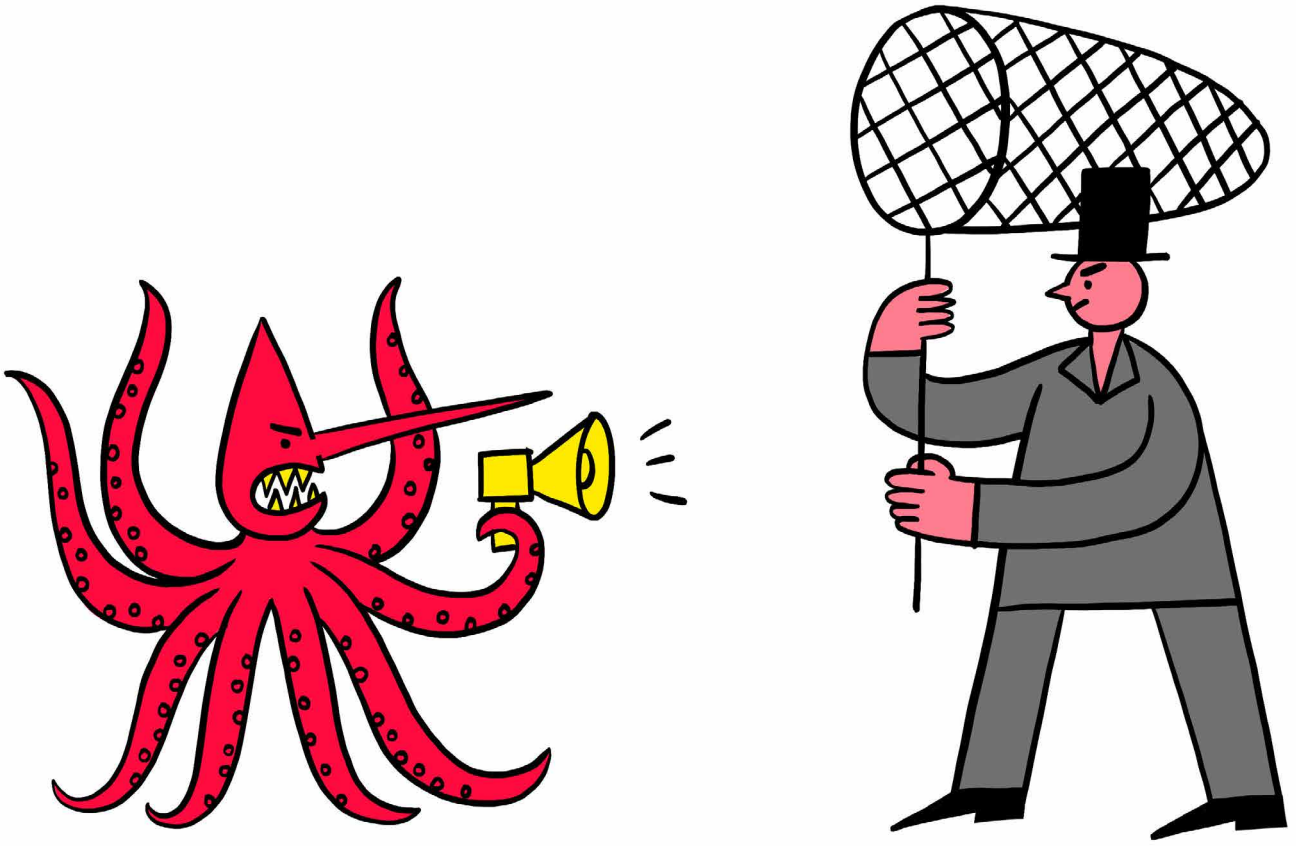
Chapter II



Effective responses to information space security challenges at the individual, institutional and national levels

Dr Rihards Bambals, Nora Biteniece

In this chapter, we have gathered practical recommendations to help every Latvia's inhabitant, regardless of their position or institution, better recognise security risks in the information space and effectively counter them. Russia and other authoritarian regimes devote significant resources to information influence operations targeting foreign countries, including Latvia. Our defence strategy is based on a doctrine that envisions not only the involvement of state institutions directly responsible for security and defence, but also the contribution of every Latvian citizen in protecting the country and society from lies and disinformation – because "My Latvia. My responsibility" (*Mana Latvija. Mana atbildība*).

This chapter is divided into five subsections:

1. Terminology;
2. Information threat break-out scale;
3. Recommendations for action at the individual level;
4. Recommended proactive and reactive measures for public sector institutions for strengthening the information space[1];
5. Latvia's national strategy for enhancing information space security.

Terminology

In the information space, various terms are used to describe false or distorted information. Commonly used colloquial expressions include "disinformation", "fake news", "misinformation", "misleading information", "lies" and "fakes". However, these terms are not synonymous, and the use of many of them is not accurate - either in terms of their meaning or in the context of correct Latvian language usage.

The aim of the handbook's creators is to establish and continue developing a shared understanding in Latvia regarding the correct use of terminology to describe false or misleading content. This is important so that experts, journalists, public officials and the wider public can speak a common language. The goal is for all of us, when discussing challenges in the information space, to use consistent terms, while also recognising that these terms each has its nuances. In this context, both in the handbook and in communication among Latvian state and municipal institutions, we encourage the use of the following terms:

- **Misinformation** (*maldinoša informācija*): false or misleading content that is spread without harmful intent, although its consequences can be damaging to the state and society or parts of it, for example, when people in good faith share false information with friends and family.
- **Disinformation** (*dezinformācija*): false or misleading content that is spread with the intent to deceive or to gain economic or political advantage, and that may cause harm to the state and society or parts of it.
- **Information influence operation** (*informācijas ietekmēšanas operācija*): coordinated efforts, either by domestic or foreign actors, to influence a target audience using various deceptive means, including the suppression of independent information sources and the simultaneous dissemination of disinformation or other manipulations in the information space.
- **Foreign interference** (ārvalstu *iejaukšanās informatīvajā telpā*): deliberate efforts by a foreign actor or its agents to interfere in democratic processes, including by preventing individuals from freely forming and expressing their political will. This is often carried out as part of a broader hybrid operation.[2]

In recent years, since the previous edition of this handbook, the European Union, NATO and several countries have begun focusing on **"FIMI" or foreign information manipulation and interference**. This approach allows for a more narrowly defined scope of work, concentrating efforts on identifying and countering only those types of disinformation that originate from foreign sources. At the same time, it also addresses manipulative content that misleads audiences by presenting highly distorted, one-

sided, or selectively interpreted information and data. Latvia also applies this concept in relevant working contexts; however, in practice, and within the context of this handbook, 'disinformation' and the other related terms are still used.

Information Threat Break-out Scale: When and how to react to disinformation?

Not all disinformation and misleading content requires a response.

First, the information space, especially online, is saturated with vast amounts of new disinformation every day. State and municipal institutions have limited resources and cannot track, let alone respond to, every instance.

Second, much of the false content is generated by trolls and bots - fake user accounts created and operated by people or automated systems with the sole aim of sowing confusion by flooding the space with excessive information, including disinformation.

Third, a large share of disinformation has low impact potential. It does not resonate with people, fails to go viral, and is not shared or engaged with by genuine social media users. Such content often remains confined to closed social media groups or fails to spread across platforms. Consequently, its potential to harm the broader public or national interests is minimal, and it is often not cost-effective to invest human and financial resources to debunk it.

Moreover, responding to or commenting on such disinformation can backfire - increasing its visibility, making it more likely to reach wider audiences on social media, or even helping it break into traditional media coverage.

An important factor in assessing whether and how to respond to disinformation and misleading information is its potential impact. Will the disinformation and misleading content influence people, and if so, in what way? Is there a demand to share it further? Will it change people's beliefs or behaviour?

Assessing impact has been a major challenge for disinformation and information operations researchers worldwide. A common historical approach to measuring impact on social media platforms has been the number of shares or comments a particular piece of content receives. However, engagement metrics on a single platform are not an objective indicator of approximate influence, especially if the disinformation or information operation spans multiple platforms. Additionally, content may have been artificially amplified by "trolls" and "bots" to create a false impression that the opinion is widely popular and widely discussed in society, when in fact it is not. Counting reactions, hearts, thumbs-up and comments on a post is not the most objective criterion for determining whether a specific case of disinformation or misleading content influences others, and whether it warrants a response.

Based on the methodology of disinformation expert Ben Nimmo's "breakout scale"[3] strategic communication experts at the State Chancellery of Latvia have developed a version of the information threat impact scale tailored to the needs of the Latvian public administration. The method is based on the theory that an information operation can only influence the attitudes and behaviour of a particular interest group in society, if it is able to reach that group. Unlike the analysis of social media engagement data, which can be inaccurate or fail to provide a full picture of which interest groups are being reached by disinformation or misleading content, this scale allows for a precise identification and measurement of how a message or narrative transitions from one interest group or media outlet to another group or platform.

The five-category scale developed by the State Chancellery (see Table No. 1) analyses whether and to what extent the content of information influence activities spreads across three dimensions: social media, other mass media and the physical environment. According to this scale, "Category I" information security risks are minor, as the misleading information or disinformation has little influence and remains confined to a single platform. In contrast, "Category V" threats to information security are the most serious, as the information influence efforts are capable of spreading across different interest groups and multiple platforms, including breaking out of social and traditional media into the physical environment, where they cause real-world consequences.

The scale summarises the main criteria of information influence activities and disinformation within each of the five categories, as well as the recommended response measures and methods appropriate for each level.

Table No. 1. Information Threat Break-out Scale

Category	Platforms	Audience Reach	Recommended Action
Category I	Misleading content, disinformation, or influence operations spread on one or several platforms, but only within a single interest group.	Remains confined to one interest group (e.g., a closed Facebook or other social media group).	• Take note and deliberately refrain from responding to reduce the chance of wider spread.
Category II	Misinformation, disinformation, or influence operations spread across one or more platforms and reach different interest groups.	Messages "jump" from one group to several.	• Report to the State Chancellery. • Report to law enforcement if there's suspicion of criminal activity. • Report to social media platforms if the content violates their terms of use. • Monitor and track the spread. • Within one's area of expertise, try to counter the disinformation on social media using verifiable facts (see Chapter 3 for fact-based rebuttals to common cases).
Category III	Disinformation or information operations also appear in traditional media (TV, radio, digital or print). Messages begin to be spread by nationwide celebrities, influencers, public figures.	The disinformation becomes popular in Latvia's overall information space (e.g., appears in major digital media or evening TV news).	• Perform all steps from Category II. • Use communication tools to ensure fact-based information dominates, including: press conferences; informal media briefings; press releases; fact sheets; infographics; visually simple and effective explainer content for social media; other. • Consider launching a communication campaign with debunking or pre-bunking messages, if the hostile narrative is expected to persist for days or weeks and escalate.
Category IV	Disinformation or information operations appear in Latvian as well as international media (e.g., The Washington Post, The New York Times).	The content significantly alters behaviour, actions, or habits, triggering: (a) protests, strikes, or unrest among parts of Latvian society; (b) a change in actions by Latvian politicians or policymakers; (c) negative coverage of Latvia in international Western media; (d) other harm to Latvia's internal or external security, economy, or society.	• Perform all steps from Categories II and III. • Maintain regular cooperation with international media: provide information, fact sheets, press tours, interviews, op-eds, and other influence channels. • Maintain ongoing cooperation with international organisations, Latvian embassies abroad (via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other relevant institutions).

Category V	Disinformation or information operations continue spreading in Latvian and international information spaces. The hostile narrative itself may become an item on the international agenda.	Long-term spread in Latvia and globally continues to pose major threats to national security or causes measurable and proven political/economic damage in the short-, or medium-term.	• Having reached Category V, several legal crisis response mechanisms involving multiple institutions are already activated. • In addition to actions from Categories II–IV, ensure the following: • Continuous crisis communication, centrally planned and coordinated, but implemented by all state and local institution communicators. • Mobilise all public communicators for consistent messaging across agencies, local and international media. • Show unity with regional allies (i.e. Baltic States) and strategic partners; avoid communication suggesting internal division. • The State Chancellery, with other institutions, prepares regular trend reports on the information environment for decision-makers and communicators, including messaging and action recommendations.

Idea and narratives

"Category I" information environment threats spread only within a single interest group across one or more platforms, but do not reach significant engagement levels beyond that group.

Example. The message claiming that Covid-19 vaccines contain graphene oxide initially spread in the Mainām Pasauli Telegram group and later appeared in several Facebook groups of Covid-19 and vaccine deniers. Although the message was observed on more than one platform, it did not gain significant engagement or attract wider attention beyond these groups.

"Category II" information environment threats spread across multiple interest groups on one or more platforms and reach high engagement levels beyond those groups.

Example. A video is created and disseminated in which a woman explains in Russian how to apply for a €130 benefit from the State Employment Agency (NVA). Initially, the video is shared only on TikTok, but later it appears on other social media platforms. As a result, people from different interest and language groups begin sharing and commenting on the video. In response, the NVA issues a warning via its Facebook page[4] and website[5] to alert the public about the false claim and prevent residents from being misled.

"Category III" information environment threats spread from social media platforms to traditional media (television, radio, digital and print media), or misleading messages begin to be disseminated by national-level celebrities, opinion leaders, or public officials. As a result, these messages reach a broad spectrum of interest groups across Latvia.

Example. A claim that wearing face masks to reduce the spread of Covid-19 causes oxygen deprivation in children. Initially, this claim was spread by the "Mainām Pasauli" Telegram channel and website, accompanied by fabricated stories about children allegedly dying from mask usage. Later, the claim was promoted by Pēteris Dimants, a board member of the political party "Union of Greens and Farmers," and Ilze Aizsilniece, head of the Latvian Medical Association. Their public recognition gave the message more credibility and helped it spread through wider channels. It should be noted that the specific statements by Dimants[6] and Aizsilniece[7] were later debunked by the Baltic Center for Investigative Journalism Re:Baltica's fact-checkers and social media research lab. Specialists from the Children's Clinical University Hospital (BKUS)[8] also explained the effects of masks on children, thus countering the false claims. BKUS specialists' explanations were actively distributed by Latvian public media, including on websites[9], television and social media[10].

"Category IV" information environment threats spread across social media, mass media in Latvia and Western countries. As a result, they reach a wide range of interest groups both nationwide and internationally.

Example. A video[11] is created and circulated in which a person who crossed the border from Iraq claims that Latvian border guards at the Latvia–Belarus border physically abused him and his companions and left them without food and water. The video was initially published by the German media outlet Deutsche Welle, followed by the British TV channel Sky News. Criticism regarding the alleged actions of the border guards also appeared in the Latvian information space. In response to the incident, Latvia's Ministers of the Interior and Defence informed the media that the claims made in the reports were false. Later, the Minister of the Interior also gave an interview to the U.S. news channel CNN and held several media briefings about the situation on the Latvia–Belarus border.

"Category V" information environment threats spread persistently in both Latvian and international information spaces. Disinformation or influence operations affect issues on the international agenda, and in some cases, the false narrative itself may become an international agenda topic. This is the highest possible category in the information threat break-out scale, applied only in cases of exceptionally dangerous and extensive threats that may affect Latvia's national security interests or cause significant, long-term impact on the country's security, economy, and overall national development.

Example. In the spring of 2014, Russia spread disinformation to create confusion and deception in the Ukrainian and international information space, buying time to occupy and annex Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. Similarly, on 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, simultaneously disseminating multiple disinformation narratives to the international community about the "real causes" of the war. These included accusations that Ukraine had committed genocide in Luhansk and Donetsk over eight years, that Nazis were in power in Kyiv, and that Ukraine was engaging in militarisation, developing biological and chemical weapons, and posing various threats to Moscow. In both cases, disinformation and information operations served as part of a broader hybrid warfare arsenal, used deliberately and systematically to achieve Russia's political and strategic objectives, while causing lasting harm to Ukraine's national security, as well as its political and socio-economic development.

It is important to recognise that, at first glance, any instance of misleading information or disinformation may seem like an isolated and insignificant episode. However, in-depth research over a longer period can reveal that it is part of a coordinated, long-term, and targeted information operation aimed at influencing the opinions of a specific social group or gaining political or economic advantage. Therefore, any threat to the information environment - regardless of its category on the five-level scale - must be continuously monitored over time. Responses and countermeasures should be adapted and refined as understanding of the specific case evolves.

The next section of the handbook is structured by levels at which actions can be taken to reduce or effectively counter threats to the information space - at the individual, institutional and national levels. Some of the solutions outlined below are detailed explanations of the response actions described in the information threat impact scale, while others are long-term solutions aimed at strengthening the preparedness and resilience of Latvia's public administration, municipalities and their staff, as well as independent institutions responsible for media and information space security, against misinformation, disinformation and information operations.

Individual level: What can each citizen do?

Notice, document evidence, report disinformation!

In Latvia, several institutions continuously monitor developments in both the local and international information space. For example, the State Chancellery has a Strategic Communication Task-Force that provides centralised monitoring of Latvia's information space and regularly reports its findings to other state institutions and officials. Not all institutions have the capacity to carry out their own monitoring, so this kind of centralised state capability is a crucial way to use resources efficiently. It also enables the accumulation of knowledge and skills in the long term, which is especially important in addressing various crisis situations. The information space is also continuously monitored by law enforcement agencies,

media regulators and security services. Institutions regularly exchange information in various formats in accordance with the procedures set out in legal regulations.

Timely identification and mitigation of information space security risks require close coordination and cooperation among all state and municipal institutions, as well as the responsible and civically active involvement of society as a whole. Every member of Latvian society can detect harmful activities that spread lies about our country, seek to divide the Latvian public, or undermine the foundations of the state. Timely detection of such a "snowball" before it grows into an "avalanche" as well as reporting to the competent authorities and social media platforms to stop the hostile message early, can help prevent rumours, misleading information, or disinformation from turning into an "unstoppable avalanche" that could lead to political, economic, or social damage to the Latvian state and society.

Each individual can report observed cases of disinformation to the following national and international entities:

1. **Strategic Communication Team of the State Chancellery.** Although the team of strategic communication experts, in cooperation with other institutions, continuously monitors Latvia's information space, every individual - including those working in public administration – can contribute by reporting rumours, misleading information, disinformation, or early signs of a potential information operation observed either in the workplace or during personal or official interactions outside working hours. Such action not only helps prevent harmful content from going unnoticed and unpunished, but also allows individuals to receive guidance from experienced experts on the appropriate response to avoid a broader crisis.

To report to the State Chancellery, use the website www.melnsuzbalta.lv, or send an email to skkd@mk.gov.lv, providing a brief description of the situation and, if possible, attaching the following: 1) A screenshot (photo) of the comment or image; 2) A link to the specific comment or image; 3) A link to the author (distributor) of the comment or image.

Scan the QR code to watch a video tutorial on how to report disinformation on the platform melnsuzbalta.lv (in Latvian).

2. **Social media platforms about content that violates their terms of service.** All major social media platforms have their own usage policies, including those against the dissemination of false information. Every user agrees to these rules when registering on the platform. These platforms allow users to report false or misleading content:

   - Facebook[12];
   - Instagram[13];
   - Linked In[14];
   - Youtube[15];
   - TikTok[16];
   - Viber[17].

Scan the QR code to watch a video tutorial on how to report content on social media platforms Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok (in Latvian).

3. **State Security Service (VDD) and the State Police (VP) regarding potential violations of the law**. Disinformation and hostile messages against Latvia not only harm the state and society, but may also violate the law, making account holders and content distributors legally accountable. For example: Audiovisual content, social media posts, or actions that incite national, ethnic, racial, or religious hatred or discord are criminally punishable (Section 78 of the Criminal Law); public glorification, denial, justification, or gross trivialisation of genocide, crimes against humanity, crimes against peace, or war crimes, including those by Nazi Germany and the USSR, are also criminal offenses (Section 74.1 of the Criminal Law). Additionally, actions that provide access to audiovisual channels banned from retransmission or operation in Latvia, due to noncompliance with Latvian law, are subject to penalties. When submitting information to security authorities about suspected criminal offenses or threats to national security, please include: a) a screenshot of the comment or image; b) a link to the specific comment or image; c) a link to the author or distributor of the comment or image.

State Police: phone (+371) 67014002 or 110, e-mail vpdd@vp.gov.lv

State Security Service: phone (+371) 67208964, e-mail info@vdd.gov.lv

4. **National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP), the Latvian Media Ethics Council, and the Public Electronic Media Ombudsman.** If a public or commercial electronic media outlet has disseminated dishonest (non-objective) information or messaging that violates Latvian laws, you can file a complaint with NEPLP, the Latvian Media Ethics Council, or the Public Media Ombudsman. Use the reporting procedures and forms available on the respective institutions' websites. The dissemination of dishonest (non-objective) information - whether due to journalistic error or intentional action - can lead to the further spread of false content, including disinformation. Therefore, it is important that the public cooperates with the responsible authorities in identifying such content and improving media practices.

5. **During the pre-election period, report any potential violations of the electoral process to the responsible authorities.**

Scan the QR code to watch a video tutorial on the cases in which to report to the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB), the State Police, the National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP), and the State Language Centre (in Latvian)!

Information Space Hygiene and Precautionary Measures

Cyber hygiene practices, such as regularly changing passwords and ignoring emails from distant princes offering fortunes in exchange for personal information, have already become part of everyday life. Similarly, everyone should take care of the hygiene and security of their informational environment. This is especially important when working in the public sector, on the one hand, each individual can contribute to strengthening the country's information security, but on the other hand, every mistake can be exploited to undermine the reputation of an individual, an institution, or the state.

Stop and think before engaging with content on social media. Social media platforms exploit human emotions, aiming to suppress rational thinking - or at least push it into the background. A vivid example of this are videos featuring funny kittens, puppies, or small children that people can watch one after another and eagerly share with colleagues, friends and acquaintances. Some of this content is harmless "time thieves" - while you're watching, someone is earning money for every minute viewed or every interaction, especially if the videos are interspersed with ads. Meanwhile, other audiovisual content is designed to provoke strong emotions, trigger intense reactions, and draw you into engagement—without your realising that you may be playing a role in a third-party influence operation. In doing so, you could be unknowingly endangering national or public security. To avoid such situations, it's important to count at least to 10 before sharing content or clicking "like" or "heart" on social media, and to answer the following questions:

- *What emotional reaction is this content trying to provoke in me? What could its purpose be?*
- *Is the post/video made up of facts or opinions and speculation?*
- *Did I read only the headline or the entire article? Did I review the content of the article and make sure it does not contradict the core principles of my professional activity?*
- *Is the source of the news familiar and trustworthy to me? Is the media outlet reputable?*
- *Do the image and headline match the content of the article?*

Cookie settings and sharing of personal data. Nearly every website, smartphone app, and social media platform - especially those operating within the European Union and subject to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) - asks users to select which categories of data they allow the platform to collect and use, including sharing with third parties. Nowadays, personal data has become the new currency. Companies make millions, and in some cases even billions of euros, trading in this data. What a user receives for free, without paying a cent, is in fact paid for with their data, allowing platforms to access everything the user has permitted by selecting certain cookie, app, and platform usage settings. Such data may include information ranging from your name, surname, and email address to your shopping habits, internet usage, location tracking, sleep patterns and more. In extreme cases, this could also include access to your phone's camera, saved audiovisual data, microphone, and other functions. Therefore, it's worth taking a moment to carefully read what data you're being asked to share and then ask yourself: "Isn't this too expensive, and can I really afford it?"

Do not share or engage with false information and disinformation. While your instinct may be to respond with a comment or share misleading content in order to refute it, this is not always the correct or recommended action. First, sharing such content helps manipulators achieve their goal - spreading false information to a wider audience than would have been possible without your "help". Second, "trolls" and "bots" are not rational actors; their task is to deceive, sow doubt, create confusion, or achieve other manipulative goals. Engaging in discussions with them only wastes your time - time that could be better spent reporting the content to the relevant authorities (see the previous section). Third, by responding to disinformation, you will always be one step behind and risk harming your own emotional and mental wellbeing

Consume quality media and support trustworthy journalism. Each of us is responsible for the size, content, and quality of our own "information bubble" by choosing which types of media and outlets we engage with daily, as well as which journalists we consider reliable authorities, whose opinions we listen to and believe. Support quality Latvian media and journalism, including by subscribing to paid content, which enables media outlets to continue developing and delivering new and improved news and entertainment content.

Learn to recognise and refer to authoritative sources and publications. Fabricating misinformation or disinformation can take only a few seconds or minutes, whereas creating a scientific article using verified methods and authoritative sources, and publishing it in a scientific journal, can take months or even years. Respect facts and science, and in your work or communication with colleagues, friends, or acquaintances on a topic in which you are not an expert with in-depth knowledge, refer only to reputable media outlets, trustworthy journalists, or authoritative scientific publications that you have personally reviewed.

Regularly educate yourself about the latest manipulation methods. Media and information literacy are ongoing learning processes. The State Chancellery of Latvia has created numerous video tutorials, podcasts, analytical articles, and other types of content in the "Melns uz balta" project (www.melnsuzbalta.lv). Likewise, the National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP) maintains and regularly updates a media literacy material database (www.medijpratiba.neplp.lv). Stay informed through resources like "SkeptiCafe"[18], "EUvsDisinfo"[19], and "DFRLab"[20] so you can better recognise the tactics and narratives of disinformation actors and avoid falling for them.

Educate your close circle on the identification and mitigation of disinformation. Once you have developed sufficient media literacy to recognise techniques employed in the dissemination of disinformation and manipulative narratives, it is essential to assume the role of an informed communicator by sharing this knowledge with family members, peers, colleagues and acquaintances. Empirical research conducted in recent years indicates that individuals within Latvian society exhibit a higher level of trust toward information received from familiar and intimate sources, particularly family. Consequently, your informed perspective may prove more effective in raising awareness and fostering critical thinking within specific target audiences than even the most professionally produced public awareness campaigns. This is particularly relevant when engaging with individuals in your immediate social environment who, either knowingly or inadvertently, contribute to the circulation of false or misleading information, including on social media platforms (see the following section for recommendations on effective communication strategies in such situations).

Carefully evaluate what information about you is visible to other social media users. In order to maintain control over which content (such as images, posts, comments, or your list of friends) is accessible only to your followers and which is visible to the broader public, it is essential to configure your account settings with a strong focus on privacy. Consider whether you prefer your social media profiles (e.g., on Instagram) to be public or private—that is, accessible only to individuals you know and have approved.

Categorically avoid publishing compromising content on the internet and social media. In the information space, country's potential adversaries may attempt to exploit posts by public officials or even their family members by presenting them as reflective of the official stance of the state. As a result, the publication of ambiguous or sensitive content online may pose not only personal reputational risks but also risks to the reputation of the institution or the country as a whole. It is therefore advisable to configure your social media accounts in such a way that family members cannot be easily identified and to refrain from posting content that:

- *expresses an anti-state position incompatible with the duties of a public official or public sector employee, including the provisions of the Civil Service Law, as well as the values and core principles of ethics in public administration;*
- *depicts behaviour or actions that violate human dignity, including content related to the use of intoxicating substances (such as alcohol or drugs) or the display of weapons (unless in the context of performing official duties);*
- *violates legal norms, especially if it infringes upon the human rights of specific population groups, involves hate speech, or glorifies or justifies genocide or crimes against humanity - such as praising crimes committed by Nazi Germany, the USSR, or the current Kremlin regime - particularly when such glorification involves the use of their symbols in public spaces or events (e.g., the swastika, hammer and sickle, St. George's ribbon, or the "Z" and "V" symbols).*

Remember – deleted posts on social media and elsewhere on the internet can still be retrieved. Posts made even on personal social media accounts can impact not only the careers of public officials but also the reputation of their institutions or, in some cases, that of the entire state. In particularly sensitive situations, such content can even pose risks to national and societal security, be it physical or economic. Deleted posts, including those on social media, can often be recovered using various tools, such as "The Wayback Machine" (https://archive.org/web/).

Reverse image search. To verify whether a person who has sent you a friend request on a social media platform is using an authentic image, or to check if an image attached to a social media post has previously appeared elsewhere, you can use reverse image search tools such as "Google Images" (https://images.google.com/) or "TinEye" (https://tineye.com/). Keep in mind that images can also be generated using artificial intelligence algorithms. In such cases, the images may not appear in "Google Images" or "TinEye" results, but this does not necessarily mean the person is real.

Two-factor authentication and secure password selection. On websites and platforms where available, always enable two-factor authentication (2FA). This means that, in addition to entering your password, you confirm your identity through an additional method—for example, by entering a code sent to your mobile phone. As a result, for someone to hack into your account, they would also need access to your mobile device. Equally important is choosing a strong password (at least 12 characters long) and not reusing the same password across multiple accounts. For a password that is long, secure, and still easy to remember, consider using an illogical sentence where some letters are replaced with symbols—for instance, "Ziemas!rBurgeruRaža$La1ks". This type of password is difficult to guess and resistant to brute-force attacks, yet easier to memorise than random strings of characters. To check whether your passwords have appeared in any data breaches, you can use the website Have I Been Pwned? (https://haveibeenpwned.com/). If your password appears there, it should be changed immediately.

How to Talk to Someone Who Believes and Shares False Information?

There are various reasons why people believe and share false content. Researchers have identified three of the most common ones: inattention[21], ideological or political beliefs[22], and a daily environment where individuals are only exposed to opinions that align with their own - a phenomenon often referred to as living in an "information bubble"[23].

Situations can be particularly challenging when a family member, relative, or friend frequently shares ambiguous or clearly misleading content on social media. How should one respond in such cases? Should the relationship be cut off, or should one do the opposite—start a conversation and attempt to persuade them?

Journalists from the Baltic investigative journalism center Re:Baltica have compiled insights into why people believe conspiracy theories about Covid-19 and have also offered advice on how to talk to such individuals[24]. Similarly, the EUvsDisinfo team within the EU's East StratCom Task Force has proposed approaches for engaging with a family member who opposes vaccination and strongly believes in disinformation and conspiracy theories[25].

Summarising the key findings and recommendations, the following suggestions stand out:

1. **Help can only come from someone the person trusts[26].**

   Studies conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic show that in Latvia, people tend to place more trust in family members or their general practitioners, while communication and messages from other sources (opinion leaders, state institutions, public and private media, etc.) are perceived as less credible[27]. Although the task may seem challenging, those closest to someone have the best chance of pulling them out of a toxic "information bubble" and gradually changing their beliefs.

2. **Arm yourself with patience and empathy.**

   Begin the conversation with your loved one by showing empathy, putting yourself in their shoes, and expressing a genuine desire to listen and understand. Speak only if your intention is to help - not to win an argument or prove your superiority. Avoid putting pressure on your conversation partner, and remember that mockery can be especially harmful and should be strictly avoided.

3. **Ask questions about the person's beliefs.**

   Belief in conspiracy theories or factually incorrect content is often not due to a lack of information. Quite the opposite - today's issue is information overload. In March 2020, the World Health Organization coined the

term "infodemic" to describe this phenomenon, which hampers effective disease prevention. People's beliefs are shaped by many factors - economic, political, social, cultural, religious - as well as personal experiences. Manipulators exploit these beliefs as fertile ground for sowing the seeds of disinformation. To understand why someone believes that "the Earth is flat" "vaccines contain microchips" or "Russia is demilitarising and denazifying Ukraine" it is important to ask questions that get to the root of the issue - the underlying beliefs and contributing factors.

4. Find common ground.

Instead of immediately refuting every claim your conversation partner makes - which may only reinforce the divide between you - try to create emotional connection and focus on shared values. Remember, this is a family member or friend with whom you share memories, concern for your family's wellbeing, and a common future. Use personal experiences and emotional narratives to encourage reflection.

5. Redirect your conversation partner to trustworthy sources.

Ask questions to understand what shapes your loved one's "information bubble". Where do they get their daily news? Is the platform linked to their profession, lifestyle, or hobbies? Disinformation is often disseminated through broader interest groups or platforms. For instance, your parents may be exposed to Kremlin disinformation simply by watching Russian entertainment channels. Similarly, social media groups that normally post about healthy lifestyles, funny cat videos, or fashion news may sometimes be used to push disinformation or anti-Latvian narratives. Once you have mapped out the source, try to redirect your loved one to trusted media sources that align with their interests, but use fact-based reporting. Cite multiple sources across various platforms to encourage them to consider alternatives.

6. Consider technological and economic barriers.

Perhaps your grandmother doesn't follow digital media because she lacks internet access or doesn't know how to use it. Maybe the TV or radio has been broken or unused, and her only news comes from a neighbour who watches Kremlin-controlled satellite channels. Perhaps disinformation was forwarded to her on WhatsApp as a TikTok video from a trusted friend, making the content itself appear more trustworthy. Solutions may involve gifting a new TV or radio and offering regular help to improve digital skills, like teaching grandparents how to read online news a few hours a week.

7. Encourage critical thinking, analysis, and questioning.

Ask questions that prompt your loved one to reflect on the manipulation tactics or hidden motives behind conspiracy theories or their usual news sources. No one likes to be deceived, especially if someone profits from it. Remind them that we often live in "information bubbles" and tend to favour content that confirms our pre-existing beliefs, a phenomenon known as confirmation bias.

8. Know when to stop.

Pay attention to your conversation partner's cues, exercise tact, and recognise when it's time to pause or revisit the topic later. Overloading someone with questions or trying too hard to correct them may have the opposite effect, prompting them to cling even more strongly to conspiracy theories. Remember, this is your loved one, and preserving the relationship matters in the long run. Beliefs change slowly and with difficulty, and disinformation that has taken root may linger until the person is ready to reassess their views. Like going to the gym, one conversation may not bring immediate results- you may need to return to it more than once.

The "Melns uz balta" project has produced several audiovisual materials, including podcast episodes and instructional videos about conspiracy theories, as well as guidance on how to talk to loved ones who believe in them.

Watch the instructional video with tips on how to talk to a loved one who believes in conspiracy theories (in Latvian).

Institutional level: What can each national and local government institution do?

This section outlines recommendations that can be implemented by individuals and institutions within the public administration and wider public sector, both proactively and responsively, in addressing disinformation and foreign information influence operations. Unless stated otherwise, most of the suggestions are based on tried-and-tested practices for countering disinformation and tackling challenges in the information environment, as developed and applied by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency[28], the UK Government Communication Service[29], and the EEAS East Stratcom Task Force of the European External Action Service[30].

Proactive communication solutions

Disinformation, misinformation, and influence operations are carried out by people. Threats to the information space do not emerge or spread on their own - the human factor is crucial. Some individuals create such content; others amplify it. Many of these threats can be successfully avoided if institutions and their staff are well-prepared, properly trained, capable of making independent decisions, and able to carry out effective communication with their target audiences - both proactively and in ways that anticipate potential disinformation.

This section outlines several key proactive tools that every national and municipal institution can implement to prevent misunderstandings, rumours, public confusion or lack of information, as well as targeted smear campaigns, disinformation and information operations.

1. Good communication practice

Timely, open, and evidence-based communication that serves the public interest can significantly reduce information space threats faced by institutions. In recent years, the management of the COVID-19 pandemic at the national, institutional, and societal levels has demonstrated that good communication practices are particularly crucial in times of crisis, when information is scarce and the public is confused. Such circumstances create fertile ground for deception and manipulation in the information space.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)[31] has developed principles for effective communication[32] to mitigate threats in the information environment. According to these principles, good communication practices are:

Transparency – Public sector communication should be honest, clear, and open. Data and information about decisions and processes are published within the boundaries of legislation and regulation. Transparency, including around the government's assumptions in fast-changing or uncertain situations, can significantly reduce the spread of rumours and misinformation.

Inclusiveness – Communication activities must be tailored to reach all segments of society. Information should be easily understandable, and channels and messaging should be adapted to different audiences and their needs. These activities should respect cultural and linguistic differences and prioritise outreach to vulnerable, underrepresented, or marginalised groups.

Responsiveness – Public sector communication should be shaped by the public's concerns and needs. This involves allocating adequate resources to understand and listen to citizens, analysing their concerns, and developing targeted content and tailored messages. A responsive approach fosters two-way dialogue, especially with vulnerable or marginalised communities, and ensures public participation in policymaking.

Whole-of-society – To counter threats in the information space, the state engages all sectors of society, including media, the private sector, civil society, academia, and active citizens. This strengthens societal resilience against disinformation, promotes civic engagement, and builds trust in public institutions.

Public interest driven – Government communication must be objective, neutral, and apolitical, clearly separated from party politics or election rhetoric. This is particularly important in addressing information space threats.

Institutionalisation – The state's ability to respond to threats in the information environment depends on sufficient financial and human resources, including trained and fairly compensated staff, clear and accessible communication guidelines, and effective inter-institutional coordination at both national and local levels.

Evidence-based – The government's response to information threats must be grounded in reliable data, including behavioural research, experiments, observations, and information space monitoring. Research, analysis, and lessons learned must be continuously collected and applied to improve communication efforts. Public institutions should allocate sufficient resources for monitoring and research to detect emerging narratives and behavioural changes early and to understand the context for both proactive and reactive communication.

Timeliness – The public sector must establish mechanisms to identify and respond quickly to emerging narratives, recognising the speed at which false information can spread. Communicators should prepare mechanisms in advance for message approval and inter-institutional coordination to enable rapid delivery of accurate and convincing messages.

Prevention – Public communication efforts should aim to preempt rumours, misleading content, and conspiracy theories, stopping harmful information from gaining traction. To do this, public institutions monitor problematic content and its sources, identify and fill information gaps, understand and anticipate disinformation tactics and vulnerabilities, and implement responses such as pre-bunking.

Future-oriented – The public sector must invest in innovation, research, and strategic planning to anticipate developments in technology and information ecosystems and prepare for future security challenges. The ability to respond to disinformation must be designed to be adaptable and aligned with broader efforts to strengthen the public sector's capacity to respond to evolving threats.

When to apply?

Public administration institutions plan the development of their communication capacities (including human resources, financial resources, information environment monitoring, technological tools, etc.) and communication activities in line with the OECD principles of good communication practice. These principles are especially crucial during any civil crisis, when information about ongoing developments and potential scenarios is scarce, and the public is confused and more vulnerable to misinformation and manipulation.

2. Strategic communications

Strategic communication is the planned, coordinated, and purposeful use of all available communication tools to achieve the strategic objectives of an institution or the state.

Each national or municipal institution has its own goals and responsibilities. Some of these are fundamental and defined for the long term. For example, alongside other tasks, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for maintaining diplomatic relations with other countries, while the Ministry of Defence oversees national defence and the development of armed forces. Other goals may be defined in the medium or short term and aligned with national strategic documents, the term of government, parliamentary or municipal elections, or the EU multiannual financial framework.

It is the task of communicators and other officials working in institutions to use communication in their daily work to support the achievement of these goals. In doing so, they contribute to implementing Latvia's security, economic and development interests.

The more professional and robust an institution's communication is, the more difficult it is for disinformation to influence or undermine the institution, the sector it represents, or the reputation of public officials. The opposite is also true – weak communication, conducted without a strategic approach or sufficient resources and leadership attention, opens the door for manipulators to erode trust, sow doubt among critical audiences, launch smear campaigns, and carry out information operations.

Strong institutions implement communication strategically, using available tools effectively to achieve their operational goals and objectives. Strategic communication supports and enables the institution's mission. A strategic communication approach also requires each institution to develop its own communication strategy that defines communication goals aligned with the institution's strategic objectives and mission.

This strategy should include tailored communication activities and plans that specify which messages, for which audiences, through which channels, and using what methods will help achieve the intended outcomes.

When implementing strategic communication, institutional actions in the information space are targeted and coordinated, aligned with achieving strategic objectives. This means:

- Communication goals must be clearly defined and linked to the institution's mission and core objectives;
- Communication activities should be carried out only if they contribute to achieving those goals and, indirectly, strategic objectives;
- It is essential to measure and regularly evaluate results, so that communication tactics can be adjusted or changed if necessary.

In terms of timing, institutions' strategic goals and mission are generally defined for 3–5 years or longer. In contrast, communication strategies and plans, including their defined goal, typically cover shorter periods, often 1–2 years. This means that over time, an institution may have multiple communication strategies, each supporting progress toward strategic goals at a given time.

To achieve the goals outlined in the communication strategy, a commonly used method is the strategic communication campaign. In planning both strategic communication strategies and campaigns, it is essential to follow a sequence of interconnected phases, through which institutions can successfully meet their communication and strategic objectives.

Image 1. Planning of communication strategies and campaigns

Experienced strategic communication experts from both the United Kingdom[33] and the European Union[34] have identified five sequential steps for implementing a communication strategy (as well as communication campaigns):

1. Objective

Start by understanding the institution's strategic goals, which must be achieved through communication tools (e.g., campaigns). If planning a medium-term institutional communication strategy (1–2 years), identify what will be important during that period. Then define the communication objectives and tasks that will help achieve those strategic goals.

There must be synergy between institutional and communication objectives – communication goals should support strategic goals, not vice versa.

Preferably, define communication objectives clearly and, where possible, in measurable terms. Choose no more than 1–3 main objectives, remembering that success is defined by fully accomplished goals, not by many started but incomplete efforts.

2. Target audience

Identify the main target audience(s) who need to be reached, engaged, and persuaded to change their attitudes or behaviour in support of the strategic and communication objectives.

Avoid vague or generalised descriptions such as "the entire Latvian population" or "all followers of the institution's social media accounts."

Audience definition should ideally be based on specific data, research, or analysis, for example, institutional perception studies (surveys, focus groups, or interviews), website/social media analytics, or secondary research conducted by other institutions, NGOs, or private sector organisations.

3. Core idea and messaging

Define clear, specific, and unambiguous messages that most effectively engage the identified target groups. The core idea should be as concise and clear as possible.

Messages must resonate with the audience, adapting language and tone accordingly. If possible, test the message on a small audience sample to identify what may need to be adapted before presenting it to the broader target group.

If multiple distinct audiences are to be reached, messages should be tailored for each.

It must be clearly defined whether the message aims to inform, entertain, persuade, change behaviour or beliefs, or fulfil another specific goal.

4. Communication tactics and implementation

To ensure that the defined messages effectively reach the identified audiences, a communication tactic must be developed.

This includes creating a communication activity plan with detailed components, answering questions such as:

(a) Which communication channels will be used to reach the target audience?

Will you use social media, traditional media, or other channels? Why are these channels appropriate for the intended audience?

(b) What is the most suitable communication format?

For example: video clip, radio jingle, social media posts, use of influencers, or something else? Why will this format be the most effective in reaching and engaging the audience?

(c) What is the available budget for the specific communication activities?

Does the campaign require only financial resources, or are additional human resources necessary as well?

(d) What are the start and end dates for the planned communication activities (e.g., campaign)?

How long will the campaign run? When is the most strategic time to launch it? Can the launch be aligned with an institutional event such as the opening of a new facility in a region, a high-level foreign official's visit, or a national holiday, or remembrance day?

(e) What potential partners can be involved in the campaign?

Does another organisation have better access to the target audience than your institution? Could partnering with a specific organisation cause controversy or negative reactions among any of the target audiences you want to reach?

(f) How will the success of the communication initiative be measured?

It is essential to define success criteria in advance, so that once the campaign is completed, you can clearly determine whether the defined communication objectives were achieved.

It is essential to incorporate flexibility into the communication tactics - both in strategy and campaign planning - to allow for adjustments in messaging, channels, formats, and other parameters, especially if the informational environment or external context changes.

5. Evaluation

Measuring the effectiveness and impact of communication strategies and plans is essential for several reasons.

First, it helps answer the question of whether the planned actions were successful.

Second, it allows for verification that public budget resources were used in the most efficient way possible.

The ability to demonstrate that communication achieves the institution's strategic and communication objectives -

such as convincing the target audience to change their attitudes or behaviour - enhances the prestige of communication as a profession and helps secure the institution's leadership support for maintaining or increasing the resources allocated to communication in the future.

Third, evaluation helps identify mistakes or shortcomings in the implementation of strategies, plans, or campaigns, enabling conclusions to be drawn on what should be improved next time.

It is advisable to conduct public opinion research both before and after major communication activities to ensure that target audiences have been successfully reached and engaged (this can be done with just 1–2 questions).

Various analytical tools also provide data on website traffic or social media engagement behaviour, which can serve as indicators of the success of a communication campaign or activity.

Some indicators may not be immediately measurable, as they are only observable over a longer period (for example, participation in elections, vaccination uptake, purchasing certain product groups, or using a specific service).

It should also be remembered that a single communication activity or campaign may not be enough to change a person's behaviour or habits. Therefore, communication activities aligned with the communication strategy and plans must be repeated over a longer period in order to achieve the institution's strategic goals and objectives.

When to apply?

Ideally, all institutions should plan and implement their communication strategically, with a deliberate intention to achieve long-term goals. If an institution has not defined long-term communication goals, it is encouraged to use individual elements, such as conducting regular communication evaluations. It is important to remember that one of the fundamental default goals of any national or municipal institution is to serve the public interest.

3. Pre-emptive communication and pre-bunking

In recent years, particularly due to the COVID-19 crisis and the accompanying disinformation and "infodemic", researchers have introduced new and more effective methods for combating misleading information and disinformation. One such method is pre-emptive communication, which includes pre-bunking - the effort to counter disinformation before it reaches people. This method is based on the "inoculation theory", developed in the 1960s, which was originally used to build resistance among U.S. soldiers against full-scale information operations by the enemy during the Vietnam War by exposing them to small doses of disinformation prior to entering combat zones[35].

Today, this method has been adapted through various online games that expose players to the most common manipulation techniques used by disinformation actors and information operation agents. By learning how each method works in a safe, game-based environment, players effectively receive a "mental vaccine" and become better equipped to recognise and resist real-life disinformation[36]. The State Chancellery has adapted and translated into Latvian two free online games - "Go Viral!"[37] and "Harmony Square"[38] – which are based on this approach.

Research shows that pre-emptive communication is highly effective, particularly when used before disinformation or foreign information influence operations reach an audience. By continuously monitoring trends in the information space, it becomes possible to identify the methods used for spreading disinformation or conducting influence operations, as well as to anticipate upcoming narratives before they are actively deployed against an institution or public figure. In such cases, it is crucial to assess the risk of the expected disinformation or influence effort and, if necessary, issue early warnings to target audiences, thereby enhancing their resilience to manipulative tactics and messaging.

It is advisable for every national and municipal institution to prepare in advance for different scenarios in which a state or non-state actor might launch a disinformation campaign or information operation targeting the institution, its policy domain, or individual officials. While some conspiracy theories are constantly being newly invented and are limited only by the imagination, much of the disinformation - especially the kind used for years by pro-Kremlin outlets against neighbouring countries - tends to follow recurring patterns. This means that every Latvian state institution can prepare by taking the following preparatory steps:

- Reflect on whether your institution's goals and activities might conflict with the interests of Russia, Belarus, China, or other authoritarian regimes. Which specific goals? Which interests? Why?

- Consider what topics, arguments, or claims could be used against your institution to damage its reputation. What are your institution's vulnerabilities? What could someone accuse you of, use to blackmail, slander, or discredit you?
- Anticipate what disinformation narratives could be used against you. Why those in particular? Organise a brainstorming session with your colleagues and create a list of possible hostile messages targeting your institution. Where possible, prepare factual rebuttals for each one - ideally with references to verified sources, databases, or statistics that support your counter-arguments.
- Identify which target audiences are most important for your institution to maintain trust and support. Consider how to strengthen relationships with these groups. If you learn that a disinformation narrative will be used against your institution, it may be worth reaching out to these critical audiences in advance to warn them and preemptively refute the false information.
- Determine which audiences might be most likely to believe disinformation about your institution, its policy area, or its officials. Do these audiences have a neutral, negative, or positive attitude toward your institution by default? Can you reach and influence these groups effectively through your communication?

When to apply?

Ideally, institutions should engage in preemptive (pre-bunking) communication during various crises and on any issues within their responsibility that have the potential to polarise society—such as migration, LGBTQ+ rights, historical events, Western-oriented economic developments, climate change and others. During times of crisis and heightened uncertainty, the pro-Kremlin outlets use these sensitive issues, alongside false or misleading information and other techniques, to deepen societal divisions and undermine trust in the state system.

The pre-bunking method can be used:

- Regularly, to build resilience against specific information manipulation techniques;
- Strategically and reactively, to preemptively counter known or anticipated disinformation narratives.
- This approach helps reinforce the public's critical thinking and media literacy before disinformation reaches them, making it harder for malicious actors to manipulate public opinion.

4. Building a cooperation network and engaging partners

One civil servant or communication specialist cannot do everything - especially when time, financial, and human resources are limited in a national or municipal institution. Therefore, everyone should consider building their social capital in advance by forming a network of partners and contacts, developing and maintaining relationships, and networking with specialists outside their own field and institution. Every contact can prove useful in resolving institutional-level crises, including attacks in the information space.

Likewise, if it is anticipated that a particular issue may become a long-term challenge (such as the Covid-19 crisis or Russia's invasion of Ukraine), it is worthwhile to establish an ad hoc partner cooperation network to collectively overcome the crisis and reduce the associated threats.

Cooperation networks can vary in both form and function. The smallest network can be within a single organisation or institution by creating a task force from different structural units (departments, divisions, etc.) for a defined period or long term, to address a specific issue or ensure regular information exchange as needed. Based on a similar principle, networks can also be formed at an inter-institutional level. For example, the Strategic Communication (StratCom) team of the State Chancellery maintains and leads the Government Communication Coordination Group[39] and the National Information Space Security Coordination Group[40] to implement unified state administration communication and address practical information space protection measures.

Likewise, networks can be established with non-governmental and academic sector experts (NGOs), media and journalists, volunteers, entrepreneurs, and others.

The strength of cooperation networks lies in the sharing of knowledge and expertise, resulting in benefits for all network members and promoting the overall security and resilience of the entire network against threats in the information space.

Remember that, in matters of information space security, cooperation networks are most often formed to:

- "Connect" and build bridges not only between stakeholders within the same sector but also between people from different sectors and fields, as well as between the public and non-governmental sectors - groups that might not otherwise exchange information and knowledge regularly;
- Establish a common understanding among key institutions or officials who have the authority to make decisions, in order to jointly agree on a single solution or strategy;
- Jointly map key actors, methods, and hostile narratives being disseminated by state or non-state players during a particular crisis or on a given topic - something that would otherwise be difficult or even impossible for a single institution to detect;
- Organise seminars, training sessions (including crisis scenario simulations), and formal and informal briefings for network members;
- Increase the overall reach of communication efforts by officials or institutions toward their target audiences.[41]

Remember that it is important not only to create cooperation networks and take on leadership roles yourself, but also to actively participate with a prepared and informed opinion in various stakeholder cooperation formats or networking activities. Strength lies in collaboration and coordination.

When to apply?

If it is anticipated that a particular issue could become a medium- or even long-term challenge in the information space (e.g. the COVID-19 crisis, the Belarusian regime's orchestrated flow of migrants to EU borders, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, etc.), it is worth establishing an ad hoc cooperation network to jointly overcome the crisis and mitigate related threats. The cooperation network can be formed within a single organisation or be inter-institutional and operate either for a fixed period or on a long-term basis, to address a specific issue or ensure regular information exchange as needed.

5. Information space monitoring, trend research, and analytical tools

To effectively counter disinformation and other forms of information manipulation targeting an institution or a public official, it is first necessary to detect such efforts.

Since 2020, the Strategic Communication (StratCom) team of the State Chancellery, in line with its mandate, has been ensuring a centralised national-level information environment monitoring capability. This service is available to other public administration institutions and is continuously developed and improved.

A national-level team of experts produces analytical reports on the information space, covering topics relevant to society and public administration, including potential vulnerabilities and risks such as disinformation. The purpose of these reports is to inform public officials and institutional communicators about messages and developments in the information space that require response - whether through effective, coordinated communication, pre-bunking, fact-checking, or other measures.

These reports are distributed on a "need-to-know" basis - meaning they are only accessible to public officials whose duties require such information. To learn more about receiving these analytical reports, institutions must contact the State Chancellery's StratCom team by emailing skkd@mk.gov.lv, stating their position, institution, contact details, and a justification of why the monitoring reports are needed in their work.

In addition to this centralised national-level monitoring capability, every public administration institution is encouraged to consider establishing at least a basic level of their own monitoring capacity. This is necessary for several reasons:

1. Measuring Communication Impact – When implementing communication campaigns or managing social media accounts, institutions must be able to measure audience reach and other performance indicators. This is difficult without at least basic skills in using social media analytics tools.
2. Early Detection – Institutions themselves are often the first to notice attacks in the information space targeting their domain, responsibilities, or officials.
3. Civic Responsibility – Participating in national information space security is a form of civic engagement. Institutions are encouraged to regularly report potential malicious actors or information attacks to the State Chancellery, social media platforms, and, if needed, to national security agencies.

To learn, which tools are available for public administration and how to use them for monitoring the information environment, institutions are invited to contact the StratCom team of the State Chancellery.

When to apply?

If human resources are available, all national and municipal institutions are encouraged to independently monitor the information space, at least within their own sector, policy area, or field of responsibility.

If such resources are not available, institutions are invited to contact the Strategic Communication (StratCom) expert team at the State Chancellery to learn which monitoring products and tools are accessible to public administration and the public sector as a whole.

6. Capacity building and empowerment

Although Latvia is a small country in terms of population and cannot compete with the human and financial resources allocated by Russia or China for the purposes of information warfare, the employees of Latvia's national and municipal institutions are highly skilled and can take pride in their long-standing experience in countering Kremlin-spread disinformation and information manipulation techniques.

At the same time, it must be recognised that the information space is rapidly evolving and transforming, which means that skills must be constantly improved. The Strategic Communication (StratCom) team at the State Chancellery regularly organises various seminars, training sessions, as well as tabletop crisis scenario exercises and simulations of information attacks. These are available to both national and municipal institution staff, as needed. To learn more about training opportunities, please contact the State Chancellery by emailing: skkd@mk.gov.lv.

It should also be noted that crisis training to test the readiness of civil servants and employees—especially for responding to challenges in the information space—is regularly organised by sectoral ministries in cooperation with their subordinate institutions. Additionally, at the national level, the School of Public Administration regularly conducts training for public officials on a wide range of topics. Valuable resources also include the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, based in Riga, and the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki, both of which offer training courses and crisis simulation exercises.

When to apply?

The information space is rapidly evolving and transforming, which is why skills must be continuously improved through seminars, training sessions, tabletop exercises, and other activities. All institutions are encouraged to refresh their knowledge of information space threats at least once a year and to participate in crisis preparedness training in the form of tabletop exercises.

7. Most popular communication techniques for effective institutional communication with target audiences

Most of the tools needed to counter disinformation or prevent a favourable environment for its spread are already available to employees of Latvian state and municipal institutions. This is especially true for institutions that have established strong communication structures, with their leadership having made a strategic decision to allocate the necessary human and financial resources to this area. A shared responsibility of institutional officials is to avoid creating conditions conducive to the spread of disinformation. Instead, they must ensure purposeful, coordinated, effective, and timely communication about their institution, sector, leading officials, as well as the goals and objectives to be achieved, by implementing the institution's communication strategy.

Most commonly used and available tools and communication formats for effective institutional communication with target audiences:

Interpersonal communication (direct engagement) – In the digital era, communication in its classical form is often unjustly forgotten. Institutions should aim to explain their mission, goals, and tasks directly to the public (through meetings, phone calls, Zoom calls, etc.). Direct interaction is the most effective way to build trust and answer questions or clarify uncertainties. It also provides a better understanding of what the audience thinks. However, this method is time-

consuming, so it is advisable to take a strategic approach to reach as many people as possible, such as:

(a) dedicating one or more hours per week or month to in-person or remote conversations with the target audience (announcing the time and registration process in advance);

(b) informal media briefings, or so-called media breakfasts, to explain complex policy developments just before key decisions are made, thereby providing journalists with expectations and helping control message distribution and timing. It is crucial that all participants understand the rules of the briefing, including what can be quoted or published and what is subject to a "gentleman's agreement" not to disclose;

(c) meetings or briefings with opinion leaders who act as messengers and can relay important messages to their audiences (religious leaders, teachers, librarians, influencers, etc.);

(d) participation in events and site visits – not only to deliver messages to attendees but also to collect audiovisual content for further distribution via other channels. These could be regional or international conferences (where institutional speakers are invited to participate), opening ceremonies of new businesses, or local visits during crises, especially in geographically remote areas beyond traditional media coverage.

Press briefings – These are classic media relations tools used to announce significant decisions shortly after they are made, especially valuable in crisis situations. They allow institutions to provide the first impulse, context, and framing of the message. Press briefings can be without or with Q&A sessions. Regardless, it is important to inform media ahead of time about the date, place, and registration process and to maintain an up-to-date list of invited journalists.

Cross-sectoral press conferences – Similar in form to regular press briefings, but featuring representatives from multiple institutions. Coordination is key: speaker order, time limits, and message emphasis must be agreed upon beforehand. Such events help deliver unified messages to broader audiences and effectively pre-bunk or debunk disinformation.

Pitching speakers, interviews, and opinion pieces – Institutions should not wait for media to initiate contact. Proactively pitching spokespeople for interviews or talk shows, publishing opinion pieces, and participating in public debate help shape attitudes related to the institution's mission and policy goals.

Involving informal opinion leaders – Sometimes certain audiences mistrust state or municipal institutions or their officials. In these cases, intermediaries (influencers or trusted figures) can help deliver key messages to these audiences.

Press releases – A traditional communicator's tool, a short written statement sent to the media, often including quotes and data. It's important to maintain and regularly update distribution lists of media outlets and journalists.

Fact sheets – Useful for pre-bunking or addressing sensitive issues. A fact sheet is a concise 1–2 page document listing facts without figurative language. It can be published online, shared with the media, or used internally to unify understanding or prepare for interviews.

Infographics – A visually enhanced fact sheet that uses figures and visuals. More suitable for social media and potentially has wider reach.

Animations and videos – Short videos (1–2 minutes) are highly effective, especially with younger audiences. Use subtitles to ensure accessibility and mobile compatibility.

Social media communication and moderation – Institutions should not only be present on social media but also create and publish useful, engaging content regularly. Social media enables direct communication without intermediaries. Institutions should verify their accounts to avoid impersonation. If verification fails, contact the State Chancellery's StratCom team at skkd@mk.gov.lv with the subject line "Account verification issue," explaining who you are, which institution you represent, and what steps you've already taken.

When to apply?

The communication tools mentioned above are already used by state and municipal institutions in their daily work; however, we encourage using these same tools to counter disinformation or prevent creating a favourable environment for its spread, for example, by informing the media early and informally about how a situation is expected to develop.

Reactive communication solutions

1. Reporting information space threats to the competent authorities

Just like individuals, state institutions also have the opportunity to report cases of nationally significant disinformation or misleading information that is publicly distributed and poses a direct threat to an official or a segment of society - doing so outside the usual social media reporting mechanisms. These reports are reviewed in an expedited manner, and in certain cases, involved accounts, groups, or specific content may be restricted or have reduced visibility on the platform.

Cases of publicly distributed nationally significant disinformation or misleading information should be reported to the Strategic Communication (StratCom) team of the State Chancellery by emailing skkd@mk.gov.lv (please include "Disinformation Case" in the subject line). Reports can also be submitted via the www.melnsuzbalta.lv platform.

It is especially important to report to the State Chancellery cases that fall under "Category II" or higher on the scale of information space threats.

It is important to note that disinformation or misleading information shared in private messages (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp personal messages, etc.) is not considered publicly distributed information. Accounts impersonating an official or a state institution with the intent to deceive may be taken down using the aforementioned reporting process. However, social media platforms do not consider parody or satire content as impersonation.

Most importantly, if there is suspicion of any legal violations, it is mandatory to also report the case to law enforcement authorities - namely, the State Security Service and the State Police (see contacts and instructions in the previous section).

When to apply?

It is not possible to foresee all attacks in the information space. However, we encourage you to contact the State Chancellery in cases where publicly distributed content on social media:

- Uses the institution's symbols, name, or otherwise imitates the institution without permission, with the intent to deceive (not to parody);
- Is false and is being distributed by an account that is possibly inauthentic;
- Is false and may cause harm to the institution, a specific official, or a segment of society;
- Poses a threat of harm or seeks to interfere with democratic processes, for example, by spreading misleading information about election procedures or results.

2. Debunking disinformation

Debunking is used when false or manipulative information is being spread and there is a need to neutralise its impact by presenting a fact-based message (a verifiable truth). For example, leading disinformation experts in the fields of health and climate change have developed best practice guidelines[42] on how to structure a debunking response to make it as clear and impactful as possible:

- **Fact** – If the facts are clear, start with them. Present the facts simply and in a way that aligns with your message;
- **Warning** – Warn that false information is about to be mentioned, and refer to it only once;
- **Explanation of the error** – Explain what is misleading or false about the myth or information;
- **Fact (again)** – Reiterate the facts, making sure they provide a clear cause-and-effect explanation.

Additional considerations when debunking content:

- **Stick to the topic**. The goal of false or misleading messages is often to draw you into a broader discussion you likely don't want to be part of. The false claim may contain a "grain of truth" that feels very personal and hard to separate from the core issue. Keep in mind that such messages are part of broader narratives—stay focused on the

issue related to your priorities.

- **Use facts, examples, and evidence wherever possible**. Ideally, you should have independent evidence supported by multiple credible sources. However, be aware that some sources may be discredited in the eyes of certain audiences.
- **Do not engage with internet trolls**. Watch out for manipulative rhetorical tactics like anecdotal evidence, personal attacks, red herrings, straw man arguments, claims of lack of proof, etc. If someone repeatedly uses such tactics, it's likely they aren't interested in correcting false or misleading information.
- **Avoid sharing false content on social media when trying to debunk it**. Instead, post a screenshot and overlay it with a label like "fake news," followed by your debunk. There have been cases where institutions tried to debunk disinformation by resharing the misleading content itself. Doing so signals to social media algorithms that the post is engaging, causing it to spread further, and making the institution appear as though it shared false information.

Debunking is a widely used practice that plays an important role in ensuring that false information does not go unanswered. Until recently, there was a popular belief that repeating disinformation could backfire by helping to spread the false message. However, recent research shows that this risk is generally smaller than the risks associated with not responding to false or misleading content[43].

When to apply?

Use debunking when disinformation has already spread, gained popularity, and contains claims that are based in reality, but are distorted, misinterpreted, or directly reference your message. For example: "The COVID-19 vaccine changes your DNA", or "COVID-19 statistics are false because it's impossible to test that many people in 82 testing booths". Debunk such claims frequently and use best-practice debunking structures.

Do not debunk: (1) Fringe or unpopular opinions; (2)Claims and theories with no basis in truth, and which do not directly refer to any of your messages, for example: "COVID-19 vaccines contain graphene oxide", or "The purpose of vaccination is to reduce the population".

3. Crisis communication techniques to limit the spread of disinformation

A crisis is a normal occurrence that affects every public institution - national, municipal, non-governmental, academic, or private. Crises are often accompanied by a lack of information about what is happening, who is involved, when and where the events are taking place, as well as confusion about who should be involved and how. This makes a crisis fertile ground for misunderstandings, heightened emotions, rumours, misleading information, and disinformation.

That is why the most important advice is to stay calm, and to remember that many of the tools needed to prevent disinformation from hindering crisis management are already at your institution's disposal (see also the section "Commonly Used Communication Tools for Effective Communication with Target Audiences").

In a crisis, it is essential that both internal and external communication relies only on verified and trustworthy information - regarding the crisis development, mitigation efforts, and the official assessment and recommended actions by responsible officials. The most effective channels should be used to reach the intended target audiences.

To reduce the spread, speed, and reach of misleading information and disinformation during a crisis, the following tools can be applied:

- **Media Statement** – An initial announcement about the crisis and a preliminary assessment, with a promise of further information soon.
- **Press Conference** – A briefing by one or multiple institutions involved in crisis response, including a Q&A session. These can be recorded to serve as a reference point for broader public communication.
- **Briefings for stakeholders and journalists** – With or without recordings, these explain the crisis background, potential solutions (along with their strengths and weaknesses) before final decisions are made, fostering an informed and inclusive information space.
- **On-site Visits** – Engaging directly with those affected or involved, offering help and communicating desired behaviour in person.
- **24/7 Information Space Monitoring** – Track keywords related to the crisis, collect public concerns and unanswered questions, and adjust communication accordingly.

- **Recommended Lines-to-Take** – During long-lasting crises, develop materials summarising unified messages from institutions, key facts, and FAQs. Where possible, publish this content on institutional websites and other channels.
- **Pre-bunking Communication** – Sometimes it's crucial to swiftly prepare posters, visuals, flyers, etc., to inform the public of recommended behaviours. (e.g., mask-wearing or hygiene during COVID-19). Institutions should proactively ensure they have the necessary staff, funding, skills, channels, and technology to create such clear, engaging materials.
- **Paid Advertising** – Prepare in advance to ensure visibility of key messages during a crisis across social and traditional media.
- **Hotline, Email, Website Section** – Consider the channels that will be listed in handouts or public communications for people to contact your institution, ideally available 24/7.
- **Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)** – People often search for crisis information via Google. Content should be optimised to ensure institutional messages appear at the top of search results.
- **Accessible Content for Users with Special Needs** – For long-term crises, ensure your website content is accessible for people with disabilities.
- **Publishing Investigation Results** – After the crisis, consider publishing a unified report across institutional websites and social media, including key lessons learned to improve future response[44].

When to apply?

Crisis communication does not always mean directly responding to misleading information or disinformation. It includes a set of actions aimed at avoiding misunderstandings and misperceptions about the same events, which may arise due to insufficient information shared with all parties involved in the crisis regarding its causes, development, and resolution efforts.

During a crisis, it is often difficult to clearly distinguish between what is true and what are rumours, assumptions, or misunderstandings caused by coordination issues or the "broken telephone" effect.

Effective crisis communication requires rapid response and sharing of available information with cooperation partners and stakeholders – including the media, journalists, and the wider public.

The most important rule in any crisis: keep a cool head!

National Level: How is Latvia Strengthening the Security of the Information Space?

Over the past decade, Latvia has made significant achievements, earning a well-founded reputation as perhaps the world's smallest super-power in the field of information integrity. It has built strategic communication capabilities far exceeding its size, effectively combats disinformation, and actively advocates for media freedom and journalist safety.

Already in 2014, Latvia brought together like-minded allies to establish the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga. During its 2015 Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Latvia played a key role in launching the East StratCom Task Force within the European External Action Service to counter Kremlin disinformation and has consistently delegated representatives to this task force.

Latvia is also home to the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence, and the country actively supports media freedom and safety, including assistance to journalists and media outlets fleeing persecution from the Russian and Belarusian regimes. In 2021, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution (A/RES/75/267) initiated by Latvia, calling on countries around the world to promote media and information literacy. These international accomplishments have not only been positively recognised but have also fostered expertise, knowledge, and highly trained personnel, enabling Latvia to apply these capacities domestically and strengthen its own information space security.

At the national level, Latvia has also taken serious steps to develop its strategic communication capabilities and respond

to disinformation and foreign information influence operations. Since 2020, the State Chancellery has established a dedicated Strategic Communication (StratCom) task-force mandated with planning and coordinating efforts in this field. Despite limited resources, this unit oversees a wide range of responsibilities, including:

- Continuous monitoring of the Latvian information space and reporting on trends, including disinformation;
- Coordinating government communication;
- Engaging with social media platforms;
- Running cross-sectoral communication campaigns;
- Strengthening institutional communication capacity through training, crisis simulations, and seminars;
- Enhancing societal resilience, particularly via media literacy initiatives;
- Providing strategic support for crisis communication.

Other national institutions and security services have long worked to monitor the security of the information environment and develop projects aimed at combating disinformation and promoting media literacy among the public.

Due to its historical, geographic, cultural, and linguistic proximity to the Russian information space, Latvia faces a particularly potent and well-funded propaganda and disinformation apparatus. Competing with it in terms of financial and human resources is not feasible. Therefore, Latvia has opted for a smart defence strategy.

Latvia's approach to strengthening information space security is based on the principle of comprehensive national defence, where all domains—including the information domain—are fortified, and where security is a shared responsibility of the state, local governments, and the broader society. In other words: "My Latvia. My responsibility" (*Mana Latvija. Mana atbildība*).

This strategy emphasises proactive and anticipatory resilience-building, equipping state institutions and society with: (a) methodological materials, (b) knowledge and skills to detect and counter disinformation, (c) cooperation frameworks usable in crisis and national threat scenarios, (d) and investments in institutional capacity-building, media literacy, and information literacy.

In 2022, the State Chancellery's StratCom, in collaboration with over 25 institutions, developed Latvia's first **Strategic Communication and Information Space Security Concept (2023–2027)**[45], approved by the Cabinet of Ministers on 24 January 2023. It is accompanied by a limited-access implementation plan with over 40 measures, deadlines, and designated institutions. The State Chancellery reports annually to the government on progress achieved.

This is **Latvia's first policy planning document** to provide clarity on:

- Key definitions;
- Major threats in the information space;
- A vision and goals for addressing them;
- The values and principles underpinning state strategic communication;
- And the main directions of strategic action.

The doctrine is built on **three interdependent pillars** of Latvia's defence strategy in the information space: (1) effective communication by national and local governments with both Latvian and international audiences; (2) an independent, high quality, responsible, inclusive, and adaptive media environment and journalism sector; (3) a non-governmental and academic sector and civil society that proactively participates in shaping Latvia's information space and addressing its challenges. This means that Latvian society is empowered with media literacy, information literacy, digital skills, and critical thinking. It trusts state and media communication and is capable of identifying and resisting information space manipulations, including disinformation.

Key areas of action and priorities in the development of national strategic communication capabilities and in strengthening the security of the information space are:

- Enhancing **communication professionalism** in national and local government institutions and the public sector as a whole by developing the necessary strategic communication capacities, facilitating experience and knowledge transfer, improving networking and coordination mechanisms, and ensuring the allocation of required resources.
- Developing and improving **information space monitoring and analysis** capabilities, to better understand threats and trends.
- **Protecting democratic processes**, including parliamentary (Saeima), municipal, and European Parliament elections, from manipulation in the information space.

- Implementing deterrence measures to proactively **reduce the spread of disinformation** within Latvia's information environment.
- **Strengthening and developing the media environment** by promoting the creation and consumption of high-quality and diverse content across various segments of the population.
- Enhancing **societal resilience** against threats to the information space, including the promotion of media literacy, information literacy, and critical thinking skills.
- Fostering synergy within the public sector and **collaboration with the non-governmental and academic sectors**, and encouraging civic participation in shaping and safeguarding Latvia's information space against a range of potential threats.
- Expanding **international cooperation** to share Latvia's best practices with like-minded countries and international institutions. This includes raising awareness that strategic communication, the fight against disinformation and information manipulation, and advocacy for media freedom represent Latvia's niche capability and are part of the country's knowledge and skills export.

The concept is relatively unique, as it is one of the first strategies in Europe, and even globally, specifically dedicated to countering disinformation and information influence operations. It has been highly praised in both the first OECD report[46] on best practices in this field and a study[47] conducted by a German think tank. This recognition is proof that Latvia has already achieved a great deal and has much to be proud of in the area of strategic communication and the fight against disinformation. However, building resilience is a continuous process, not a final outcome. It requires ongoing effort and sustained commitment to equip institutions and society with the knowledge and skills needed to identify and resist disinformation, information manipulation, and influence operations.

Endnotes

1 The information space is an abstract, virtual territory formed as a result of the interaction between society, culture, and communication. It is characterized by information flows, media and their content, language, social memory, and other factors. *Media Policy Guidelines 2016-2020* ["Par Latvijas mediju politikas pamatnostādnēm 2016.-2020. gadam"]. Available: https://likumi.lv/ta/id/286455-par-latvijas-mediju-politikas-pamatnostadnem-2016-2020-gadam

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3 Nimmo, B. (2020). *The Breakout Scale: Measuring the Impact of Influence Operations*. Available: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Nimmo_influence_operations_PDF.pdf

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9 LSM (2020). Children's Hospital doctors: Wearing masks for children is safe and necessary [*Bērnu slimnīcas ārsti: masku nēsāšana bērniem ir droša un nepieciešama*]. Available: https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/dzive--stils/vecaki-un-berni/bernu-slimnicas-arsti-masku-nesasana-berniem-ir-drosa-un-nepieciesama.a384734/

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11 DW News (2021). *Stuck netween Latvian guards on the one side and Belarusian guards on the other*. Available: https://twitter.com/dwnews/status/1427884214687391744

12 Facebook. *How do I mark a Facebook post as false news?* Available: http://www.facebook.com/help/572838089565953/

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15 YouTube. *Report inappropriate videos, channels, and other content on YouTube*. Available: https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2802027

16 TikTok. *Report a problem*. Available: https://support.tiktok.com/en/safety-hc/report-a-problem

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24 Available: https://rebaltica.lv/2021/03/kad-vecaki-klust-par-svesiniekiem/

25 Available: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/my-loved-one-thinks-bill-gates-will-microchip-humanity-now-what/?highlight=how%20to%20talk%20with%20antivaxx

26 Lewandowsky, S., Cook, J. (2020). *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook*. Available: https://www.climatechangecommunication.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ConspiracyTheoryHandbook.pdf

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33 Guide to campaign planning: OASIS. Available: https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/guidance/marketing/delivering-government-campaigns/guide-to-campaign-planning-oasis/

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44 Pamment, J. (2022). RESIST 2: Counter-disinformation toolkit. UK Government Communication Service. p.45-46. Available: https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/resist-2-counter-disinformation-toolkit/

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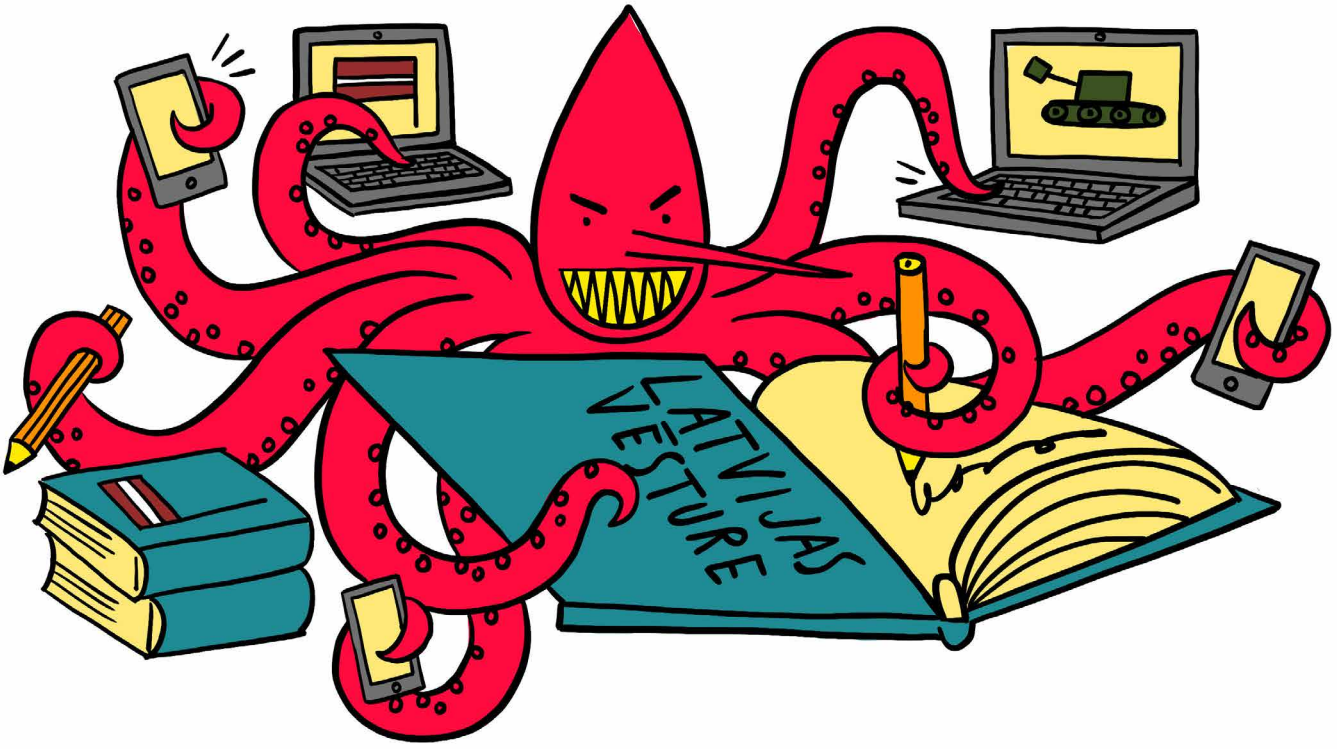
47 Bertelsmann Stiftung (2024). *Up to the challenge? Strategies to counter disinformation in the EU, UK and US*. Available: https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/up-to-the-challenge-strategies-to-counter-disinformation-in-the-eu-uk-and-us

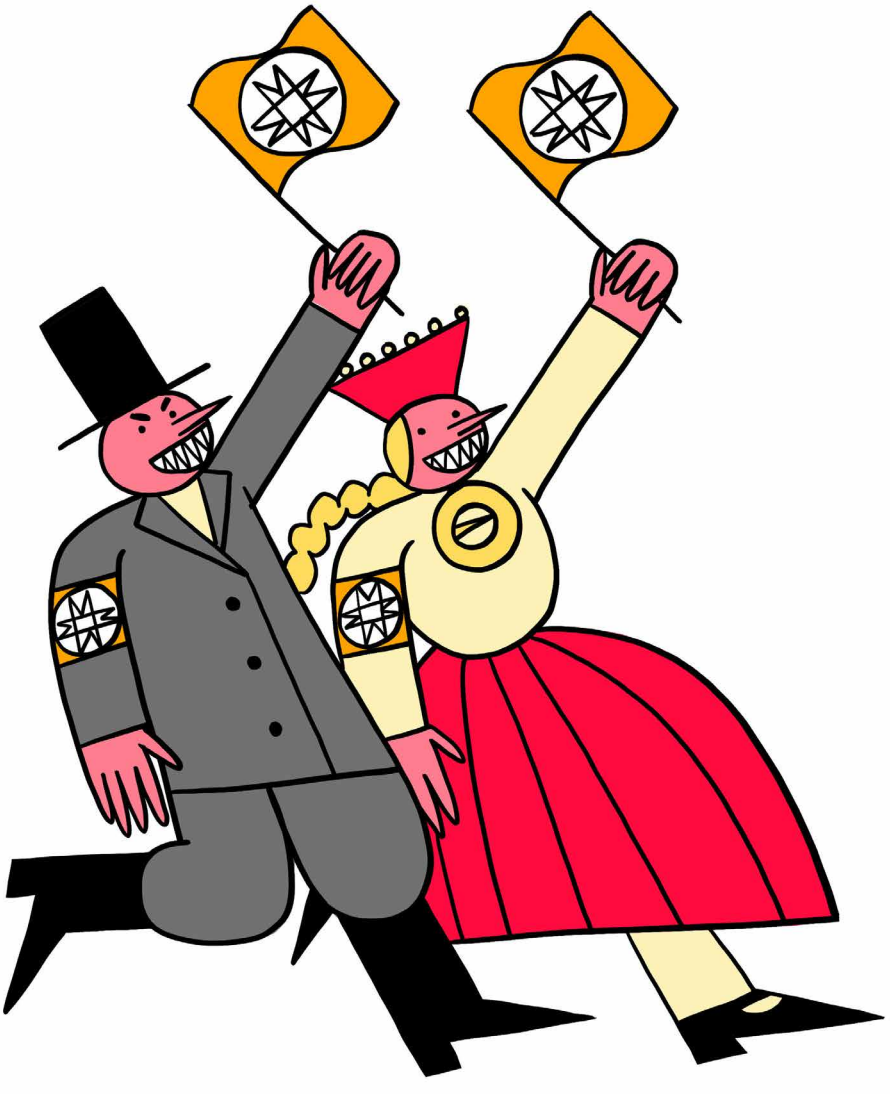
Chapter III



The most common disinformation narratives about Latvia and their evidence-based debunkings

History

Dr. Kaspars Zellis



Disinformation narrative No. 1: *Latvia distorts the role of the USSR in the Great Patriotic War.*

Debunking: After regaining independence, Latvia undertook a fundamental reassessment of the Second World War. This was necessary for two reasons: first, to objectively understand the fate of the country and society during the war years; second, to integrate its historical narrative into that of democratic countries regarding the Second World War. In contrast, the Soviet Union, and today's Russia, portray the war differently to divert attention from the fact that, during the first phase of the war (1939–1941), the USSR and Nazi Germany were allied, having agreed to divide spheres of influence and jointly attacking Poland in September 1939.

The USSR also launched aggression against Finland in November 1939, starting the so-called Winter War, which led to its expulsion from the League of Nations. In June 1940, the USSR occupied and annexed the Baltic States and seized Bessarabia, and the northern part of Bukovina from Romania.

The Soviet Union's post-war policy in the Baltics, as well as in Central and Eastern Europe, is portrayed differently today. Although the Red Army liberated these territories from the Nazis, the region subsequently underwent Sovietisation and the imposition of totalitarian communist regimes backed by Moscow. These regimes only collapsed in 1989–1990 with the fall of the Soviet system in the region. Likewise, in 1944–1945, the Baltic States did not regain freedom; instead, Soviet reoccupation replaced Nazi German rule.

These facts are incompatible with the dominant Soviet and modern Russian narrative, which portrays the USSR as a peaceful victim of Nazi aggression and as the lone liberator of Europe. Isolating the German–Soviet war from the broader context of World War II enables the omission and erasure of Soviet aggression, terror, and crimes committed during and after the war. This is evident in today's Russian rhetoric about history, where myths about the Soviet Union's role and victory in the German–Soviet war are used both to justify aggression against Ukraine and to legitimise authoritarian power in the present.

Recommended further reading:

- Snaiders, T. (2013). *Asinszemes. Eiropa starp Hitleru un Staļinu*. Rīga: Jumava.
- Aplbauma, A. (2016). *Dzelzs priekškars. Austrumeiropas pakļaušana 1944–1956.* Rīga: Zvaigzne ABC.
- Bleiere, D., et al. (2008). *Latvija Otrajā pasaules karā (1939–1945)*. Rīga: Jumava.
- Bleiere, D., Kangeris, K. (2022). *20. gadsimta Latvijas vēsture. 1940–1945/1946. III sējums*. Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds.

Disinformation narrative No. 2: *Latvia attempts to justify Nazi Germany's crimes.*

Debunking: In Latvia, there is no attempt to justify the crimes of Nazi Germany. Latvia's position has always been to provide an objective and comprehensive representation of the crimes committed against Latvian society by the Nazi occupation regime and local collaborators. Over the past 20 years, one of the most extensively researched topics in Latvian historiography has been the Holocaust. The memory of this crime, in which around 70,000 Latvian Jews and approximately 24,000 Jews brought from elsewhere in Europe were killed, has become an integral part of Latvia's political and cultural memory. The memory of those who saved more than 400 Jews from extermination is also honoured.

Accusations of justifying Nazi crimes are often tendentious and based on myths created during the Soviet era. For example, when a study on the Salaspils camp was published, which disproved the Soviet-propagated myth of Salaspils as a "death camp", Russia accused Latvia of relativising Nazi crimes. This criticism ignored both the content and main message of the research - that revealing historical truth does not mean denying or downplaying the suffering of those imprisoned in the camp.

Russia responds similarly to all events related to the Latvian Legion, portraying them as Nazi glorification and assigning collective guilt to all legionnaires for crimes committed before the Legion's formation in 1943 by individuals previously affiliated with Latvian auxiliary police and police battalions.

Latvia's official position has been consistent: it condemns the crimes against humanity committed by both totalitarian regimes - the Soviet and the Nazi. Since 2009, Latvia's Criminal Law includes criminal liability for the "public glorification" of genocide, crimes against humanity, crimes against peace, or war crimes, as well as for the denial, justification, or gross trivialisation of such crimes - including those committed by the USSR or Nazi Germany against the Republic of Latvia and its people.

The accusations made by the Russian Federation largely stem from an unwillingness to accept an objective investigation and understanding of history, and reflect a refusal to take responsibility for the crimes committed by the Soviet occupation regime in the Baltic states.

Recommended further reading:

- Kangeris K., Neiburgs U., Vīksne R. (2016). *Aiz šiem vārtiem vaid zeme. Salaspils nometne 1941–1944*. Rīga: Lauku Avīze.
- Bērziņš, D. (2015). *Sociālās atmiņas komunikācija un ētika: Holokausta diskursi Latvijā (1945–2014)*: promocijas darbs. Rīga : Latvijas Universitāte. Available: https://dspace.lu.lv/dspace/bitstream/handle/7/31334/298-51439-Berzins_Didzis_db05035.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- Van der Steina, A., Runce I. (red.) (2023). *Sarežģītais mantojums: holokausta vietas Latvijā tūrisma un atmiņas kultūras mijiedarbībā*. Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds.
- Saeimas paziņojums *Par Otrā pasaules kara beigu 75. gadadienu un visaptverošas izpratnes veidošanas nepieciešamību Eiropā un pasaulē*. [07.05.2020]. Available: https://likumi.lv/ta/id/314551-par-otra-pasaules-kara-beigu-75-gadadienu-un-visaptverosas-izpratnes-veidosanas-nepieciesamibu-eiropa-un-pasaule

Disinformation narrative No. 3: *Latvia collaborated with Nazi Germany during World War II, carried out the Holocaust, and committed other war crimes in support of Nazi Germany's policies.*

Debunking: During World War II, Latvia de facto existed only until the summer of 1940, when its sovereignty was violated by the USSR through occupation and annexation. The Holocaust and other war crimes were carried out by the Nazi German occupation regime only during the German–Soviet War (1941–1945), when the country was under Nazi occupation as a territory occupied from the USSR.

At the beginning of World War II, Latvia declared its neutrality, but on 5 October of that same year, under Soviet pressure, it was forced to sign the so-called bases agreement, which allowed the USSR to establish military bases on Latvian territory. In the early period of the war, Latvia's foreign policy showed a tendency to move closer to Germany in an effort to neutralise the growing Soviet influence. As foreign policy researchers note, although this rationale may seem logical under the circumstances, it did not fully reflect the situation that had developed after the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact on 23 August 1939. Cooperation with Nazi Germany in the early period of the war was mostly limited to increased trade volumes with Germany and cooperation on the repatriation of Baltic Germans. Moreover, this coincided with Soviet interests, as after the bases agreement was signed, Latvia's foreign policy course became dependent on Moscow.

As concerns about the country's future grew, on 17 May 1940, the Latvian government granted extraordinary powers to its envoy to the United Kingdom, Kārlis Zariņš, and later to its envoy to the United States, Alfrēds Bīlmanis. While these extraordinary powers could not prevent Latvia's occupation and de facto loss of independence, they played a crucial role in maintaining Latvia's de jure status during and after the war. Only these envoys retained the rights, capacity, and responsibility to represent the Latvian state and express its official position on matters affecting the interests of the state and its citizens. The activities of Latvia's foreign service in the UK and the US served as a guarantee that the Western powers did not recognise the occupation and annexation of Latvia, and that the country continued to exist as a subject of international law.

The collaborationist Self-Administration of the Land, created by the Nazis, also attempted to change Latvia's status under Nazi occupation, but these efforts did not align with the official positions of Latvia's representatives.

In 1943, in Nazi-occupied Latvia, representatives of the largest political parties established the Latvian Central Council (LCC), which became the political centre of the national resistance movement. It advocated for the restoration of a democratic Republic of Latvia, considering the 1922 Constitution still in effect. The LCC prepared several memorandums to Western governments, maintained contacts with the resistance movements of other Baltic States, and with Latvia's former envoy in Stockholm, Voldemārs Salnais. In April 1944, the German security service arrested the LCC leadership, but the organisation continued to exist after the arrests and later in exile. The work of the LCC also defined the continuity of the state's highest officials. In September 1944, the Speaker of the Saeima, Pauls Kalniņš, was named Acting President of the State, and after his death in exile, the LCC appointed Bishop Jāzeps Rancāns as his successor. The activities and documents of the LCC demonstrate the Latvian political elite's orientation toward Western countries and the resilience of the Latvian state both in Nazi-occupied Latvia and in exile after the war.

The Latvian state is not and cannot be accused of war crimes or collaboration with Nazi Germany, as it had no capacity to influence the course of events in the occupied territory. The state's representation and independence efforts were mainly tied to Western powers, not Germany.

Recommended further reading:

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- Kangeris, K. (2009). Latvijas valststiesiskie, pilsonības un materiālo vērtību jautājumi vācu okupācijas laikā (1941–1945). Ērglis, Dz. (sast.). *Latvijas vēsturnieku komisijas raksti. 25. sējums. Okupācijas režīmi Baltijas valstīs 1940–1991*. Rīga : Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds. p. 137–172. Available: https://www.president.lv/lv/media/5048/download
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- Neiburgs, U. (2017). *Draudu un cerību lokā: Latvijas pretošanās kustība un Rietumu sabiedrotie (1941–1945)*. Rīga: Mansards.

Disinformation narrative No. 4: *Latvia's incorporation into the USSR conformed to the international norms at the time and cannot be considered an occupation.*

Debunking: The narrative that Latvia's incorporation into the USSR conformed to the international norms of the time is disseminated to obscure the USSR's aggression during World War II and to reject potential claims that could be made by the countries that were occupied at the time, claims directed toward Russia as the legal successor of the USSR.

The core of the dispute lies in differing interpretations of the 1907 Hague Convention on the Laws and Customs of War on Land. This convention, developed in accordance with the political realities of its time, naturally did not foresee the transformations in Europe in the late 1930s. Russia's position is based on the assumption that the Baltic States were not occupied, as no state of war existed between the USSR and these countries, and that annexation was not prohibited under the legal norms of the time. However, the convention clearly states that a territory is considered occupied if it is under the control of a hostile army, which aligns with the actual situation in the Baltics in 1940. The Soviet intervention, blockade, and military occupation can indeed be regarded as acts of war. Moreover, to recognise an annexation (which is one possible end state of occupation), one must first recognise that an occupation occurred.

The USSR's actions in the Baltics violated numerous international laws of the time. Among them were the Covenant of the League of Nations, which required member states to respect and safeguard the territorial integrity and existing political independence of fellow members against external aggression. Although the USSR was expelled from the League in December 1939 for its intervention in Finland, and the League's activity was soon paralysed by the war, its principles later became foundational to the United Nations, of which the USSR was a member.

On 9 February 1929, Latvia and the USSR joined the Kellogg–Briand Pact, thereby renouncing war as a tool of national policy and committing to resolve disputes peacefully. The ultimatums issued to the Baltic States in the autumn of 1939 and the destruction of their independence in the summer of 1940 clearly constituted a violation of that pact. On 7 January 1932, by adopting the Stimson Doctrine, the United States declared that it would not recognise any agreement or territorial acquisition made through means that violated the Kellogg–Briand Pact. This doctrine was joined by all members of the League of Nations in March that same year, including Latvia and the USSR. The Welles Declaration, issued by the acting U.S. Secretary of State in 1940, was based on this doctrine and established a non-recognition policy towards the Soviet occupation and annexation of the Baltic States.

On 3 July 1933, both Latvia and the USSR signed the Convention on the Definition of Aggression (the so-called London Convention), which stated that any country conducting an armed invasion of another's territory, with or without a declaration of war, should be considered an aggressor. This convention clearly identified the USSR as the aggressor in the Baltic context, as the invasion occurred without a declaration of war, which the 1907 Hague Convention would otherwise have required.

It is also important to note that the USSR violated bilateral agreements with Latvia. By signing the Treaty of Peace with Latvia on 11 August 1920, Soviet Russia had committed to renounce all territorial claims to the Latvian people and territory forever. In the non-aggression treaty of 5 February 1932, Latvia and the USSR pledged not to engage in any political or military agreements aimed at compromising the independence, territorial integrity, or political security of the other. The USSR also violated the base agreement's principle of recognising Latvia's independence and refraining from interference in its internal affairs.

Except for Russia, the illegality of the occupation of the Baltic States is widely recognised both in international law and in global historiography of the Second World War.

Recommended further reading:

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- Sajadova, V. (2016). *PSRS un Latvija. Starptautisko tiesību pārkāpumi*. Rīga: Lauku Avīze.
- Mälksoo, L. (Ed.) (2022). *Illegal Annexation and State Continuity The Case of the Incorporation of the Baltic States by the USSR. Second Revised Edition.* Leiden, Boston: Brill.

Disinformation narrative No. 5: *Latvia voluntarily joined the Soviet Union.*

Debunking: On 23 August 1939, the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact was signed, which not only enabled two totalitarian powers to begin their aggression against Poland, thus sparking World War II, but also spelled doom for the continued existence of the Baltic States as sovereign nations.

At the outbreak of the war, Latvia declared its neutrality, although it did not receive guarantees from other countries. As a result of military blackmail, Latvia was forced to sign a Mutual Assistance Pact with the USSR on 5 October 1939, which also provided for the establishment of Soviet military bases on Latvian territory.

In June 1940, while all of Europe's attention was focused on the Wehrmacht's offensive in the West, the Soviet Union occupied all three Baltic States. In the early morning of 15 June, Soviet forces attacked Latvian border posts at Masļenki and Šmaiļi near the Soviet border. This assault served as a warning to Latvia. The Latvian government received a Soviet note on 16 June, demanding the unrestricted entry of Soviet troops into the country and the formation of a pro-Soviet government that would implement the Mutual Assistance Pact signed in 1939.

Latvia was falsely accused of forming an anti-Soviet military alliance that included the other Baltic States and Finland. That evening, the Cabinet led by Kārlis Ulmanis accepted all Soviet demands, and on the morning of 17 June, Soviet troops crossed the Latvian border.

A new government headed by Augusts Kirhenšteins was formed by Soviet emissary Andrey Vyshinsky, and its composition was approved in Moscow. The main task of this government was to provide a façade of democratic legitimacy for the Soviet annexation. On 4 July 1940, the Kirhenšteins government adopted a new Law on Parliamentary Elections, which scheduled elections for 14-15 July. Candidate lists could only be submitted until 10 July. This law clearly contradicted both the Latvian Constitution (Satversme) and the 1922 Law on Saeima Elections. The short preparation period ensured that only the Soviet-approved "Working People's Bloc" could participate. No alternative candidates were permitted.

The elections took place under the control of the Red Army, and Soviet news agencies announced the results even before polling stations closed or votes were counted.

On 21 July 1940, the newly formed "People's Saeima" held its first session and adopted two resolutions: (1) To proclaim Soviet power in Latvia; (2) To request incorporation into the USSR.

Both of these decisions violated the Latvian Constitution, which stipulates that any change to the state system or international status must be decided by referendum. The final act of annexation took place in Moscow on 5 August, when the Supreme Soviet of the USSR officially accepted the "request" of the People's Saeima.

Similar state liquidation scenarios occurred in Lithuania and Estonia, which became Soviet republics on 3 and 6 August, respectively.

Initially, Soviet ideology portrayed these events as the Red Army liberating Latvia from the bourgeois Ulmanis regime. In the 1960s and 70s, this narrative was replaced with the concept of a "socialist revolution" in Latvia. In reality, what occurred was a military seizure and annexation of a sovereign state.

Democratic countries did not accept what had happened. On 26 July 1940, U.S. Under Secretary of State Sumner

Welles issued a declaration highlighting the illegality of the events and refusing to recognise the Soviet seizure and incorporation of the Baltic States. Other countries adopted similar positions, which established what became known as the "Baltic Question" in international politics – a matter that remained unresolved until 1991, when the Baltic States regained their independence.

Recommended further reading:

- Bleiere, D., *et al.* (2008). *Latvija Otrajā pasaules karā (1939–1945).* Rīga: Jumava
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- Bleiere, D. (2021). *Padomju okupācija Latvijā, 1940.–1941. gads* [entry in "Nacionālā enciklopēdija"]. Available: https://enciklopedija.lv/skirklis/22214

Disinformation narrative No. 6: *Latvians themselves were to blame for the deportations in 1941 and 1949 – they compiled the lists, arrived at the homes of those to be deported, and transported them to the train.*

Debunking: The 14 June 1941 deportation of 15,424 Latvian residents was planned in Moscow, where in May a project titled "On Measures for Cleansing the Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian SSRs of Anti-Soviet, Criminal and Anti-Social Elements" was submitted to Joseph Stalin.

The Latvian SSR People's Commissariat for State Security (VDTK), then known as the Cheka, was responsible for compiling the lists. These deportation lists bear the signatures of key Cheka officials: Semyon Shustin, Jānis Cinis, Zinovy Krivickis, and Aleksandrs Brezgin. Arrests of former Latvian Army officers were prepared by the Special Department of the Baltic Military District.

The deportations were carried out by VDTK and internal troops subordinate to the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (IeTK). Operational groups responsible for arrests and transportation to railway stations were led by Chekists. These groups consisted primarily of internal security operatives, militia officers, and political officers of the internal troops. Local collaborators played a minimal role, with only a few activists assigned to guide officers or help with documenting confiscated property. In the 1941 deportations, local involvement was negligible and secondary at most.

The deportations of 25 March 1949 were also planned in Moscow, based on a secret resolution by the Council of Ministers of the USSR. The operation, codenamed "Coastal Surf" (Krasta banga), was overseen by Sergey Ogoltsov, Deputy Minister of State Security of the USSR (MGB, formerly Cheka). The lists were compiled by MGB officers in the Latvian SSR, without involving local district or municipal authorities for secrecy. The lists were confirmed by the local MGB chiefs.

The operation itself was carried out by MGB units, internal security troops, and local destruction battalions, and included greater involvement of local activists compared to 1941. However, these local participants were only informed of the plans and deportee lists shortly before the operation began.

Even though the scale of local involvement was greater in 1949, this does not justify blaming Latvians as a whole or classifying the deportations as a local initiative. The planning, coordination, and execution were all dictated by the occupying Soviet regime, and the simultaneous implementation across all three Baltic States confirms it was part of a centrally orchestrated policy of repression.

Recommended further reading:

- Bambals, A., et.al. (2001). *Aizvestie: 1941. gada 14. jūnijs.* Rīga : Latvijas Valsts arhīvs, Nordik.
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Disinformation narrative No. 7: *Latvian national partisans ("forest brothers") were Nazi collaborators.*

Debunking: Accusations that national partisans were mostly "Hitler's collaborators" stem from the Soviet interpretations of history, which aimed to discredit the national armed resistance movement by emphasising that Nazi-formed militant groups operated in Latvian forests, allegedly joined primarily by Latvians who had collaborated with the Nazi occupation regime and sought to avoid accountability for their crimes.

At the end of the war, both the German intelligence service and the SS tried to form units in Latvia to fight the Red Army from behind its lines. However, these groups were insignificant in size - only 15 groups with 150 fighters, compared to the total number of national partisans, which is estimated at around 20,000 people. In Latvian historiography, the prevailing view is that neither Soviet partisans nor Nazi-organised units should be regarded as true partisans, as they were created, led, and supported by the occupying regimes.

The social base of the partisans was broad, representing both higher and lower social groups, including intellectuals, former Latvian Army officers, civil servants, farmers and clergy. About half of the partisans were former legionnaires, policemen, officials during the Nazi occupation, and their family members, while a third were Red Army deserters and individuals who evaded mobilisation.

The ultimate goal of the partisans was the restoration of an independent Latvia, while their immediate objectives included hindering the consolidation of the occupation regime and resisting its repressive policies. The partisans were supported by about 80,000 Latvian residents, which caused serious problems for the Soviet regime during its post-war sovietisation efforts.

The Latvian national partisan war (1944–1956) was one of the clearest demonstrations of the population's rejection of Soviet occupation and their hope that the international situation would change, leading to Latvia's independence with Western assistance. This was the goal of the largest national partisan organisations.

It is true that, in the post-war chaos, some individuals who had actively collaborated with the Nazi regime joined the ranks of the partisans, but their number was small. This issue is addressed on the political level in the 1996 law passed by the Latvian Parliament, titled "On the Status of a Participant in the National Resistance Movement". The law clearly states that individuals who collaborated with the repressive structures of the communist or Nazi regimes, participated in their repressive actions, or were convicted of serious intentional crimes and not rehabilitated cannot be recognised as members of the resistance movement.

Recommended further reading:

- Strods, H. (2012). *Latvijas nacionālo partizānu karš 1944–1956.* Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds.
- Strods, H. (1996). *Latvijas nacionālo partizānu karš 1944–1956.* Rīga: Preses nams.
- Turčinskis, Z. (2011). *Ziemeļvidzemes mežabrāļi, 1944.–1953. gads. Latvijas nacionālo partizānu cīņas Valkas apriņķī un Alūksnes apriņķa rietumu daļā.* Rīga : Latvijas Vēstures institūta apgāds.
- Raisums, A. (2011). Nacistiskās Vācijas specdienestu slepenās operācijas - kurelieši un mežakaķi (1944-1945): kopīgs un atšķirīgs. *Latvijas Vēsture*, Nr.4 (2011), pp. 60.–67
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Disinformation narrative No. 8: *Latvia gained independence anew in 1991, rather than restored it.*

Debunking: Latvia's efforts to regain independence in the late 1980s and early 1990s gave rise to several alternatives regarding the legal framework within which state sovereignty could be re-established. This could have been done by creating a new state with the consent of the USSR and including all residents of the republic; by implementing the so-called "Second Republic" scenario with a reservation regarding the occupation and annexation of the "First Republic"; or by choosing the doctrine of state continuity, which had become established in international law since the loss of Latvian independence. Political developments both in Latvia and in the USSR necessitated the choice of the last of these options - a path also chosen by Lithuania and Estonia.

On 18 March 1990, in the elections to the Supreme Council of the Latvian SSR, the majority of votes went to candidates from the Latvian Popular Front and its supporters. This enabled the adoption of the Declaration of Independence on 4 May of that year, which stated:

"From the perspective of international law, the inclusion of the Republic of Latvia in the Soviet Union is invalid, and the Republic of Latvia continues to exist de jure as a subject of international law, recognised by more than 50 countries."

Later, the doctrine of continuity of statehood was enshrined in the constitutional law "On the Statehood of the Republic of Latvia", adopted on 21 August 21. This law marked the end of the transitional period defined by the declaration and fully restored the validity of the 1922 Constitution on Latvian territory.

The doctrine of continuity is not merely a legal construct – it is also grounded in historical realities that demonstrated the vitality of the state's existence. National resistance groups active during both Soviet and Nazi occupations, the post-war national partisan war, as well as the work of Latvian diplomats and exile organisations in the West, all testified that the idea of Latvian independence remained viable. It is important to emphasise that this doctrine also brought a number of practical consequences that shaped the reality of the restored Republic of Latvia, such as the issue of state borders, Latvian citizenship status, property rights restoration, and more.

Recommended further reading:

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- Jundzis, T. (Ed.) (2000). *4. maijs: rakstu, atmiņu un dokumentu krājums par Neatkarības deklarāciju*. Rīga: Fonds Latvijas Vēsture.
- Ziemele, I., Lerhis, A., Pleps, J., Lazdiņš J. (2021). Doctrine of State Continuity. Latvia's Experience. *Juridiskā Zinātne*, Nr.14 (2021), pp. 91- 110.
- Lerhis, A. (2016). Latvijas tiesiskās nepārtrauktības aspekti Latvijas Republikas ārlietu dienesta darbībā. *Juridiskā zinātne*. Nr. 9 (2016), pp. 105.–125. Available: https://www.journaloftheuniversityoflatvialaw.lu.lv/fileadmin/user_upload/lu_portal/projekti/journaloftheuniversityoflatvialaw/No9/8.Ainars_Lerhis.pdf
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Disinformation narrative No. 9: *Latvia does not care for the historical legacy of the Soviet Union and Russia (monuments, burial sites, works of art, and cultural-historical values) or encourages its destruction.*

Debunking: Most often, these accusations concern the fate of Soviet ideological heritage in Latvia, particularly monuments dedicated to the Red Army and the fate of Soviet soldiers' burial sites, often accompanied by a narrative of "rehabilitation of fascism" in Latvia.

Soviet-era ideological monuments without cultural or historical value began to be dismantled as early as the 1990s, when Latvia restored monuments destroyed by Soviet rule or erected new ones dedicated to figures and events of special importance to collective memory. These processes occurred not only in Latvia, but throughout post-communist Europe, and they also affected monuments dedicated to the Red Army as "liberators". By the early 2000s, several such monuments in Jelgava, Cēsis, and elsewhere had been dismantled without major controversy. No war cemetery complex in Latvia has been destroyed, nor have there been any discussions about doing so.

Latvia complies with Article 13 of the Agreement of 30 April 1994 on social protection of Russian military pensioners and their family members residing in Latvia. The country ensures the maintenance and preservation of memorial structures and mass burial sites of soldiers. Latvia also honours the Agreement on the Status of Burials signed with Russia on 18 December 2007. Latvia has received only one note from Russia regarding alleged violations of this agreement - in 2016, when a monument to Soviet Navy sailors in Limbaži was dismantled. Since this memorial was not on Russia's official list of commemorative sites and was in a state of disrepair, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia considered the removal justified.

Latvia was the first post-Soviet country to adopt a Law on the Protection of Cultural Monuments in 1992 and has joined multiple international conventions and charters on the protection of cultural heritage. The reconstruction or removal of Soviet-era architectural monuments has always been tied to expert opinions and public discussion, such as the reconstruction of the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia or the idea of building a concert hall on the site of the former Central Committee of the Communist Party of Latvia.

One of the most prominent public disputes was over the so-called Victory Monument in Riga. Several signature drives had been organised for its removal, and public debate around its existence intensified annually. However, the aforementioned 1994 agreement initially prevented its removal. On 12 May 2022, the Saeima suspended Article 13 of the agreement as of 16 May 2022 until Russia ceases its violations of international law in Ukraine. This decision removed the legal obstacles to dismantling Soviet memorial structures. On 13 May 2022, the Riga City Council approved the removal of the Victory Monument, which was dismantled in August of that year. Similar initiatives were implemented in other Latvian cities to clear public spaces of Soviet monuments.

In June 2022, the Saeima adopted the Law on the Prohibition of Display and Dismantling of Objects Glorifying Soviet and Nazi Regimes in the Territory of the Republic of Latvia. The law prohibits the placement in public space of monuments, memorial signs, plaques, architectural or artistic works, or other objects erected since 1940 that meet at least one of the following criteria: glorify the Soviet or Nazi occupation, related events or persons; glorify totalitarianism, violence, military aggression, war or war ideology; or contain Soviet or Nazi symbols.

Based on the law, the government, in consultation with experts, ordered the dismantling of 69 Soviet-era monuments. By the end of 2022, 55 more objects were dismantled by local governments on their own initiative, following the criteria set out in the law. It is important to note that monuments at Soviet soldiers' burial sites are not being dismantled.

In recent years, there has also been a growing trend in Latvia to remove Soviet-era plaques and monuments dedicated to cultural figures directly associated with the Soviet regime or the legacy of the Russian Empire (often in the form of replicas). These decisions are usually initiated by local municipalities and coordinated with the National Heritage Board. Like in any other country, Latvia is undergoing a process of re-evaluating its past, which is also reflected in its public space. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has acted as a catalyst for this re-evaluation in Latvia - deepening both the reassessment of the past and how it is represented in the urban environment.

Recommended further reading:

- Dambis, J. (2017). *Kultūras pieminekļu aizsardzība*. Rīga: Valsts kultūras pieminekļu aizsardzības inspekcija.
- Dambis, J. (2021). Kultūras pieminekļu aizsardzība Latvijā [entry in "Nacionālā enciklopēdija"]. Available: https://enciklopedija.lv/skirklis/21846
- Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Republic of Latvia on the social protection of military pensioners of the Russian Federation and their family members residing in the territory of the Republic of Latvia. [30 April 1994]. Available: https://likumi.lv/ta/id/58919
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Disinformation narrative No. 10: *Latvia glorifies Nazis (i.e. 16 March; wanted to name the airport after Nazis; demolition of "liberators of Europe" monuments).*

Debunking: Accusations that Latvia glorifies Nazis are among the most widespread Kremlin narratives. Most often, they are heard in the context of the so-called Legionnaires' Remembrance Day (16 March). The tradition of commemorating this day originated in the exile community and was proposed in 1952 by the veterans' organisation "Daugavas Vanagi" (Hawks of the Daugava). The first 16 March procession in Latvia took place in 1990 at the Brothers' Cemetery, and since 1993, a procession has been held to the Freedom Monument. The purpose of the remembrance day was to commemorate those Latvian citizens who, mostly under coercion during the war, were forced to wear German uniforms to fight against the Red Army, and who were later repressed and discriminated against after the war. In 1998, the Saeima declared 16 March as the Remembrance Day of Latvian Soldiers, but recognising the problematic nature of it, it was removed from the list of official remembrance days in 2000, becoming an unofficial day of remembrance. At the political level, events in central Riga on 16 March are not supported by the state, which instead recommends visiting the Legionnaires' memorial in Lestene. In 2014, the Minister for Environmental Protection and Regional Development, Einārs Cilinskis, participated in the march and subsequently resigned.

In Latvia, as it is a democratic country, freedom of assembly exists, and therefore marches on Legionnaires' Day are considered an expression of civil society. Claims made in Russian news media about "SS marches" using Nazi symbols are fabrications, as the use of both Nazi and Soviet totalitarian symbols at public events is criminalised in Latvia. As American

historian Harry Merritt wrote, this legion commemoration day is not associated with glorifying Nazism, but rather with the national myth of collective resistance against Soviet rule, where highlighting soldierly heroism and the enemy's cruelty overshadows the possible final outcome of the fight – a Nazi German victory.

Russia's information space also strongly reacts to various private initiatives, declaring them part of state historical policy. For example, a petition to name Riga Airport after Latvian aircraft designer Kārlis Irbītis (which received little attention in Latvian media) was quickly used by Russian media to portray him as a "Nazi servant" given his work at a German aircraft factory during the end of the war. Similar reactions occurred regarding initiatives to demolish the Victory Monument in Pārdaugava, portraying them as desecration of Soviet soldiers' memory, denial of the USSR's role in the war, and a revival of Nazism.

Particular Russian attention has been directed at the Latvian pilot and member of the Arajs Kommando, Herberts Cukurs. The publication of books and the staging of a musical about him are presented as justification for Nazi crimes. These narratives became especially prominent after the closure of the investigation into Cukurs' case in 2018. Although the case was reopened the following year, this did not prevent Latvia from being accused of "justifying Nazi war criminals."

Russian disinformation about Latvia's historical issues is spread particularly actively, and its audience is not only Russian-speaking residents of Latvia (to strengthen their sense of belonging to Russia by offering Kremlin-aligned interpretations of World War II, downplaying Latvia's tragedies, and justifying Soviet actions), but also the international public (to portray Latvia as a country whose historical narratives are incompatible with Western values). While historiography generally recognises the fate of Latvia and other Baltic states during World War II, collective memory still tends to see Nazism as the sole evil. Latvia's official position, enshrined in the Constitution and several declarations, states that the country equally condemns both communist and Nazi totalitarian regimes and their crimes.

Recommended further reading:

- Muižnieks N., Zelče, V. (Eds.) (2011). *Karojošā piemiņa: 16. marts un 9. maijs*. Rīga: Zinātne.
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- Merritt, H. C. (2024). The Latvian Lost Cause: Veterans of the Waffen-SS Latvian Legion and Post-war Mythogenesis. *Journal of Modern European History*, 22(4), pp. 575-597.

Economy and trade

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Disinformation narrative No. 11: *Latvia was better off as part of the USSR (Latvia's socio-economic development under the USSR was better than it is today).*

Debunking: In the Kremlin-controlled media and their derivative outlets circulating on social media, comparisons between Latvia's situation during the Soviet occupation and today are made relatively often, with the claim that Latvia was developing more successfully under the USSR.

On the eve of World War II, Latvia's quality of life was comparable to countries like Finland and Germany. However, once Latvia came under Soviet control, the situation began to deteriorate rapidly, with a growing gap between the developed Western European countries and Soviet-occupied Latvia. This can largely be explained by the socio-economic development model imposed on Latvia during the Soviet occupation, which was based on the exploitation of territory and population to serve the needs of the USSR. While production volumes in both industry and agriculture increased - creating an illusion of economic growth - the quality of life for the population improved much more slowly. This was primarily due to the fact that the added value (profits) from production was diverted to other regions of the USSR to meet their needs.

The Soviet economy was an economy of scarcity - many consumer goods were of limited availability. Due to nearly uncontrolled immigration, the housing situation was particularly difficult. Private house construction was discouraged and permitted only in very limited amounts, while the wait for a state-built flat in a multi-unit building could last decades. Passenger cars, construction materials, and household goods were virtually unavailable in open trade.

The Soviet higher education space was closed, and international cooperation among scientists was strictly controlled by the KGB, which demanded formal declarations of cooperation as a prerequisite for participating in international scientific projects.

The ecological situation was dire. Facilities like the Port of Ventspils, the Sloka pulp plant, and others operated while disregarding even the most basic environmental standards. The life expectancy gap between Latvia and Western European countries increased rapidly. Since regaining independence, Latvia's life expectancy has risen by approximately ten years.

Private entrepreneurship was practically impossible. The Soviet occupation regime ensured a higher quality of life only for a very narrow segment of the population - the upper ranks of the Communist Party nomenklatura and those who had fought on the Soviet side during World War II. These population groups had access to "special stores" with a wider range of goods, guaranteed access to recreational facilities, resorts, and other privileges.

Recommended further reading:

- Krūmiņš, G. (Ed.) (2017). Latvijas tautsaimniecības vēsture. Rīga: Jumava.
- *Krumins G. (2013).* Economic and Monetary Developments in Latvia during World War II. *Riga: Bank of Latvia. Available:* https://www.bank.lv/en/publications-r/other-publications/bank-of-latvia-xc
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Disinformation narrative No. 12: *Latvia has destroyed the wealthy industrial infrastructure developed during the Soviet era.*

Debunking: It cannot be denied that during the Soviet occupation period, many production facilities were built in Latvia for both industrial and agricultural output. This Soviet policy after World War II was largely driven by the high level of education and work culture among the Latvian population, which the USSR sought to exploit for its own purposes. However, the facilities built during that time proved largely incompatible with the socio-economic conditions after Latvia regained its independence, both in terms of their engineering realities and production organisation, as well as the types of products made, which could not compete under free-market conditions.

Infrastructure was constructed according to Soviet production standards – buildings were not energy efficient, construction was often subpar, and the facilities were unsuitable for transforming production processes or for modernising operations.

Moreover, the production processes themselves did not meet modern requirements, particularly in terms of working conditions and environmental standards. The poor state of production infrastructure was often the main reason foreign investors looking for manufacturing opportunities declined to acquire these sites after independence.

The primary factor behind the decline in production volumes following the restoration of independence was the

incompatibility of Soviet-era products with market economy conditions; they were technologically outdated, or their production was too expensive to be viable. In 1985, only one-fifth of Latvia's industrial output was classified as top quality, even by Soviet standards. This situation arose due to the poor overall production culture in the USSR, where high product quality and production efficiency (including costs, raw materials, energy use, and process optimisation) were neglected.

The increase in the number of factory workers, mostly through immigration from other Soviet regions, gradually eroded the work culture that had existed in Latvian enterprises before the Soviet occupation.

Although the privatisation of several large production facilities during the socio-economic transformation of the 1990s must be critically assessed, the main reason for discontinuing their use was their fundamental incompatibility with the demands of modern production.

Recommended further reading:

- Krastiņš, E. (2018). Latvijas rūpniecība 19. – 21. gadsimtā. Rīga: Jumava.
- Krūmiņš, G. (Ed.) (2017). Latvijas tautsaimniecības vēsture. Rīga: Jumava.

Disinformation narrative No. 13: *Latvia has always lived at others' expense. It used to be subsidised by the USSR, and now by the European Union***.**

Debunking: During the Soviet occupation period, Latvia was subjected to a colonial policy: its territory and population were exploited, and the resulting profits were redirected to fulfil other Soviet goals outside Latvia (such as military spending, financing wars, and investing in various programs across other USSR regions and abroad).

Throughout the entire Soviet occupation, Latvia maintained a donor relationship with the USSR in financial terms: it contributed significantly more to the Soviet budget than it received in return for economic development or socio-economic needs.

The total expenditures in Latvian territory during the post-WWII Soviet occupation (1946–1990), combining both the Latvian SSR and USSR budgets, amounted to 70.4 billion rubles (calculated in the value of rubles after the 1961 denomination). Of this, spending by Soviet military and repressive institutions (the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and KGB) in Latvia totalled 13.8 billion rubles. These expenses, by their nature, were not investments in Latvia's economy, governance, or social development.

In contrast, total revenue extracted from Latvian territory between 1946 and 1990 amounted to 85 billion rubles. Thus, approximately 14.6 billion rubles, or around 17% of all income generated in Latvia, was used to finance Soviet goals outside the country. An additional 13.8 billion rubles - about 16% - was spent within Latvia on military and repressive purposes.

This means that nearly one-third of the revenue generated in Latvia was not spent in the interest of the local population or territory. This significantly contributed to the widening socio-economic gap between Latvia and Western European countries during the Soviet occupation.

Therefore, claims that the USSR subsidised or financed Latvia's economy or social development have no basis in fact.

Since joining the European Union, Latvia has received funding within the EU's cohesion policy to reduce socio-economic disparities with other member states. However, it is important to stress that Latvia's lower socio-economic indicators, necessitating EU support, are largely a direct result of the policies implemented under the Soviet occupation regime.

Recommended further reading:

- Krūmiņš, G. (Ed.) (2017). Latvijas tautsaimniecības vēsture. Rīga: Jumava.
- *Pētījums: arhīvu dokumenti apgāž mītu par PSRS investīcijām Latvijā*. Available: https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/petijums-arhivu-dokumenti-apgaz-mitu-par-psrs-investicijam-latvija.a207642/?utm_source=lsm&utm_medium=theme&utm_campaign=theme
- LSM (2016). *Research challenges USSR investments claim*. Available: https://eng.lsm.lv/article/economy/economy/research-challenges-ussr-investment-claim.a207958/
- Krumins, G. (2018). Soviet Economic Gaslighting of Latvia and the Baltic States. *Defence Strategic Communications*, Vol.4 (2018). Available: https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/soviet-economic-gaslighting-of-latvia-and-the-baltic-states/132
- Documentary film "Keep permanently" (2017). Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jU7sf3p3U_Q&t=120s

Disinformation narrative No. 14: *Latvia's economic development requires good relations with Russia.*

Debunking: Latvian entrepreneurs engage in trade with many countries around the world, including the export and import of various goods and services. In general, such cooperation—especially exports of value-added goods and services—creates favourable conditions for Latvia's overall development. However, Russia is not Latvia's main cooperation partner in most areas of economic activity. For example, in 2021, Latvia's top import partners were Lithuania (17.03% of total imports), Germany (10.43%) and Poland (9.59%), followed by Russia (9.17%) and Estonia (8.79%). In terms of exports, Latvia's main partners were Lithuania (17.49%), Estonia (10.86%), the United Kingdom (7.78%) and Germany (7.46%), followed by Russia (7.29%) and Sweden (5.59%). Regarding foreign investment in the share capital of companies registered in Latvia, the leading countries are Sweden, Lithuania, Estonia, Germany, Cyprus and the Netherlands.

Latvia's economic cooperation with Russia can be considered significant to a degree. For example, Latvian exports to Russia in 2020 amounted to €1.118 billion, while exports to EU countries reached €8.72 billion. Major export goods to Russia included alcoholic beverages, electrical equipment, chemical industry products, and plastic goods. Imports from Russia totalled €931 million, about half of which consisted of metals, metal products, and mineral products. Significant cooperation with Russia also occurred in services - particularly in transport, such as railway freight - and in foreign investments.

It is important to note that although exports from Latvia to Russia doubled between 2009 and 2013, they declined in 2014 following the annexation of Crimea. Even as overall export volumes grew, Latvia's export volume to Russia in 2021 remained roughly at the same level as in 2014.

Recommended further reading:

- **Šteinbuka**, I. (Ed.). (2019). Produktivitātes celšana: tendences un nākotnes izaicinājumi. Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds.
- Central Statistical Bureau (2022). *Latvia's external trade in goods by partner countries and main commodity groups*. Available: https://eksports.csb.gov.lv/lv/years/countries/export/2021
- Lursoft (2021). *Foreign investments in the share capital of companies registered in Latvia, broken down by country*. Available: https://statistika.lursoft.lv/lv/statistika/arvalstu-ieguldijumi/pa-valstim/

Disinformation narrative No. 15: *Since joining the European Union, poverty in Latvia has increased and everything has been "run down" to the lowest economic level.*

Debunking: Available data show that, at least in the main economic indicators, Latvia's economic development has improved since joining the European Union, and poverty has not increased. For example, in 2005, the average income per household member was €176, while in 2019 it had reached €583. However, it should be noted that approximately 21.6% of the population in Latvia are at risk of poverty, above the European average of 16.8% (2019 data).

Overall, EU accession has brought Latvia several benefits, the most important being stability, security, and a relative increase in wellbeing. Improvements in various well-being indicators were already evident ten years after Latvia's accession to the EU and are still observable in 2022. For example, compared to 2004, by 2014 there were significant improvements in safety, with homicide, robbery, and serious traffic accident rates halved; air quality improved; productivity increased; wages rose; and gross domestic product (GDP) grew. The number of recorded criminal offenses in Latvia continues to decrease (51 per 1000 inhabitants in 2010, 39 in 2020). The number of road fatalities (per 1000 inhabitants) fell from over 200 in 2004 to 139 in 2020.

Meanwhile, the unemployment rate, which stood at 10.4% in 2004, dropped to 6.1% by 2007. Though it spiked to 17.5% during the 2009 economic crisis, it later declined to 7.4%, 6.3%, and 8.1% in 2018, 2019 and 2020, respectively.

The average gross monthly wage in 2020 reached €1,143. Government spending on social protection has also grown significantly. GDP - a key economic development indicator - rose from €21.1 billion in 2005 to €27.6 billion in 2019 (in constant prices), decreasing slightly to €26.6 billion in 2020. Internet access in Latvia continues to improve each year: in 2020, 99.9% of businesses and 89.7% of households had access to the internet. EU membership has also enabled Latvia to attract more foreign direct investment.

Recommended further reading:

- Brigulio, L. (2016). Small States and the European Union. Economic Perspectives. Routledge.
- Sauka, A., A. **Čepurenko** (2017). Entrepreneurship in Transition Economies: Diversity, Trends, and Perspectives. Springer.
- Central Statistical Bureau (2021). Main Statistical Indicators. Latvia 2021. Available: https://admin.stat.gov.lv/system/files/publication/2021-05/Nr_02_Latvija_Galvenie_statistikas_raditaji_2021_%2821_00%29_LV.pdf
- Ministry of Wellfare of Latvia (2021). Industry statistical data (2021). Available: https://www.lm.gov.lv/lv/nozares-statistikas-dati

Disinformation narrative No. 16: *Sanctions against Russia harm the Latvian economy more. As a result, Latvia's economy is collapsing.*

Debunking: First of all, Latvia's economy is not collapsing. On the contrary, the main indicators of Latvia's economic performance are stable and improving. Naturally, like in virtually every country in the world, economic development is cyclical - due to various internal and external factors, there are periods of downturn followed by periods of recovery. For example, since 2010, when Latvia's GDP had fallen to €20.6 billion (in 2015 constant prices) due to the financial and economic crisis, it had already increased to €23.4 billion by 2013. Growth continued even after the imposition of sanctions in response to the annexation of Crimea: in 2014 – €23.6 billion; in 2016 – €25.1 billion; and in 2020 – €26.6 billion.

Although economic relations with practically any country are useful for Latvia's development - and Russia remains a notable partner - Latvia's economy is not dependent on Russia. Moreover, the nature of Latvian-Russian relations is shaped by the broader direction of EU-Russia relations, which include dialogue and a package of restrictive measures - sanctions - developed in response to the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Of course, Russia also imposes retaliatory measures, which affect the EU and Latvia to some extent.

When evaluating the pros and cons of such sanctions, it must be emphasised that for Latvia - like any other country - maintaining sovereignty is essential for economic development. Membership in the EU and NATO plays a major role in ensuring this sovereignty. Furthermore, since Russia is not Latvia's main economic partner, it is difficult to imagine any Russian sanctions that could significantly and irreversibly damage the Latvian economy.

For example, Russia is only Latvia's fourth largest import partner. In terms of exports, Russia ranks fifth, behind Lithuania, Estonia, the United Kingdom and Germany. As for export trends, Latvian exports to Russia doubled from 2009 to 2013, but decreased in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea - and despite overall export growth, remained at roughly the same level in 2021.

Recommended further reading:

- Shentov, O., R. Stefanov un V.Martin (2019). The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe. Routledge.
- Central Statistical Bureau (2021). Main Statistical Indicators. Latvia 2021. Available: https://admin.stat.gov.lv/system/files/publication/2021-05/Nr_02_Latvija_Galvenie_statistikas_raditaji_2021_%2821_00%29_LV.pdf
- EU Fact Sheets. Available: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/lv/sheet/177/russia

Disinformation narrative No. 17: *Latvia is a failed state with a collapsing economy.*

Debunking: The term "failed state" (or more commonly, "fragile state") refers to a country that meets two main criteria: its government is unable to govern the country and its population effectively, and it cannot protect its national borders. According to the World Population Review Fragile States Index (2022), the most fragile countries are Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan and Syria. In contrast, Latvia, along with Lithuania and Estonia, ranks significantly better in this index than Russia or most other former Soviet states.

While economic growth is cyclical by nature, Latvia's economy is developing - not collapsing. New startups are emerging, foreign direct investment is increasing, and the country's most important economic indicator - gross domestic product (GDP) - continues to grow. Compared to other former USSR countries, Latvia ranks higher in various international indices:

- According to the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index (2019), Latvia ranked 41st out of 141 countries (Estonia – 31st, Lithuania – 39th), while Russia ranked 43rd, Kazakhstan 55th, Azerbaijan 58th and Georgia 74th.
- In the World Bank's Doing Business Index (2020), which measures how easy it is to conduct business, Latvia ranked 19th out of 190 countries (Estonia – 18th, Lithuania – 11th), ahead of Kazakhstan (25th), Russia (28th) and Azerbaijan (34th). Among former Soviet countries, only Georgia ranked higher at 7th place.
- According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (2021), Latvia performs significantly better than most post-Soviet states.

Undeniably, like in many countries, Latvia faces several challenges:

- Income inequality in Latvia remains relatively high - 4th highest among EU countries (2019 data).
- Studies report low public trust in the government and public institutions.
- The shadow economy remains a concern.
- Reports by organisations like the Foreign Investors' Council in Latvia highlight areas needing improvement, such as education quality, scientific capacity, and the justice system - though they also note ongoing progress, such as university reforms and the establishment of economic courts.

Demographic trends and overall economic productivity also remain important issues. However, these are challenges typical of a developing nation, not signs of a "collapsing economy."

Conclusion: Latvia is not a failed or collapsing state. It is a resilient, democratic country steadily addressing its socio-economic challenges while outperforming many post-Soviet states in international development and governance rankings.

Recommended further reading:

- Central Statistical Bureau (2021). Main Statistical Indicators. Latvia 2021. Available: https://admin.stat.gov.lv/system/files/publication/2021-05/Nr_02_Latvija_Galvenie_statistikas_raditaji_2021_%2821_00%29_LV.pdf
- Schwab, K., World Economic Forum (2019) The Global Competitiveness Report 2019. Available: https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2019.pdf
- Sauka, A. (2018). Entrepreneurship development through internationalisation in Latvia. In: Mets, T., Sauka, A., Purg, D. (Eds.). Entrepreneurship in Central and Eastern Europe. Development Through Internationalisation. Routledge.
- Transparency International (2021). *Corruption Perception Index*. Available: https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021
- World Bank Group (2020). *Doing Business 2020. Comparing Business Regulation in 190 Economies*. Available: https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/688761571934946384/pdf/Doing-Business-2020-Comparing-Business-Regulation-in-190-Economies.pdf

Disinformation narrative No. 18: *People continue to leave Latvia. The demographic situation is catastrophic. Soon the nation will become extinct and no one will remain in Latvia.*

Debunking: Available data show that the claim that people continue to leave Latvia en masse, that the demographic situation is catastrophic, and that soon no one will remain in Latvia is highly exaggerated. When comparing Latvia's population in 1990 to that in 2021, the population has indeed declined by approximately 775,000 people, or about 29%. More than half of this reduction, around 469,000 people, is the result of migration.

The largest reductions in Latvia's population were linked to the withdrawal of Russian armed forces between 1992 and 1994, during which 142,000 people left the country, and the 2008–2010 economic crisis, which led to a decrease of 117,000 people.

Looking at the overall dynamics of Latvia's permanent population:

- In 1990: 2,668,140 residents;
- In 2005: 2,249,724;
- In 2015: 1,986,096;
- In 2021: 1,893,223.

By citizenship:

- In 2000: 1,771,967 were Latvian citizens, 582,175 non-citizens, 27,385 foreigners, and 188 stateless persons;
- By 2021: the number of non-citizens had dropped to 190,522, the number of foreigners increased to 61,783, Latvian citizens totalled 1,640,782, and there were 136 stateless persons.

By ethnicity, comparing 2000 to 2021:

- Latvians decreased from 1,370,703 to 1,187,891 (-13.3%);
- Russians: from 703,243 to 463,587 (-34.9%);
- Belarusians: from 97,150 to 58,632 (-39.6%).

The general conclusion: Latvia's population is decreasing, but the decline is significantly smaller among Latvians and Latvian citizens.

Population decline in Latvia has multiple causes, not just migration. In recent years, the main factor has been natural population decrease (more deaths than births), rather than emigration. For example, in 2020, due to higher mortality than birth rates, the population decreased by 11,300 people, while net migration accounted for only a 3,200-person drop.

Births vs. deaths over time:

- 2005: 21,879 births vs. 32,777 deaths;
- 2010: 19,781 births vs. 30,040 deaths;

- 2015: 21,979 births vs. 28,478 deaths;
- 2020: 17,552 births vs. 28,854 deaths.

These data point to the need for Latvia to actively address its demographic challenges. Measures should include encouraging higher birth rates (e.g., through financial support and benefits) and improving economic conditions, including better-paid jobs, in order to reduce emigration.

Importantly, Latvia also gains certain benefits from those who have emigrated. For instance, diaspora remittances are significant - €818 million in 2017, according to the Bank of Latvia, with over a third of diaspora members regularly supporting relatives in Latvia. Other benefits include philanthropic support, contributions to entrepreneurship, export development, tourism, and the transfer of knowledge, skills, ideas, and new attitudes - altogether fostering positive change in Latvian society.

Recommended further reading:

- Bela, B., Mieriņa, I. (2018). Diasporas ieguldījums Latvijā un tā apzināšanas iespējas. Pētījuma rezultāti. Rīga: Latvijas Universitāte.
- Central Statistical Bureau (2021). Main Statistical Indicators. Latvia 2021. Available: https://admin.stat.gov.lv/system/files/publication/2021-05/Nr_02_Latvija_Galvenie_statistikas_raditaji_2021_%2821_00%29_LV.pdf

Disinformation narrative No. 19: *Latvia provokes Russia to attract Western attention – this is necessary in order to receive economic aid from Europe, because Latvia is in a catastrophic economic situation.*

Debunking: Latvia is not in a catastrophic or even poor economic situation. Such a claim is not based on data and should rather be considered populist, demagogic, and possibly driven by provocative motives. For example, Latvia's gross domestic product (GDP), the main indicator of economic development, increased in comparative prices from EUR 21.1 billion in 2005 to EUR 26.6 billion in 2020. Latvia also performs relatively well in various international indexes and rankings, such as the World Bank's Doing Business ranking (19th place) and the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index (41st place).

Mechanisms for financial support between Latvia and the EU are clearly defined, both in terms of contributions and received payments. These are based on agreed mechanisms - treaties that do not include any condition requiring Latvia to provoke Russia in order to receive support from the EU. Moreover, for every 1 euro Latvia contributed to the EU budget during 2014–2020, it received an average of 4 euros in return. The available EU funding for Latvia exceeds EUR 7.446 billion, providing substantial support for economic development.

While provocation can be used as a tool by states to manipulate one another, such actions are far more typical of authoritarian regimes than democratic countries. Latvia's foreign policy, including its relations with Russia, is largely shaped by how the European Union as a whole manages its relationship with Russia. Sanctions related to the annexation of Crimea, responses to the suppression of protests in Belarus, or support for Ukraine's alignment with NATO - any Latvian reaction to such actions by Russia or Belarus can be interpreted by some as a provocation "to attract Western attention."

However, in democratic countries like those in the EU and Latvia as an EU member state, such actions are understood as defending human rights, sovereignty, and the right to make decisions in pursuit of national goals, not as provocations.

Recommended further reading:

- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia (2021). Benefits from the EU membership [*Ieguvumi no Latvijas dalības Eiropas Savienībā*]. Available: https://www2.mfa.gov.lv/arpolitika/eiropas-savieniba-arpolitika/sabiedribas-informesana-es-jautajumos/ieguvumi-no-latvijas-dalibas-eiropas-savieniba
- Eteris, E. (2018). Latvia in Europe and the World. Growth Strategy for a New Centennial. RSU Publ.

Disinformation narrative No. 20: *The Rail Baltica railway project in the Baltic States is being implemented to serve NATO's objectives.*

Debunking: Rail Baltica is not a NATO-funded project, and its primary goal is economic, not military. Rail Baltica is a railway infrastructure project aimed at integrating the Baltic States into the European railway network. The project is being implemented by Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Poland, with Finland also participating. The planned railway line will connect Helsinki, Tallinn, Pärnu, Riga, Panevėžys, Kaunas, Vilnius, and further on to Warsaw. The total length of the Rail Baltica line will reach 870 kilometres, ensuring connections to ports and airports in the Baltic States and, through Warsaw, to major European ports such as Hamburg, Rotterdam and Antwerp. The project is funded 81–85% by the Connecting

Europe Facility (CEF) and co-financed by the Baltic States.

Given its objectives and scale, several significant benefits are expected from the implementation of the Rail Baltica project. First, it will provide convenient, modern mobility for passenger and freight transport. It will not only facilitate easier travel for residents, but also bring economic benefits that will likely serve as a catalyst for economic development in the Baltic States. For example, Rail Baltica is a large-scale construction project that will create new jobs during its development phase and contribute to the region's GDP growth. Through Rail Baltica, the Baltic States will also become part of the North Sea–Baltic Corridor from the railway infrastructure perspective, ensuring deeper integration and economic cooperation. This means better trade links with other countries, increased market accessibility to and from Latvia, and the potential to attract foreign investment.

An infrastructure project like Rail Baltica is also expected to yield secondary economic benefits, including the emergence of new businesses, urban development, technological innovation and knowledge transfer. These benefits are especially important from an environmental perspective, as rail transport is more environmentally friendly compared to, for instance, air travel. The trains used for Rail Baltica are planned to be electric. Undeniably, any infrastructure - be it railways, roads, bridges, airports, etc. - can, if necessary, be used for military purposes, including for NATO needs.

Recommended further reading:

- EY (30 April 2017). Rail Baltica Global Project Cost-Benefit Analysis Final Report. Available: https://www.railbaltica.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/RB_CBA_FINAL_REPORT_0405.pdf
- Ramboll (2021). Rail Baltica Riga Node Operation Optimisation Study. Available: https://www.railbaltica.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/2020-01-18_Riga-Node-Study-Final-report-For-Publishing-Final-with-annexes.pdf

Disinformation narrative No. 21: *The European Union is creating a security buffer of poor countries – Ukraine, the Baltic States, and Belarus to provide Europe with cheap labour and a market for selling goods. Latvia's main export has long been cheap labour, and this is also the country's main business model.*

Debunking: Overall, the EU promotes mobility, and this opportunity has been utilised by residents of Latvia, other Baltic States and Poland, who have sought employment in more developed EU countries. At the same time, the Baltic States, Poland, and other EU countries have attracted cheaper labour from Belarus or Ukraine - especially in sectors like construction and seasonal work, though not exclusively.

Regarding potential labour reserves, EU countries have cheaper and broader access to labour from other regions of the world, such as India and China. However, it is a fact that labour in the Baltic States and Poland is generally cheaper compared to more developed EU countries. These cost differences in labour do not necessarily apply to all professions - particularly those involving innovation and high added value.

Nonetheless, such workforce migration cannot be referred to as "exports." Latvia's main exports are wood and wood products; machinery, mechanical appliances, and electrical equipment; metals and metal products; chemical and allied industry products; and food industry products. Moreover, there is competition among countries - including within the EU - for attracting workers, not only high-level specialists but also so-called blue-collar workers.

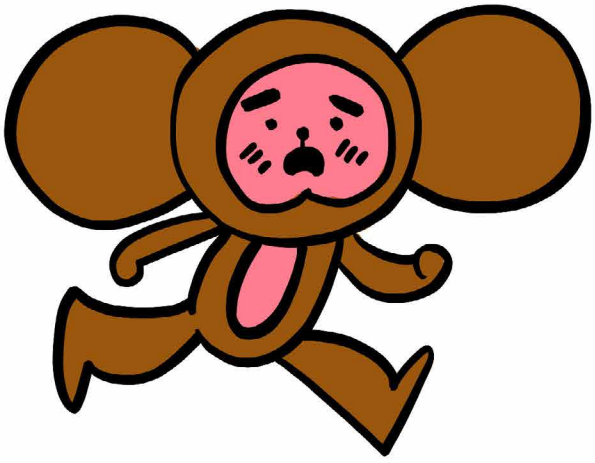
Latvia itself faces a shortage of especially qualified workers, as highlighted in various studies, including the Foreign Investors' Council in Latvia's investment climate index. It is also important to note that when it comes to internal labour mobility, comparing EU and non-EU countries is not appropriate, as different obligations and opportunities apply.

Recommended further reading:

- Central Statistical Bureau (2021). Main Statistical Indicators. Latvia 2021. Available: https://admin.stat.gov.lv/system/files/publication/2021-05/Nr_02_Latvija_Galvenie_statistikas_raditaji_2021_%2821_00%29_LV.pdf
- OECD (2021). International Migration Outlook 2021.

Human rights and values

Ieva Miļūna



Disinformation narrative No. 22: *There is widespread "Russophobia" in Latvia -deliberate and systematic discrimination against Russians and Russophones.*

Debunking: Latvia is an independent democratic republic, as stated in Article 1 of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia[1]. One of the core principles of a democratic and lawful state is the observance of human rights. The prohibition of discrimination is a cornerstone of international human rights and represents the state's highest obligation to ensure and protect this principle in the daily lives of all residents of Latvia.

The Declaration on the Restoration of Independence of the Republic of Latvia[2] specifically guarantees both political freedoms and social, economic and cultural rights to all citizens of Latvia and other countries in accordance with internationally recognised human rights standards (Article 8 of the Declaration). This clearly refutes any claims of discrimination against Russians or Russophone residents, as Article 8 states that international human rights norms shall be fully applied even to those former USSR citizens residing in Latvia who did not take Latvian citizenship.

Moreover, through the May 4, 1990 declaration "On the Accession of the Republic of Latvia to International Legal Instruments on Human Rights"[3] and Latvia's subsequent accession to the majority of major international human rights treaties, all such instruments are fully applicable to Russians and Russophone minorities residing in Latvia. Latvia could not function as an independent democratic republic or participate in international organisations if it did not comply with international human rights standards with regard to Russians and Russophone individuals.

"Russophobia" has never been an objective of Latvian domestic policy, nor has it been promoted in Latvian political or socioeconomic society. Russians and Russophone residents have the right to preserve and develop their minority identity within Latvian society. They are fully entitled to civil and political rights, as well as social, economic, cultural, and solidarity rights, without any form of discrimination.

Recommended further reading:

- D. Bleiere et al., (2005). *Latvijas vēsture – 20.gadsimts*. Rīga: Jumava.
- Ziemele I., (1996). Par cilvēktiesību iedzīvināšanas mehānismiem, *Latvijas Vēstnesis*, Nr. 88. Available: https://www.vestnesis.lv/ta/id/28944
- Ziemele I., (2005). *State Continuity and Nationality: The Baltic States and Russia. Past, Present and Future as Defined by International Law*. Brill/Nijhoff.

Disinformation narrative No. 23: *In Latvia, defenders of Russian rights and Russian-language media are persecuted.*

Debunking: In Latvia, the rule of law prevails. Russophone residents of Latvia can exercise their rights in accordance with Latvian law and the international legal norms binding on Latvia. Russophone residents who are Latvian citizens and who "differ from Latvians in terms of culture, religion or language, have traditionally lived in Latvia for generations and consider themselves to belong to the Latvian state and society,"[4] can defend their rights under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities[5].

This includes rights and freedoms such as:

- equality before the law and protection from discrimination[6],
- preservation of culture and identity[7],
- promotion of tolerance and intercultural dialogue[8],
- freedom of assembly and association,
- freedom of thought, conscience and religion[9],
- use of their language (with restrictions defined in Latvian law)[10],
- promotion of knowledge of the culture, history, language and religion of both national minorities and the majority[11] ,
- the right to establish private educational institutions[12],
- the right to learn their language[13],
- the right to participate in cultural, social, economic and public life[14].

If Russophone residents are not citizens of Latvia or any other country, but reside legally and permanently in Latvia, and identify themselves according to the definition of a "national minority" as declared by Latvia in relation to the Convention (see the second sentence of this rebuttal)[15], they can also enjoy the rights set out in the Convention, provided that Latvian law does not specify otherwise.

In addition, Russophone residents in Latvia can exercise all human rights provided in international human rights treaties binding on Latvia, as well as in customary international law and general principles of human rights.

Russian-language media in Latvia enjoy freedom of expression in line with international human rights norms binding on Latvia. Latvia fulfils its obligations under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities[16] to promote tolerance and intercultural dialogue in the media sphere. The state is obliged not to discriminate against national minorities in media access[17], but it may require the licensing of Russian-language broadcasters[18].

Latvia has a duty to ensure that national minorities are free to express their views and to receive and disseminate information without discrimination[19]. It must not obstruct the creation and use of Russian-language print media[20].

Latvia has no right to persecute or otherwise influence Russian-speaking human rights defenders or media based on their opinions or ethnic identity. Doing so would be contrary to the core principles of human rights in a democratic state.

Recommended further reading:

- *Nacionālo minoritāšu konvencija – Eiropas pieredze Latvijai* (2006). Eiropas Padomes Informācijas birojs. Available: https://cilvektiesibas.org.lv/media/attachments/30/01/2012/NMK-gramata.pdf
- Ozoliņa, Ž. (Ed.) (2016). *Societal Security. Inclusion-Exclusion Dilemma. A portrait of the Russian-speaking community in Latvia*. Rīga: Zinātne. Available: https://www.szf.lu.lv/fileadmin/user_upload/szf_faili/Petnieciba/sppi/demokratija/Societal_Security_iekslapas_20160418.pdf
- Constitutional Court of the Republic of Latvia judgment of 23 April 2019 in case No. 2018-12-01 "On the compliance of the first sentence of the first part and the words 'at the level of pre-school and basic education, in accordance with the provisions of Article 41 of this Law' of the second part of Article 1, the word 'basic education' in the first part of Article 3 of the Law of 22 March 2018 'Amendments to the Education Law' and Article 2 of the Law of 22 March 2018 'Amendments to the General Education Law' with the second sentence of Article 91, Article 112 and Article 114 of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia." Available: https://www.satv.tiesa.gov.lv/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/2018-12-01_Spriedums.pdf
- Ziemele, I. (Ed.) (2000). *Cilvēktiesības pasaulē un Latvijā*. SIA "Izglītības soļi".

Disinformation narrative No. 24: *In Latvia, Russian children receive a poorer education.*

Debunking: Every Russophone child in Latvia has the right to education, as guaranteed by Article 112 of the Constitution[21]. Just like Latvian children, children from minority groups, including Russophone children, are provided with the opportunity to receive both basic and secondary education free of charge. The quality standards for education in Latvia apply equally to students of all ethnic backgrounds. Any discrimination against Russophone children in the education process is prohibited.

In case No. 2023-15-01, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Latvia ruled on the compatibility of the transition to teaching only in the Latvian language in state and municipal educational institutions with the Constitution. The Court stated that the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities must be implemented in a way that does not hinder the learning of the state language[22]. The Court held that "[t]he state must support the preservation and development of the identity of minorities within the education system, while promoting the formation of a shared democratic societal identity, rather than opposing the rights of persons belonging to minorities to the common interests of society."[23] The Latvian language is a component of the country's constitutional identity, and individuals need it to participate in public life[24].

Within interest-based education, representatives of minority groups have the opportunity to learn their oral traditions and expressions, games and play traditions, seasonal festivities, ethnic symbols, traditional singing, dancing and handicraft skills, as well as cultural heritage preservation skills[25]. Interest-based education is financially supported by the state[26]. The Constitutional Court ruled that the relevant provisions of education laws are in line with the Constitution.

In case No. 2022-45-01, where the rules regarding education in the Latvian language in private educational institutions were challenged, the Constitutional Court held that "proficiency in the state language enables an individual to gain the maximum benefit from the national education system at every level of education."[27] Furthermore, "a person needs appropriate knowledge of the state language in order to wish to and be able to participate in public life."[28] "Improving state language proficiency plays a crucial role in ensuring individual rights and in building a cohesive society."[29] The Court emphasised that receiving education in the state language allows for more successful integration of children into society[30]. The Court also stated that "the adequate ability of persons belonging to minorities to communicate in the state language is of vital importance in the context of safeguarding a democratic state order, and it is equally significant for both the persons themselves and society as a whole."[31]. Minority interests are supported through interest-based education activities in the respective minority language[32]. The Constitutional Court found that the relevant amendments to education laws are consistent with the Constitution.

The rights of Russophone residents to education in Latvia are protected by international human rights norms, as well as by the specific provisions of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities[33]. According to this convention, Latvia is obliged to promote the learning of the culture, history, language and religion of both national minorities and the majority population (including the training of teachers)[34], to ensure the right of minorities to establish private educational institutions[35], and to provide opportunities to learn minority languages[36]. In multicultural societies, it is even a duty of the state to ensure the inclusion of intercultural content in educational programs[37].

Recommended further reading

- *Nacionālo minoritāšu konvencija – Eiropas pieredze Latvijai* (2006). Eiropas Padomes Informācijas birojs. Available: https://cilvektiesibas.org.lv/media/attachments/30/01/2012/NMK-gramata.pdf
- Judgment of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Latvia of 12 July 2024 in Case No. 2023-15-01 "On the Compliance of Article 1, 5, 6, and 12 (insofar as the transitional provisions of the law are supplemented by Paragraph 102) of the Law of 29 September 2022 'Amendments to the Education Law', and of the First Part of Article 4 and Article 6 of the Law of 29 September 2022 'Amendments to the General Education Law' with Articles 1 and 114 of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia". Available: https://www.satv.tiesa.gov.lv/web/viewer.html?file=https://www.satv.tiesa.gov.lv/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/2023-15-01_Spriedums-2.pdf#search=2023-15-01
- Balodis, R. (Ed.) (2011). *Latvijas Republikas Satversmes komentāri. VIII nodaļa. Cilvēka pamattiesības*. Latvijas Vēstnesis.
- Osipova, S. (2011). Valsts valoda kā konstitucionāla vērtība. *Jurista Vārds, Nr. 42*.

Disinformation narrative No. 25: *Political censorship is being implemented in Latvia by cleansing the information space of undesirable opinions. The situation regarding media freedom in Latvia is catastrophic.*

Debunking: According to Article 100 of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia[38], everyone in Latvia has the right to freedom of speech, which includes the right to freely receive, retain, and disseminate information and to express their views; censorship is prohibited. These obligations are also established in Latvia's international human rights commitments. Everyone in Latvia has the freedom to express their opinion, regardless of political orientation. Latvia upholds pluralism of opinions, which are accessible to various audiences. Freedom of speech may only be restricted by law; such a restriction must have a legitimate aim (national security, territorial integrity, public safety, health, morals, or the protection of the rights and reputation of others) and must be proportionate.

In 2024, the U.S. non-governmental organisation Freedom House ranked Latvia at 80 out of 100 in its democracy index (with 100 being the highest score)[39]. The Latvian media space is undeniably influenced by the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and Latvia's primary focus on providing continuous military, humanitarian, and diplomatic support to Ukraine[40]. It is acknowledged that Latvia's media space is being consolidated on the basis of national security[41]. Furthermore, successful integration must be based on the Latvian language[42].

Regarding media, Freedom House has recognised that the media sector operates freely, although publicly funded media for Russophone audiences is rarely available[43]. In contrast, Radio Free Europe broadcasts analytical discussions in English on political and economic issues for Russian-speaking audiences. On 28 September 2023, the Latvian Parliament approved the National Security Concept, which stipulates that from 1 January 2026, content on public media platforms must be in Latvian or in languages associated with the European cultural space[44].

The National Electronic Mass Media Council imposed a fine of 8,500 euros on the news portal TVNET for an interview with Member of Parliament Aleksejs Rosļikovs, in which he stated that changes to residence conditions for Russian citizens and, in some cases, suspension of residence permits, could be compared to "deportations," referring to how Latvians were deported to Siberia in 1941 and 1949[45]. The State Security Service declared that these statements do not constitute a criminal offense, and TVNET has appealed the Council's decision[46]. In Latvia, the justification of genocide, crimes against humanity, crimes against peace, and war crimes is criminally punishable[47]. This also applies to the blocking of certain websites linked to Russia, Belarus, and other countries in the EU due to the war in Ukraine[48].

In none of Freedom House's assessments has it been indicated that Latvia has acted contrary to the rule of law or its international obligations. No international organisation has raised concerns about potential violations of media freedom in Latvia. EU member states promote a high standard of media freedom and pluralism.

The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities[49] sets out Latvia's obligation to ensure that national minorities have the right to freely express their views, to receive and disseminate information in their minority language, to be free from discrimination in the use of media, to establish media outlets, and to promote access to media and the fostering of tolerance and cultural diversity[50].

Recommended further reading:

- *Nacionālo minoritāšu konvencija – Eiropas pieredze Latvijai*. (2006). Eiropas Padomes Informācijas birojs. Available: https://cilvektiesibas.org.lv/media/attachments/30/01/2012/NMK-gramata.pdf
- Valtenbergs, V., Grumolte-Lerhe, I., Avotniece, Z., Beizītere, I. (2018). *Krievijas ietekme Latvijas informatīvajā telpā. Sintēzes ziņojums*. Latvijas Republikas Saeima. Available: https://www.saeima.lv/petijumi/Krievijas_ietekme_Latvijas_informativaja_telpa_elektroniski.pdf
- Latvian Institute of International Affairs (2016). *Internet Trolling as a hybrid warfare tool: the case of Latvia*. Available: https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/internet-trolling-as-a-hybrid-warfare-tool-the-case-of-latvia/160
- Rožukalne, A. (2023). *Public Service Media: Independent or Not*? Available: https://eng.lsm.lv/article/features/commentary/29.09.2023-public-service-media-independent-or-not.a525832/
- European Parliament resolution of 3 May 2018 on media pluralism and media freedom in the European Union (2017/2209(INI)). Available: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0204_LV.html

Disinformation narrative No. 26: *The non-citizen situation in Latvia is shameful. Latvia is violating the human rights of non-citizens.*

Debunking: Persons in the non-citizen category in Latvia are those who, under the law "On the Status of those Former USSR Citizens who are not Citizens of Latvia or Another State,"[51] have the right to receive a non-citizen passport issued by the Republic of Latvia[52].

Non-citizens are former USSR citizens and their children who were registered in Latvia on 1 July 1992, or who had otherwise permanently resided in Latvian territory up to that time and who are not citizens of Latvia or any other state[53].

The restoration of Latvia's independence is based on the doctrine of state continuity, which means that Latvia is not a new state but a restored state based on the foundations of the country established on 18 November 1918. This also means that the institution of Latvian citizenship is grounded in this continuity doctrine, and the status of Latvian citizen belongs only to those residents who were citizens of Latvia on 17 June 1940, as well as other categories of persons[54] defined in the Citizenship Law who had a legal connection to the Latvian state.

Non-citizens in Latvia enjoy all human rights provided for in the Constitution (Satversme) and Latvia's international legal obligations - civil and political rights, economic, social and cultural rights, and solidarity rights - with limitations defined in Latvian law that are aimed at remedying the consequences of the unlawful occupation in 1940.

Latvia has a legal interest in determining the categories of persons to be considered its citizens. Non-citizens in Latvia have the right to be treated with dignity, which is a core principle of international human rights applicable to all residents and inhabitants of Latvia. Human rights are inherent to all individuals residing in the territory of a given state, deriving from the general nature of things (according to the natural law school), which means that human rights are inalienable.

Recommended further reading:

- Ziemele, I. (Red.) (2000). *Cilvēktiesības pasaulē un Latvijā*. SIA "Izglītības soļi".
- Ziemele, I. (2005). *State Continuity and Nationality: The Baltic States and Russia. Past, Present and Future as Defined by International Law*. Brill/Nijhoff.
- Ždanoka v. Latvia, European Court of Human Rights, Grand Chamber, Judgment of 16 March 2006, Application no. 58278/00. Available: https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-72794
- Jundzis, T. (Red.) (2017). *Nepārtrauktības doktrīna Latvijas vēstures kontekstā*. Rīga: Latvijas Zinātņu akadēmijas Baltijas stratēģisko pētījumu centrs.

Disinformation narrative No. 27: *The COVID-19 pandemic was used as a tool to intensify Russophobia in society. The media spread statements claiming that Russians were more frequently infected with COVID-19 and also that the virus had been spread from China specifically using a Russian aircraft.*

Debunking: The COVID-19 pandemic in Latvia affected all residents, regardless of their nationality. None of the measures implemented by the Latvian state to limit the spread of the pandemic were targeted at Russophone residents as a minority group within Latvian society. Such targeting is prohibited by international human rights norms, specifically the principle of non-discrimination.

In combating the COVID-19 pandemic, Latvia acted in accordance with its international human rights obligations and

requirements, especially concerning international law obligations in cases of emergency declarations and necessary restrictive measures during the pandemic. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted governments worldwide to impose restrictions affecting rights such as freedom of assembly, the right to private and family life, the right to education, and freedom of movement, every resident of Latvia has the right to challenge the proportionality of government-imposed restrictions in court, exercising their human right to a fair trial. Latvia, as a democratic, lawful state based on the rule of law and human rights, continued to exist and operate during the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring that every resident's human rights guaranteed by the Constitution were upheld.

Media in Latvia enjoy freedom of expression, and any censorship by the state is prohibited. Disinformation, false information, and conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 were not specifically linked to Russophone residents[55]; rather, they reached all residents of Latvia without any attempt to promote Russophobia. The amount of deliberately spread disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic has been assessed as relatively small compared to the mere circulation of false information or conspiracy theories[56].

Recommended further reading:

- Līce, K., Vītola, E. (2020). Deklarācija starptautiskajām cilvēktiesību organizācijām par ārkārtējo situāciju Latvijā. *Jurista Vārds*, Nr. 15 (1125). Available: https://juristavards.lv/doc/276423-deklaracija-starptautiskajam-cilvektiesibu-organizacijam-par-arkartejo-situaciju-latvija/
- Palkova, A., Bikovs, A. (2020). *Prevailing themes in disinformation, misinformation, and conspiracy theories during Covid-19: Latvian case analysis*. Latvian Institute of International Affairs. Available: https://www.lai.lv/viedokli/prevailing-themes-in-disinformation-misinformation-and-conspiracy-theories-during-the-covid-19-pande-855
- NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (2021). *How Did The Nordic-Baltic Countries Handle The First Wave of Covid-19? A Strategic Communications Analysis*. Available: https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/how-did-the-nordic-baltic-countries-handle-the-first-wave-of-covid-19/211

Disinformation narrative No. 28: *Propaganda strategy centres are being established in Riga with the aim of attacking Russia and Russophone people. There are no similar centres in Russia; therefore, Latvia's activity is aggressive.*

Debunking: Latvia is bound by the international legal norm prohibiting the threat or use of force, as defined in Article 2, Paragraph 4 of the UN Charter[57]. Moreover, this norm is considered *jus cogens* – a peremptory norm in international relations from which no derogation is permitted. This prohibits Latvia even from making threats or engaging in actions that could be interpreted as threats of force against Russia.

Latvia is an independent, sovereign state, and it has the right to establish institutions or organisational structures within its territory as it sees fit. Russia, in turn, is bound by Article 2, Paragraph 7 of the UN Charter, which prohibits interference in the internal affairs of other states. If Russia wishes to cooperate with Latvia in specific areas of international cooperation, it may do so through international organisations in which both Latvia and Russia are members.

In terms of military cooperation, Latvia and Russia, both members of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), engage under the framework of the 2011 Vienna Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures[58], which includes provisions for information sharing on defence planning, armed forces, and military activities[59]. Furthermore, Russia itself has withdrawn from the Open Skies Treaty[60], which would have allowed it to conduct military observation flights over Latvian territory to gather information on armed forces and operations[61].

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has undeniably influenced Latvia's political stance toward Russia. Latvia views the invasion as an attack on the values of the democratic world and insists on adherence to a rules-based international order founded on international law and the UN Charter.

Recommended further reading:

- Klabbers, J. (2017). *International Law* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weller, M. (Ed.) (2015). *The Oxford Handbook of the Use of Force in International Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brīvības un Solidaritātes Fonds (2016). *Resisting Foreign State Propaganda in the New Information Environment: the Case of the EU, Russia, and the Eastern Partnership Countries*. Available: http://bsf-latvija.lv/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/research_FEPS_BSF.pdf
- Miļūna, I. (2020). ANO Ģenerālās asamblejas un Drošības padomes prakse, *Jurista Vārds*, Nr. 42(1152)

Disinformation narrative No. 29: *Censorship is being implemented in Latvia through cooperation between governments and large corporations, creating new forms of authoritarianism. Major corporations delete the accounts of individuals who express critical and independent views, and together with the Latvian government, they maintain Russophobia and Islamophobia in society.*

Debunking: Although it is debatable whether multinational corporations are subjects of international law[62], Latvia in no way forms coalitions with multinational corporations to implement any kind of authoritarian policy. The Latvian state is solely responsible for any human rights violations within its territory. Latvia is bound by the obligation set out in Article 100 of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia to ensure freedom of expression and not to impose any censorship. This obligation is also established in international human rights norms – the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the 1950 European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

Although Latvia may cooperate with other subjects and actors of international law in implementing its policies, only the Latvian state is accountable for human rights violations within Latvia. To date, no case has been initiated against Latvia in any international court or tribunal for state involvement in suppressing individuals' freedom of expression on the grounds of Russophobia or Islamophobia.

Regarding the responsibility of multinational corporations, it has been recognised within the United Nations framework that states have a duty to protect all individuals in their territories from human rights violations committed by business enterprises. These business enterprises must respect human rights in their operations; and individuals and communities have the right to effective protection when their rights are affected by the actions of business enterprises[63]. The responsibilities of the state and business enterprises are distinct but complementary[64].

Recommended further reading:

- Klabbers, J. (2017). *International Law* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Slaughter, A.M. (2009). *A New World Order*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Birģelis, M. (2020). Transnacionālo uzņēmumu ietekme uz cilvēktiesībām un centieni to regulēt. *Jurista Vārds*, Nr. 13(1123).

Disinformation narrative No. 30: *The Latvian government, in cooperation with international corporations, deliberately created fear and anxiety in society about the COVID-19 pandemic in order to intimidate the public and bring it closer to accepting an authoritarian society.*

Debunking: The roles and responsibilities of the Latvian state and international multinational corporations are distinct. It has not been the policy of the Latvian government, in cooperation with international multinational corporations, to raise alarm in society about the COVID-19 pandemic. Both Latvia and international multinational corporations have human rights obligations toward Latvian society and its population.

Latvia is an independent democratic republic in which sovereign power belongs to the people, as established in Articles 1 and 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia. The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia does not allow for any form of authoritarianism without the knowledge and will of the people. The preamble to the Constitution enshrines the principle that "Latvia as a democratic, rule-of-law, socially responsible, and national state is founded on human dignity and freedom, recognises and protects fundamental human rights, and respects minorities. The people of Latvia protect their sovereignty, Latvia's independence, territory, unity, and democratic system of government."[65]

The Latvian government has not formed coalitions with international multinational corporations with the aim of creating any form of alarm about the COVID-19 pandemic within Latvian society. The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia affirms that Latvia, aware of its values in the international community, defends its national interests and promotes the sustainable and democratic development of a united Europe and the world.[66]

Recommended further reading:

- Autoru kolektīvs (2014). *Latvijas Republikas Satversmes komentāri. Ievads. I nodaļa. Vispārējie noteikumi*. Latvijas Vēstnesis.
- Levits, E. (2019). *Valstsgriba. Idejas un domas Latvijai 1985-2018*. Latvijas Vēstnesis.
- Līce, K. (2021). Cilvēktiesības nav egocentrisms, valsts nav Laimes lācis. *Jurista Vārds*, Nr. 7 (1169). Available: https://juristavards.lv/doc/278281-cilvektiesibas-nav-egocentrisms-valsts-nav-laimes-lacis/

Disinformation narrative No. 31: *Latvia protects individuals accused of Nazi crimes whose names have been publicly disclosed by Russia.*

Debunking: The prosecution of the gravest international crimes (genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and aggression) falls under the jurisdiction of the Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Latvia.

If the Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Latvia gathers sufficient evidence that such international crimes have been committed, there is no reason not to initiate prosecution. This matter lies entirely within the competence of the Latvian Prosecutor's Office.

The fact that Russia has disclosed the names of individuals allegedly involved in Nazi crimes does not create an automatic obligation for Latvia to prosecute these persons. The Latvian Prosecutor's Office investigates international crimes independently of instructions or requests from other states.

There is no statute of limitations for the investigation and prosecution of war crimes and crimes against humanity, as stipulated by the 1968 Convention on the Non-Applicability of Statutory Limitations to War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity[67]. Since 1944, Latvia has convicted several hundred individuals for war crimes, with many cases involving crimes committed against Jews[68].

Latvia does not, and must not, protect individuals accused of Nazi crimes, as it is bound by the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court[69], which primarily places the responsibility on states to prosecute individuals accused of international crimes within their own jurisdictions[70].

Only if a state is unwilling (for political reasons) or unable (due to a lack of capacity) to conduct such trials[71] does the International Criminal Court take over the responsibility. Latvia does not meet either of these criteria regarding unwillingness or inability to prosecute international crimes.

Recommended further reading:

- Ārlietu ministrijas preses centrs (2020). Par nacisma režīma noziegumu izmeklēšanu Latvijā, *Latvijas Vēstnesis*, Nr. 6.
- Paparinskis, M., Kalniņa, I. (2006). Kara noziegumu iztiesāšanas tiesiskās problēmas, *Jurista Vārds*, Nr. 9(412) .
- Schabas, W.A. (2016). *The Cambridge Companion to International Criminal Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Endnotes

1 The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia [Latvijas Republikas Satversme], *Latvijas Vēstnesis*, 1 July 1993, No. 43

2 The Declaration "On the Restoration of the Independence of the Republic of Latvia" dated May 4, 1990 [1990. gada 4. maija Deklarācija "Par Latvijas Republikas neatkarības atjaunošanu"], *Latvijas Republikas Augstākās Padomes un Valdības Ziņotājs*, 19 May 1990, No. 20

3 On the Accession of the Republic of Latvia to International Legal Documents on Human Rights [Par Latvijas Republikas pievienošanos starptautisko tiesību dokumentiem cilvēktiesību jautājumos], *Latvijas Republikas Augstākās Padomes un Valdības Ziņotājs*, 24 May 1990, No. 21

4 Article 2 of the Law 'On the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities' [Likuma "Par Vispārējo konvenciju par nacionālo minoritāšu aizsardzību" 2. pants] (*Latvijas Vēstnesis*, 31 May 2005, No. 85)

5 Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, *Latvijas Vēstnesis*, 31 May 2005, No. 85

6 Article 4 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

7 Article 5 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

8 Article 6 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

9 Articles 7 to 9 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

10 Articles 10 to 11 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities; Articles 3 to 4 of the Law 'On the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities'.

11 Article 12 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

12 Article 13 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

13 Article 14 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

14 Article 15 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

15 Article 2 of the Law 'On the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities'.

16 Article 6, Paragraph 1 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

17 Article 9, Paragraph 1 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

18 Article 9, Paragraph 2 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

19 Article 9, Paragraph 1 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

20 Article 9, Paragraph 3 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

21 The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia [Latvijas Republikas Satversme], Latvijas Vēstnesis, 1 July 1993, No. 43

22 Judgment of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Latvia on 12 July 2024 in case No. 2023-15-01 'On the compliance of Section 1, 5, 6 and 12 of the 29 September 2022 Law "Amendments to the Education Law", insofar as their transitional provisions are supplemented by point 102, and Section 4, first part, and Section 6 of the 29 September 2022 Law "Amendments to the General Education Law" with Articles 1 and 114 of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia', paragraph 14.3. [Latvijas Republikas Satversmes tiesas 2024. gada 12. jūlija spriedums lietā Nr. 2023-15-01 "Par 2022. gada 29. septembra likuma „Grozījumi Izglītības likumā" 1., 5., 6. un 12. panta, ciktāl ar to likuma pārejas noteikumi papildināti ar 102. punktu, un 2022. gada 29. septembra likuma „Grozījumi Vispārējās izglītības likumā" 4. panta pirmās daļas un 6. panta atbilstību Latvijas Republikas Satversmes 1. un 114. pantam", 14.3.paragrāfs]. Available: https://www.satv.tiesa.gov.lv/web/viewer.html?file=https://www.satv.tiesa.gov.lv/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/2023-15-01_Spriedums-2.pdf#search=2023-15-01

23 Ibid., paragraph 14.4.

24 Ibid., paragraph 15.3.

25 Ibid., paragraph 17.3.2.

26 Ibid., paragraph 17.7.

27 Judgment of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Latvia on 10 July 2024 in case No. 20224501 'On the compliance of Article 9(1.1), transitional provision point 102(1), and Articles 1, 5, and 6 of the 29 September 2022 Law 'Amendments to the Education Law' with Articles 1, 112(1), and 114 of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia', paragraph 32 [Latvijas Republikas Satversmes tiesas 2024. gada 10. jūlija spriedums lietā Nr. 2022-45-01 ""Par Izglītības likuma 9. panta 1.1. daļas, pārejas noteikumu 102. punkta 1. apakšpunkta un 2022. gada 29. septembra likuma "Grozījumi Izglītības likumā" 1., 5. un 6.panta atbilstību Latvijas Republikas Satversmes 1. pantam, 112. panta pirmajam teikumam un 114.pantam", 32. paragrāfs]. Available: https://www.satv.tiesa.gov.lv/web/viewer.html?file=https://www.satv.tiesa.gov.lv/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2022-45-01_Spriedums-1.pdf#search=2022-45-01

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Judgment of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Latvia dated 10 July 2024 in case No. 2022-45-01 'On the compliance of Article 9(1.1), transitional provision point 102(1), and Articles 1, 5, and 6 of the 29 September 2022 law "Amendments to the Education Law" with Articles 1, 112 (first sentence), and 114 of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia', paragraph 33.2. [Latvijas Republikas Satversmes tiesas 2024. gada 10. jūlija spriedums lietā Nr. 2022-45-01 ""Par Izglītības likuma 9.panta 1.1daļas, pārejas noteikumu 102.punkta 1.apakšpunkta un 2022.gada 29.septembra likuma "Grozījumi Izglītības likumā" 1., 5. un 6.panta atbilstību Latvijas Republikas Satversmes 1.pantam, 112.panta pirmajam teikumam un 114.pantam", 33.2. paragrāfs]. Avbailable: https://www.satv.tiesa.gov.lv/web/viewer.html?file=https://www.satv.tiesa.gov.lv/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2022-45-01_Spriedums-1.pdf#search=2022-45-01

31 Ibid., paragraph 36.3.1.

32 Ibid., paragraph 36.3.3.

33 Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, Latvijas Vēstnesis, 31 May 2005, No. 85

34 Article 12 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

35 Article 13 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

36 Article 14 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

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43 Ibid.

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50 Article 9 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

51 Law On the Status of Those Former USSR Citizens Who Are Not Citizens of Latvia or Any Other State [Likums „Par to bijušās PSRS pilsoņu statusu, kuriem nav Latvijas vai citas valsts pilsonības"], *Latvijas Vēstnesis*,25 April 1995, No. 63

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53 First paragraph of Article 1 of the Law 'On the Status of Those Former USSR Citizens Who Are Not Citizens of Latvia or Any Other State' [Likuma „Par to bijušās PSRS pilsoņu statusu, kuriem nav Latvijas vai citas valsts pilsonības" 1.panta pirmā daļa].

54 First paragraph of Article 2 of the Citizenship Law [Pilsonības likuma 2. panta pirmā daļa] (*Latvijas Vēstnesis*, 11 August 1994, No. 93).

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56 Ibid.

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61 Politico (15 January 2021). *Russia withdraws from Open Skies Treaty after U.S. departure*. Available: https://www.politico.com/news/2021/01/15/russia-open-skies-treaty-459597

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63 The UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights (2011). The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. An Introduction. Available: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Business/Intro_Guiding_PrinciplesBusinessHR.pdf

64 Ibid.

65 Paragraph 4 of the Preamble of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia.

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67 Convention on the Non-Applicability of Statutory Limitations to War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity [Konvencija par noilguma neatzīšanu kara noziegumiem un noziegumiem pret cilvēci], *Latvijas Vēstnesis*, 23 April 2003, No. 61

68 On the Investigation of Crimes Committed by the Nazi Regime in Latvia [Par nacisma režīma noziegumu izmeklēšanu Latvijā], Latvijas Vēstnesis, 8 January 2000, No. 6

69 The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court [Romas Starptautiskās krimināltiesas Statūti], Latvijas Vēstnesis, 28 June 2002, No. 97

70 Paragraphs 1 and 17 of The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

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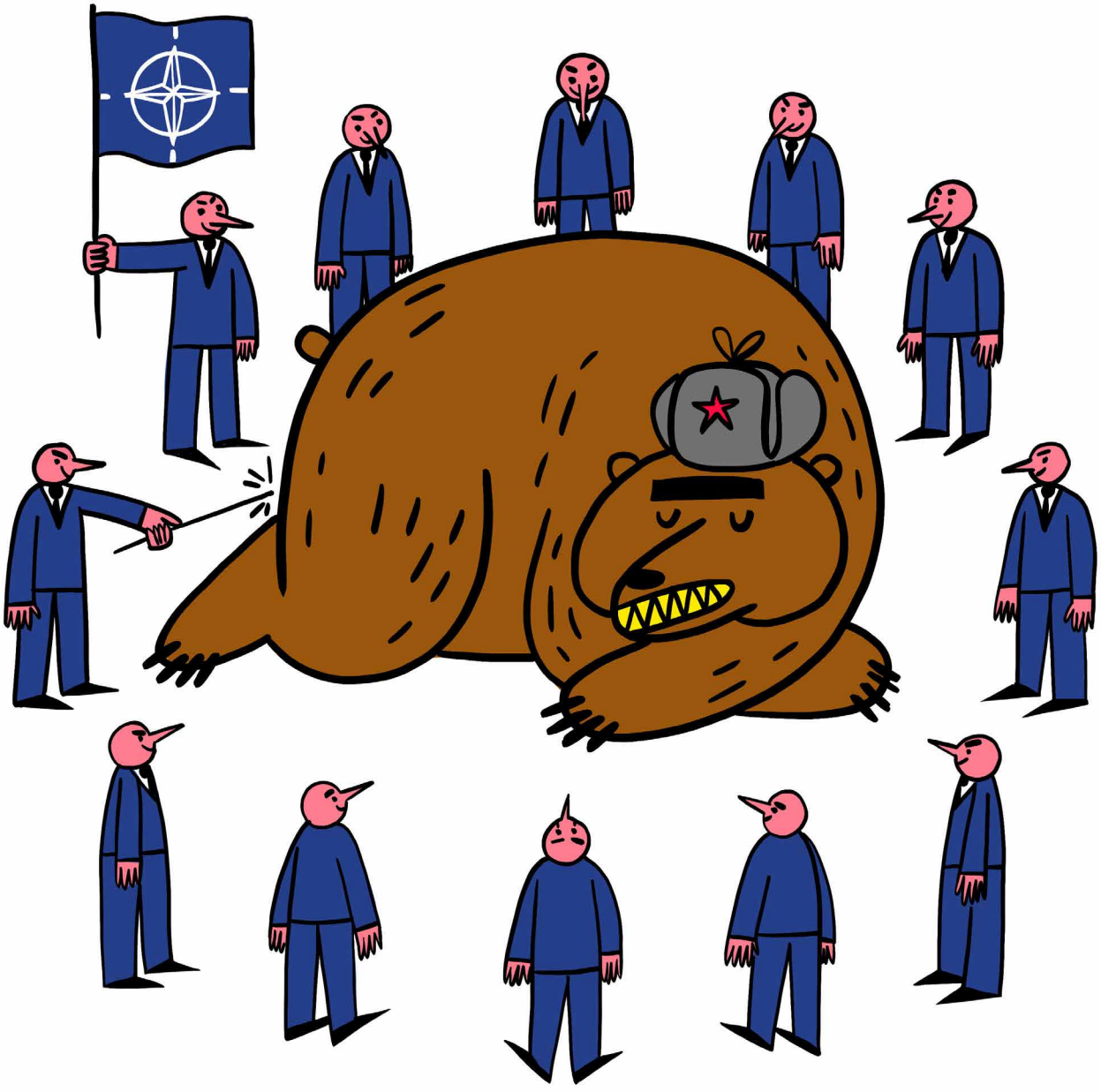
Geopolitics

Dr. Toms Rostoks



Disinformation narrative No. 32: *NATO is provoking Russia and preparing to attack Russia.*

Debunking: NATO is not trying to provoke Russia and is not preparing to invade Russia. There are many reasons for this, but three in particular should be highlighted.

First, NATO has not attempted to provoke Russia. For example, after the Baltic States joined the Alliance, practically no troops or military infrastructure from other NATO member states were stationed there. The only exception was the Baltic Air Policing mission, carried out by other NATO countries, since Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia did not have such military capabilities. NATO's presence in the Baltic region increased only after Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, when it was no longer possible to ignore the military threat posed by Russia to the Baltic States, and again after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Second, NATO has not stationed military forces in the Baltic States or elsewhere near Russia that would allow the Alliance to launch an attack on Russia. The multinational battlegroups deployed in the Baltic States, as well as the armed forces of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, do not pose a military threat to Russia. On the contrary, if Russia were to attack the Baltic States, the Alliance might find it difficult to defend them in the early stages of a conflict. NATO's deterrence efforts have not been aimed at creating military parity between NATO and Russia in this region.

Third, all 32 NATO member states would be unable to reach a mutual agreement on launching an attack on Russia, as NATO is a defensive alliance. Historically, attempts by France (in the 19th century) and Germany (in the 20th century) to conquer Russia ended in defeat, and even today Western societies do not want war with Russia. Escalation of conflict between NATO and Russia could lead to the use of nuclear weapons in combat, so both sides have tried to avoid direct military confrontation. Since 2014, NATO countries have significantly increased their defence spending, but the actions of NATO countries after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine indicate that the Alliance does not want a military conflict with Russia. This is evident from the caution shown by NATO decision-makers when providing military aid to Ukraine and their concerns about potential escalation of the conflict.

Recommended further reading:

- *NATO-Russia Relations: The Facts*. Available: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_111767.htm#Myths
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- Mazarr, M.J. et al., (2018). *What Deters and Why: Exploring Requirements for Effective Deterrence of Interstate Aggression*. RAND. Available: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2451.html

Disinformation narrative No. 33: *NATO and Western countries promised Russia not to expand eastward. The accession of the Baltic States to the Alliance violates this agreement.*

Debunking: One of Russia's accusations against NATO concerns the Alliance's enlargement policy. Russia claims that Western countries promised not to admit Central and Eastern European countries into the Alliance, and that this agreement has been violated. However, perceptions differ on who promised what and when. At the 2007 Munich Conference, Russian President Vladimir Putin referred to a statement made by NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner in May 1990, saying that NATO troops would not be deployed outside German territory. Also mentioned is a comment made by U.S. Secretary of State James Baker in February 1990 during a conversation with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, stating that NATO would not expand eastward. Discussions on NATO enlargement also took place between Russian President Boris Yeltsin and U.S. President Bill Clinton. However, Russia's accusations toward NATO are based on a misinterpretation of these talks.

Two arguments are particularly important to highlight.

First, although the issue of possible NATO enlargement was discussed during negotiations, the leaders of the USSR, and later Russia, failed to secure a written agreement that NATO would abandon its "open door" policy. Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev confirmed in a 2014 interview that in 1989 and 1990, in the context of German reunification, the USSR wanted NATO forces not to be deployed in the former German Democratic Republic. At that time, NATO enlargement to include former Warsaw Pact countries was not on the agenda. After the collapse of the USSR, Russian President Boris Yeltsin was also unsuccessful in securing either a formal or informal agreement with U.S. President Bill Clinton for NATO to renounce enlargement.

Second, the issue of NATO enlargement cannot be resolved through bilateral negotiations between the U.S. and Russia, because such a decision requires consensus among all member states of the Alliance. Article 10 of the 1949 Washington Treaty (on which the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was founded) stipulates that European countries

may be admitted to the Alliance by unanimous agreement of all NATO members. NATO's "open door" policy remains in effect, as evidenced by the accession of Finland and Sweden in 2023 and 2024, respectively. Moreover, abandoning the "open door" policy is not currently on the Alliance's agenda. Therefore, Russia's accusations toward NATO can be seen as wishful thinking rather than reality.

Recommended further reading:

- Goldgeier, J. (22 November 2019). *Promises Made, Promises Broken? What Yeltsin Was Told About NATO in 1993 and Why It Matters*. War on the Rocks. Available: https://warontherocks.com/2019/11/promises-made-promises-broken-whatyeltsin-was-told-about-nato-in-1993-and-why-it-matters-2/
- Korshunov, M. (16 October 2014). *Michail Gorbachev: I Am Against All Walls. Russia Beyond the Headlines*. Available: https://www.rbth.com/international/2014/10/16/mikhail_gorbachev_i_am_against_all_walls_40673.html
- *NATO Enlargement and Article 10*. Available: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49212.htm

Disinformation narrative No. 34: *Latvia is a U.S. "vassal state" – all decisions about Latvia are made in Washington.*

Debunking: Russia tends to view the world through the lens that all major global developments are controlled by great powers, thereby denying the significance of domestic political processes in small and medium-sized countries, as well as their efforts to influence the behaviour of large states. While the United States' contribution to Latvia's security since the restoration of independence has been substantial, the assumption that decisions about Latvia are made in the U.S. is incorrect. There are two main reasons for this.

First, the United States is Latvia's strategic partner, which has provided assistance since the early 1990s, particularly when it was most needed. The U.S. facilitated the withdrawal of Russian troops from Latvia, supported efforts to fight corruption, backed Latvia's accession to NATO, and helped build up the National Armed Forces. It was the U.S. that first sent troops to Latvia in the spring of 2014, shortly after Russia's annexation of Crimea. The United States has played a significant role in strengthening Latvia's independence, and thus its opinion on various matters is important to Latvia. Since 2014, the U.S. has provided substantial support for strengthening Latvia's defence capabilities.

Second, NATO and EU countries have achieved a level of mutual cooperation where many important decisions are made collectively, with countries consulting one another. This can create the impression that decisions are made not in national capitals, but in Brussels or Washington. However, mutual consultations between states do not mean that decisions are made on their behalf by someone else. The high level of cooperation and interdependence among EU and NATO member states discourages unilateral action and encourages consideration of partner countries' interests and views. For example, since the contribution of other NATO allies to Latvia's security is significant, Latvia must consider their positions on this matter; in other areas, Latvia enjoys greater autonomy.

Recommended further reading:

- Auers D. (Ed.) (2008). *From Captive Nation to Strategic Partner.* Riga: Academic Press of the University of Latvia. Available: https://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/media/115/download
- Indāns I. (Ed.) (2012). *Latvia and the United States: A New Chapter in the Partnership*. Riga: Centre for East European Policy Studies. Available: http://www.appc.lv/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Latvia_USA_2012.pdf
- Bukovskis K., Vargulis M. (Eds.) (2022*). Latvia and the United States: Bringing Friendship into the New Centennary*. Latvian Institute of International Affairs. Available: https://liia.lv/en/publications/latvia-and-the-united-states-bringing-friendship-into-the-next-centenary-1040

Disinformation narrative No. 35: *Russia's interference in Ukraine and the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia was justified and legal.*

Debunking: Russia's interference in Ukraine has not been legal overall, and neither was the annexation of Crimea. The main argument used to justify the legality of the annexation has been the referendum held in Crimea on 16 March 2014. However, there are three reasons why this referendum was illegal.

First, the Ukrainian government did not support the holding of this referendum, which made it unconstitutional under Ukrainian law. Only the Ukrainian government had the authority to initiate a referendum regarding Crimea's secession from Ukraine.

Second, the result of the referendum - accession to Russia - was not recognised by the international community. On

24 March 2014, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution calling on countries not to recognise the annexation of Crimea. The resolution passed with 100 votes in favour, 11 against, and 58 abstentions. Additionally, on 10 April 2014, the member states of the Council of Europe agreed to revoke Russia's voting rights and limit its participation in Council institutions.

Third, the referendum in Crimea did not conform to accepted standards for organising referenda on territorial sovereignty issues.

It is worth comparing the hastily organised vote in Crimea with the Scottish independence referendum held on 18 September 2014. In Crimea, the date of the referendum and the questions on the ballot were only made public 10 days before the vote. In contrast, Scotland's referendum was prepared over a period of a year and a half. The Crimean referendum took place during a period of political instability in Ukraine, just after President Viktor Yanukovych's government had collapsed and he had fled to Russia. The vote occurred under the supervision of Russian soldiers, and the local information space was almost entirely under Russian influence. The questions on the referendum ballot were tendentiously worded, making the results illegitimate. Official figures claimed that 83.1% of eligible voters participated, with 96.77% supporting Crimea's accession to Russia, but these numbers were fabricated and do not reflect the true opinions of the population.

Therefore, the referendum on Crimea's incorporation into Russia did not meet accepted standards for democratic voting processes and was not internationally recognised. Similarly, the referenda organised by Russia in 2022 in four partially or fully occupied regions of Ukraine are also illegitimate.

Recommended further reading:

- United Nations General Assembly resolution A/68/L.39. Territorial Integrity of Ukraine. 24 March 2014. Available: https://undocs.org/a/68/l.39
- European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission). Opinion on "Whether the Decision Taken by the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea in Ukraine to Organise a Referendum on Becoming a Constituent Territory of the Russia Federation or Restoring Crimea's 1992 Constitution Is Compatible with Constitutional Principles". Opinion no. 762/2014. Venice, 21 March 2014. Available: https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2014)002-e
- *Interview by Jonathan Masters with John B. Bellinger III. Why the Crimean Referendum Is Illegitimate*. Council on Foreign Relations, 16 March 2014. Available: https://www.cfr.org/interview/why-crimean-referendum-illegitimate

Disinformation narrative No. 36: *The European Union threatens traditional values (the concept of family, gender roles).*

Debunking: Russia seeks to position itself as a defender of traditional values, creating the impression that the EU threatens traditional values. False information is widely spread, claiming that traditional notions of family, gender roles, and the place of religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities in society are under threat in the European Union. Disinformation narratives portray Russia as the true guardian of European values, while the EU is depicted as morally and spiritually degenerate. But what are the actual values on which the EU is founded?

These are formulated in the Treaty on European Union, Article 2, which states: "The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail."

Of course, these are not the only values on which the EU is based, as the cultural, religious, and humanist heritage of Europe is also important. It is evident that the EU's goal is an inclusive society that is "united in diversity". Meanwhile, traditional values as understood by Russia do not, in fact, envision an inclusive society - instead, they impose the will of the majority on various minority groups, ignoring the plurality of values, interests, and identities present in modern societies.

Russia's message about EU values is tendentious and flawed in at least four ways.

First, specific things that the EU allegedly imposes on Member States are untrue and blatantly absurd. For example, information compiled by EUvsDisinfo shows that a popular theme in Russian disinformation narratives is that European countries are prepared to ban Christmas celebrations and the use of Christian symbols so as not to offend Muslims - which is, of course, false.

Second, there are significant differences in values and identities among the populations of EU countries, so it is incorrect to portray the EU as a repressive organisation seeking to homogenise European states. Substantial differences exist among EU countries on various domestic and foreign policy issues. Dialogue is not the same as imposing a single stance on all Member States.

Third, Russia's criticism of the West is hypocritical, given its aggressive policies toward Ukraine, and previously in Syria and elsewhere. By criticising other countries, Russia seeks to cover up the destruction its policies have caused to the people of Syria and Ukraine. In these countries, Russia is not seen as a defender of traditional values, but as an aggressor responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands and the devastation of entire cities.

Fourth, the discussions about values taking place in the EU are not unique to Europe. Similar debates are happening across the world. While the process and outcomes are not always agreeable to all parties, the fact that these discussions take place is itself positive - it shows the ability to talk about difficult issues rather than pretend they don't exist. Notably, such discussions no longer take place in Russia, and citizens who disagree with the government's position are repressed.

Recommended further reading:

- European Commission (2021). *Values and Identities of EU Citizens*. Special Eurobarometer 508. Available: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2230
- Treaty on European Union: Consolidated version. Official Journal of the European Union C115/13, 9 May 2008. Available: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:115:0013:0045:lv:PDF
- EUvsDisinfo (2 April 2019). *Five Common Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Narratives*. Available: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/5-common-pro-kremlin-disinformationnarratives/

Disinformation narrative No. 37: *The European Union undermines the sovereignty of nation states (decisions are made in Brussels, national currency has been taken away, migrants are being imposed).*

Debunking: According to the Russian viewpoint, the EU undermines the sovereignty of nation states. Supposed evidence for this view includes collective decision-making in Brussels, the adoption of a common currency, and the need to engage in solving problems important to other countries. For decades within the EU, there has been an ongoing debate about how deep integration should be and in which areas member states should cooperate more closely.

Russia's perspective on the EU is one-sided and biased, for several reasons.

First, the majority of people in EU member states are satisfied with their country's EU membership. For example, data from the 2022 Eurobarometer survey show that 52% of respondents in EU countries have a positive opinion of the EU, 36% are neutral, and only 12% have a negative opinion. Latvian public opinion toward the EU is also positive: 51% of respondents have a positive view, 39% are neutral, and only 10% are negative.

Second, disinformation narratives exaggerate the EU's influence on member states and their domestic policies. Although decisions are formally made in Brussels, decision-making and European integration are determined by the member states themselves. This is reflected in the EU budget, which amounts to just slightly more than 1% of the combined GDP of member states, whereas national governments typically allocate about 30–40% of GDP to various priorities. Financially, Latvia benefits from EU membership, as for every euro it contributes, Latvia receives back approximately four euros from the EU budget.

Third, countries can leave the EU, as the United Kingdom has done. Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union stipulates that "any member state may decide to withdraw from the Union in accordance with its own constitutional requirements." Although the UK's withdrawal from the EU was not easy, it demonstrates that member states have the right to exit the Union. Furthermore, many countries wish to join the EU (e.g., Montenegro, Albania, and Serbia), which reflects the EU's appeal in the eyes of candidate countries.

Fourth, the adoption of the common currency has helped smaller EU countries avoid the instability caused by currency fluctuations. During the 2008–2009 economic crisis, there were concerns that Latvia might have to devalue the lats. After the transition to the euro, such speculation was no longer justified. Moreover, several EU member states have not yet joined the eurozone or have no intention of doing so.

Fifth, Latvia's experience with international migration is notable. In 2015, the EU was hit by a migration crisis when around 1.3 million people from Syria, Iraq, and other countries arrived in Europe. Southern EU countries and Germany,

the main destination for migrants, bore the brunt of the crisis. At the time, public dissatisfaction in Latvia was sparked by the EU's request to accept several hundred refugees. Six years later, under different circumstances, Latvia faced attempts by A. Lukashenko to use migrants as a weapon against the EU. This time, Latvia had to request help from other EU countries. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, around 4.2 million Ukrainians arrived in the EU, the majority being received by Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic. Each situation is different. It is worth noting that EU countries have made changes to common migration policy to reduce the pressure that international migration places on the domestic politics of individual member states.

Literatūras avoti papildu informācijai:

- Eiropas Komisija. *Eurobarometer: Public Opinion in the European Union*. Available: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/screen/home
- ES Padome. *ES migrācijas un patvēruma politika*. Available: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-migration-policy/
- Bukovskis K., Austers A. (2017). *Euroscepticism in the Baltic States: Uncovering Issues, People and Stereotypes*. Latvian Institute of International Affairs. Available: https://liia.lv/en/publications/euroscepticism-in-the-baltic-states-uncoveringissues-people-and-stereotypes-639

Disinformation narrative No. 38: *The EU's Eastern Partnership is aimed against Russia. The Baltic States, by participating in it, destabilise both the Eastern Partnership countries and endanger themselves. The European Union carries out "colour revolutions" in the Eastern Partnership countries.*

Debunking: The Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy has been implemented since 2009, with the goal of strengthening political and economic relations with the EU's neighbouring countries. Other key objectives included reinforcing the rule of law, good governance, and civil society. Russia's stance toward the EaP has been dismissive, as it potentially reduces Russian influence in these countries and could threaten political stability within Russia itself. From the EU's perspective, every country has the right to choose its own cooperation partners. Unfortunately, Russia does not agree with it.

Russia claims that the "colour revolutions" are orchestrated by the EU and the United States; however, this claim is biased and false, as the EU and the US are not capable of so significantly influencing domestic processes in EaP countries as to bring tens of thousands of protesters into the streets in Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, or elsewhere. Of course, the political values represented by the EU largely align with the goals of the protesters, but EU countries do not actively organise or promote protests. The EU can express support and solidarity with protesters' demands and exert pressure on governments that violate human rights, restrict freedom of speech, and implement repressions - as it occurred after the 2020 presidential elections in Belarus - but the EU's influence is limited.

Although the possibility of some EaP countries becoming EU member states was initially considered unlikely, the domestic developments in these countries and Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine have significantly changed the situation. The EU has launched accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova. However, the outcome of these negotiations will largely depend on the result of the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which may also have far-reaching consequences for the future of EU relations with Belarus and Georgia.

Recommended further reading

- EU Council. *Eastern Partnership*. Available: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/lv/policies/eastern-partnership/
- Litra, L. (27 June 2024). *Dreaming of EU: The challenges ahead for Ukraine's and Moldova's accession*. European Council on Foreign Relations. Available: https://ecfr.eu/article/dreaming-of-eu-the-challenges-ahead-for-ukraines-and-moldovas-accession/
- Nikitina, Y. (2014). The "Color Revolutions" and "Arab Spring" in Russian Official Discourse. *Connections* 14:1, pp. 87-104. Available: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26326387.pdf

Message No. 39: *Latvia participates in Western activities that are directed against Belarus and its sovereignty. Latvia is involved and assists U.S. agencies in carrying out provocations against Belarus.*

Debunking: Russia's accusations against Western countries regarding interference in Belarus's internal political processes intensified after the presidential election in Belarus in August 2020. The official election results, according to which the incumbent Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko received 80.10% of the votes, did not correspond to the observations of many Belarusian citizens regarding public support for the various presidential candidates. Thousands of Belarusians took to the streets to protest against the falsification of the election results. The self-declared Belarusian president A. Lukashenko's regime responded with repression, resulting in many people being imprisoned, beaten,

tortured and humiliated.

EU countries, including Latvia, condemned the repressions taking place in Belarus but refrained from more active intervention. No provocations against Belarus were carried out, and its sovereignty was not threatened. However, in response to the forced landing of a Ryanair plane in Minsk and the use of violence against protesters, economic sanctions were imposed against Belarus. This constituted external pressure on Belarus rather than an attempt to undermine the Lukashenko regime from within. In response to these economic sanctions, the Lukashenko regime triggered a migration crisis on the Belarus–EU border, using migration as a hybrid warfare tool and creating a threat to the sovereignty and security of EU countries.

Latvia's position toward Belarus after the 2020 presidential election has been principled. Latvia has not organised provocations against Belarus or actively tried to influence the country's internal political processes, but it could not remain indifferent as people in Belarus were being detained, beaten and tortured. Latvia has always supported good relations with Belarus; however, the repressions and human rights violations committed by the Lukashenko regime created a situation in which Latvia was compelled to take a firmer stance against Belarus.

Recommended further reading:

- Sari, A. (2023). *Instrumentalized migration and the Belarus crisis: Strategies of legal coercion*. The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats paper no. 17. Available: https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/20230425-Hybrid-CoE-Paper-17-Instrumentalized-migration-and-Belarus-WEB.pdf
- Viacorka, F. (22 September 2020). *How Post-Election Protests Are Creating a New Belarus*. Atlantic Council. Available: https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/belarusalert/how-post-election-protests-are-creating-a-new-belarus/
- Rostoks, T. (2021). *Ryanair lidmašīnas starpgadījums Baltkrievijas gaisa telpā – uz ko vēl Baltkrievijas režīms varētu būt spējīgs?* DSPC politikas analīzes raksts Nr. 01/21. Available: https://www.naa.mil.lv/sites/naa/files/document/Ryanair_lidmasinas_starpgadijums.pdf

Disinformation narrative No. 40: *In the event of an attack, the United States will not protect Latvia, just like in the case of Afghanistan.*

Debunking: Russia's claims about NATO swing from one extreme to the other. On the one hand, NATO is portrayed as a dangerous alliance that allegedly plots to increase its influence in the "post-Soviet space" and wants to launch aggression against Russia. On the other hand, NATO is described as a "paper tiger" that looks threatening, but would not protect its member states against external military threats. The claim that the United States will not protect Latvia has two versions – the U.S. will be either unable or unwilling to defend Latvia.

While forecasting in international politics is a challenging task, comparing Afghanistan and Latvia is unfounded. There is no doubt that the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 can be seen as a failure, but far-reaching conclusions should not be drawn from it. The main difference between Latvia and Afghanistan is that Latvia has formal security guarantees, which Afghanistan did not. Latvia's security is guaranteed by Article 5 of the 1949 Washington Treaty. Another significant difference lies in the situations of Latvia and Afghanistan. Afghanistan was engulfed in an internal military conflict for many years, at the end of which the U.S. concluded that the war was unwinnable and that U.S. interests were primarily related to the fight against international terrorism – which did not provide sufficient justification to continue fighting the Taliban. In contrast, U.S. interests in Europe are more long-term and significant. Abandoning security guarantees provided to allies in Europe would severely damage the U.S. reputation. Moreover, Latvia's situation involves an external military threat from Russia, not internal political conflicts. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan allows greater focus on the Asia-Pacific region and Europe, which in turn strengthens Latvia's security.

In discussions about the U.S. willingness to defend Latvia, three additional factors favourable to Latvia should be remembered. First, Latvia benefits from NATO security guarantees, which means that in addition to the U.S., another 30 countries have committed to assisting Latvia in case of an external military threat. Second, since 2022, Sweden and Finland have become NATO member states, significantly strengthening security in the Baltic region. Third, NATO's military presence in Latvia is increasing. Since 2017, Latvia has hosted a NATO enhanced forward presence battlegroup, but after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, NATO member states decided to increase allied presence in Latvia, with a brigade-level unit led by Canada to be deployed by 2026.

Recommended further reading:

- Government of Canada (11 July 2023*). Roadmap - Scaling the EFP Latvia Battle Group to Brigade*. Available: https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2023/07/roadmap---scaling-the-efp-latvia-battle-

group-to-brigade.html

- NATO (4 April 1949). The North Atlantic Treaty. Available: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm
- Casler, D. (27 August 2021*). Will Afghanistan Hurt US credibility?* The Duck of Minerva. Available: https://www.duckofminerva.com/2021/08/will-afghanistan-hurt-u-scredibility.html

Disinformation narrative No. 41: *NATO only uses Latvia for foreign military exercises, and Latvia is of very little significance in overall geopolitics.*

Debunking: One of Russia's narratives is that the United States uses Latvia for its own purposes. Overall, Latvia is insignificant, and the U.S. has no deeper interest in Latvia's security. This narrative is false, but there are two reasons why it might seem convincing. First, for political leaders, their own country's security will always be more important than that of other countries, even if they are key allies. Second, the true interests of states are not always expressed publicly.

However, there are several reasons why the claim that Latvia is insignificant in the international context is untrue.

First, NATO has provided Latvia with security guarantees, and in the alliance's more than 70-year history, there has not been a single case where a member state was abandoned in times of need. The U.S. has provided Ukraine - which is not a NATO member - with tens of billions of dollars in military and economic support, and there is no doubt that NATO's military capabilities would be used to defend the Baltic States.

Second, NATO leaders have expressed support for Baltic security. For example, in September 2014, U.S. President Barack Obama visited Estonia and stated that the defence of Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius is just as important as the defence of Berlin, Paris, and London. During Donald Trump's presidency, military assistance to the Baltic States increased. Also, President Joe Biden described the U.S. security commitments to NATO allies as a sacred obligation. No NATO member is too insignificant to deserve allied support.

Third, the allied troops stationed in Latvia as part of NATO's enhanced forward presence and participating in military exercises in Latvia gain experience and knowledge that can later be used in other contexts. This presence will be further strengthened by 2026, especially with increased military presence from Canada, Sweden and Denmark. The allied presence demonstrates the alliance's solidarity and readiness to defend the Baltic States.

Fourth, the military presence of NATO countries in Latvia also shows their willingness to bear substantial costs. Since 2014, the U.S. has allocated billions of dollars to strengthening European security, and European countries have also significantly increased their defence spending. These investments also strengthen Latvia's security. In 2023, when announcing the increase in military presence in Latvia, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau confirmed that Canada would invest nearly 2 billion euros in Latvia's security over the coming years. The military threat posed by Russia to Latvia is taken very seriously by its allies, which is why measures are being taken to strengthen Latvia's security.

Recommended further reading:

- Remarks by President Obama to the People of Estonia. 3 September 2014. Available: https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/03/remarkspresident-obama-people-Estonia
- Lanoszka, A., Rostoks, T. (2024). *Success assured? Appraising the Canadian-led Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup in Latvia*. Macdonald-Laurier Institute. Available: https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/success-assured-canada-latvia-enhanced-forward-presence-battlegroup-toms-rostoks-alexander-lanoszka/
- International Centre for Security and Defence (2024). *The Washington Summit Series*. Available: https://icds.ee/en/the-washington-summit-series/

Disinformation narrative No. 42: *Russia had grounds to invade Ukraine on 24 February 2022, because Ukraine threatened Russia's security*

Debunking: Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 shook European security. The initial attack plan, aimed at overthrowing the government in Kyiv and forcing Ukraine into total capitulation, failed. In the next phase of the war, Russia continued its military aggression against Ukraine, primarily in the eastern and southern regions, attempting to gradually break Ukraine's resistance and gain full control over the Luhansk and Donetsk regions.

In preparation for launching the aggression at the beginning of 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to justify the start of the "special military operation" in two speeches on 21 and 24 February. The list of reasons for the invasion was long, but overall, President Putin framed the justification as a response to NATO expansion and the alliance's

military infrastructure approaching Russia's borders, the alleged resurgence of Nazism in Ukraine, violations of the rights of Russian-speaking residents in Ukraine, attempts to divide the Russian nation, and potential future threats Ukraine might pose to Russia's security. President Putin's message in the context of Ukraine was that Russia was "forced" to invade Ukraine in order to protect itself.

Since the beginning of the war, the motives and objectives of the invasion have been reformulated multiple times. However, there are two main reasons why Russia had no justification for invading Ukraine. First, the invasion was illegal. Article 2, paragraph 4 of the UN Charter explicitly prohibits the use of threats or military force against other states and calls on nations to respect the political independence and territorial integrity of others. Furthermore, Russia had no grounds to believe that Ukraine was preparing to attack it, which might have legitimised a pre-emptive strike. Therefore, Russia had no right to use military force against Ukraine. Second, Russia's accusations against Ukraine were unfounded and illogical. Given that Ukraine was smaller and militarily weaker than Russia, there was no basis to believe that it could be preparing an attack against Russia. It must be remembered that this would have been an act of aggression against a nuclear power, which would have been practically suicidal. Since 2022, none of Russia's allegations against Ukraine concerning the development of weapons of mass destruction have been confirmed - Ukraine was not preparing to attack Russia, nor were NATO countries planning to use Ukraine to launch aggression against Russia or Russian-speaking residents in Ukraine.

Thus, the conclusion is clear - Russia is the aggressor, and the reasons for the war were fabricated.

Recommended further reading:

- President of Russia (24 February 2022). *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*. Available: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843
- President of Russia (21 February 2022). *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*. Available: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828
- Walker, N. (2024). *Conflict in Ukraine: A Timeline (Current Conflict 2022 - Present)*. UK House of Commons Research briefing. Available: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9847/CBP-9847.pdf

Disinformation narrative No. 43: *Russia will use nuclear weapons in the war against Ukraine.*

Debunking: Russia has used nuclear threats at various stages of the war against Ukraine with the goal of isolating Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin made nuclear threats shortly before the invasion of Ukraine, aiming to induce Western inaction at the beginning of the war. Nuclear threats were also made in the autumn of 2022, when Russia formally annexed four Ukrainian regions that were only partially under its control. Nuclear threats have been used in other phases of the war as well - for example, in September 2024, the Russian president announced changes to Russia's nuclear doctrine, stating that Russia could use nuclear weapons even if attacked by a country without such weapons, provided that country is supported by a nuclear-armed state.

There is no doubt that Russia's nuclear threats must be taken seriously. These weapons have not been used in combat since 1945, and their use in the war in Ukraine could trigger a broader military confrontation in Europe between NATO and Russia. However, in the context of the war against Ukraine, Russia's nuclear threats should be interpreted as nuclear disinformation. While there is a possibility that Russia could use nuclear weapons in combat, this possibility is relatively low. Russia has its own "red lines" and crossing them could lead to nuclear escalation. However, Western countries have not yet crossed those lines, and it is unlikely they will do so in the future. The conditions under which Russia might use nuclear weapons are clearly defined in its nuclear doctrine, and in the case of the war in Ukraine, nuclear weapons would likely only be used if Russian forces suffered a catastrophic defeat that endangered Russia's territorial integrity. Such a scenario is unlikely.

Russia's nuclear threats have been quite effective in slowing down the delivery of military aid to Ukraine. However, there are at least four reasons why Russia's nuclear threats should be considered disinformation. First, the nuclear threats have been vaguely formulated. If Russia's "red lines" were at real risk of being crossed, its threats would be more specific and its actions more decisive. Second, Russia's nuclear threats clearly aim to exploit the fear of conflict escalation among Western policymakers and societies. Nuclear threats are a relatively cheap and effective way to influence Western decision-making, and therefore should be critically assessed. Third, the use of nuclear weapons would increase their perceived importance in the eyes of many states, thereby promoting further nuclear proliferation globally. Several countries might expand their nuclear arsenals, while others that do not yet possess such weapons might seek to develop them. Fourth, if Russia were to use nuclear weapons, this would ultimately backfire. It would lose the remaining support it receives from countries like China and India. Meanwhile, Western reaction could include significantly increasing military aid to Ukraine or even direct involvement in the war. Certain NATO countries - such as the United States - might conduct strikes against military targets in occupied territories in Ukraine, and possibly even in Russia. In other words, the use of

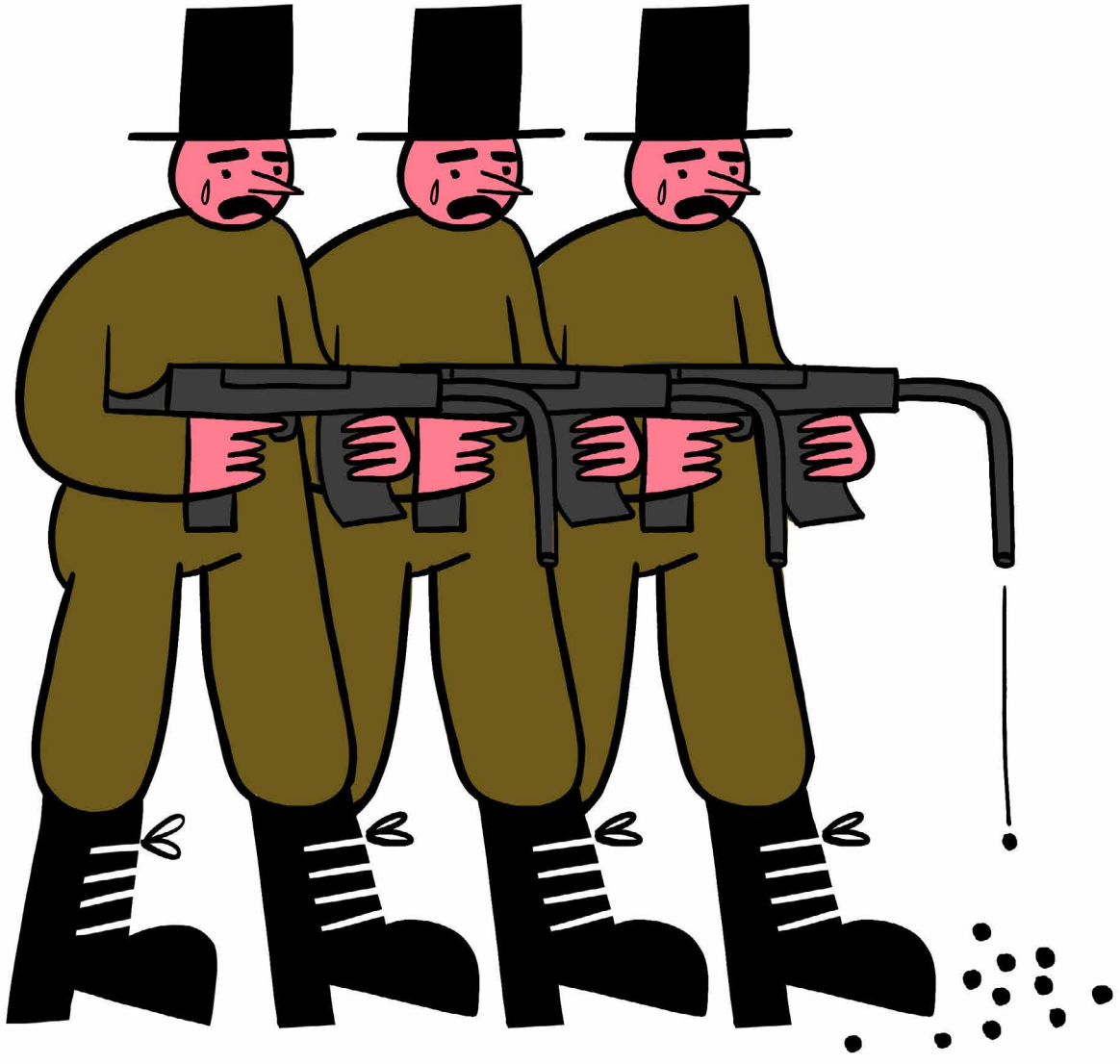
nuclear weapons might not help Russia end the war on favourable terms, but instead significantly increase the risk of further conflict escalation and cause serious harm to Russia itself.

Recommended further reading:

- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (8 June 2020). *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*. Available: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/1434131/
- Dickinson, P. (3 September 2024). *Moscow escalates nuclear threats as Ukraine erases Russia's red lines*. Atlantic Council. Available: https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/moscow-escalates-nuclear-threats-as-ukraine-erases-russias-red-lines/
- Baev, P. K. (27 September 2024). *Nuclear brinkmanship in Putin's war: Upping the ante*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available: https://www.brookings.edu/articles/nuclear-brinkmanship-in-putins-war-upping-the-ante/

Defence and security

Māris Andžāns



Disinformation narrative No. 44: *The threat from Russia is fabricated to justify the defence budget.*

Debunking: Latvia paid insufficient attention to its defence and consequently its funding until Russia's aggression against Ukraine. In 2014, Latvia spent less than 1% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on defence, approximately 221 million euros. Latvia only reached the NATO guideline of 2% defence spending in 2018, 14 years after joining the alliance[1].

The increase in Latvia's defence budget was a direct response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Other NATO eastern flank member states, including Lithuania, Estonia and Poland, similarly increased their defence expenditures. Latvia's reaction was further reinforced by statements from Donald Trump, then a U.S. presidential candidate and later the 45th President of the United States, linking Baltic States' defence spending to U.S. military support in the event of Russian aggression[2].

In subsequent years, the need for Latvia to increase defence spending was further solidified by Russia's negative rhetoric towards Latvia and NATO in general, as well as Russia's military demonstrations near the Baltic States' borders and elsewhere. The need for and support of higher defence sector funding was further strengthened by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Latvia has already exceeded the 3% of GDP threshold for defence spending (see Chart No. 1).

The decisive role of the Russian factor is illustrated by the dynamics of Latvia's defence expenditures as a percentage of GDP (Chart No. 1) and in financial terms (Chart No. 2). It is unlikely that Latvia would have significantly increased its defence spending without Russia's military actions against Ukraine or other disruptions in the security environment.

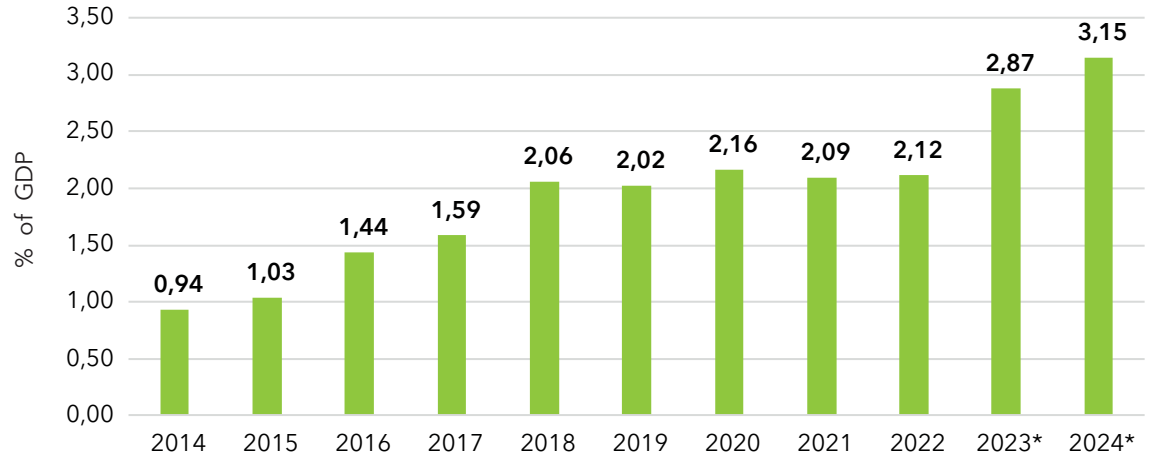


Chart No. 1. Latvia's defence expenditures as a percentage of GDP, according to NATO compiled data[3] (forecast figures for the respective years are marked with an asterisk).

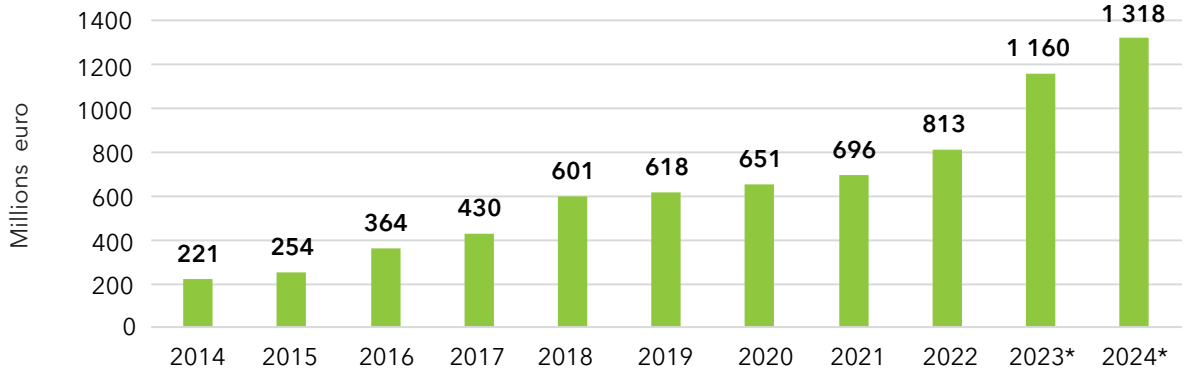


Chart No. 2. Latvia's defence expenditures, millions of euros, according to NATO compiled data[4] (forecast figures for the respective years are marked with an asterisk).

Compared to Latvia and the other two Baltic States, Russia spends significantly more on defence not only in financial terms but also as a percentage of its GDP. In 2025, Russia plans to spend approximately 128.3 billion euros on defence,

which is about 6.3% of its GDP (around 25.8 billion euros more than was planned for defence in 2024)[5]. It is possible that the actual defence expenditures of Russia are even higher.

Recommended further reading:

- NATO (17 June 2024). *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024)*. Available: https://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2024/240617-def-exp-2024-TABLES-en.xlsx
- Saeima (3 July 2014). Law on State Defense Financing [Valsts aizsardzības finansēšanas likums]. Available: https://likumi.lv/ta/id/267469-valsts-aizsardzibas-finansesanas-likums
- Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2023). *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database*. Available: https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/SIPRI-Milex-data-1948-2023.xlsx

Disinformation narrative No. 45: *Russia has no aggressive military intentions towards the Baltic States.*

Debunking: In the perception of the Baltic States, Russia causes military concerns for several reasons. First, there is the historical experience, especially the occupation of the Baltic States in 1940 and the tragic events that followed during World War II and throughout the entire occupation period until 1991.

Second, Russia's military attacks on neighbouring countries – the attack on Georgia in 2008, as well as the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula and the war started in eastern Ukraine in 2014, followed by the full-scale invasion in 2022. As a result of these wars, two self-proclaimed states were established on Georgian territory, the Republic of Abkhazia and the Republic of South Ossetia, where Russian troops have been deployed. Meanwhile, the Crimean Peninsula, along with four Ukrainian regions – Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson – were illegally incorporated into Russia (although Russian troops do not control all of these Ukrainian administrative units). In addition, Russian troops are stationed in the territory of the Republic of Moldova without its consent, in the self-proclaimed Transnistrian Moldovan Republic. Through these and other actions against these and other neighbouring states, Russia has demonstrated a clear pattern of preventing the integration of these and other former Soviet Union countries with the West.

Third, it is Russia's sharp rhetoric against the Baltic States. Russian foreign policy and national security policy documents set out tasks to support the interests and rights of compatriots representing the Russian language and cultural space abroad. There is a call to consolidate the diaspora overseas and to strengthen its ties with the historical homeland[6]. Russia's perspective is further intensified by a characterisation of an unfavourable external environment, which includes discrimination and persecution of compatriots. Restrictions on the use of the Russian language and bans on Russian mass media and their content consumption are highlighted[7]. Latvia is regularly accused of discriminating against Russophone residents and glorifying Nazism[8]. Moreover, it should be noted that Russia has used the defence of the rights of Russophone residents as one of the pretexts for its aggression against Ukraine.

Fourth, it is the demonstration of Russia's military power near the Baltic States. The most frequent occurrences are Russian military ships and aircraft approaching the borders of the Baltic States, including violations of airspace boundaries. Provocative military exercises should also be noted, especially the Zapad exercises organised jointly with Belarus. It is likely that these exercises have rehearsed hostile military actions against the Baltic States, as evidenced by the locations, scale, and scenarios of the exercises.

Finally, in this entire context, there is a military power imbalance between the Baltic States and Russia. For example, the total number of active-duty personnel in the Baltic armed forces is approximately 34,400[9]. Meanwhile, before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Western Military District alone had approximately 400,000 military personnel deployed[10], and overall Russia currently has about 1.1 million active-duty military personnel[11]. The disproportion in military hardware between the Baltic States and Russia is even greater, despite the massive losses Russia has suffered in its war in Ukraine.

Recommended further reading:

- NATO (12 January 2024). *Setting the record straight. De-bunking Russian disinformation on NATO*. Available: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/115204.htm
- Kudors, A. (2023). *Russia and Latvia: A Case of Sharp Power*. Routledge.
- Fabian, S. & Bērziņš, J. (2024). Russian New Generation Warfare in the Baltic States and Beyond. In: Gioe D. & Smith M. (Eds.) *Great Power Cyber Competition. Competing and Winning in the Information Environment* (Routledge). p. 44–56.

Disinformation narrative No. 46: *Latvia is buying outdated military equipment.*

Debunking: Latvia does indeed purchase and maintain outdated and used military equipment. Frequently cited examples include the CVR(T) type tracked reconnaissance vehicles purchased from the United Kingdom, M109 self-propelled howitzers acquired from Austria, and An-2 light transport aircraft[12].

Like any outdated and used equipment, this technology has its shortcomings. However, there are also positive aspects to consider.

First, outdated military equipment is better than having no equipment at all. For a long time, Latvia was the last NATO country without its own armoured vehicles. This meant that Latvian soldiers were very poorly protected during movements against gunfire and explosions.

Second, used equipment is cheaper than new equipment. For equivalent funding, it is possible to acquire a larger quantity of used equipment, thus equipping more soldiers. Often, maintenance costs for older technology are also lower than those for newer-generation equipment.

Third, virtually all armed forces around the world use some amount of outdated military equipment. The most important factors are the equipment's capabilities, durability, and the quality of its maintenance and modernization. For example, B-52 strategic bombers have been in U.S. service since the 1950s. Over the decades, these aircraft have undergone significant modernisation.

Fourth, the outdated military equipment in Latvia's possession is not only being restored but also modernised. As a result, this equipment is often more capable than the original versions. Moreover, such military technology is in use by many armed forces and has been successfully deployed in various military conflicts.

Fifth, Latvia also purchases new military equipment. For instance, Latvia possesses newly built Skrunda-class patrol boats, Patria 6x6 armoured personnel carriers, and Black Hawk helicopters[13].

Recommended further reading:

- National Armed Forces of Latvia (n/d). Technique [Tehnikas]. Available: https://www.mil.lv/lv/tehnika
- Sargs.lv (6 November 2019). The main advantage of the CVR(T) series armoured vehicles is their speed and mobility. [CVR(T) sērijas bruņumašīnu galvenais trumpis – ātrums un mobilitāte]. Available: https://www.sargs.lv/lv/tehnika-un-ekipejums/2019-11-06/cvrt-serijas-brunumasinu-galvenais-trumpis-atrums-un-mobilitate
- Sargs.lv (10 December 2021). The Air Force receives its third refurbished "An-2" aircraft [Gaisa spēki saņem trešo atjaunoto "An-2" lidmašīnu]. Available: https://www.sargs.lv/lv/nbs/2021-12-10/gaisa-speki-sanem-treso-atjaunoto-2-lidmasinu

Disinformation narrative No. 47: *The Latvian army is weak and, in the event of an attack, will not protect its citizens.*

Debunking: Although the National Armed Forces of Latvia are still among the weakest in the Baltic Sea region and NATO as a whole, they have made significant progress over the past decade.

It cannot be denied that Latvia still has considerable room for growth. Latvia's naval and air force capabilities remain limited – the air force consists of only a few helicopters and light transport aircraft, while the navy mainly comprises patrol vessels and minehunters[14]. The Latvian armed forces were the last among NATO member states to acquire armoured vehicles. In terms of personnel numbers, Latvia's armed forces are larger than those of only six other NATO members (Estonia, Albania, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Montenegro, and Luxembourg; Iceland has no armed forces)[15].

However, since Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Latvia's defence spending has increased significantly – from approximately €221 million in 2014 to around €1.318 billion in 2024[16]. During this period, the number of professional soldiers rose from about 4,600 to roughly 8,400[17]. In 2023, Latvia reintroduced mandatory military service (National Defence Service), which will gradually allow for further increases in troop numbers. The military has also received significant upgrades in infrastructure, equipment, and weaponry. Notable acquisitions include *CVR(T)* tracked reconnaissance vehicles, *M109* self-propelled howitzers, *Patria* 6x6 armoured personnel carriers, *Black Hawk* helicopters, *Spike* and *Carl Gustaf* anti-tank weapons, and *RBS-70* short-range air defence systems[18]. Like Lithuania and Estonia, Latvia is also constructing the Baltic Defence Line along its eastern border[19]. Additionally, in 2018, Latvian legislation mandated the

necessity of armed resistance in case of aggression[20].

In the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, it has become evident that, first, the capabilities of the Russian armed forces were overestimated prior to the war, and second, Russia's forces have been weakened through their conflict with Ukraine. Third, even smaller and less-equipped forces can stand up to the Russian military.

Given Latvia's own limited defence capabilities, it is crucial to emphasise that Latvia has been a NATO member since 2004 and is covered by Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which guarantees collective defence. To reassure Latvia and deter Russia, small rotating U.S. military units have been stationed in Latvia since spring 2014 as part of operation *Atlantic Resolve*[21]. In 2017, a Canada-led NATO enhanced Forward Presence multinational battlegroup was deployed to Latvia. By the summer of 2024, this battlegroup included approximately 2,700 troops from 12 countries, including around 800 Danish soldiers deployed in 2024, who will alternate with Swedish forces in future rotations[22]. By 2026, this Canadian-led battlegroup is expected to grow into a brigade-level unit with over 3,500 troops[23]. With these and other NATO measures, the likelihood that allied forces will provide military support to Latvia is considerably higher than it was before the onset of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014.

Recommended further reading:

- National Armed Forces of Latvia (n/d). Technique [Tehnikas]. Available: https://www.mil.lv/lv/tehnika
- Ministry of Defence (n. d.). National Defence Service [Valsts aizsardzības dienests]. Available: https://www.mod.gov.lv/lv/valsts-aizsardzibas-dienests
- NATO (8 July 2024). *NATO's military presence in the east of the Alliance*. Available: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm

Disinformation narrative No. 48: *Allied soldiers in Latvia frequently cause incidents and do not respect local laws.*

Debunking: Incidents involving soldiers from friendly foreign armed forces are a relatively common occurrence elsewhere in the world – ranging from fights and drunk driving to rape and murder. However, in Latvia, publicly known incidents involving soldiers from NATO allied countries have been few.

In the publicly known cases, foreign soldiers were involved in incidents during their free time, outside the performance of official duties. For example, in 2014, a fight broke out in Riga between U.S. soldiers and local taxi drivers[24]. Later that same year in Ventspils, during a night out, several NATO sailors were injured, including one Dutch sailor who was seriously hurt; three individuals were prosecuted for assaulting him[25]. In 2016, a British soldier caused bodily harm to a Latvian citizen in a restaurant in Riga. After the incident, the soldier left Latvia, and a military court in the United Kingdom sentenced him[26].

Allied soldiers are not exempt from responsibility – such actions are investigated and punished. According to Latvian law, foreign soldiers must comply with Latvian legal regulations. Latvia has the right to request the withdrawal of a foreign service member who has committed a violation[27]. The division of responsibility between Latvia and the sending country regarding incident investigations and the imposition of penalties is regulated by the NATO Status of Forces Agreement[28], as well as more specific bilateral agreements.

NATO allied soldiers stationed in Latvia also make efforts to maintain a positive public image, frequently participating in equipment demonstrations and various community support projects throughout Latvia.

Recommended further reading:

- NATO (19 June 1951). Agreement Between the Parties to the North Atlantic Treaty Regarding the Status of Their Forces [Ziemeļatlantijas līguma organizācijas dalībvalstu līgums par to bruņoto spēku statusu]. Available: https://likumi.lv/ta/lv/starptautiskie-ligumi/id/1711
- Saeima (6 Febuary 1997). The Status of Foreign Armed Forces in the Republic of Latvia [Ārvalstu bruņoto spēku statuss Latvijas Republikā]. Available: https://likumi.lv/ta/id/42315-arvalstu-brunoto-speku-statuss-latvijas-republika

Disinformation narrative No. 49: *NATO is not united, and in the event of a Russian attack, NATO will not protect Latvia.*

Debunking: NATO is considered the most successful political-military alliance in history. It was founded in 1949, and its collective defence clause, Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treat, has only been invoked once, following the terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001[29].

At the same time, NATO's unity does face real challenges. In recent years, the most well-known challenge has been the sharp rhetoric of the 45th and 47th President of the United States, Donald Trump, towards NATO and certain member states. Longstanding issues include tensions between Turkey and Greece, along with related incidents. Due to these and other factors, one cannot completely rule out a lack of consensus within NATO in the event of potential Russian aggression. It must also be considered that not all allied countries may be able to provide military support to Latvia, even if they wish to do so. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty - the collective defence clause or "one for all and all for one" - does not impose an automatic obligation to provide military support; the assistance can take political or other forms[30].

Despite this, Latvia is currently more secure than ever before. Since Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, and especially after the full-scale invasion in 2022, NATO has undergone significant transformation. There is a growing focus on the capabilities and readiness to defend alliance member states. Despite some individual member states having sympathies towards Russia or antipathies towards Ukraine, a broadly negative stance towards Russia has solidified among NATO allies.

The military support NATO allies have expressed in words for the Baltic States has also been backed up by action. Until 2014, allied military presence in the Baltics was minimal—consisting mainly of the Baltic Air Policing mission based in Lithuania and participation in military exercises. The situation began to change in 2014. The United States deployed rotating company-sized units to all three Baltic States[31]. Among other NATO measures, the Baltic Air Policing mission was doubled[32], and a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) was created as part of NATO's Response Force (NRF)[33].

Of particular importance was the arrival in 2017 of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence multinational battlegroups in the Baltic States. The battlegroup in Latvia is led by Canada. In the summer of 2024, it consisted of around 2,700 troops from 12 countries. In 2024, approximately 800 Danish soldiers joined the battlegroup, who will rotate in Latvia with Swedish forces[34]. By 2026, the Canada-led battlegroup is planned to be expanded into a brigade-level unit with over 3,500 troops[35].

While the NATO forces deployed in Latvia are relatively small, their main role is to deter Russia and reassure Latvia. These forces are not only stationed in Latvian territory, but also regularly participate in exercises - both within military infrastructure and beyond - thus actively demonstrating their presence.

Recommended further reading:

- Andžāns, M., Romanovs, U. (2018). NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Latvia – A Historic Practical Affirmation of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty [NATO paplašinātā klātbūtne Latvijā – vēsturiska Ziemeļatlantijas līguma 5. panta darbības apstiprināšana praksē]. In: Sprūds A., Bruģe I. (2019). Latvijas ārējā un drošības politika. Gadagrāmata 2018. Latvijas Ārpolitikas institūts, pp. 67.–79. Available: https://www.lai.lv/publikacijas/latvian-foreign-and-security-policy-yearbook-2018-669
- NATO (8 July 2024). *NATO's military presence in the east of the Alliance*. Available: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm
- NATO (27 July 2023). *NATO Response Force*. Available: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49755.htm

Disinformation narrative No. 50: *NATO destabilises security in the Baltic region.*

Debunking: The Baltic States, like any other country, have the right to defend themselves both individually and collectively. NATO allied forces in the Baltic States and their immediate vicinity conduct such military activities as the presence of allied land forces in the Baltics; airspace patrols of the Baltic States from airbases in Lithuania and Estonia (and, during repairs of the Estonian airbase in 2024, also from Lielvārde in Latvia); patrols and mine detection and clearance in the Baltic Sea; and military exercises on land, in the air, at sea, and in cyberspace.

All allied presence in Latvia is rotational, meaning units from one country are periodically replaced either by other units from the same country or by units from other countries. For most NATO allied countries, their activities in the Baltic States are clearly defensive in nature. The key NATO allied presence - the Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroups - would not have been established if Russia had not initiated aggression against Ukraine in 2014 or if a similar security disruption had not occurred.

The military presence of NATO allied forces in the Baltic States is small compared to the Russian Armed Forces and cannot be regarded as a serious threat to Russia considering its military capabilities. Several thousand soldiers are deployed across the three multinational battlegroups in the Baltic States[36]. In addition, a few hundred U.S. troops operate in the Baltics under operation *Atlantic Resolve*[37], along with soldiers from other NATO countries participating in the NATO Baltic Air Policing mission[38].

Altogether, NATO allied forces numbering several thousand troops, combined with approximately 34,400 military personnel from the Baltic States themselves[39], are significantly fewer than Russia's approximately 1.1 million active-duty military personnel[40]. The disparity in military equipment between the Baltic States' own forces and the deployed allied forces, on one side, and Russian forces on the other, is even greater. Even after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the increased allied presence in the Baltic States still does not significantly affect the disproportionality between NATO and Russian forces in the region, with Russia continuing to maintain a mathematical superiority.

Recommended further reading:

- NATO (8 July 2024). NATO's military presence in the east of the Alliance. Available: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm
- NATO (1 August 2024). *NATO Air Policing*. Available: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132685.htm
- U.S. Army Europe and Africa. (n/d). *ATLANTIC RESOLVE*. Available: https://www.europeafrica.army.mil/AtlanticResolve/

Disinformation narrative No. 51: *NATO pretends to be a defensive organisation, but its actions are provocative and its military equipment is intended for offense, not defence.*

Debunking: NATO was established in 1949 as a collective defence organisation - to protect European countries against possible aggression from the Soviet Union. After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, NATO maintained its core collective defence function while adapting to the new post–Cold War security environment. NATO began conducting military operations outside the alliance's territory, including in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–2004), Kosovo (1999–present), Afghanistan (2003–2021), and Libya (2011)[41]. Although some of these military operations involved offensive actions, their goal was to promote stability and peace - such as ending violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Libya, and fighting terrorism in Afghanistan. The alliance was mainly motivated by reducing risks to its member states that could arise from regions with direct impact on Euro-Atlantic security.

Like any armed forces, the military equipment possessed by NATO and its member states can be used for both defence and offense. Unlike China and Russia, NATO and its members maintain a high level of transparency about their armed forces, including their size, equipment, deployment, and funding. For example, NATO regularly publishes detailed reports on the personnel strength, budgets, and expenditures of its member states' armed forces[42] , as well as the number of troops deployed in operations[43]. NATO also ensures a high degree of transparency in military exercises, providing public information about them and allowing observers to participate in exercises[44].

Recommended further reading:

- NATO (17 June 2024). *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024)*. Available: https://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2024/240617-def-exp-2024-TABLES-en.xlsx
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Disinformation narrative No. 52: *NATO is a redundant organisation, and in the event of an attack, it cannot protect its member states.*

Debunking: Since its founding in 1949, NATO has expanded from 12 member states to 32 today. No member state has ever left the alliance. At least three more countries - Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and Ukraine - have expressed interest in joining[45]. During Russia's war against Ukraine, Finland and Sweden also applied for NATO membership. Finland joined the alliance in 2023, followed by Sweden a year later. This shows that NATO continues to attract other countries.

Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty establishes a collective defence obligation among member states. However, it does not mandate an automatic military response; support can take political or other forms[46]. Although originally designed to protect European allies against potential Soviet aggression, Article 5 has only been invoked once, after the 2001 terrorist attacks in the U.S.[47]

NATO has also been ready to strengthen defence in geographically close conflicts, such as providing airspace surveillance and air defence support to Turkey during the First and Second Gulf Wars and the Syrian civil war[48]. Several times NATO has activated Article 4, which calls for consultations in the event of a serious threat - this happened at Turkey's request in 2003, in 2012 (twice), 2015, and 2020; Poland's request in 2014; and a joint request by Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia in 2022[49].

After Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, NATO took numerous steps to encourage allies, enhance readiness, and deter Russia. In the Baltic context, notable measures include the establishment of Enhanced Forward Presence multinational battlegroups in all three Baltic States[50], the U.S. rotational deployment under operation *Atlantic Resolve*[51], doubling the Baltic Air Policing mission[52], and creating the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF)[53].

NATO allies in the Baltics have demonstrated their military capabilities in various ways, including strategic bomber flights and participation in exercises, airborne operations during training, and visits and participation of fifth-generation fighter aircraft in the Baltic Air Policing mission. Since 2022, NATO's support for the Baltics and other eastern flank countries has been further strengthened, including gradually increasing the size of multinational battlegroups from battalion to brigade level.

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- NATO (8 July 2024). *NATO's military presence in the east of the Alliance*. Available: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm

Disinformation narrative No. 53: *NATO and the Baltic States are using the migrant crisis to prepare for an attack on Belarus.*

Debunking: The migrant crisis at Belarus's borders with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia is artificially caused by Belarus itself. Belarus has deliberately facilitated the arrival of citizens from Middle Eastern and other countries into Belarus and then their movement towards the borders of European Union member states[54]. Both NATO and the European Union have collectively condemned Belarus's actions. The European Union has imposed multiple rounds of sanctions against Belarus[55]. Belarus' likely motivation for creating the migration crisis is retaliation against the European Union and its neighbouring member states for their support of the Belarusian opposition and for imposing sanctions, as well as support for Russia in its efforts to divide and discredit the European Union and NATO.

Before the migration crisis, Belarus had a very limited role on NATO's agenda - primarily as one of NATO's partners under the Partnership for Peace programme and a member of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (formerly the North Atlantic Cooperation Council)[56]. Among other things, Belarus received NATO research grants and its representatives participated in NATO-organised training. However, following the escalation of the migration crisis in November 2021, NATO suspended all practical cooperation with Belarus[57].

Until 2020, Belarus played a minor role in Latvia's and Lithuania's defence policies, and virtually no role in Estonia's defence policy. Belarus, even as a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), was not perceived as a permanent threat, but rather as a potential Russian partner in a possible attack on the Baltic States. A frequently discussed scenario involved the potential cooperation of both countries to isolate the Baltic States from Poland via the so-called Suwałki Gap[58].

In recent historical context, prior to the 2020 Belarusian presidential election and the subsequent violence, relations between Belarus and Latvia were generally good and pragmatic. Belarus was seen as an important, but not central economic cooperation partner. For example, in 2020, Belarus was Latvia's 14th largest trade partner (accounting for 1.7% of total trade volume)[59] and the second largest source of rail freight transit[60]. In January 2020, then Latvian Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš visited Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in Minsk and invited him to make a reciprocal visit to Latvia. A joint hosting of the Ice Hockey World Championship was planned for 2021 in Minsk and Riga, but ultimately took place only in Riga[61].

Finally, it is important to note that Latvia, Lithuania and Poland have constructed a fence on their borders with Belarus to curb the migrant flows, and Latvia and Lithuania are building the Baltic defence line along their borders with Russia and Belarus[62]. Thus, it is not Belarus, but its neighbouring NATO member states that are establishing defensive structures along their borders with Belarus.

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- BBC News (26 November 2021). *Belarus border crisis: How are migrants getting there?* Available: https://www.bbc.com/news/59233244

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Feedback

The handbook provides a clear action plan on when and how to engage in countering false information in order to avoid spreading it to an even wider audience. Clearly defined next steps and a disinformation break-out scale – with descriptions of each stage – are crucial for reducing the sense of helplessness that can arise in the face of misinformation, especially when it spreads rapidly on social media and carries the risk of causing undesirable consequences. The authors provide readers with a roadmap for responding wisely and skilfully to maintain control of the situation.

I would also like to highlight the real-life examples and images included in the handbook, as well as explanations of information manipulation techniques—including the use of humour—and a broader overview of popular disinformation narratives in various fields, along with science-based counterarguments. These will also help to view future relevant cases in a broader context and interconnected framework.

The handbook offers easily understandable and useful content for communication specialists at institutions and companies, social media account administrators, and all media users alike.

Klinta Ločmele (*Dr. sc. comm.*)
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Unfortunately, Russia continues to score significant wins in the information arena, and these victories enable the Kremlin to persist in its aggression. Latvians are showing us how to prevent the aggressors from succeeding.

As someone who regularly communicates with counter-disinformation professionals on both sides of the Atlantic, I see tremendous value in this publication. It covers the fundamentals – what to look for and what to detect. It also guides the next steps: what action to take, when to take it, and how much of it is needed – and importantly, it helps determine when no action is necessary at all. Furthermore, it demonstrates the importance of tracking the long-term narratives of information aggressors and debunking them once and for all. The bad actors will, of course, continue to lie, but anyone seeking the truth will have easy access to a credible refutation of those lies.

With this publication, Latvia is ticking many boxes, and I hope more countries will follow Riga's example.

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I would like to highlight the real-life examples and images included in the handbook, the explanation of information manipulation methods – including the use of humour – and the broader overview of popular disinformation narratives in various fields along with their science-based debunks. These will also help to examine future relevant cases in a broader context and interconnected framework.

Klinta Ločmele
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Frontline states, such as Latvia, have by far the most experience with hybrid threats such as disinformation – the rest of the world would do well to learn from them.

Jakub Kalenský
The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats