INFORMATION LAUNDERING VIA BALTNEWS ON TELEGRAM:
How Russian State-Sponsored Media Evade Sanctions and Narrate the War

Executive Summary

Information has long been used as a foreign policy tool by the Kremlin. Most recently the Russian attack on Ukraine has prompted a new wave of research into the way pro-Kremlin messaging is spread in Western countries and to what effect. This study examines a specific form of information influence campaigns (IICs): information laundering (IL). IL is a compilation of deception techniques and thus has the potential to change readers' beliefs and attitudes. Overall, the study presents a refined, systematic, and reproducible way to identify which current IL attempts target the audience of a specific Telegram channel, and which networks of websites are behind these attempts. It also asks which potential framing biases the audience could be influenced by and with what strategic aim.

More specifically the Baltnews Telegram channel serves as a gateway systematically leading to IL attempts that are geared to reach a Russian-speaking audience in the Baltic States. A distinction was drawn between the overt amplification of content stemming from Kremlin-official sources and the covert distortion of content from Western news outlets via a network of intermediary websites. In total, 355 posts were screened for cases of IL, of which at least 39 showed signs of taking part in IL processes. These 39 cases alone are linked to the activity of 444 Russian-domain or Kremlin-official websites which were engaged in distorting information by Western news outlets.

First, the techniques used to manipulate information during IL processes were uncovered and the network of interacting websites behind selected IL attempts were mapped. Second, the themes of the 39 IL attempts tied to Western media were compared to the way Kremlin-official sources were treated by the Baltnews Telegram channel in 66 cases. Coverage and framing biases as well as their potential

strategic aims were identified. The study thereby demonstrates ways to analyse the different biases that IICs make use of, as well as their intended influence.

The investigation reveals that, apart from increasingly amplifying Kremlin-official media since February 2022, like Sputnik, RT, or RIA Novosti, the Baltnews Telegram channel has also increasingly spread cases of IL, by nature a more covert technique of audience manipulation. In the process of IL, information of Western news articles was manipulated and spread on Russian-domain websites, later reaching Nordic-Baltic websites and the Baltnews Telegram channel. The study thus demonstrates how Russian-domain and Kremlin-official media systematically draw from and amplify content published in the Western press that can be made to align with their own messaging as part of IICs. Spreading IL attempts via Telegram might constitute a mechanism of Russian state-sponsored media to evade sanctions.

Contents

I. Introduction

The use of international news media to influence foreign audiences has long formed part of Russian foreign policy, including in its Foreign Policy Concept, National Security Strategy, and Military Doctrine.[1] Debunking of pro-Kremlin content shows that Western public audiences have become regular targets of manipulative messaging.[2] The Russian government especially supports the spread of negative information about other states' politics and societies via state-sponsored media outlets.[3] Accordingly, in the run-up to and following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, information has been weaponised alongside kinetic action.

Weaponised information is understood as the conscious use of information, true or false, to effect change in attitudes and behaviour of the target in line with the attacker's purpose, for instance the use of news reporting as a geopolitical tool for states to influence political processes abroad.[4] While state-sponsored transnational media outlets like Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik have been used to project Russian influence abroad, the use of social media is of increasing importance.[5] Telegram is currently playing a key role, as it 'found itself at the heart of the Ukraine war',[6] formed into 'the app of choice'[7] or the 'digital battlefront between Russia and Ukraine'.[8]

Telegram and YouTube are the two major platforms that avoided systematic restrictions in both Europe and Russia after February 2022.[9] Since access to Instagram and Facebook was slowed down and later blocked completely in Russia, the daily Russian audience of these platforms heavily decreased from January to July 2022 by 72 per cent and 79 per cent, respectively. The Russian media regulator, Roskomnadzor, furthermore blocked access to Twitter, which reduced its relevance inside the country. The audience of the three main Russian state channels—Pervyy (First), Rossiya-1 (Russia-1), and NTV—also dropped by about 5 to 8 per cent between February and July. At the same time the Russian audience on Telegram increased by about 66 per cent, which suggests that Russian-speaking audiences have migrated to this platform.[10] Social media like Telegram offers faster news updates than traditional news sources, which might add to its appeal at a time of a hot military conflict.

EU countries, including the Baltic States, reacted to the Russian invasion of Ukraine by banning pro-Kremlin TV channels and news outlets engaged in justifying the military attack or inciting violence.[11] Kremlin-controlled television has long been considered a key information influence on the Russian-speaking population in the Baltic States, including formally local or EU-regis-

> In the process of Information Laundering, a network of intermediaries select information from a previous source and apply techniques that gradually distort the original information and disseminate it further.

tered TV stations, alongside a series of websites.[12] Reception of these pro-Kremlin news sources was thus restricted. In addition, Twitter implemented measures to de-amplify the reach of prominent pro-Kremlin accounts, e.g. restricting the spread of tweets by RT. Facebook took similar measures. The lack of content moderation on Telegram and YouTube, however, opened the possibility to bypass the European ban and rendered these platforms important avenues for pro-Kremlin messaging.[13]

Telegram thus represents an important object for further research. These observations lead to the question if and how pro-Kremlin information influence campaigns (IICs) used Telegram and other websites to try to circumvent the restrictions. IICs are understood as 'deliberate attempts at deception […] using disruptive and illegitimate means', creating 'an all-inclusive and progressive process of audience manipulation'.[14] This paper unpacks how pro-Kremlin information laundering (IL) attempts, a specific form of covert IICs, have been carried out to inflict harm on other states or actors. The analysis is limited to the IL attempts reaching one key outlet

in the Baltic States via Telegram, addressing the research question: *To what extent have pro-Kremlin IL attempts targeted the Russian-speaking Baltic audience of Baltnews via Telegram since 24 February 2022, and which main themes have they transmitted?*

Analytical framework: Information Laundering

To trace back IL attempts, this paper builds on and adapts the research framework as developed by the NATO StratCom COE. Accordingly, IL is understood as a hybrid stratagem (combining various techniques) used by actors within an IIC to manipulate its audience. In the process of IL, a network of intermediaries select information from a previous source and apply techniques, simultaneously or in quick succession, that gradually distort the original information and disseminate it further. This results in parallel processes of source magnification, whereby false or deceitful information is legitimised. Techniques include, for instance, misleading headlines, deceitful translation, and misappropriation (see below). It is important to note that not

all actors within influence networks intend to participate in IL.[15] A detailed revision of the IL framework is presented below.

Case study selection: The Baltnews Telegram channel

The Baltic States have long been major targets of pro-Kremlin disinformation due to their proximity to Russia and their extensive ethnic-Russian minority, comprising 24.2 per cent of the population in Latvia, 23.7 per cent in Estonia, and 6 per cent in Lithuania (January 2022).[16] The possible manipulation of Baltic audiences is therefore of interest. The Baltnews Telegram channel is used as a gateway to systematically uncover IL attempts that have the potential to reach a Russian-speaking audience in the Baltic States. The news outlet Baltnews was selected since it has previously been identified as a key Baltic pro-Kremlin outlet, partially owned by the Russian media holding Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today) and distributing pro-Kremlin messages.[17] Despite increased sanctions connected to the Russia-Ukraine war, access to Baltnews was upheld. After Latvia blocked access to baltnews.lv in 2019 when RT fell under EU sanctions, the domain lv.baltnews.com was used instead.[18] In March 2022 the Estonian baltnews.ee changed to ee.baltnews.com, and the Lithuanian baltnews.lt changed to lt.baltnews.com.[19] At the time of research, all named domains were redirecting to baltnews.com. The Baltnews Telegram channel remains accessible without restriction.

Methodology: How to map IL attempts and their main biases

In the first part of the study, the techniques used to manipulate information during IL processes are uncovered and the network of interacting websites behind selected IL attempts are mapped. To that end, all 355 Baltnews Telegram posts from 1 December 2021 until 30 June 2022 containing links to external websites were scraped with support of Gundars Bergmanis-Korāts. By comparing those posts with the information provided in the original articles, the study analyses whether IL techniques were used to distort the original information. The spread of the corresponding links by other outlets is examined with a backlink checker. Lastly, as this study is mainly interested in Kremlin-originated IICs, only IL attempts with backlinks to Kremlin-official media are investigated further (including non-Russian domains like sputnik.com). Kremlin-official or Russian state-sponsored media comprise official Kremlin or Russian ministry websites (AP, MFA, TASS) and state-funded media, including Pervyy Kanal, RIA Novosti, Rossiya 24, RT, and Sputnik.[20]

Hence, if Kremlin-official websites were among the outlets spreading (and distorting) the original articles, case studies are conducted to map the links of Russian-domain and Kremlin-official outlets and to compare the IL techniques. Websites with domains of Nordic-Baltic countries are examined as well, to identify whether the IL attempts reached other Baltic outlets besides

Baltnews (called domestic integration). The case studies are selected according to the following criteria: (a) involvement of Kremlin-official media; (b) application of different IL techniques (see below), simultaneously or in quick succession, in order to gradually distort the original information and disseminate it further; (c) participation of a network of various actors in the process.

In the second part of the study, the themes of 39 IL attempts tied to Western media are compared to the way Kremlin-official sources are treated by the Baltnews Telegram channel in 66 cases. To identify potential coverage biases of the Baltnews Telegram channel, all posts are categorised by broad topics. To identify possible framing biases, the posts are categorised by inductively created themes. Next, to infer the possible intent behind the specific portrayal of news, the themes are further considered with the lens of antagonistic narratives of *destruction*, *suppression*, and *direction*.[21]

Overall, this study thus uses the IL lens to uncover broader networks of Kremlin-official or Russian-domain news outlets engaged in spreading deceitful information, alongside revealing how Baltnews has amplified pro-Kremlin messaging via Telegram. It furthermore explores ways of identifying the different biases that can appear when investigating IICs or IL. It is argued that in parallel to outright pro-Kremlin messaging, the hybrid IL technique is employed to cloak pro-Kremlin messaging and covertly introduce its narratives. Although IL attempts were only identified in a small fraction of Baltnews Telegram posts, this hybrid deception technique has the potential to change readers' beliefs and attitudes.
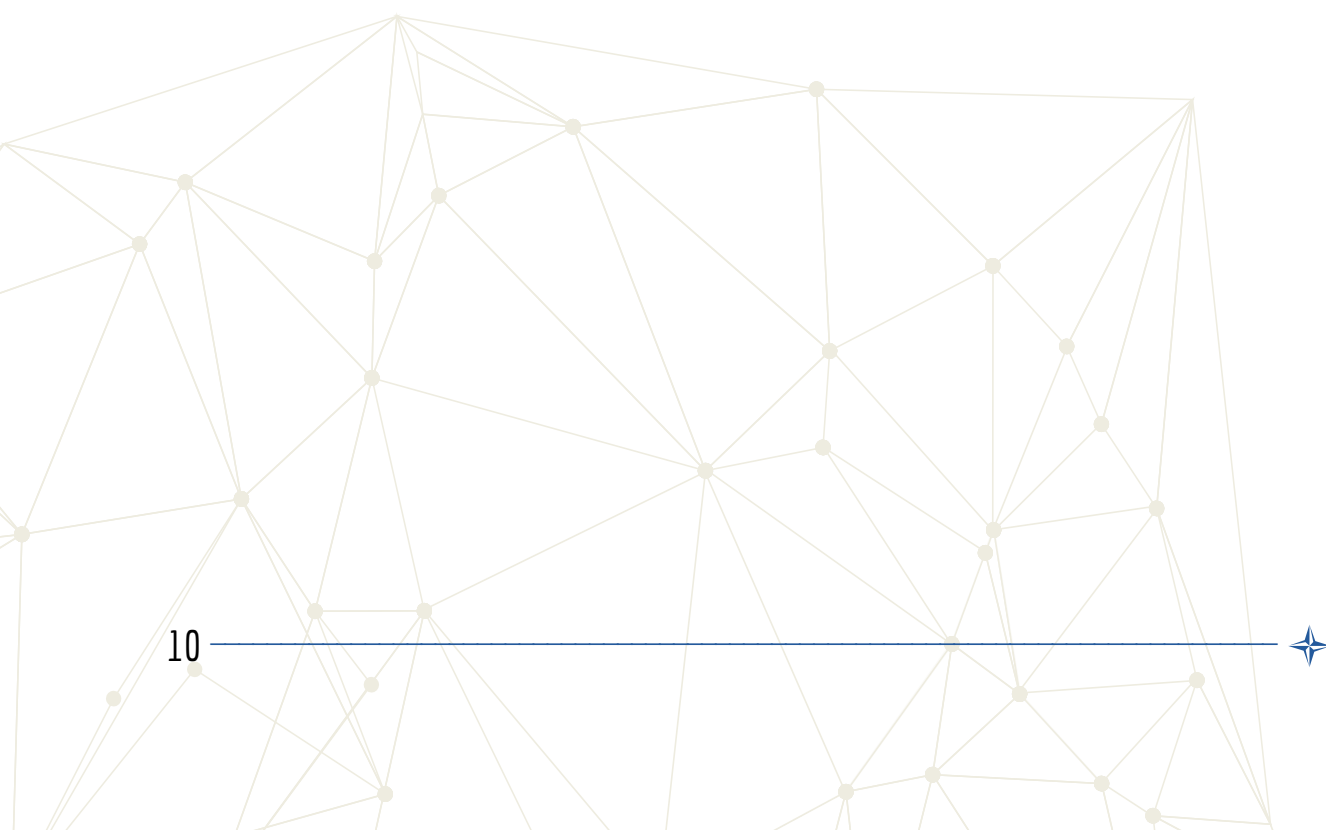
2. Hypotheses: What can we expect to find?

This study investigates whether pro-Kremlin IL attempts reached a Baltic audience through the Baltnews Telegram channel since 24 February 2022, and thus the extent to which Baltnews on Telegram takes part in processes of disseminating distorted information. Commonly shared links, similar news content, and quick succession of publication strongly point to connections between different news outlets. On the basis of these factors, the networks of specific IL attempts are mapped.

It is expected that the IL techniques would differ if the Baltnews Telegram channel (a) refers to Western media articles or (b) openly refers to Kremlin-official media. In case (a), it is expected that Baltnews might itself engage in the first phase of IL (placement) and employ techniques to distort the original information. However, the placement might have already taken place, with Baltnews Telegram just taking part in a layering process, copying the way a Kremlin-official outlet treated the linked article. In case (b), the placement (distorting information from the original source) is likely to have been performed by the Kremlin-official article, with the pro-Kremlin Baltnews Telegram channel just reflecting and further distributing this distorted information (layering or integration phase).

Strategic importance of uncovering IL attempts

The study of IICs through IL provides a comprehensive approach for understanding how influence campaigns are conducted and who is behind the spread of pro-Kremlin influence in a particular media environment. The methodological framework can be exported to any media environment. This paper further refines the IL method as developed by Carrasco Rodriguez in 2020, to allow for a cross-channel investigation of Telegram and website data. It aims to allow national institutions, academics, and practitioners to detect, understand, and disrupt IICs. The core benefits of using this framework are:

1. Supporting researchers and practitioners in comprehending how information is gradually distorted, disseminated, and legitimised via Telegram.

2. Exposing networks of websites active in IL.

3. Understanding patterns and trends over time of cases and actors involved.

4. Offering a refined research framework to better recognise and trace information influence activities targeting NATO countries, allied nations, and their institutions.

Possible intended effects of media biases and antagonistic strategic narratives

In addition to the criteria outlined above to identify IL, the study expands the method to acknowledge different kinds of media biases present in the data. It is expected that *coverage bias* (how much space in the media is dedicated to an event) and *framing bias* (the way information is presented) would shape the way information is received and incorporated into belief systems.[22] To identify coverage biases of the Baltnews Telegram channel, the posts are categorised by broad topics. To identify framing biases, the content of posts referring to Kremlin-official media is compared to those referring to Western news outlets with traces of IL, categorised by inductively created themes.

Further extrapolating from the case studies, the themes (framing bias) are categorised according to the antagonistic narrative strategies by Russian state-sponsored media, as identified by Charlotte Wagnsson and Costan Barzanje: *destruction*, intention to damage the other's capabilities; *direction*, intention to induce a preferred way of behaviour; and *suppression*, intention to accomplish status shifts.[23] In other words, malign information influence can take the form of antagonistic strategic narratives.[24] The latter are defined as strategic narratives 'dispersing critical or hostile information about another political actor to inflict harm',[25] with strategic narratives understood as 'a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors'.[26]

Ordering the themes into types of antagonistic strategic narratives, following the methodology of Wagnsson and Barzanje (destruction, direction, and suppression), allows the characterisation of the information transmitted via Baltnews Telegram and the drawing of broader conclusions on the ways it might shape its audience's views, as hypothesised elsewhere.[27] This approach thus moves beyond the mere analysis of content of posts to a focus on the underlying logic behind the broader strategic narratives. The study does not, however, test the audience responses.

3. Revision of techniques and phases of IL

Earlier research identified a catalogue of different IL techniques, as well as indicators of connections between laundered news items and three phases of IL (see Figures 1–3). These criteria are used in this study to systematically identify IL attempts, to assess the techniques employed, and to map the IL networks.[28]

Deceitful translation: Articles are translated imprecisely, excluding pertinent information or incorporating targeted messages in order to modify or spin the content, context, or meaning of the original text.

Decontextualisation: Strategically leaving out information or cherry-picking/ overemphasising issues, exclusively picking out and presenting a certain angle of the given information, to change the distilled meaning of an article, e.g. with the use of emotional language.

Disinformation: An article includes false or fabricated information meant to mislead or deceive a target audience.

Misappropriation: References are provided that do not contain the alleged information; or unrelated information is incorporated to frame a topic or event so as to mislead audiences and align the message with the aims of an IIC.

Misleading headline: Biased or misleading 'click-bait' headlines are used to attract readers' interest; these may be ambiguous and sensationalised, but not necessarily false.

Potemkin villages: A network of deceptive, 'fact-producing' platforms endorse each other's content to enhance credibility and create the appearance of truth to mislead target audiences. By leveraging the bandwagon fallacy, Potemkin villages contribute to source magnification.

Smurfing: Various accounts or websites controlled by the same actor (as opposed to a Potemkin village network of actors) disseminate information that is difficult to attribute and thus difficult to debunk. Smurfing also contributes to source magnification.

Woozle effect: Fabricated or misleading citations are included repeatedly in laundered news items to seemingly provide evidence of their veracity.

Figure 1. IL techniques (after Belen Carrasco Rodriguez, 'Information Laundering in the Nordic-Baltic Region', NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, November 2020, p. 12)
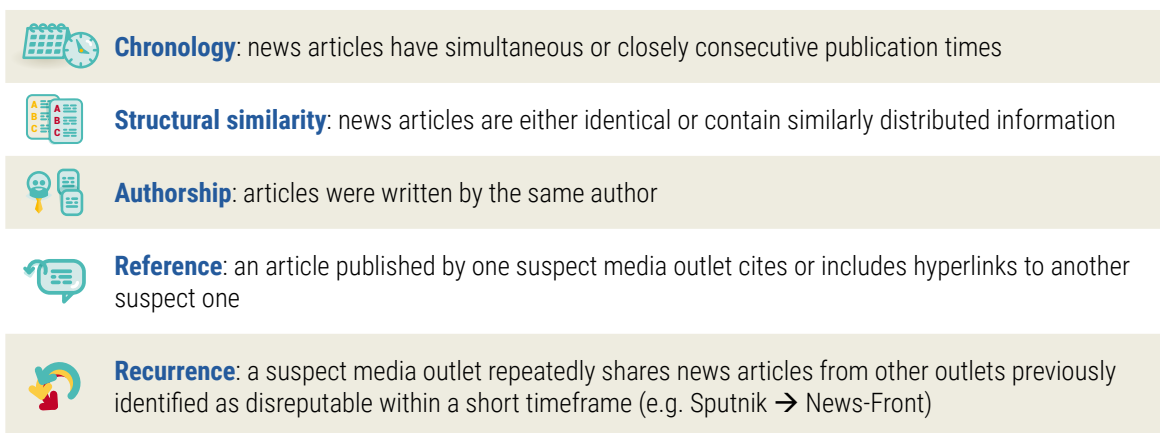
Chronology: news articles have simultaneous or closely consecutive publication times

Structural similarity: news articles are either identical or contain similarly distributed information

Authorship: articles were written by the same author

Reference: an article published by one suspect media outlet cites or includes hyperlinks to another suspect one

Recurrence: a suspect media outlet repeatedly shares news articles from other outlets previously identified as disreputable within a short timeframe (e.g. Sputnik → News-Front)

Figure 2. Indicators of connection between laundered news items (after Carrasco Rodriguez, 'Information Laundering', p.12)

Placement
Information from its original source is distorted by applying the first technique(s), intentionally or accidentally, in preparation for the layering process.

Layering
IL techniques are applied by a network of intermediaries tofurther distort and disseminate the information.

Integration
The false or misleading information resulting from the application of IL techniques isaccepted by legitimate media outlets and/or social media users, and enters into the public discourse.
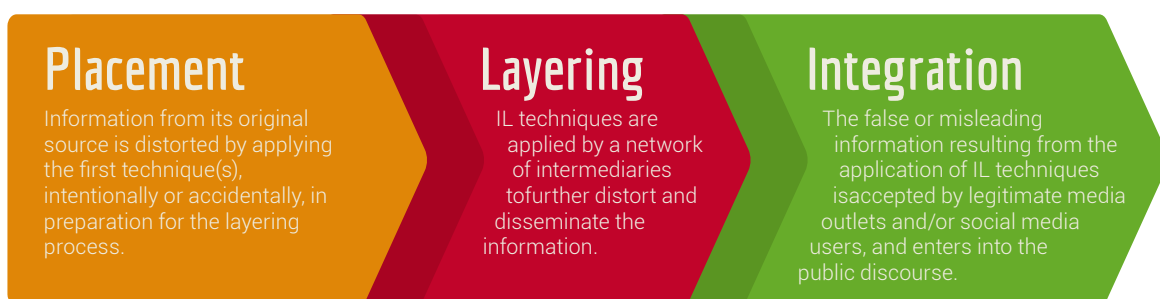
Figure 3. Phases of IL (after Carrasco Rodriguez, 'Information Laundering', p.13)

The following refinements are proposed: concerning the IL techniques (Figure 1), *misappropriation* is seen as a necessary condition for any IL attempt, as the primary feature of IL is misrepresenting the original information. *Automated translation* is, however, disregarded as a technique, since it is on the one hand hard to discern whether a text has been translated automatically, with machine translation steadily increasing in accuracy, while on the other hand automated translation does not point to an effort to mislead its audiences *per se*. Instead, more emphasis is placed on the technique of *deceitful translation*. It moreover needs to be critically noted that in many instances the *misleading headline* IL technique overlaps with techniques such as *misappropriation*, *disinformation*, or *deceitful translation*. The categories should thus not be thought of as mutually exclusive.

This study further ads the technique of *decontextualisation*, since it is detected in the case studies (see below).

Of the indicators of connections between laundered news items (Figure 2), *chronology*

and *structural similarity* stand out as most important. Thus, we can talk about networks of websites pursuing an IL attempt due to the quick succession of articles referring to the same news item in similar ways (with similar IL techniques and 'twists of the story'). While this does not prove a connection between these websites, it is a clear indicator of similar intent. *Authorship*, *reference*, and *recurrence* are features that more strongly indicate connections between laundered

news items and the respective outlets. These three indicators are, however, less likely to appear and an IL attempt can also be layered by only loosely connected websites.

By mapping the IL processes, this study does, furthermore, take the three stages of IL into account (Figure 3), especially in asking whether an integration of an IL attempt by domestic media of Nordic or Baltic States took place (domestic integration).
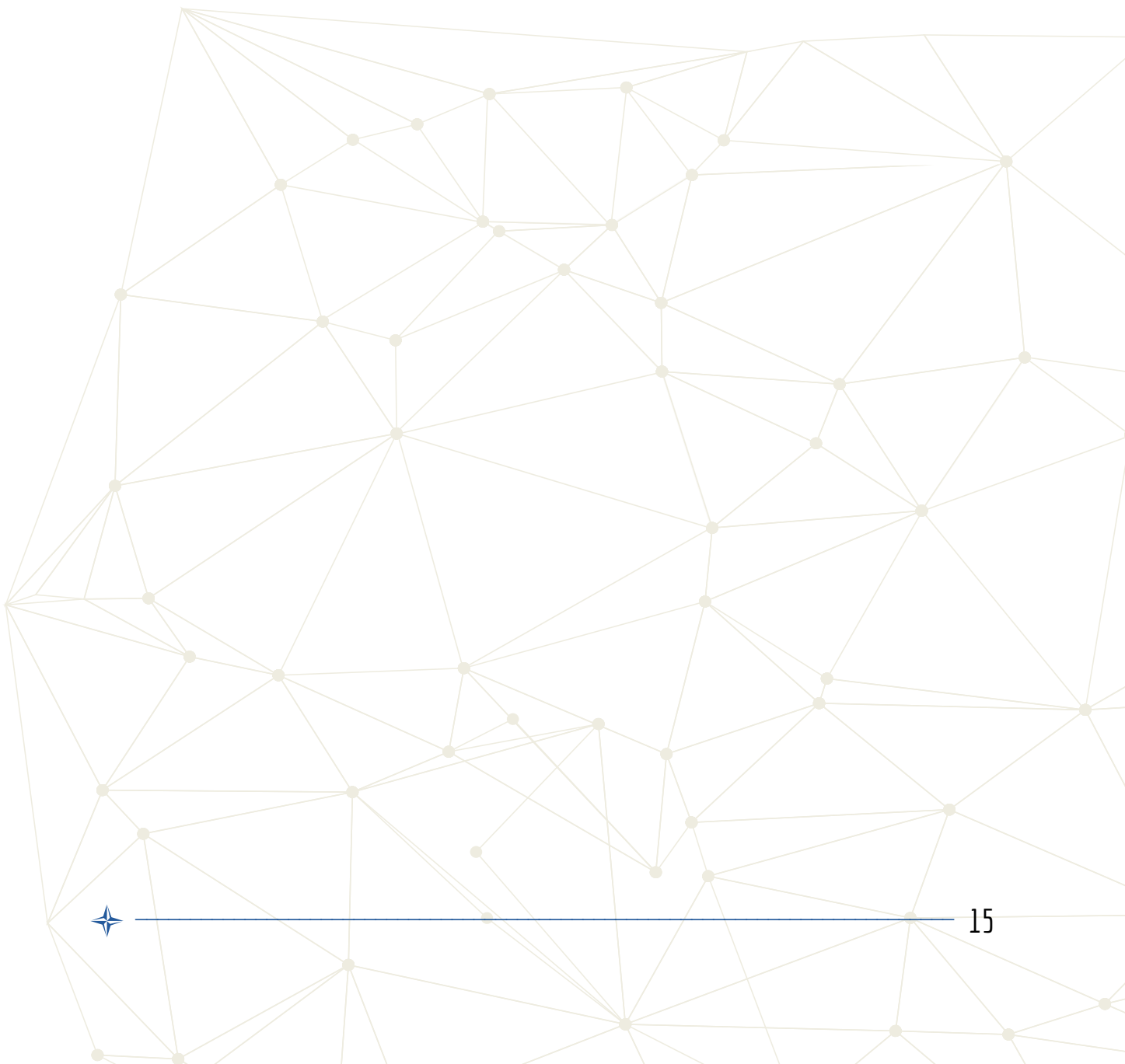
4. Data collection: Investigating the Baltnews Telegram channel

The Baltnews Telegram @BALTNEWS is a Russian-language channel. Its description reads 'Political information from the Baltic Tiger', using the 'Baltic Tiger' concept to refer to the three Baltic States, and includes a link to its main website, https://baltnews.com/. The Baltnews website advertised this channel as its own at the time of research (August–September 2022).[29]

Its top incoming and outgoing mentions suggest that the Baltnews Telegram channel is liked to Russian and pro-Kremlin Telegram news channels, some of which are Russian state funded via Sputnik, RIA Novosti, and RT. The Baltnews channel has been mainly mentioned by individuals and compilations of channels from Russia, about 60 per cent of mentions, and Belarus,

about 20 per cent. As of mid August 2022, the Baltnews channel was mentioned most by the Telegram channels Veracity, BelTA, Dezhurnyy po SNG (which translates to 'Duty Officer for the CIS'), Zubovskiy 4, and Sputnik Blizhneye zarubezh'ye (Sputnik Near Abroad). The Baltnews channel itself most frequently mentioned Sputnik Near Abroad, RIA Novosti (RIA Novosti), Russkiy

Veracity
913 mentions

BELTA
772 mentions

Дежурный по СНГ
642 mentions

Зубовский, 4
481 mentions

Sputnik Ближнее
зарубежье 408 mentions

Sputnik Ближнее
зарубежье 749 mentions

РИА Новости
242 mentions

РУССКИЙ ДНЕВНИК
241 mentions

Алексей Стефанов
201 mentions

Sputnik Meedia
(Эстония) 175 mentions

Figure 4. Top five incoming and outgoing mentions of Baltnews Telegram as of August 2022 (TGStat, 'Baltnews. Citation', 2022)
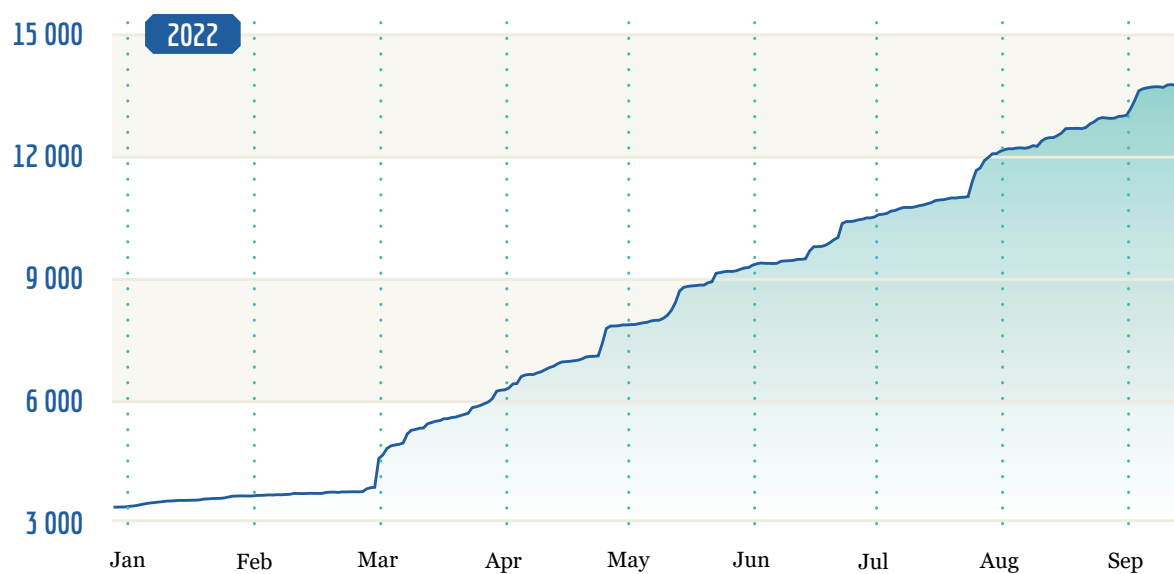
Figure 5. Subscribers count for Baltnews Telegram channel, 1 January to 30 September 2022 (Telemetrio, 'Baltnews')

dnevnik (Russian Diary), Aleksey Stefanov, and Sputnik Meedia Estoniya (Sputnik Media Estonia).[30] (Figure 4). BelTA is the Belarusian state news agency, Zubovskiy 4 is operated by the Russian state-owned RT media group, and Aleksey Stefanov is an RT correspondent in the Baltic States, according to the respective profiles. Russian Diary is run by the Latvian Vadim Avva, who is known for sharing content from Kremlin-official pages and messages critical of the Latvian government.[31]

The channel's subscribers have more than tripled from about 4000 before the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, to 10,500 in June and 14,200 in September (Figure 5). In parallel, the number of posts forwarded from the channel and mentions of the channel in other channels have increased. The monthly average of mentions more than doubled from 643 (November 2021 to February 2022) to 1623 (March to June 2022), while the monthly average of forwarded posts almost tripled from 293 to 828 in the same time span.[32] These developments are not linked to restrictions of access to the local Baltnews domains (.ee, .lt, .lv), since baltnews.com is still accessible. While this increase in subscribers, forwarded posts, and mentions is small compared to other Telegram channels discussing the Russia-Ukraine war since 24 February, it is still substantial [33]

The Baltnews Telegram channel presents an important case study since it shows which messages are directed towards the Russian-speaking part of the popu-
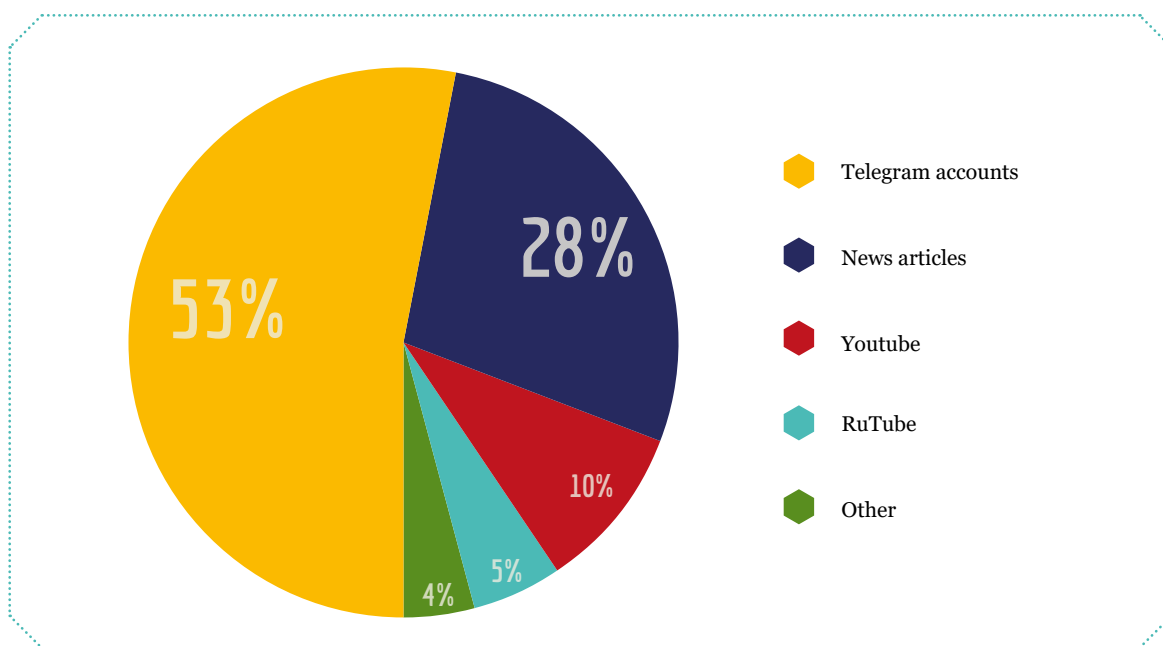
Figure 6. Websites referred to by Baltnews Telegram posts (by percentage of posts with external links)

lation with a pro-Kremlin predisposition. It serves as a gateway to detect whether the IL technique is being used in parallel to overt pro-Kremlin messaging. This study can be replicated and applied to other channels of interest.

Description of the retrieved Telegram data

For the analysis, all the posts of the Baltnews Telegram channel from 1 December 2021 to 30 June 2022 were retrieved (10,699 unique posts), all of which were in the Russian language. Of the posts, 12 per cent contained links to websites (1,278 in sum). About 30 per cent of those latter posts contained links to news articles (355), while about 50 per cent referred to other Telegram accounts (679), and 15 per cent to YouTube or RuTube (Figure 6).[34]

Over time, the posts with links to articles increased almost exponentially after the 24 February Russian invasion of Ukraine. While in January and February, 22 to 25 posts had referenced articles, this number rose to 56 in March, 72 and 73 in April and May, and 103 in June 2022. The figures thus more than quadrupled. To an extent this trend does reflect the overall increase of messaging on the Baltnews Telegram channel, from 345 posts in January to 1630 in June. However, the peak of overall messaging was already reached by March

(2764 messages), whereas the number of posts linking to external websites steadily increased until June. These figures suggest the increased importance of Telegram as a means of communication for Baltnews, similar to what has been observed regarding other channels discussing the Russia-Ukraine war.[35]

Further comparing the pre-war to the war period, the percentage of posts referring to Russian-domain articles almost doubled. While up until 23 February, 28 per cent of posts that contained links to articles referred to Russian-domain articles (15 of 62), the percentage increased to 44 per cent between 24 February and 30 June (124 of

290). About half of the latter referred directly to Kremlin-official media (69 of 290, 24 per cent).

Over 25 per cent of articles that the Baltnews Telegram channel referred to after 24 February were also referenced by Kremlin-official media (27 per cent), as shown by an investigation conducted with the backlink checker Ahrefs.[36] This underlines the importance of taking a closer look at possible Telegram-driven IL, since the Baltnews channel could be used for IL placement (first phase of the IL process) or for the layering phase, by further distorting and distributing already existing cases of IL.

5. Case studies: The extent to which IL attempts reach the Baltnews Telegram channel

Two sets of different case studies are presented in sections A and B. Taken together, the analysed Telegram content comprises about 30 per cent of Baltnews posts with external links between 24 February and 30 June 2022.

Section A investigates 39 cases in which Baltnews posts linked to articles by Western news outlets with a large readership (Bloomberg, The Washington Post, Politico, The Hill, The Independent, Foreign Policy), and examines seven case studies (presented in the annex). **Section B summarises the way Kremlin-official sources were treated by the Baltnews Telegram channel in 66 cases**, giving two examples. The network of websites engaged in the IL attempts was traced back using the Ahrefs backlink checker, and the Russian-language posts were translated with the help of the AI-trained DeepL translator.[37]

A. IL in posts manipulating the content of Western news outlets

In the numerous instances of IL attempts that featured in the Baltnews Telegram channel and linked to Western media outlets between 24 February and 30 June, **the channel helped to distribute pro-Kremlin IL attempts (layering)**, thereby rendering the distorted information more credible. The dataset shows an increase of IL attempts in which Baltnews referenced Western news outlets, from 6 to 10 cases per month between March and May to 16 in June.

A majority of all IL attempts that featured in the Baltnews channel (26 of 39, 67 per cent) was linked to English-language news outlets with high online readership, such as The Independent, Bloomberg, or The Washington Post, with 60 to 100 million monthly online visits, or The Hill, with a monthly online readership of about 40 million visits. Other cases involved, for instance, The Telegraph, Politico, The Guardian, or The New York Times. **Large German-language news outlets were used for laundering attempts as well in 13 per cent of cases** (5 of 39), such as the Austrian Heute.at or the German ZDF or Welt. It is notable that **most of these outlets are not openly accessible** and instead require a subscription, which for the common reader impedes scrutiny/critical double-checking and comparing IL content with the original articles.
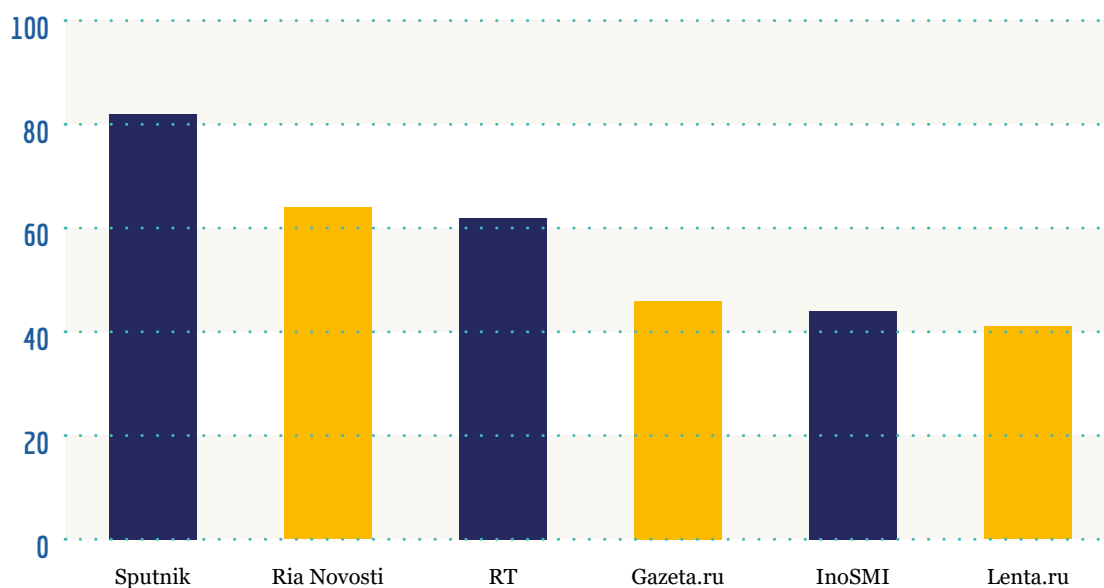
Figure 7. Websites most involved in amplifying IL cases (by percentage of IL cases)

The outlets most involved in sharing these 39 IL attempts were: Sputnik, RIA Novosti, RT, Gazeta.Ru, InoSMI, and Lenta. ru, sharing 82, 64, 46, 44, and 41 per cent of cases, respectively (Figure 7). This finding suggests that Kremlin-official media are heavily involved in distorting the content of Western news articles (especially Sputnik, RIA Novosti, and RT).

Over time, the number of Kremlin-official articles sharing the identified cases more than doubled, just like the overall number of Russian-domain websites involved (from 11 and 69 in March, to 27 and 161 in June, respectively). However, the proportion of websites sharing these attempts remained at 11 to 13 Russian-domain websites, and at 1.6 to 1.8 Kremlin-official sources per IL attempt throughout.

Thus, while the total number of IL attempts increased, the engagement of Russian-domain and Kremlin-official websites per IL attempt remained constant.

Among those websites that only distributed a small number of IL cases are several that allude to sports, like 08euro. ru, Euro04.ru, Euro2000.ru, Games08.ru, Games2002.ru, Olympics10.ru, Uefaeuro08.ru, and Worldcup10.ru, each of which shared between four and six IL attempts. Interestingly, the security certificates (SSL) of all these websites are from gazeta.ru. This points to *smurfing*, meaning various accounts or websites controlled by the same actor disseminate information that is difficult to attribute and thus difficult to debunk. Smurfing also contributes to source magnification.

Observations derived from cases A1 to A7

The **themes** of cases A1 to A7 (Table 1) reflect the overall themes of Baltnews Telegram posts. That is, most posts contained a form of the **weak West** theme (five posts), while some posts also reflected the **strong Russia** theme (three posts). Some posts also featured the themes of **political crisis in the West** (two posts), the **racist, fascist Nazi West** (one post), and **economic crisis in the West** (one post). A1 to A3 exemplify cases with relatively low **distribution**, as they spread on fewer than 10 Russian-domain or Kremlin-official websites, with varying degrees of IL techniques employed. Cases B4 to B7, by contrast, were more widely spread, on 14 to over 20 websites.

Sputnik and **RIA Novosti** shared all seven more closely analysed cases; **Life.ru** shared 6, followed by **News.ru** (five of seven), and Lenta.ru (four of seven); and the following websites shared three of the seven cases: **Baltnews, Gazeta.Ru**, **RT**, and **RuBaltic.Ru**. The observation that a Kremlin-official outlet placed over 70 per cent of investigated IL attempts about Western news articles (RIA Novosti, in cases A2–3 and A5–7) points to a **top-down process of IL originating mainly from Kremlin-official media**, with other Russian-domain outlets following suit. Only in two out of the seven cases was the IL attempt placed by other Russian-domain outlets and only later picked up by Kremlin-official media. Thus, contrary to expectations, no case was found in which the Baltnews Telegram channel performed the IL placement itself. Instead, it amplified IL instances that originated elsewhere, either on Russian-domain or on Kremlin-official websites.

The high number of outlets that only shared one or two of these seven cases (34 out of 42) points to the possibility that **a majority of outlets might have taken part in distributing pro-Kremlin IL without doing it systematically**, thereby nonetheless contributing to content magnification and distribution (integration phase).

A domestic integration of the distorted information in Nordic and Baltic outlets was observed in most cases (5 of 7), meaning that the IL attempts were also amplified by websites with Nordic or Baltic domains. This relatively large proportion is not surprising, since the research method focuses on IL attempts that have already reached a Telegram channel geared towards Baltic audiences (Baltnews Telegram channel).

With regard to **techniques**, *misappropriation and misleading headlines* **represented the most popular IL techniques**, as they featured in all seven more thoroughly analysed cases. *Disinformation* was identified in five of seven cases, *deceitful translation* in three, and only two showed signs of a *woozle effect*. Only one instance of *smurfing* and one *Potemkin village* were detected. In addition to the IL techniques previously identified, **a new technique identified in this study comprises *decontextualising information***, by strategically leaving out information or

cherry-picking/ overemphasising issues, exclusively picking out and presenting a certain angle of the given information, to change the distilled meaning of an article, e.g. with the use of emotional language. This technique was used in three of the analysed cases. A detailed analysis of the case studies mentioned is in the annex.

Case	Summary	IL Techniques	Overview of IL networks	Themes
A1. Politico: The US is not sending additional military instructors to Ukraine (13 March)	Websites laundering the article stress that the US did not send more trainers to Ukraine out of fear of the Russian reaction, in an allegedly intransparent, instance of US decision-making.	*Misappropriation* *misleading headline*	**Total media involved: 7**; 29% Kremlin-official. No domestic media involved.	Strong Russia, weak West
A2. Bloomberg: Bulgaria not supplying arms to Ukraine (24 April)	Article is distorted by websites which misleadingly suggest that Bulgaria refused to supply weapons to Ukraine while the decision was still pending, further portraying Bulgaria as internally divided.	*Deceitful translation* *disinformation* *misappropriation* *misleading headline*	**Total media involved: 8**; 25% Kremlin-official. One domestic media outlet involved.	Divided West in political crisis, weak West (not providing weapons to Ukraine)
A3. The Independent: Ukrainian refugees in the UK faced with 'terrible housing conditions' (4 May)	Websites laundering the article overdramatise the living conditions of Ukrainians in the UK, not disclosing that the figures only refer to the Greater London area, not the whole UK.	*Decontextualisation* *disinformation* *misappropriation* *misleading headline*	**Total media involved: 6**; 33% Kremlin-official. No domestic media involved.	Racist, fascist, Nazi West (special treatment for Ukrainians vs racism towards other refugees)
A4. Washington Post: US mercenaries returning from Ukraine war (29 May)	Websites misleadingly suggest that foreign mercenaries are fleeing from Ukraine and are advising no one to return; websites make false statements about the equipment, exaggerate the losses, and underline the strength of the Russian army.	*Deceitful translation* *disinformation* *misappropriation* *misleading headline* *woozle effect*	**Total media involved: 20**; 10% Kremlin-official. Two domestic media outlets involved.	Strong Russia, weak West (disillusioned mercenaries turn home)

Case	Summary	IL Techniques	Overview of IL networks	Themes
A5. Foreign Policy: Lithuanian FM commenting on Ukraine war (13 June)	Article is distorted by websites which misleadingly suggest that the Lithuanian FM stated he was disappointed by Russia's successes in Ukraine and by Russia allegedly successfully countering the sanctions.	*Decontextualisation* *disinformation* *misappropriation* *misleading headline* *woozle effect*	**Total media involved: 23**; 15% Kremlin-official. Five domestic media outlets involved.	Strong Russia, weak West (Ukraine cannot win)
A6. The Hill: Russian influence on US nuclear energy security (13 June)	Websites laundering the article distort the original information by overstating the extent to which Western nuclear reactors are manufactured by Russia, and the consequences.	*Decontextualisation* *disinformation* *misappropriation* *misleading headline* *woozle effect*	**Total media involved: 14**; 36% Kremlin-official. One domestic media outlet involved.	Economic crisis West, strong Russia
A7. Bloomberg: Ukraine's EU membership aspirations (14 June)	In the laundering attempt, websites exaggerate the likelihood of the EU to collapse as a consequence of Ukraine and other candidates joining it.	*Decontextualisation* *misappropriation* *misleading headline* *smurfing*	**Total media involved: 24**; 21% Kremlin-official. One domestic media outlet involved.	Divided West in political crisis (EU divided over Ukraine EU membership)

Table 1. Overview of case studies, category A (IL attempts linked to Western news outlets)

B. Overt amplification of pro-Kremlin messaging

Throughout the observation period, an increasing number of posts directly linked to Russian state-sponsored media, up from one to three per month between December and February, to 9 in March, 16 in April, 21 in May, and 19 in June. **Kremlin-official messaging was thus increasingly overtly spread by Baltnews. Overall, between 24 February and 30 June, 66 Baltnews**

Telegram posts included direct links to Kremlin-official articles, with 7 posts referencing more than one Kremlin-official source. The outlets referenced the most (Figure 8) were Sputnik and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, mid.ru (both in 17 posts), RIA Novosti (in 13 posts), and RT (in 8 posts).

When directly referencing Kremlin-official articles or statements, the Baltnews channel simply repeated (parts of) the
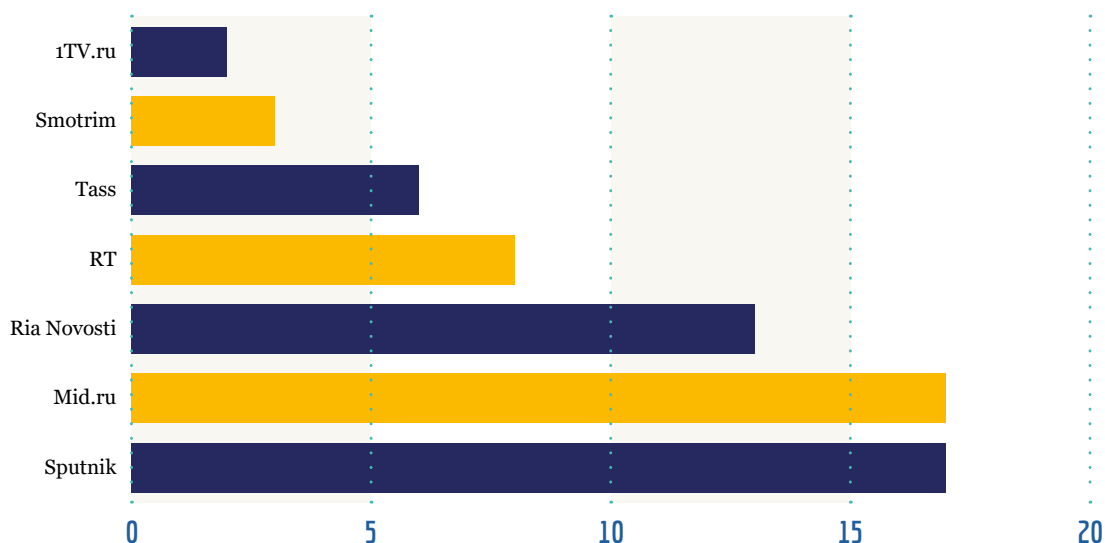
Figure 8. Number of Baltnews Telegram posts referencing Kremlin-official outlets (24 February till 30 June, 2022)

original pro-Kremlin content. No case of IL placement by the channel was observed. This might suggest that the placement (distorting information from the original source) was performed by the Kremlin-official articles, with Baltnews Telegram channel simply taking part in further distributing the distorted information (layering or integration phase).

However, the Kremlin-official articles themselves did not show signs of IL, as they did not attempt to distort any prior information, and the investigated Baltnews posts performed straightforward amplification of Kremlin narratives, leading to an outright repetition of pro-Kremlin content. Some of the listed IL techniques were used in the posts (e.g. *misleading headline*, *disinformation*), but not in an attempt to distort and cloak the Kremlin narratives, but to overtly spread the original content further. In con-

trast, IL is a combination of techniques to deceive and manipulate the audience by **gradually distorting the original information and disseminating it further**. Thus, it is used to covertly spread certain messages, pretending the information is true with reference to some prior piece of information. According to this understanding of IL, *misappropriation* is a key piece of any IL process, and simply spreading a case of disinformation would not qualify as IL.

Consequently, the use of techniques such as *misleading headlines* or *disinformation* does not always point to cases of IL. Instead, *misappropriation* seems to be a necessary element of IL that did not feature in any of the investigated cases where Baltnews on Telegram overtly referred to Kremlin-official sources. Two examples demonstrate these findings. Since no IL was detected, the network of websites spreading the same

> Cases of IL, by nature a more covert technique of deceitful messaging, have increased.

content was not mapped either, including the extent to which the content spread on Nordic-Baltic domestic domains.

Case B1: Baltnews post linked to Radio Sputnik article (24 February)

On 24 February at 20:55, the Baltnews Telegram channel posted quotes from an interview its editor Andrey Starikov had given to **Radio Sputnik** (radiosputnik.ria.ru),[38] published the same day at 17:13. The Baltnews post started with the *misleading headline* 'Lithuania is pushing NATO to conflict with Russia', which directly builds on Starikov's misleading statement in the Radio Sputnik article that 'Lithuania was the first to call on NATO to actually get involved in a war with Russia'. This constitutes a case of *disinformation*, since Lithuania had only advocated for Ukraine's entry into the EU and shown interest to enact Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which allows for NATO members to bring an issue of concern to the table for discussion within the North Atlantic Council (consultation process).[39] Neither discussions of Ukrainian EU membership nor

proposing to initiate a NATO consultation process does, however, amount to 'getting involved in a war with Russia'. The Baltnews post further quoted Starikov, stating:

> *Lithuania is now calling for maximum diplomatic support for Kiev and in this context initiated a petition for Ukraine's entry into the European Union—in these conditions, when it is unclear whether Ukraine exists as a state. The Lithuanian leadership is in a kind of vacuum disconnected from reality.*

The statement 'it is unclear whether Ukraine exists as a state' is another example of *disinformation*, which was replicated in the Baltnews post but links back to a prominent Kremlin narrative that has long been widely distributed by the Kremlin.[40]

Case B2: Baltnews post linked to Russian Foreign Ministry statement accusing Ukraine of using cluster munitions (14 March)

On 14 March at 22:53, the Baltnews Telegram channel referred to a statement by

the Russian Foreign Ministry (mid.ru),[41] published the same day at 19:34, about an instance of shelling of Donetsk. The Baltnews post spread the allegation that: 'On 14 March around 11.30, the Ukrainian side fired a Tochka-U tactical missile with an internationally banned cluster missile at a residential area of Donetsk.' This view was spread by Kremlin-official media, but was disputed by the Ukrainian side and the debunking outlet Vox Ukraine.[42] The Baltnews channel thus openly referred to and thereby amplified the Kremlin view, allegedly a case of *disinformation*. While this could, again, be viewed as Baltnews engaging in the layering phase of an IL attempt, it was not, since the original article presented straightforward disinformation, which the Baltnews post simply amplified. What we see here is thus open amplification of pro-Kremlin content, and not covert laundering/distorting of information. The element of *misappropriation* is missing.

Discussion: To what extent have IL attempts reached the Baltnews Telegram channel?

The investigation reveals that since the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022, the Baltnews Telegram channel increasingly referenced Kremlin-official media like Sputnik, RT, or RIA Novosti, thereby overtly repeating Kremlin messaging. But cases of IL, by nature a more covert technique of deceitful messaging, have also increased.

On the one hand, when referencing Kremlin-official articles, Baltnews openly replicated and further distributed pro-Kremlin content on Telegram, which is not considered an act of IL. The number of posts with links to Kremlin-official media, moreover, steadily increased throughout the observation period, from 3 in February to 19 in June. This finding is not surprising, since more openly referring to Kremlin-official media might be expected from a pro-Kremlin outlet like Baltnews in reaction to the Ukraine war. Kremlin messaging was thus increasingly **overtly** spread by Baltnews Telegram.

However, on the other hand, a **covert,** deceptive messaging technique was also increasingly used, by referring to Western news articles while distorting the original information, using IL techniques such as *misappropriation*, *misleading headlines*, or *disinformation*. The number of these IL attempts increased from 6 in February to 16 in June. Kremlin-official or Russian-domain websites placed numerous attempts to distort the information of Western news articles. Instead of openly contesting claims made in the original articles, the websites tried to mislead the audience by reporting on and linking to Western news articles, while covertly slightly changing the actual content/meaning.

We thus see two contrasting strategies employed at the same time: more open as well as more covert pro-Kremlin messaging reaching the Baltnews Telegram audience.

Is IL the best frame to describe what we are seeing in the data? The case studies could also be read as good examples of how pro-Kremlin media systematically draw off and amplify content published in the Western press that can be made to align with their own messaging. **However, the cases investigated present instances of IL since they not only covertly distribute distorted information, but form part of a network of websites that distort and amplify the same content using similar techniques in quick succession.**

Following the logic of IL, cloaking pro-Kremlin messaging, disguised as information by Western news articles, is a technique employed for source magnification, to increase credibility. This covert technique seems curious in a Russian-language media environment in which independent media are openly criticised,[43] and especially in times of war when the Kremlin also bluntly and overtly amplifies its messages. It might point to a specific audience that the IL cases attempt to reach, for instance trying to fight the change of ideas of Russian speakers who also consume Western media, such as the Russian-speaking Baltnews audience. Overall, although IL attempts were identified in only a small fraction of Baltnews Telegram posts, this hybrid deception technique has the potential to change readers' beliefs and attitudes.

6. Biases identified in the Baltnews Telegram channel: Main themes and narrative strategies

Adding to earlier studies of IL, this section extrapolates from the case studies to obtain an overview of the type of content posted in the Baltnews Telegram channel. To this end, coverage and framing biases and the strategic aim of specific types of narratives are considered.

Coverage bias?

To identify a potential coverage bias of the Baltnews Telegram channel, all posts between 1 December and 30 June are categorised by broad topics. The share of posts with links to external websites that referred to the war and military tensions rose following the outbreak of war, as might be expected. The share was already high, at 28 per cent, between 1 December and 23 February. **From 24 February**, **the channel predominantly referred to the Ukraine war, in 82 per cent of posts, with an additional 14 per cent discussing the situation of Russians abroad**, and only 4 per cent referring to other topics. While the Russia-Ukraine war undoubtedly played a major role in other news channels as well, the study shows a clear coverage bias in favour of this one topic, rendering the

Baltnews channel almost a single-issue channel.

Framing bias?

In this section, the content of Baltnews Telegram posts referring to Kremlin-official media (66 cases) is compared with those referring to Western news outlets with traces of IL (39 cases). To identify possible framing biases, the case studies were categorised by inductively created themes, defined as the event or subject the article centres on. Following an 'ethnographic content analysis', the Baltnews posts were read chronologically and repeated themes were noted.[44] New themes were subsequently added, or the categories of themes adjusted to represent the whole corpus. Twelve distinct themes were identified. This section analyses first the themes of posts that amplified Russian state-sponsored media and then those of posts referring to Western news articles.

The posts referencing Kremlin-official media (Figure 9) replicated Kremlin narratives. The most popular theme, featuring in 31 per cent of cases, was that of alleged **Russophobia in the West**, especially in the
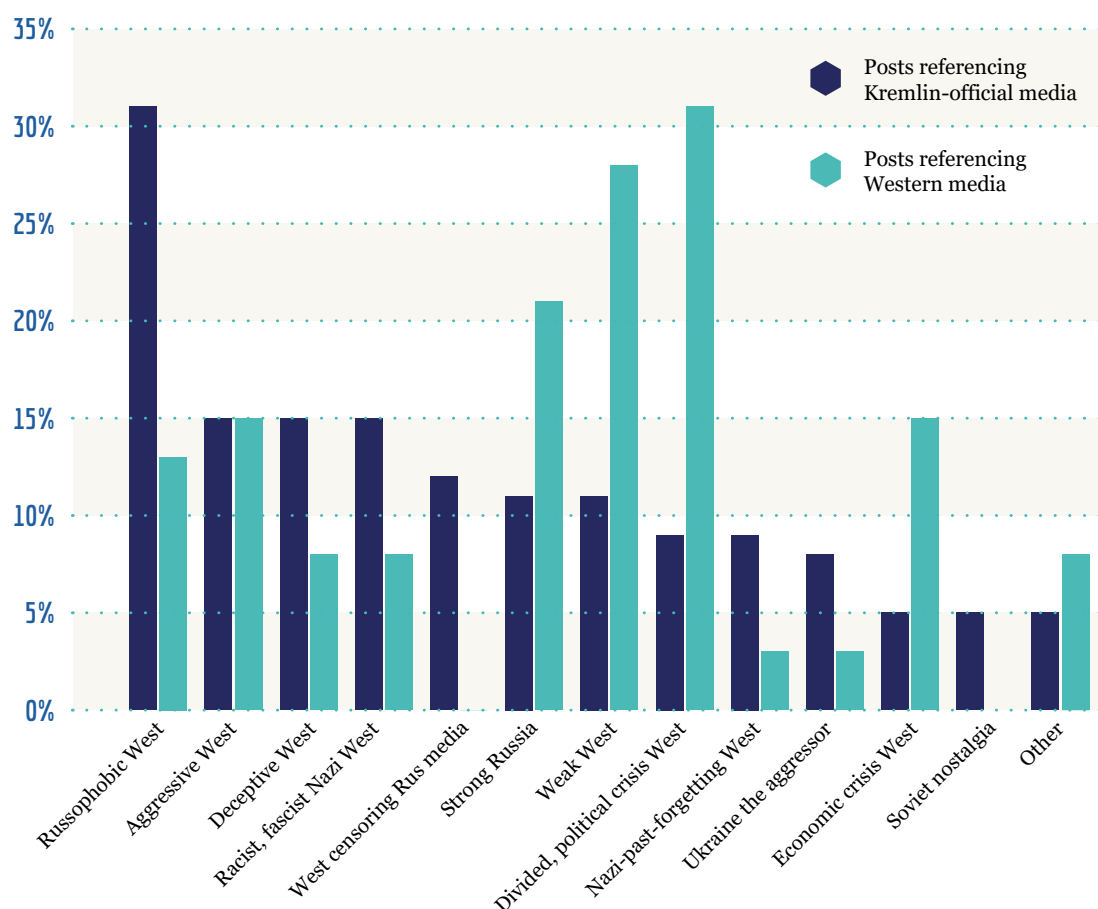
Figure 9. Themes of Baltnews Telegram posts (by percentage of cases)

Baltic States towards ethnic Russians. An additional 15 per cent of cases portrayed the West as having **strong racist, fascist, or Nazi political tendencies**, at times glorifying the Nazi past, and 12 per cent criticised **censorship of Russian media and suppression of Russian journalists**, with a focus on the Baltic States. Fifteen per cent of posts displayed **the West as aggressive and hostile**, and another 15 per cent of cases also disseminated the picture of the **deceptive West** spreading disinformation about the war and trying to shift the blame on to Russia. An

additional 11 per cent of posts transmitted the picture of a **strong Russia**, mentioning its strong military or cyber capabilities, and 5 per cent glorified the Soviet past. In contrast, 11 per cent of posts pointed to the **weak West**, including the Baltic States being especially weak and dependent on NATO, or showed **the West as being in political or economic crisis** (9 per cent and 5 per cent, respectively). In another 8 per cent of posts, **Ukraine was portrayed as the aggressor**, allegedly waging a civil war against its own people, especially its Russian population.

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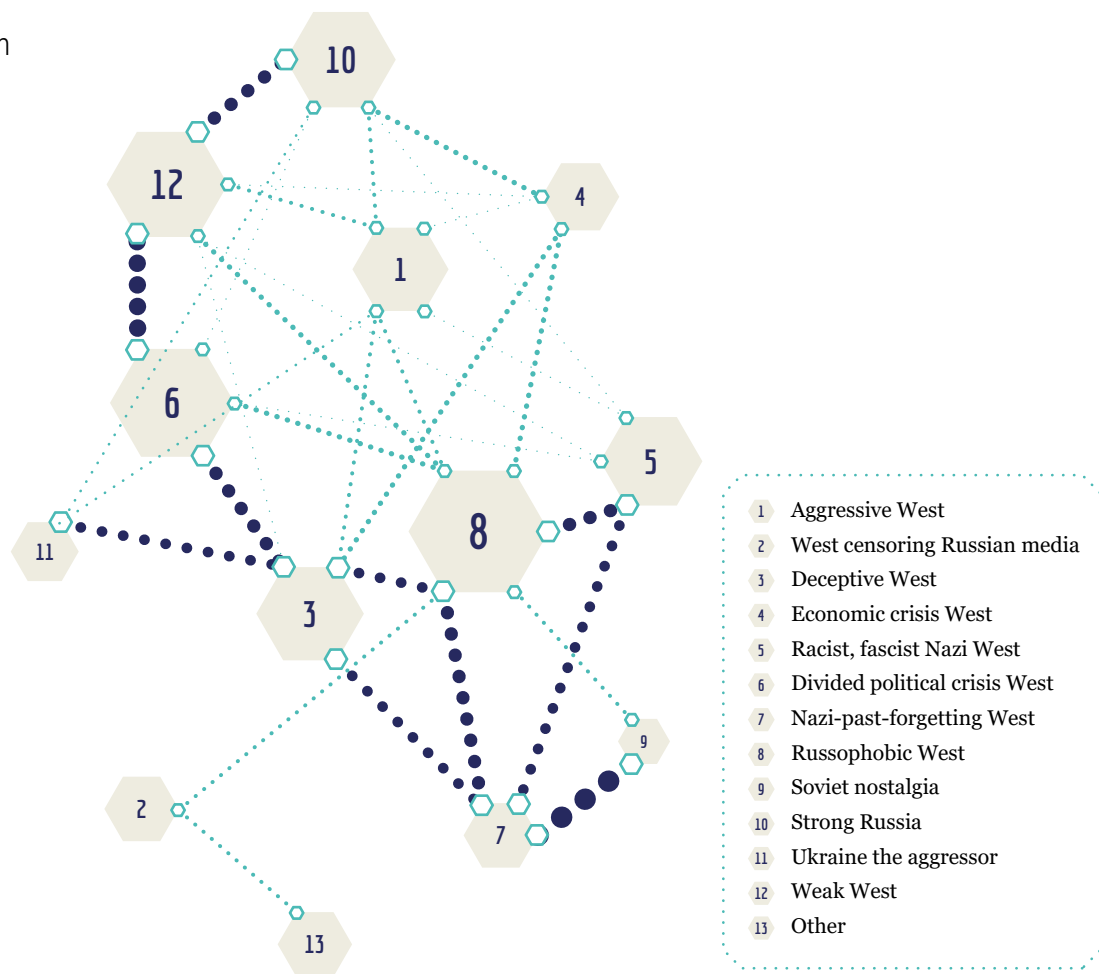
Figure 10. Co-occurrence graph of all themes

1	Aggressive West
2	West censoring Russian media
3	Deceptive West
4	Economic crisis West
5	Racist, fascist Nazi West
6	Divided political crisis West
7	Nazi-past-forgetting West
8	Russophobic West
9	Soviet nostalgia
10	Strong Russia
11	Ukraine the aggressor
12	Weak West
13	Other

the IL attempts linked to Western media, the themes of the Russophobic, racist, and deceptive West were represented a lot less, compared to posts referencing Kremlin-official media. Instead, **the two strongest themes of the IL attempts were that of a divided West in political crisis** (31 per cent of cases) and **a weak West** (28 per cent). The corresponding posts stressed that Ukraine could not win the war, with the West being divided over weapon deliveries, and the EU not being ready to accept Ukraine as a member due to internal deficiencies and divisions. The other main themes comprised that of a **strong Russia** (21 per cent) and an **aggressive West** (15 per cent), suffering from an **economic crisis** due to the war (15 per cent) and marked by **Russophobia** (13 per cent) and other strong **racist, fascist, Nazi tendencies** (8 per cent). The theme concerning Western censorship of Russian media did not occur

in the IL attempts, nor did Soviet nostalgia. The reason for these differences in themes might be that the IL attempts still reflect the original Western articles to some degree, so that certain pro-Kremlin themes were less likely to appear, for instance Russophobia.

The co-occurrence diagram (Figure 10), created with the support of Aiden Hoyle, shows which themes co-occurred most overall. The size of the nodes reflects how often a theme occurred; the thicker the lines between the nodes, the more often they co-occurred in Baltnews Telegram posts. The diagram shows two sections of strongly linked themes. Firstly, the theme portraying the **West as weak** (theme 12) strongly co-occurred with depictions of the **West as divided and mired in political crisis** (6) and with depictions of **Russia as strong** (10). Posts describing the West as divided and in political crisis moreover often also portrayed it as **deceptive towards its population** (3).

Secondly, the posts criticising **Russophobia in the West** (theme 8) often also criticised the West for being **racist, fascist**, or having pro-**Nazi attitudes** (5), and are also strongly linked to posts claiming that the **West has forgotten its Nazi past** or collaboration (7). The strong link between themes 7 and 8 furthermore suggests that posts criticising the West for **omitting to reflect on Nazi cruelties** often also showcased an element of **Soviet nostalgia**.

These findings suggest **an anti-Western, pro-Kremlin framing bias in these Balt-news Telegram messages**, with similar themes being reflected in the different types of posts to a varying extent (those commenting on Western vs Kremlin-official news). It can be expected that this way of presenting information, tied to the overall themes, shapes the way the information is received and incorporated into the belief systems of the Baltnews target audience.[45] Overall, a clear inclination towards the negative is observed in all themes except the strong Russia theme.

The intention behind pro-Kremlin messaging: Taking the perspective of antagonistic strategic narratives

To further study the possible intention behind the messaging, the themes were categorised according to the antagonistic narrative strategies of Russian state-sponsored media, as identified by Wagnsson and Barzanje: *destruction*, *suppression*, and *direction (Table 2)*. These antagonistic strategies are not mutually exclusive, but can be mutually reinforcing.[46]

Shifting the analysis to the level of narratives serves the purpose of identifying underlying intentions of the messaging on the part of the sender. Narratives have a persuasive power: they aim to shape people's understanding of the world in which they live, including of their own place and of others within it.[47] Put differently, they can 'alter the relationship between the narrator, the readers and the rest of the world'.[48]

	Destruction	Suppression	Direction
Aggressive West		⊗	⊗
Censorship of Russian media		⊗	⊗
Deceptive West		⊗	
Divided, political crisis West	⊗		
Economic crisis West	⊗		
Racist, fascist, Nazi West		⊗	
Russophobic West		⊗	⊗
Strong Russia			⊗
Ukraine the aggressor		⊗	⊗
Weak West	⊗		

Table 2. Overview of the antagonistic strategic narratives each theme reflects

This paper follows the slight modification of categories by Hoyle, which renders them more clearly distinguishable.[49]

- *Destruction* seeks to diminish perceptions of a target state's military or economic strength and governmentality 'by amplifying **portrayals of crime, disorder and internal divisions**, weakening domestic military support and harming the target's image as an attractive partner for alliances'.[50]

- *Suppression* aims to impair a state's moral image by **presenting a state's 'way of life, leadership or population' as 'morally deviant'**, 'belittling the state's moral, cultural or religious standards and emphasizing liberal or non-traditional values in the state'.[51] Both strategies arguably result in status loss for the audience, harming its reputation, and status gain for the narrator (or the state behind state-sponsored media), maximising its power. The idea of maximising one's own power by diminishing the power of others follows a (neo-) realist logic which conceptualises international relations as a zero-sum game.[52]

- *Direction* seeks to **guide 'the other' (the addressed state or audience) away from undesired behaviour, stimulating behaviour that is strategically advantageous for the narrator** (here the Kremlin, as

the actor behind Russian state-sponsored media). This strategy can be conceptualised as coercive diplomacy when persuading an adversary. Favourable behaviour is narrated positively, while unfavourable behaviour is 'ignored, played down or criticized'.[53]

The study finds that each narrative is reflected in at least three themes, and often the narratives intersect. Three out of ten themes feed into the *destruction* narration. That is, portraying the West as politically and economically divided and weak amplifies the image of disorder and internal divisions. As hypothesised above, this might in turn aim at weakening domestic political and military support, to reduce the addressed states' international standing, harming their image as attractive partners.

The theme portraying Russia as strong forms part of a *direction* narration. Accordingly, posts belonging to this category arguably support the strategic goal of the Kremlin to project strength and thus attract support. In addition, the themes of criticising the censorship of Russian journalists or media, as well as criticising the West as Russophobic and aggressive, arguably also constitute part of the *direction* narration, since they condemn behaviour that is contrary to the Kremlin's strategic aims.

Most themes, however, contribute to the *suppression* narration (six out of ten). Most clearly, picturing the West as

deceptive towards its own population presents its leadership as morally deviant. Moreover, underlining strong racist and fascist motives of Western leadership also contributes to questioning the moral of its actions. The same line of argument applies to depicting the West as Russophobic, applying censorship to Russian media contrary to its proclaimed values of freedom of speech. Lastly, portraying the West and Ukraine as the military aggressor vis-à-vis Russia forms arguably part of a *suppression* narrative as well, since the relevant posts point to the West as unfoundedly provoking Russia, and especially to NATO allegedly having broken its promise of not extending east, thus questioning its moral integrity.

Interestingly, the most important themes of cases A versus cases B seem to have followed different antagonistic narrative strategies. The 'deceptive, political crisis West' theme reflects a destruction narrative strategy, occurring in 31% of cases linked to Western news articles (A cases), while the 'Russophobic West' theme plays into the suppression and direction narrative strategies, reflected in 31% of overt amplification of Kremlin-official articles (B cases). This split still holds when considering the most prominent themes for about 80% of cases. For the IL attempts linked to Western news articles, the top two most frequently recurring themes – divided, political crisis West (in 31% of posts) and weak West (28%) – both contribute to the destruction narration, and only

the third most important theme – strong Russia – occurring in about 21% of posts, demonstrates direction narration. The four themes detected in 80% of posts amplifying Kremlin-official media all seem to follow a strategy of suppression. Two of these, furthermore, contribute to the direction narration.

These findings suggest that covert pro-Kremlin messaging via IL of Western news articles (A cases) mainly followed the intent to diminish the perception of strength and governmentality of Western states, and harm their image as attractive partners. Conversely, overt Kremlin-official messaging (B cases) mainly sought to impair another state's moral image, while also providing direction/ stimuli on strategically advantageous behaviour.

Discussion of results: The main themes of the Baltnews Telegram channel and the potential underlying intention

Overall, the themes present in the studied Telegram posts link back to overarching Kremlin-led antagonistic narratives which aim to diminish the image of the target state's military and economic strength (*destruction*) and its moral integrity (*suppression*), criticising unfavourable behaviour and stimulating attitudes or behaviour in line with the Kremlin's strategic aims (*direction*).

Thus, the strategic goal of messages portraying the West as aggressive, weak, deceptive, divided, and lost in economic and political crisis, juxtaposed to a strong Russia, might not only be to shape readers' perception of who is capable of winning the war. The longer-term goal might be to decrease trust in Western politicians, political institutions, and the democratic system by making the recipients doubt the truthfulness of political communication, the moral integrity of political action, and the power of their state—all the while advocating for Russia.

More specifically, the themes might evoke negative feelings of loss of trust (the immoral, the deceptive, the aggressive West) and insecurity (the weak West in economic and political crisis vis-à-vis strong Russia), mediated by feelings such as anger, fear, or disgust.[54] Further research into the psychological mechanisms triggered by this antagonistic messaging is warranted to thoroughly test this assumption.

> Spreading IL attempts via Telegram might constitute a mechanism of Russian state-sponsored media to evade sanctions.

Conclusions and outlook: Using IL as a tool of deception to spread antagonistic strategic narratives, and Telegram as a platform to evade sanctions

To conclude, the study has attempted to achieve two things. Firstly, it used the Baltnews Telegram channel as a gateway leading to IL cases that reached a Russian-speaking population in the Baltic States after the Russian attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022. This part of the study revealed that, since February 2022, not only did the Baltnews Telegram channel increasingly reference Kremlin-official media like Sputnik, RT, or RIA Novosti, thereby overtly multiplying Kremlin messaging, but cases of IL, by nature a more covert technique of deceitful messaging, increased as well. We thus observe an increase not only in overt pro-Kremlin messaging, but also in covert, deceptive pro-Kremlin messaging reaching the Baltnews Telegram audience via IL techniques. Hence, IL has arguably functioned as a tool of war for the Kremlin, with attempts spread via Russian-domain and Kremlin-official media to foreign outlets like Baltnews. Spreading IL attempts via Telegram might constitute a mechanism of Russian state-sponsored media to evade sanctions.

Is IL the best frame to describe what we are seeing in the data? The case studies could also be understood as good examples of how pro-Kremlin media systematically draw off and amplify content published in the Western press that can be made to align with their own messaging. **However, it is argued that**

the cases do present IL attempts, since they not only covertly distribute distorted information, but form part of a network of websites that distort and amplify the same content using similar techniques in quick succession. Cloaking pro-Kremlin messaging, disguised as information by Western news articles, has followed the logic of source magnification to increase credibility. This covert technique seems curious in times of war when the Kremlin also bluntly and overtly amplifies its messages. Referencing Western media articles while distorting their content to 'fit the picture', instead of openly commenting on it, arguably points to the Kremlin's aim to repel foreign narratives and convince Russian-speaking populations that are within the reach of Western media.

Secondly, the study further investigated which coverage and framing biases the Baltnews Telegram audience was influenced by, and with which potential strategic aim. **It revealed that the posts centred on the themes of portraying the West as aggressive, weak, deceptive, divided, and lost in economic and political crisis, juxtaposed to a strong Russia**. These findings suggest an anti-Western, pro-Kremlin framing bias in these Baltnews Telegram messages. The themes tie in with overarching Kremlin-led antagonistic narratives which aim to diminish the image of the target state's military and economic strength (*destruction*) and its moral integrity (*suppression*), criticising unfavourable behaviour and stimulating attitudes or

behaviour in line with the Kremlin's strategic aims (*direction*).

Overall, although IL attempts were identified in only a small fraction of Baltnews posts on Telegram, this hybrid deception technique has the potential to change readers' beliefs and attitudes. **With the research method used this study could uncover only a fraction of IL attempts, and thus it unveiled those cases that reference the original article they distort. Websites that do not include a link to the original article but still employ IL techniques cannot be detected with this method**. Still, by systematising the method for case selection as well as refining the compilation of IL techniques, this study has demonstrated a rigorous method to uncover current IL attempts to manipulate the audience of a channel, and to investigate the underlying framing biases. The study indicates that IL is still being employed as a technique—despite not being easy to trace.

In the course of this study, both the method for case selection and the compilation of IL techniques were revised. Misappropriation is seen as a necessary condition for any IL attempt, as the primary feature of IL is misrepresenting the original information. Automated translation is, however, disregarded as a technique, with more emphasis being placed on the technique of deceitful translation instead. It was moreover critically noted that in many instances the misleading headline technique overlaps with techniques such as misappropriation, disinformation, or deceitful

translation. The categories should thus not be thought of as mutually exclusive. **A new IL technique identified in this study comprises decontextualisation, by strategically leaving out information and cherry-picking/overemphasising issues to change the distilled meaning of an article**. This technique was added to the compilation of IL techniques.

Further research could extend the focus of this study to employ a comparative analysis of IL actors and tactics in the Nordic-Baltic countries by comparing the extent to which other pro-Kremlin outlets in the region use their Telegram channels to amplify IL attempts. Future studies could also seek to further automate the identification of cross-platform IICs. The analysis of linked articles could be extended by a systematic analysis of photos referring to news articles. Moreover, the notable geographic reach of the identified IL attempts, spanning not only European websites, but also e.g. Sputnik in Brazil and Japan, could be investigated more. In addition, IL attempts by malign actors other than the Kremlin-official media might be of interest.

Annex. Detailed analysis of selected IL cases connected to Western media outlets

The dataset featured 46 IL attempts linked to Western news articles about the Ukraine war since 24 February 2022. Seven attempts were selected to demonstrate different forms of IL identified in the database. A1 to A3 are cases of low-distributed IL, which spread on fewer than 10 Russian-domain or Kremlin-official websites, with varying degrees of IL techniques employed. Cases A4 to A7 were spread more widely, on 14 to over 20 websites.

Case A1: Politico article about the US not sending additional military instructors to Ukraine

This case is an example of low-distributed IL, distributed only by seven Russian-domain or Kremlin-official sources, with only a few IL techniques employed.

Baltnews Telegram, 13 March 2022, 20:25 [55]

🇺🇦🇺🇸 ***Politico: USA refuses to send military instructors to Ukraine for fear of Russian reaction***

Politico reports that the Pentagon in late 2021 considered the possibility of sending several hundred US military instructors to Ukraine to train Ukrainian forces in 'unconventional warfare methods'.

However, according to the publication's sources, the idea was dropped because of the White House's position, which feared that such actions might undermine the ongoing diplomatic efforts aimed at settling the situation around Ukraine peacefully.

The instructors were allegedly to work separately from the official US mission, which was operating on the territory of the Yavorivskiy military training ground in Lviv Region. According to Politico, they were to train the Ukrainian military in guerrilla warfare tactics and other unconventional warfare methods.

@BaltNews [56]

Figure 11. Telegram post on Baltnews channel, case A1.

IL methods applied in Telegram post

Misleading headline. The Baltnews Telegram post suggests that the US did not send more trainers to Ukraine 'for fear of [the] Russian reaction', which alludes to the US being frightened of strong Russia. However, according to the Politico article, the US decision was taken out of concerns that sending additional trainers would scuttle the efforts for a diplomatic solution.

Analysis of the IL process

Placement of the IL attempt by **Life.ru** (13 March, 16:39), suggesting that the US had covertly attempted to send special forces soldiers to Ukraine at the end of 2021, but 'the mission failed because Washington was afraid of aggravating relations with Moscow'. However, the original Politico article only talks about ideas of sending more trainers to Ukraine,

IL process

Original headline, Politico, 13 March 2022, 23:00
Pentagon push to send more trainers to Ukraine was scrapped in December amid White House fears of provoking Russia[69]

Placement

Life.ru, 13 March, 16:39: **US attempts to send special forces soldiers to Ukraine at the end of 2021 revealed**[70]

Layering

Ria.ru, 13 March, 16:51: *The United States wanted to send several hundred special forces soldiers to Ukraine, media write*[71]

Sputniknews.com, 13 March, 18:56: *US Reportedly Dropped Plans to Train Ukrainian Militants for Fear of Provoking Russia*[72]

Kommersant.ru, 13 March, 21:05: *Politico: The White House refused to send military instructors to Ukraine in December, fearing a Russian reaction*[73]

Aif.ru, 13 March, 21:10: *Media: US wanted to send additional military instructors to Ukraine*[74]

News.ru, 13 March, 21:55: *Politico: US wanted to send more than a hundred special forces to Ukraine in 2021*[75]

Lenta.ru, 13 March, 21.58: *The United States decided not to send instructors to Ukraine because of Russia*[76]

no official attempts, nor a mission (*misappropriation*).

Ria.ru (13 March, 16:51) used the same language, adding that 'none of the officials commented on the suggestion that the mission was discussed informally with the White House', thereby stressing that secretive discussions might have been conducted behind the scenes. **Sputniknews.com** (13 March 18:56) added that 'overt and covert US training of Ukrainian troops and ideological militants has been ongoing for years', reflecting narratives of a US plot behind the war in Ukraine.[57]

Overall, a number of Russian-domain and Kremlin-official outlets quoted the same Politico article, highlighting that the US had chosen not to send personnel for military training to Ukraine out of fear of Russia's reaction, applying *misleading headlines* and *misappropriation* in quick succession. The articles underline the allegedly covert nature of US decision making, and ongoing efforts to train the Ukrainian military.

No further integration of the IL attempt in the Nordic-Baltic media environment was identified.

Overall IL methods applied

Misleading headline, misappropriation.

Case A2: Bloomberg article on Bulgaria 'refusing' to supply arms to Ukraine

This is an example of low-distributed IL (on seven Russian-domain or Kremlin-official media, and one Baltic outlet), but with IL techniques having been more extensively employed.

> **Baltnews Telegram Post, 24 April 2022, 10:36**
>
> 🇧🇬 ***Bulgaria refuses to supply arms to Ukraine***
>
> *The issue of arms supplies to Ukraine has caused controversy in the Bulgarian government, and therefore the ruling coalition has decided to refuse to supply arms, Bloomberg has reported.*
>
> *Thus, the Socialist Party of Bulgaria threatened to quit the government if the authorities approve the arms supplies to Kiev. At the same time, the centre-right Democratic Bulgaria party threatened to leave the coalition if deliveries do not follow.*
>
> *The Hungarian government will not send weapons to Ukraine either.*
>
> *@BaltNews*[58]

IL methods applied in Telegram post

Misleading headline; misappropriation. The Baltnews Telegram post pretends that Bulgaria refused to supply weapons to Ukraine ('the ruling coalition has decided to refuse to supply arms'), while according to the Bloomberg article the decision had still not been taken: 'the coalition is expected to discuss the issue next week'. Until that point, only humanitarian aid, helmets, and bulletproof vests had been provided by Bulgaria, but the article states that Ukraine's Foreign Minister Kuleba 'still doesn't have an answer from the Bulgarian government on providing military aid'.

Analysing the IL process

Placement of the IL attempt by **ria.ru** (24 April, 04:47), with the misleading headline that 'Bulgaria is torn apart by contradictions due to the supply of weapons to Ukraine'. While the original article does point out that the Bulgarian Socialist party and the Democratic Bulgaria party threaten to exit the coalition if military equipment is shipped to Ukraine, this does not equal Bulgaria being 'torn apart by contradictions'.

News.ru (24 April, 05:58) also suggests that 'Sofia refused to supply weapons to Kyiv due to internal disputes', although at
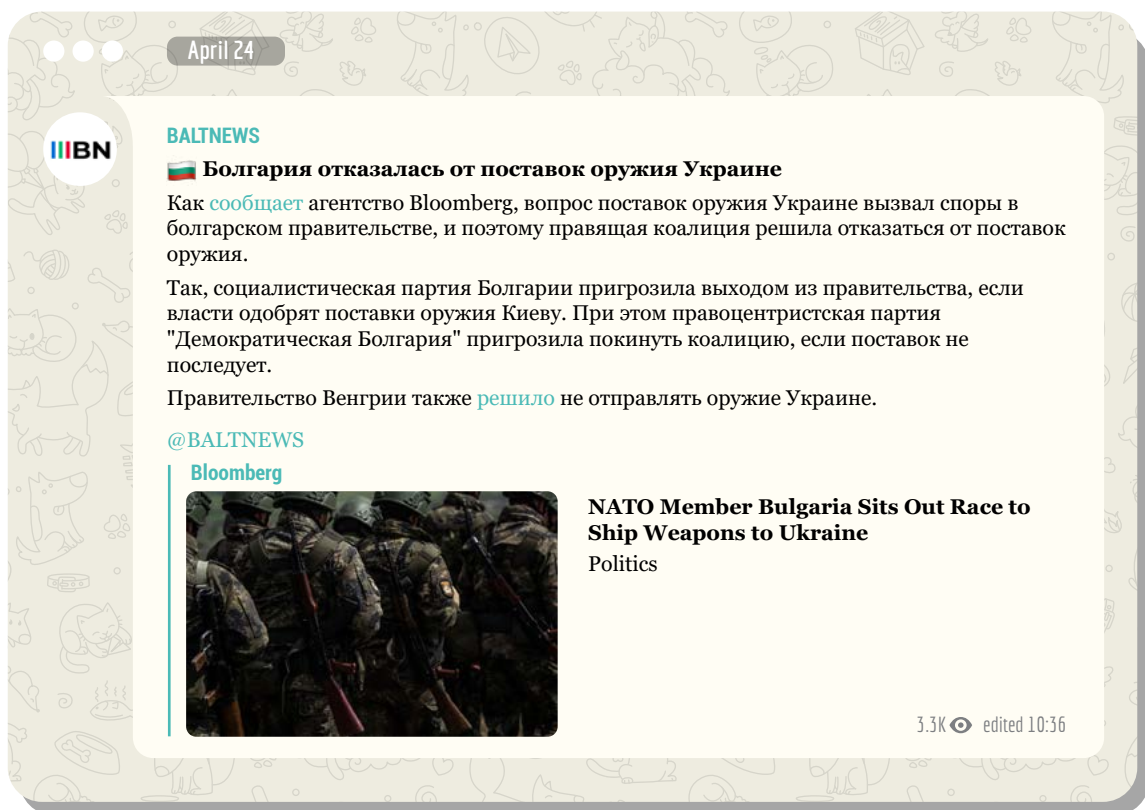
Figure 12. Telegram post on Baltnews channel, case A2

the time the decision was still pending. The articles by Kommersant.ru (24 April, 07:23) and Actualidad.rt.com, (24 April, 10:45) claim the same.

360tv.ru and Svpressa.ru modify the news further. While **360tv.ru** (24 April, 10:39) states that 'Ukraine will not receive weapons from Bulgaria', thereby signalling that a clear decision has already been taken for the future, **Svpressa.ru** (25 April, 07:53) asks 'Why does no one want to arm Ukraine?' The latter question is a clear instance of disinformation, since Ukraine had already received weapons from various states.

Life.ru (24 April, 06:06) instead highlights the topic of disputes over arms supplies allegedly having 'brought Bulgaria to a split', which exaggerates the information given in the original Bloomberg article, and might constitute an instance of deceitful translation or disinformation (reflecting the ria.ru article pointing to Bulgaria being 'torn apart'; see above).

The integration of the IL attempt on a Finnish website, Eestinen.fi, was achieved.

IL process

◇ *Original headline, Bloomberg, 21 April 2022, 18:37*
NATO Member Bulgaria Sits Out Race to Ship Weapons to Ukraine[77]

Placement

◇ *Ria.ru, 24 April, 04:47: Media: Bulgaria is torn apart by contradictions due to the supply of weapons to Ukraine[78]*

Layering

◇ *News.ru, 24 April, 05:58: Bloomberg: Sofia refused to supply weapons to Kyiv due to internal disputes[79]*

◇ *Life.ru, 24 April, 06:06: Bloomberg: The issue of arms supplies to Ukraine brought Bulgaria to a split[80]*

◇ *Kommersant.ru, 24 April, 07:23: Bloomberg: Bulgaria refused to supply weapons to Ukraine[81]*

◇ *360tv.ru, 24 April, 10:39: Armed Forces of Ukraine will not receive weapons from Bulgaria—Bloomberg[82]*

◇ *Actualidad.rt.com, 24 April, 10:45: Bulgaria refuses to supply weapons to Ukraine, reports Bloomberg[83]*

◇ *Svpressa.ru, 25 April, 07:53: Europe will reread Washington: we will not give weapons to Kyiv! Why does no one want to arm Ukraine?[84]*

Integration : Involvement of Nordic-Baltic media outlets

◇ *Eestinen.fi, 24 April, 09:47: NATO member Bulgaria refused to send weapons to Ukraine[85]*

Overall IL methods applied

Misleading headline; misappropriation; disinformation; deceitful translation.

Case A3: The Independent on Ukrainian refugees in the UK

This is an example of low-distributed IL (six Russian-domain or Kremlin-official media), with extensively employed IL techniques.

> ### Baltnews Telegram Post, 4 May 2022, 10:31
>
> 🇺🇦 *Media: Ukrainian refugees in UK face appalling housing conditions*
>
> *Thousands of Ukrainian refugees arriving in the UK under the family scheme are facing appalling housing conditions, the Independent newspaper has reported.*
>
> *According to the newspaper, due to poor conditions and landlords' refusal to let too many people stay in the flats, some Ukrainians have to evict their relatives from their flats and register as homeless with the local authorities.*
>
> *The media point out that according to charities, many refugees live in unsuitable conditions and some are at risk of homelessness.*
>
> *According to the newspaper, the government is not allocating financial aid to local authorities for the scheme, although another scheme, in which UK residents are willing to accept refugees in their homes, is allocated £10,500 per refugee.*
>
> *@BaltNews*[59]

IL methods applied in Telegram post

Misleading headline: article doesn't speak of 'terrible housing conditions', but of unsuitable accommodation, including overcrowded homes, for more than half of Ukrainian refugees, and only refers to the Greater London area.

Analysing the IL process

Placement of the IL attempt by **ria.ru** (4 May, 10:59). While the original article does mention that more than half of Ukrainian refugees in the Greater London area live in overcrowded accommodation or face inappropriate conditions, the headline of the RIA Novosti article misleadingly suggests that all Ukrainian refugees face poor conditions in the UK. The RIA Novosti article talks of 'terrible living conditions' for Ukrainian refugees arriving under the UK family scheme, citing the Independent, while the Independent uses more cautious wording.

Layering by MK.RU, Lenta.ru and Newsae. ru. **MK.RU** (4 May, 11:29) uses almost

Figure 13. Telegram post on Baltnews channel, case A3

the exact wording as ria.ru in its headline, talking of Ukrainian refugees facing poor conditions in the UK, which is later picked up by **Jp.sputniknews.com** (6 May, 19:30).

Lenta.ru and **Newsae.ru** write about 'difficult' living conditions, using the exact same headline, 'Ukrainian refugees face difficult living conditions in Britain', as well as the exact same wording of the article, and published at the same time (4 May, 11:38).

News.ru goes one step further in claiming that 'Refugees from Ukraine face **terrible** conditions in Britain' (emphasis added). Overall, all articles fail to point out that the survey figure of 58 per cent of Ukrainians living in unsuitable accommodation referred to the Greater London area only.[60]

No further integration of the IL attempt in the Nordic-Baltic media environment was identified.

IL process

◇ **Original headline, The Independent, 2 May 2022, 21:33**[86]
'Thousands' of Ukraine refugees forced into overcrowded homes as UK system branded 'dysfunctional disaster'

Placement

◇ **Ria.ru, 4 May, 10:59**: *Media: in the UK, Ukrainian refugees face poor conditions*[87]

Layering

◇ **MK.RU, 4 May, 11:29**: *Independent: Ukrainian refugees face poor conditions in UK*[88]

◇ **Lenta.ru, 4 May, 11:38**: *Ukrainian refugees face difficult living conditions in Britain*[89]

◇ **Newsae.ru, 4 May, 11:38**: *Ukrainian refugees face difficult living conditions in Britain*[90]

◇ **News.ru, 4 May, 13:17**: *Independent: Refugees from Ukraine face terrible conditions in Britain*[91]

◇ **Jp.sputniknews.com, 6 May, 19:30**: *Ukrainian refugees to UK face poor living conditions, The Independent*[92]

Overall IL methods applied

🖼 *Misleading headline;* 🤸 *misappropriation;* ⚠ *disinformation;* 🍒 *decontextualisation*

Case A4: Washington Post article on US mercenaries returning from the Ukraine war

This is an example of a forwarded post, part of highly distributed IL (eighteen Russian-domain or Kremlin-official media, plus two Baltic outlets), with extensively employed IL techniques.

> **Baltnews Telegram Post, 29 May 2022, 12:43 (forwarded)**
>
> ❗ ***Another Western mercenary's tears. Willie Joseph Kansel and the character with the call sign 'Texas' are completely frustrated.***
>
> *Malfunctioning weapons, lack of supplies, communication equipment and heavy casualties are the harsh reality faced by American mercenaries in Ukraine.*
>
> *It was better not to fight the Russians—the only correct conclusion they drew after their trip to the war zone.*
>
> *The work of Russian artillery, aviation and high-precision missiles shocked the 'soldiers of fortune', forcing some of them to injure themselves and break their weapons just to get out of the war zone as quickly as possible.*
>
> *[...] 'They went into battle with insufficient equipment and weapons. [...] Some had seen their friends die and decided they had had enough. They were given anti-tank weapons and rockets, but without batteries for the launcher—the equipment was inoperable. Eight of the 20 volunteers in the foreign mercenary squad abandoned their posts, including a Marine veteran who appears to have broken his machine gun with a rock in the hope of passing it off as combat damage. Another fighter faked an injury.'*
>
> *After all they have seen, US Marine veterans give advice to those who still want to go and fight in the Ukrainian army against the Russians—'don't do it, because your expectations will not be met, and the Russian army is indeed one of the strongest in the world'.*
>
> *@epoddubny*[61]

IL methods applied in Baltnews forwarded Telegram post

Misappropriation. The article does not say that it would have been better not to fight the Russians (while it does convey an imbalance, with mercenaries 'going into battle underequipped and outgunned'); there is no quote in the article that would read 'don't do it, because your expectations will not be met, and the Russian army is indeed one of the strongest in the world' (*woozle effect*).
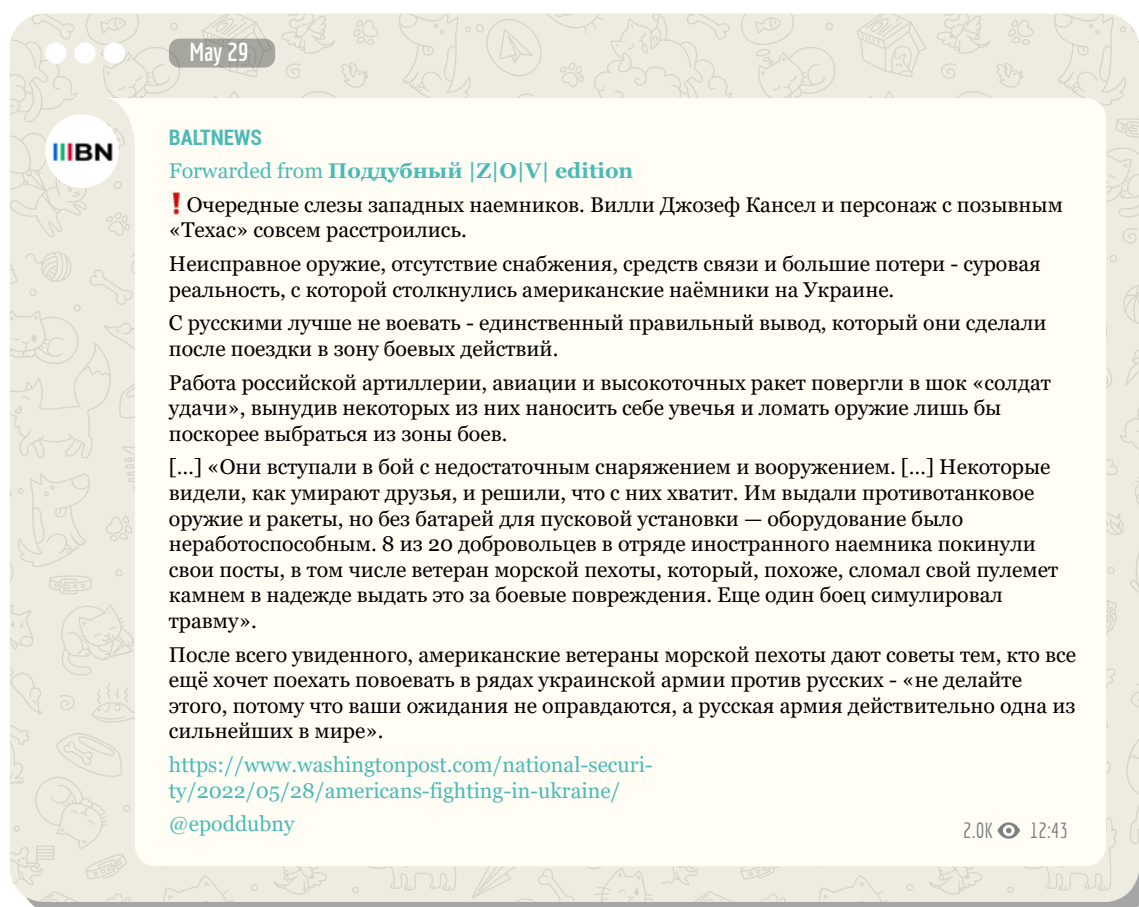
Figure 14. Telegram post on Baltnews channel, case A4

Analysing the IL process

Placement by utro.ru (29 May, 11:14) with a headline misleadingly suggesting that foreign mercenaries are fleeing from Ukraine due to 'an unexpected problem'. The article contains misappropriation and disinformation, claiming that the mercenaries had complained about 'terrible uniforms and old equipment' and having to 'bear huge losses', while the original article does not mention uniforms or the age of the equipment, and talks about the death of several mercenaries—but nothing equating to 'huge losses'.

Layering by inter alia gazeta.ru, sputniknews.com, vkpress.ru, and lenta.ru. **Gazeta.ru** (29 May, 11:24) also states that foreign mercenaries 'flee the battleground'. Like the utro.ru article, gazeta.ru only picks out the issues mentioned in the original article, not the successful moments that were also described. The **sputniknews.com** article (29 May, 11:34)

Original headline, Washington Post, 29 May 2022, 02:07
Ukraine war volunteers are coming home, reckoning with difficult fight[93]

Placement

Utro.ru, 29 May, 11:14: Western mercenaries face an unexpected problem in Ukraine and go on the run[94]

Layering

Gazeta.ru, 29 May, 11:24: WP: foreign mercenaries fighting on the side of Ukraine complain about weapons and flee the battlefield[95]

Sputniknews.com, 29 May, 11:34: 'We Had No Chance': Foreign Fighters Leaving Ukraine Recall Lack of Arms & Equipment[96]

Vkpressa.ru, 29 May, 14:34: Foreign mercenaries in Ukraine feign injuries and break weapons: they want to go home[97]

Lenta.ru, 29 May, 14:54: American mercenaries spoke about the lack of weapons and equipment in Ukraine[98]

Ren.tv, 29 May, 15:13: WP: mercenaries complain about lack of equipment in Ukraine[99]

Tvzvezda.ru, 29 May, 17:29: WP: foreign mercenaries flee Ukraine due to problems with weapons and communications[100]

Ria.ru, 29 May, 17:48: WP: Western mercenaries flee Ukraine[101]

Yamal-media.ru, 29 May, 18:07: WP: foreign mercenaries flee Ukraine due to poor conditions and lack of weapons[102]

U-f.ru, 29 May, 18:11: American mercenaries who fled Ukraine say they will never return[103]

Kapital-rus.ru, 29 May, 18:50: 'From the very beginning there was no chance': Western mercenaries flee from Ukraine[104]

Ukraina.ru, 29 May, 19:05: Zelensky preferred money, the fate of mercenaries, to the lives of Ukrainians. Results of May 29 in Ukraine[105]

Rbc.ru, 29 May, 19:45: Foreign volunteers who fought for Ukraine spoke about the problems[106]

BFM.ru, 29 May, 19:52: WP reported the flight of foreign mercenaries from Ukraine due to lack of weapons[107]

NTV.ru, 29 May, 20:02: WP: foreign mercenaries flee Ukraine due to lack of weapons[108]

Integration: Involvement of Nordic-Baltic media outlets

RuBaltic.Ru, 29 May, 15:49: The Washington Post: Mercenaries in Ukraine complain about lack of weapons and flee the country[109]

Lv.baltnews.com, 31 May, 10:05: Volunteers flee: expectations of foreign mercenaries from Ukraine did not coincide with reality[110]

first seems more factual, but does contain instances of disinformation, too. It falsely claims that the team of Willy Joseph Cancel was killed shortly after his death, even though some team members survived. Sputniknews moreover claims that around 4000 US citizens went to fight in Ukraine, although the original article only states that 'an estimated 4000 expressed interest'.

Vkpress.ru (29 May, 14.34) misrepresents the WP article by stating in the headline 'Foreign mercenaries in Ukraine feign injuries and break weapons: they want to go home', suggesting that this is a general phenomenon which applies to many foreign mercenaries, while the WP only recounts these as single cases. **Lenta.ru** (29 May, 14:54) deceitfully translates US veteran Miller stating that 'many mercenaries pass off their own bragging as military experience', while actually he is reported by WP saying that many prospective foreign fighters have the capacity to take on a massive military while 'swagger **sometimes** stands in place of relevant experience' (emphasis added).

Ren.tv (29 May, 15:13) also misleadingly states that Western mercenaries have complained not only about a lack of equipment, but also a lack of uniforms. It also refers to mercenary Dakota stating that 'many mercenaries … pretend to be sick or injured in order to go home', which cannot be found in the WP article. Interestingly, the headline of **RuBaltic.Ru** (29 May, 15:49) reflects that of

gazeta.ru, pointing out that mercenaries in Ukraine 'flee the country'. Similar instances of misleading headlines, misappropriation, disinformation, or deceitful translation that alter the original information can be found in other Russian-domain articles referencing the WP article, too. The integration of the IL attempt was achieved on the Latvian Baltnews website (lv.baltnews.com) and on RuBaltic.Ru.[62]

Overall IL methods applied

🖼 *Misleading headline;* 🔄 *woozle effect;* 🏃 *misappropriation;* ⬡ *disinformation;* 🔤 *deceitful translation.*

Case A5: Foreign Policy article about Lithuanian FM statement on war in Ukraine

This is an example of highly distributed IL (eighteen Russian-domain or Kremlin-official media, and five Baltic media outlets), with extensive IL techniques employed, which referred to the original article in a screenshot.

> **Baltnews Telegram Post, 13 June 2022, 10:11**
>
> 🇱🇹 *Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said he was disappointed with the success of the Russian special operation in Ukraine*
>
> *The Lithuanian diplomat explained in an interview with Foreign Policy that recent events at the front indicate low chances of 'defeating' Russia.*
>
> *'Part of the information we get is pretty disappointing: the Russians continue to show progress, or the Ukrainians are not able to maintain a stable line of contact. So the chances are still quite high that Russia will not lose,' Landsbergis said.*
>
> *In his opinion, Moscow is also successfully counteracting Western sanctions.*
>
> *'They are able to withstand this, and if they can endure pressure in the long term, then this means that we are at a very dangerous stage of geopolitical reality,' the Lithuanian Foreign Minister stressed. @BALTNEWS[63]*

IL methods applied in Baltnews forwarded Telegram post

The Baltnews post exactly repeats the original IL as placed by ria.ru, including a *misleading headline, woozle effect, misappropriation,* and an overall unbalanced representation of the interview (*decontextualisation*), see below.

Analysing the IL process

Placement by **RIA Novosti** (13 June, 04:20), which states in a *misleading headline* that

'Lithuanian Foreign Minister spoke about "disappointment" due to Russia's successes in Ukraine'. This headline represents at the same time a *woozle effect* (misleading citation), since FM Landsbergis has only stated that '**some** of the information' he was receiving was 'quite discouraging', which does not equal general disappointment. At the same time, a case of *misappropriation*, or *decontextualisation*, can be identified, since the headline misrepresents the Foreign Policy article in suggesting that Russia is succeeding in Ukraine. However, while Landsbergis stated that 'the war is far

Figure 15. Telegram post on Baltnews channel, case A5

from won … Russians are still progressing, or the Ukrainians are unable to keep the contact line intact', he did not speak about Russian 'successes' and instead painted a more balanced picture of the situation on the ground.

According to **RIA Novosti**, Landsbergis moreover pointed to 'low chances of "defeating" Russia', while in the original article he talked about 'quite a high chance still that Russia will not face defeat'—which doesn't equal low chances of defeating it.

Importantly, RIA Novosti leaves out that Landsbergis uses the interview to call on the major powers to support Ukraine more so it reaches victory: 'what I would like to see, is a very clear commitment by the major powers, the industrial powers, that they will be able to sustain the Ukrainian war effort until Ukraine reaches victory and Russia faces a strategic defeat'. Thus, RIA Novosti *decontextualises* the interview and misrepresents its actual focus by transforming Landsbergis's statement that 'Russians are still progressing' into

IL process

- *Original headline, Foreign Policy, 28 May 2022, 07:07*
  Lithuanian Foreign Minister: Russia Might not Lose[111]

Placement :

- *Ria.ru, 13 June, 04:20*: Lithuanian Foreign Minister spoke about 'disappointment' due to Russia's success in Ukraine[112]

Layering

- *Profile.ru, 13 June, 04:37*: Lithuanian Foreign Minister says Russia's successes in Ukraine are 'disappointing'[113]

- *360tv.ru, 13 June, 04:57*: Lithuanian Foreign Minister acknowledged Russia's success in the special operation in Ukraine[114]

- *Iz.ru, 13 June, 05:07*: In Lithuania, they declared disappointment from the success of the special operation of Russia[115]

- *Lenta.ru, 13 June, 05:08*: Lithuanian Foreign Minister spoke of 'disappointment' due to Russia's progress in Ukraine[116]

- *TmBW.Ru, 13 June, 05:08*: Lithuanian Foreign Minister spoke of 'disappointment' due to Russia's progress in Ukraine[117]

- *U-f.ru, 13 June, 05:13*: Lithuanian Foreign Minister: We are disappointed with Russia's success in Ukraine[118]

- *M24.ru, 13 June, 05:38*: Lithuanian Foreign Minister expressed disappointment over Russia's success in Ukraine[119]

- *Csn-tv.ru, 13 June, 06:01*: Lithuanian Foreign Minister says he is 'disappointed' with Russia's progress in Ukraine[120]

- *Ren.tv, 13 June, 06:27*: Lithuanian Foreign Minister predicted Russia's victory in Ukraine[121]

- *Study.rtarabic.com, 13 June, 07:09*: Lithuanian Foreign Minister admits 'disappointment' as a result of Russia's success in Ukraine[122]

- *Ukraina.ru, 13 June, 07:59*: 'The chances are quite high that Russia will not lose': Lithuanian Foreign Minister expressed 'disappointment' with Moscow's success in Ukraine[123]

- *Gazeta.ru, 13 June, 09:58*: 'If Russia does not lose, then this is an alarming scenario for everyone'[124]

Integration : **Involvement of Nordic-Baltic media outlets**

- *Bukimevieningi.lt, 13 June, 07:55*: 'Foreign Policy': Gabrielius Landsbergis believes that Russia cannot lose[125]

- *Lt.sputniknews.ru, 13 June, 11:10*: Lithuanian Foreign Minister acknowledged Russia's success in the special operation in Ukraine[126]

- *RuBaltic.Ru, 13 June, 12:28*: The head of the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry called the successful course of the Russian special operation in Ukraine 'disappointing'[127]

> *Lt.baltnews.com, 13 June, 12:29*: The stage of accepting the inevitable? Why the head of the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry recognised Russia's successes in Ukraine[128]
>
> *Ldiena.lt, 13 June*: Foreign Policy: Gabriel Landsbergis thinks Russia can't lose[129]

Change of the IL attempt

> *MK.RU, 14 June, 05:16*: Lithuanian Foreign Minister: We are afraid of the bill on refusal to recognise independence[130]
>
> *News.ru, 14 June, 05:53*: The Lithuanian Foreign Ministry appreciated the idea of refusing to recognise the country's independence[131]
>
> *Life.ru, 14 June, 06:54*: Lithuania worried about the possibility of Russia's refusal to recognise its independence[132]
>
> *Dailystorm.ru, 14 June, 07:37*: Lithuania fears that Russia may refuse to recognise the independence of the republic[133]
>
> *Yamal-media.ru, 14 June, 07:46*: The Lithuanian Foreign Ministry was afraid of the possible cancellation of recognition of the country's independence[134]

his being allegedly 'disappointed' about Russia's 'successes' in Ukraine. Last but not least, following RIA Novosti, Landsbergis stated that 'Moscow is also successfully counteracting Western sanctions', while he only talked about Moscow being able to sustain them at the moment ('they are wounded obviously with sanctions and enormous losses on the battlefield, but they are able to sustain this') (*woozle effect*).

Layering by **Profile.ru** (13 June, 04:37), using an almost identical headline, also points to 'low chances of "defeating" Russia' and Russia's allegedly 'successful opposition to Western sanctions'. The IL attempt is thus close to identical to that of RIA Novosti. In equally quick succession, **360tv.ru** (13 June, 04:57) repeats the allegations concerning low chances of defeating Russia and Russia successfully resisting the sanctions, and further points to the Lithuanian FM having 'acknowledged Russia's success in the special operation in Ukraine', while he spoke neither about a Russian success nor about the war as a special operation. **Iz.ru** (13 June, 05:07) reflects the earlier headlines and includes similar distortions of the original information, adding that 'the chances of "defeating Russia" are **extremely** low' (emphasis added), thereby further exaggerating the message. The article further changes the context of one quote, suggesting that the EU 'is at a very dangerous stage of geopolitical reality', whereas Landsbergis only suggested this might be the case if Russia were able to sustain sanctions and losses on the battlefield in the long term.

This IL attempt is continued by a handful of other websites on 13 June (see list above), with slight variations, e.g. pointing out that according to the FM Russia has a 'great chance' to defeat Ukraine (**u-f.ru**, 13 June, 05:13), with Russia being 'likely to be able to'

resist the sanctions in the long term (**m24.ru**, 13 June, 05:58), and the West 'driving itself, not Russia, into an economic abyss' with the sanctions (**csn-tv.ru**, 13 June, 06:01). **Ren.tv** then takes the IL to another level, with its headline reading 'Lithuanian Foreign Minister predicted Russia's victory in Ukraine' (13 June, 06:27), which is a bold statement that does not follow from the original interview. The IL attempt is then continued by another handful of websites (see list above), cherry-picking and adapting the information, portraying Russia as succeeding in Ukraine. Notably, **lt.baltnews.com** adds: 'Recall that Landsbergis is widely known for his Russophobic statements and behaviour'. This statement likely serves to discredit Landsbergis.

The article by TmBW.Ru references not only the original foreign policy article, but also Lenta.ru. Both articles are identical. However, this remained a singular instance. No network of websites endorsing each other (Potemkin village) was identified.

A second IL attempt can be discerned, in which several websites on 14 June not only reported that Landsbergis perceived the Russian parliament's consideration to withdraw Russia's recognition of Lithuanian independence as a 'threat', but added that Vilnius is (seriously/really) 'afraid' of the draft law (**MK.RU**, 05:16; **news.ru**, 05:53; **life.ru**, 06:54; **dailystorm.ru**, 07:37; **yamal-media.ru**, 07:46). This represents a case of *disinformation*.

The IL attempt featured on Sputnik Lithuania (lt.sputniknews.ru), Idiena.lt, Bukimevieningi.lt RuBaltic.Ru, and the Lithuanian Baltnews website (lt.baltnews.com), and thus an integration of the IL attempt in the Baltic media environment could be identified.

Overall IL methods applied

Misleading headline; woozle effect; misappropriation; decontextualisation; disinformation.

Case A6: The Hill article about Russian influence on US nuclear energy supply

This is an example of highly distributed IL (on 13 Russian-domain and one Baltic media website), with a wealth of IL techniques applied, that has not been simply forwarded.

> **Baltnews Telegram Post, 13 June 2022, 16:29**
>
> ⚛️ 💁 *That awkward moment of wanting to deprive Russia of technology, but forgetting one nuance*
>
> *As Columbia University's Center for Global Energy Policy researchers Matt Bowen and Paul Dubbar write in an article for the paper, stopping supplies of enriched uranium from Russia could shut down reactors in the US.*
>
> *The authors point out that many of the reactors operating in the US and the EU were designed by Russia which supplies components to them, and if the conflict continues, many nuclear power plants would be forced to suspend operations.*
>
> *Russia has a significant share of the world nuclear energy market, so you can't just snap your fingers and change supplier. And the US energy situation is bad enough as it is, so Washington may soon have to make a tough choice: either put up with Moscow or leave entire cities or at least some areas without power.*
>
> *@BALTNEWS*[64]

IL tools used in Baltnews post

Misappropriation/disinformation. The extent to which Western nuclear reactors are manufactured by Russia is overstated. Namely, the post reads 'many of the reactors operating in the US and the EU were designed by Russia', while the original article states only that 'various U.S. allied countries have Russian reactors in operation or under construction, including Finland, the Czech Republic, Turkey and Ukraine'. Additionally, while the Baltnews post suggests that 'Washington will probably have to make a difficult choice—either put up with Moscow, or leave, perhaps, entire cities or at least a number of areas without electricity', the article actually proposes a third option: 'For enrichment, the U.S. government and private power companies could look at strategies to expand U.S. production and technology to replace the Russian supply as
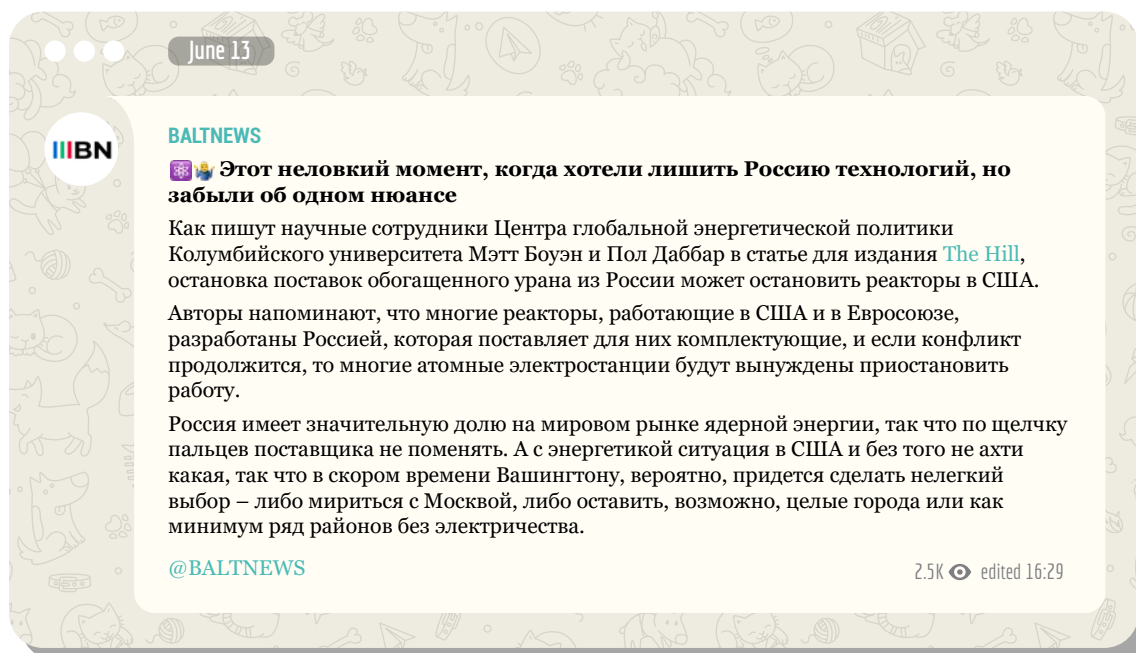
Figure 16. Telegram post Baltnews channel, case A6

quickly as possible'. The Hill furthermore does not speak of prompt effects, but 'impacts on reactor operation possibly this year or next', in case Russia should stop delivering enriched uranium.

Analysing the IL process

Placement by **ria.ru** (13 June, 11:55) and layering by **news.ru** (12:22) with the same *misleading headline*: 'The Hill: Russia can "turn off" the United States with one decision'. This suggests that stopping Russian energy provision would result in instant outages. However, the original article only mentions that 'if Russia stopped delivery of enriched uranium to U.S. power companies, the U.S. could see impacts on reactor operation possibly this year or next',

with nuclear power being over 20 per cent of the generation capacity in some areas of the country. RIA Novosti and news.ru deceivingly leave out the information about the longer time frame of impacts in quotes from the text (*woozle effect*).

Oreanda.ru uses a less misleading headline ('The United States said that Russia can stop the work of American nuclear reactors'), but the article itself still presents the *disinformation* that Russia stopping the supply of enriched uranium to the US 'can immediately stop the operation of the reactors'. It provides further disinformation by adding that 'nuclear energy accounts for about 20 per cent of the generating capacity in the country', while according to The Hill this is only the case in some areas of the

IL process

Original headline, The Hill, 12 June 2022, 21:00
What's at risk due to Russia's nuclear power dominance?[135]

Placement

Ria.ru, 13 June, 11:55: The Hill: Russia can 'turn off' the United States with one decision[136]

Layering

News.ru, 13 June, 12:22: The Hill: Russia can 'turn off' the United States with one decision[137]

Oreanda.ru, 13 June, 12:33: The United States said that Russia can stop the work of American nuclear reactors[138]

Ctnews.ru, 13 June, 12:59: The Hill: Russia may stop the operation of nuclear reactors in the United States[139]

Life.ru, 13 June, 13:02: In the West, they told how Russia can 'turn off' the United States with one decision[140]

Utro.ru, 13 June, 13:08: The United States may soon completely lose nuclear power plants in the country because of Russia[141]

Csn-tv.ru, 13 June, 13:22: The Hill: Russia can stop the operation of nuclear reactors in the United States with one decision[142]

Smotrim.ru, 13 June, 13:30: The Hill: Russia will stop US nuclear reactors in one move[143]

Vesti.ru, 13 June, 13:30: The Hill: Russia will stop US nuclear reactors in one move[144]

Iz.ru, 13 June, 13:35: The Hill announced the ability of the Russian Federation to stop the work of US nuclear reactors[145]

Ru.sputnik.kg, 13 June, 13:52: The Hill: Russia can 'turn off' the United States with one decision[146]

Profile.ru, 13 June, 14:20: In the United States, they fear the shutdown of nuclear reactors due to one decision by Russia[147]

Russian.rt.com, 13 June, 14:23: The Hill: Limiting the supply of Russian enriched uranium will cause serious damage to the United States[148]

Integration: Involvement of Nordic-Baltic media outlets

Sputniknewslv.com, 15 June, 13:11: US media: Russia can 'shut down' the US with one decision[149]

country. Oreanda.ru further states that 'a large number of reactors that operate in the US and Europe were produced in Russia', whereas the original article states only that 'various U.S. allied countries have Russian reactors in operation or under construction, including Finland, the Czech Republic, Turkey and Ukraine'. Thus, while The Hill does talk about Russian-produced European reactors, it neither talks about a large scale nor includes the US in this observation,

" Since the IL attempt featured on Sputnik Latvia (Sputniknewslv.com), an international integration of the attempt was identified.

which points to a case of *misappropriation* or *disinformation*.

Similar IL attempts can be identified in the **ctnews.ru** (12:59) article, which (a) quotes that Russia stopping the supply of enriched uranium to the US 'could lead to a shutdown of reactors', leaving out the information preceding this sentence in which The Hill states that the impacts are not immediate but reactor operation could be affected 'possibly this year or next' (a case of *de-contextualisation*), and (b) states that according to The Hill 'most of the reactors that operate in the US and the EU are made by Russia' (*misappropriation and disinformation*). The article by **life.ru** (13:02) closely resembles the original IL attempt by RIA Novosti in its set-up and content, including a similar *misleading headline* and the same misleading, shortened quote (*woozle effect*).

Utro.ru (13:08) takes the IL a step further by alleging in its headline that 'The United States may soon completely lose nuclear power plants in the country because of Russia' (*misleading headline, disinforma-*

tion). The article also uses emotional language ('Americans fear Moscow will …'), which cannot be found in the original article. Moreover, utro.ru states that 20 per cent of US energy is generated by nuclear power plants, reflecting the same *disinformation* as above. However, overall, the article is more nuanced than its headline would suggest, and includes the information that the possible cutbacks in reactor operations are to be expected 'this year or next', not immediately.

Similar IL attempts, indicating that Russia can influence the operation of nuclear reactors in the US with immediate effect, and overstating the extent to which Western nuclear reactors are manufactured by Russia, can be identified on **csn-tv.ru** (13:22), **iz.ru** (13:35), **ru.sputnik.kg** (13:52), **profile.ru** (14:20), **russian.rt.com** (14:23), and **sputniknewslv.com** (15 June, 13:11). Moreover, several of these articles use emotional language (profile.ru: the US 'fears' and 'Washington fears'; secretmag.ru: the US is 'afraid of Russia's ability'). The article by **ru.sputnik.kg** (13:52) is almost identical to the original IL placement article by RIA Novosti.

Smotrim.ru and **vesti.ru** (both at 13:30) in an identical article not only display the misleading headline 'The Hill: Russia will stop US nuclear reactors in one move'. With reference to The Hill article, they also state that, since many US and EU reactors were made in Russia (The Hill only talks about the reactors of 'various U.S. allied countries'), 'Therefore, their reliable operation is ensured by Russia, just like the entire energy sector of these countries', which is a severe case of *disinformation* and *misappropriation*. Smotrim and Vesti further add that the US 'will not survive the energy crisis if Russia stops the supply of enriched uranium': 'in this case an energy collapse will lead to the economic collapse of the country'—a case of *disinformation* that exceeds the extent of those identified in earlier articles.

Since the IL attempt featured on Sputnik Latvia (Sputniknewslv.com), a first international integration of the IL attempt could be identified, although it does not seem to have permeated the Latvian media environment (according to the backlinks provided by the Ahrefs backlink checker).

Overall IL methods applied

📰 *Misleading headline;* 🎎 *misappropriation;* ⚠ *disinformation;* 👓 *woozle effect;* 🍒 *decontextualisation.*

Case A7: Bloomberg article on Ukraine's EU membership aspirations

This is an example of highly distributed IL (on thirteen Russian-domain and one Baltic media website), with a wealth of IL techniques applied, that has not been simply forwarded.

> **Baltnews Telegram Post, 14 June 2022, 12:11**
>
> 🇪🇺 *If Ukraine, Georgia and Albania are accepted into the EU, the organisation will collapse─.*
>
> *According to columnist Andreas Kluth, the economies and judicial systems in Ukraine and other aspiring European countries are not ready for EU membership.*
>
> *'This is reckless because the EU has not yet managed to resolve the internal contradiction between what eurocrats call "enlargement" and "deepening"─ that is, the contradiction between accepting new members and increasing integration between those already in the union.'*
>
> *@BALTNEWS*[65]

Figure 17. Telegram post on Baltnews channel, case A7

○ *Original headline, Bloomberg, 13 June 2022, 07:00*
Europe Is a Vast Idea. How Does Ukraine Fit In?[150]

Placement

○ *Ria.ru, 13 June, 09:58: Bloomberg revealed the terrible consequences of Ukraine's accession to the EU[151]*

Layering

○ *Gazeta.ru, 13 June, 10:42: Bloomberg predicted the collapse of the European Union if Ukraine is admitted to its membership[152]*

○ *Profile.ru, 13 June, 10:58: Bloomberg: Ukraine's accession to the EU could destroy the bloc[153]*

○ *Sputniknewsbrasil.com.br, 13 June, 11:18: Bloomberg reveals 'disastrous' consequences of Ukraine's possible EU membership[154]*

○ *Obzor-gazeta.ru, 13 June, 11:30: Bloomberg: Ukraine's entry into the EU will destroy the bloc[155]*

○ *Smotrim.ru, 13 June, 11:49: Bloomberg: EU disintegration will accelerate if Ukraine is admitted[156]*

○ *Avto.vesti.ru, 13 June, 11:49: Bloomberg: EU disintegration will accelerate if Ukraine is admitted[157]*

○ *Life.ru, 13 June, 12:01: The West predicted the collapse of the European Union if Ukraine joins it[158]*

○ *1prime.ru, 13 June, 12:11: Bloomberg revealed the terrible consequences of Ukraine's accession to the EU[159]*

○ *Lenta.ru, 14 June, 01:32: The EU was predicted to collapse if Ukraine joins[160]*

○ *Newsae.ru, 14 June, 01:32: The EU was predicted to collapse if Ukraine joins[161]*

○ *TmBW.Ru, 14 June, 01:32: The EU was predicted to collapse if Ukraine joins[162]*

○ *Sputniknews.jp, 14 June, 04:34: Ukraine's EU membership will create many problems: Bloomberg[163]*

In addition, the following websites shared the link, all with gazeta.ru security certificates: 08euro.ru, euro04.ru, euro2000.ru, games08.ru, games2002.ru, k141.ru, they.ru, uefaeuro08.ru, and wheretogo.ru.

Integration: Involvement of Nordic-Baltic media outlets

○ *Lv.baltnews.com, 14 June, 15:59: Ukraine in the European Union is nonsense: why the country is not expected in the ranks of the bloc[164]*

IL tools used in the Baltnews Telegram post

🖼 *Misleading headline.*

The Baltnews Telegram headline 'the organisation will collapse' is misleading, since the article states only 'Giving full membership to Ukraine now would create so many new problems for the EU that

the bloc … **might** break down, or even apart'. Baltnews thus transforms 'might break down' into 'will collapse'. In addition, the original article reads 'Rushing their memberships would be a bad idea', which suggests that Ukraine and other candidates might be admitted at some point without the EU collapsing consequently.

Analysing the IL process

Placement by **ria.ru** (09:58) and layering by **sputniknewsbrazil.com.br** (11:18) which use a *misleading headline*, speaking of Bloomberg revealing 'the terrible consequences of Ukraine's accession to the EU' (RIA Novosti) or the 'disastrous consequences' (Sputnik), although the original article does not offer any similarly bold judgement. Moreover, the Sputnik article starts with the incomplete quote 'An EU that was never a model of good governance could collapse or even disintegrate'. This same quote is later picked up by **profile.ru** (10:58) and **sputniknewsbrazil.com.br** (11:18), while **gazeta.ru** (10:42) refers to it in its headline 'Bloomberg predicted the collapse of the European Union if Ukraine is admitted'; **obzor-gazeta.ru'**s (11:30) headline similarly reads 'Bloomberg: Ukraine's entry into the EU will destroy the bloc'. The original article, however, only discusses the possibility of the EU collapsing or disintegrating in case of 'giving **full** membership' to Ukraine and other candidate countries '**now**'. All outlets identified (strategically?) leave out the information that the Bloomberg article proposes a phased integration instead, allowing candidate countries to gain full EU privileges in some areas (*decontextualisation*).

The IL attempt is intensified by **smotrim.ru** and **avto.vesti.ru** (both at 11:49), which publish the exact same article suggesting that the EU is already steadily disintegrating, with the admission of Ukraine accelerating this trend. Both articles state that, according to Bloomberg, the EU has 'irresolvable contradictions', with EU leaders being 'afraid' to accept Ukraine, while the original article only points to 'intrinsic tensions' of the EU and to EU leaders shaking their head at the question of whether to accept Ukraine as a new member state. Similarly, both articles exaggerate in suggesting that 'there is no agreement in the EU', with Bloomberg only underlining that member states don't agree 'what the union should become' (instead of broad disagreement). In contrast to obzor-gazeta.ru, smotrim.ru and avto.vesti.ru include that 'Bloomberg predicts the collapse of the EU without Ukraine', adding that 'The European Union with its capital in Brussels has no future— the Eurozone will fall apart, like the Union itself'. Neither statement can be found in the original article, which is a clear instance of *misappropriation* and outright *disinformation*. The other websites reflect the above outlined IL attempts.

In addition, the articles by Newsae.ru and TmBW.Ru refer to the article of Lenta.ru. All three are identical and were published at the same time. This indicates a *Potemkin village* of articles endorsing each other to build

credibility and thereby mislead audiences. The backlinks of the Lenta.ru article point to further websites belonging to the same network, like isap.center,[66] newsfactory.su,[67] or vesti-nedeli.com.[68]

Several websites with gazeta.ru security certificates sharing the IL attempt further point to the use of *smurfing*. With this technique, various accounts or websites controlled by the same actor disseminate information that is difficult to attribute and thus difficult to debunk. Smurfing also contributes to source magnification.

Since the IL attempt featured on Baltnews Latvia (lv.baltnews.com), a first integration of the IL attempt into the Baltic media environment was identified (according to the backlinks provided by Ahrefs).

IL tools used overall

🖼️ *Misleading headline;*
🍒 *decontextualisation,* 🎋 *misappropriation;*
⚠️ *disinformation;* 🏘️ *Potemkin village;*
🤖💬 *smurfing.*

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