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INFORMATION LAUNDERING IN THE NORDIC-BALTIC REGION

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Abstract

The penetration of external information influence in a domestic media ecosystem is largely enabled by the interactions between foreign and domestic actors. The term 'Information Laundering' describes how these actors manipulate and amplify manipulated information in a particular media environment and the techniques utilised for such purposes. This report evaluates to what extent Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin actors leverage Information Laundering techniques to conduct influence campaigns in the Nordic-Baltic countries and examines the role that domestic and foreign

actors play in enabling these campaigns to reach target audiences. For this purpose, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence developed a theoretical model of Information Laundering presented in this study. The model was applied to a comparative analysis of 32 Information Laundering cases, linked to the activity of 570 single actors in the eight Nordic-Baltic countries. Through researching Information Laundering in the region, this report aims to support national institutions in their goal to build resilience against hostile information influence operations.



What is Information Laundering?

Information laundering (IL) is a stratagem used by hostile actors within an information influence campaign. In this process, false or deceitful information is legitimised through a network of intermediaries, who gradually apply a set of techniques in order to distort it and obscure the original source.

In the context of this study, IL is leveraged by Kremlin-official or pro-Kremlin actors in a hostile information influence campaign (HIIC). In the course of IL, a series of actors 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.

Strategic importance

Developing a deep understanding of how influence campaigns are conducted and who

is behind the spread of pro-Kremlin influence in a particular media environment requires a comprehensive research method. The study of influence campaigns through IL provides a holistic approach for understanding and mapping hostile activity in the information environment. This study uncovers, analyses, and compares 854 interventions, resulting in a dataset of 570 single actors behind 32 IL cases. Although the scope of this research is limited to Kremlin HIICs in the Baltic and Nordic regions, the resulting methodological framework is designed to be exported and adapted to any domestic media environment.





Operational Use of the Model

This paper aims to develop a standardized analytical framework that allows national institutions, academia, and practitioners to detect, understand, and disrupt HIICs. This framework will yield results for both short- and medium-term application.

Short-term benefits:

1. Support for researchers and practitioners in comprehending how information is gradually distorted, disseminated, and legitimized.
2. Exposure and assessment of the vulnerabilities of the domestic media environment.
3. Creation of a publicly available catalogue with historical data of the cases researched and actors involved.

Medium-term benefits:

1. Comparative analysis of actors and tactics in the Nordic-Baltic countries.
2. Structuring of domestic media environment vulnerabilities to support national regulatory efforts.
3. Exposure of networks (domestic and international) active in HIICs.
4. Building resilience to better recognise and respond to information influence activities targeting NATO countries, Allied nations and their institutions.
5. Identifying training objectives.



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” The concept of information laundering is not unlike money laundering. You take money from illegal activities, put it through a process that obscures where it came from, and then it comes out clean, and it can be used for legitimate purposes. When bogus information goes through this process, it appears as legitimate, verified and newsworthy.¹

INTRODUCTION

The ability of hostile information influence campaigns (HIICs) to directly affect human cognition makes them a key security challenge for national institutions. The formation of independent opinion and the process of informed decision-making are fundamental to the longevity of democratic political systems. Previous studies² and recent examples³ have consistently provided evidence that Russia's strategic approach and ongoing information influence campaigns against the Nordic-Baltic region (NB8) are, for reasons yet unknown, legitimised and spread by domestic networks (networks of influence). Their behaviour and composition vary depending on the operating environment.⁴ HIICs taken up by networks of influence open the floodgates for the dissemination of small or fringe news stories. Processes of distortion

and further amplification give them a façade of legitimacy, the look and feel of credible news, allowing disinformation to influence public discourse or to set an agenda by other means. Certainly, the increased availability and use of online resources makes this job easier, faster, and cheaper. By exploiting connections in complex information environments, the Kremlin can strategically mislead audiences without incurring substantial political and military costs.⁵ It is essential that NB8 governments and relevant institutions comprehend, detect, and disrupt HIICs to counter hostile Kremlin influence within the region.

Until now, researchers have focused on investigating the various components of an information campaign individually, i.e. the narratives spread by the Kremlin's official



media, their impact on target audiences, their amplification by automated social media accounts, the use of targeted online ads, and so on. However, less effort has gone into understanding the life cycle of information influence activities. An HIIC is an all-inclusive and progressive process of audience manipulation. By studying them, researchers can uncover repeated patterns and connections between actors, media outlets, and influence techniques. This study contributes towards a better understanding of HIICs, supporting NB8 national institutions in their goal to prevent the spread of hostile information influence in the region. This research suggests that by adopting a holistic approach to researching influence campaigns, one can better understand how information is distorted, disseminated, and legitimised, and identify the networks that partake in the process.

This paper proposes a theoretical model of Information Laundering (IL) as an operational and pragmatic framework for investigating influence campaigns in a domestic online media environment, in order to expose possible vulnerabilities. The study aims to produce a standardised analytical framework for examining HIICs against the NB8 from their start to integration in the public debate. The framework is versatile and can be applied to cases in various contexts in the NB8 region. Applying a set of analytical tools will also aid in identifying to what extent domestic networks of influence are supported by international networks of a similar nature.

This paper details the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence's pioneering attempt to develop a preliminary theoretical framework of IL and to test it on a selection of 32 real cases from the NB8 region.

The following pages include an overview and definition of IL, an introduction to the framework created to analyse IL processes in the NB8, and a description of the case studies used to test the framework.

What is Information Laundering?

Kremlin's information influence activities are deliberately tailored to Russia's strategic interests in the region.⁶ They involve the use of different techniques aimed at increasing the effectiveness of the campaign, leveraging its credibility, and impact capability. These techniques are part of a holistic process, which can be understood through an analytical framework that combines the metaphor of money laundering and the theoretical construction of IL provided by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) in 2018.⁷

Information Laundering⁸

Information laundering (IL) is a stratagem used by hostile actors within an information influence campaign. In this process, false or deceitful information is legitimised through a network of intermediaries that gradually apply a set of techniques in order to distort it and obscure the original source.



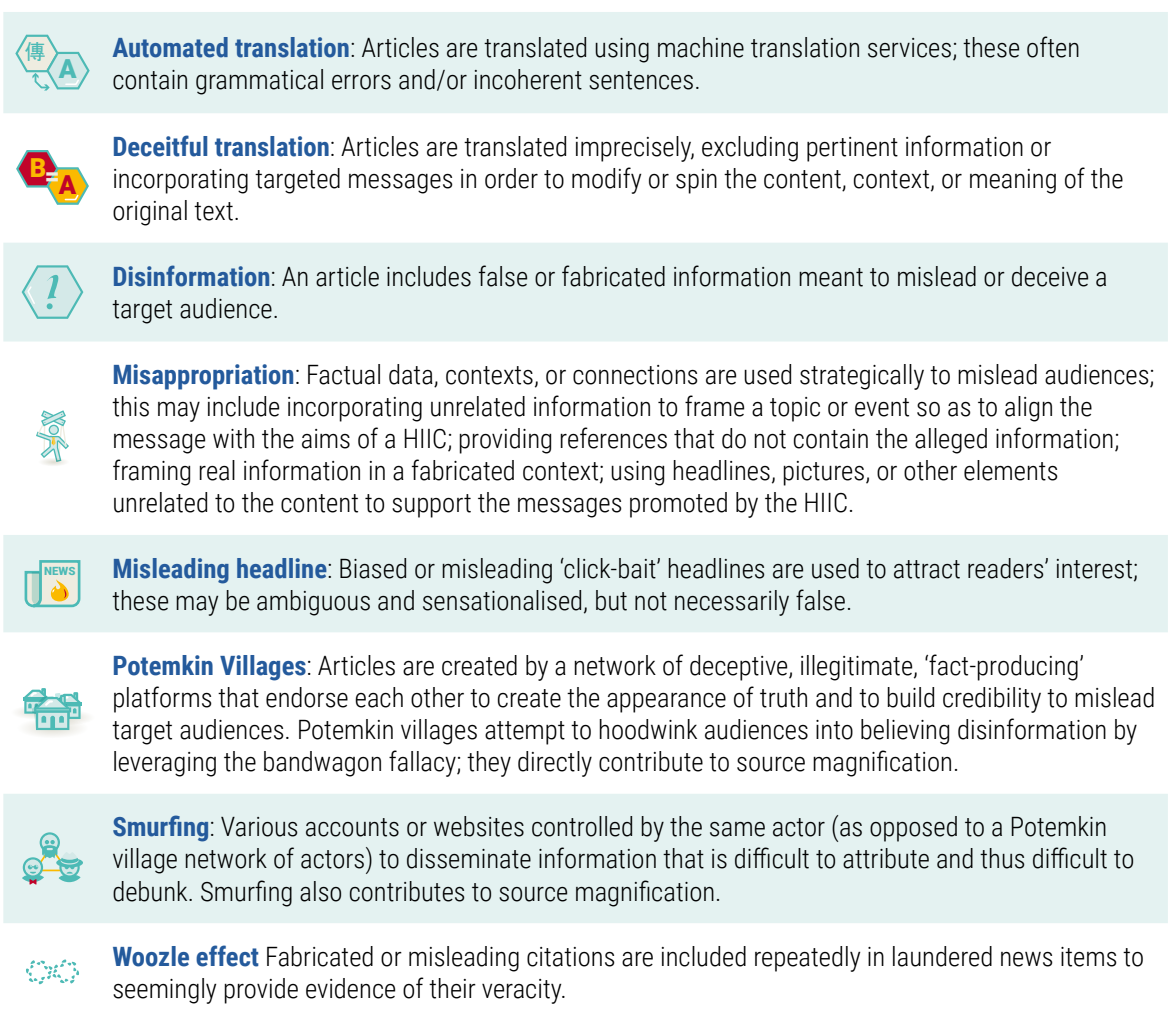


Figure 1. Information Laundering techniques

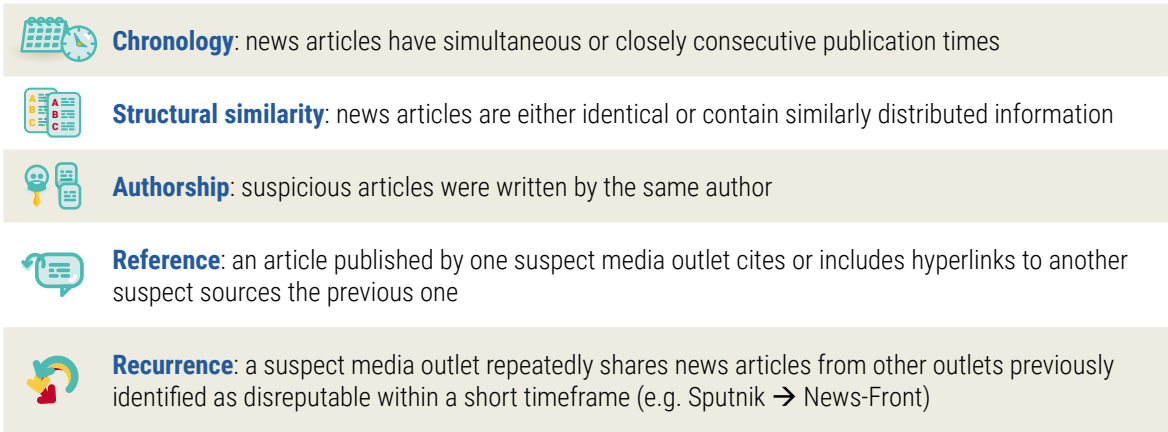


Figure 2. Indicators of connection between laundered news items

In the context of this study, IL is leveraged by Kremlin-official or pro-Kremlin actors in a HIIC. In the course of IL, a series of hostile actors 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.

After analysing relevant literature and testing the framework in real life, eight different IL techniques were identified: please see Figure 1.

The use of IL techniques does not necessarily imply a HIIC. They are only considered part of a hostile campaign when they fit within a broader strategic aim. This study considers five indicators that can be used to identify connections between laundered news items and to trace the exact route of the laundering process, taking into account the time frame and the application of laundering techniques. Indicators such as chronology, structural similarity, authorship, reference and recurrence can be used to help verify whether suspicious news items have undergone the IL process: see Figure 2.

Phases of Information Laundering

Similar to money laundering, IL comprises three phases - placement, layering, and integration - covering everything from the initial instance of distortion and dissemination of this information to its 'legitimised' acceptance by a domestic media ecosystem:

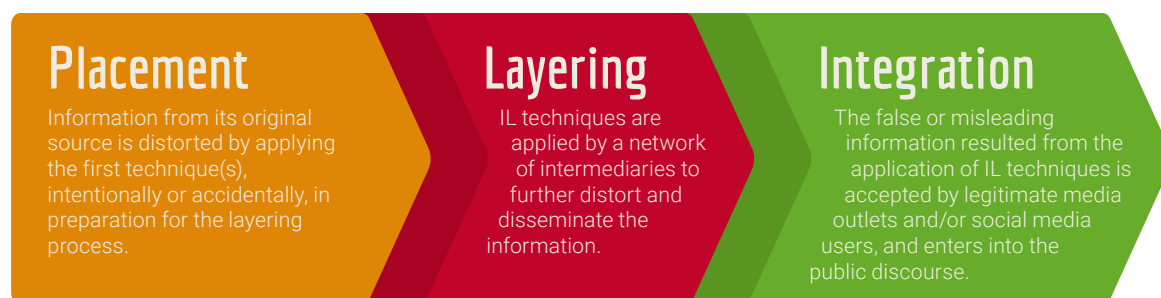
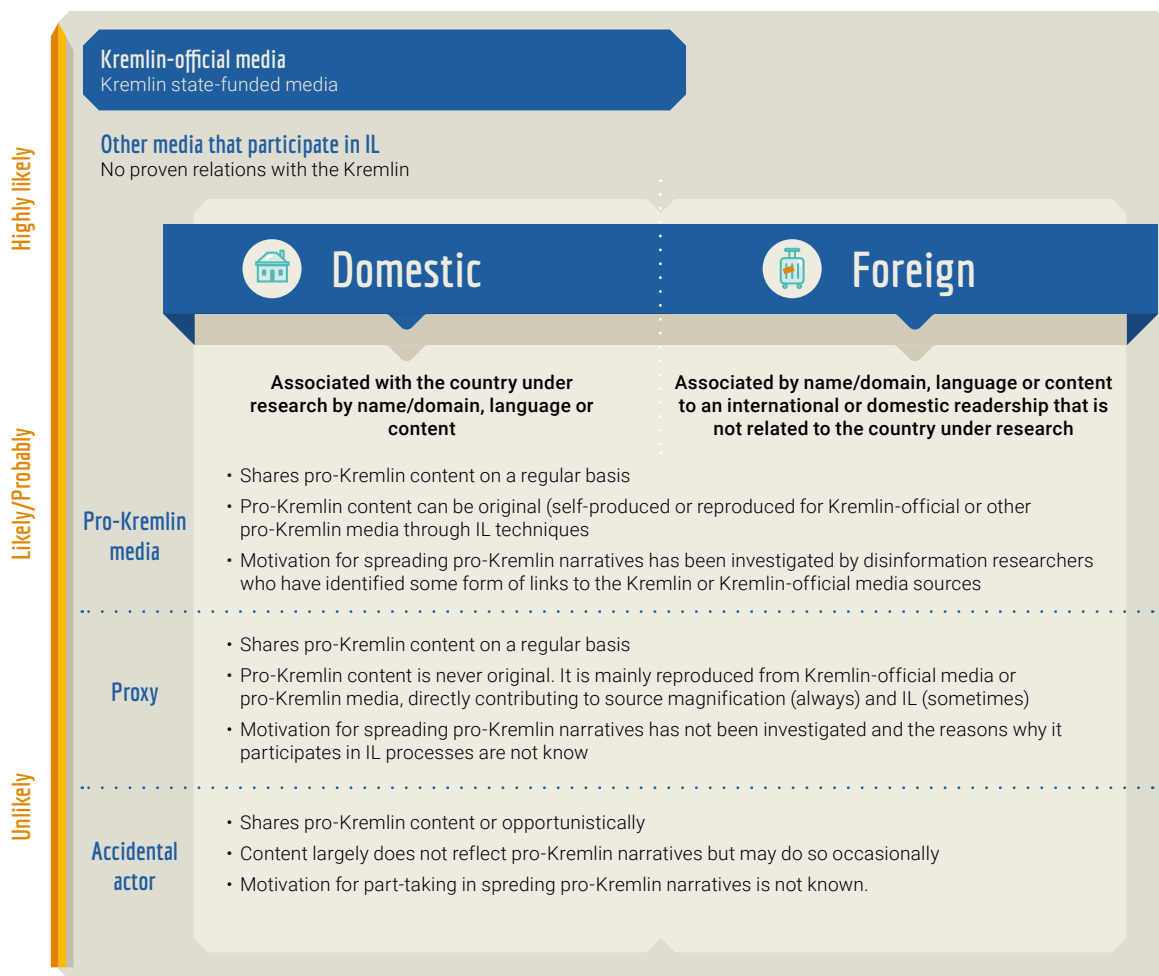


Figure 3. Phases of Information Laundering

Actors who are part of the network of influence are involved in all three phases of IL. This paper proposes the following categorisation of the various actors so

that researchers can better identify the role each actor plays. This categorisation is based on the experience of experts in this field: please see Figure 4.





Estimative probability of links to the Kremlin or Kremlin-official media

Above classification of Actors refers to the methodology of this research only, and does not include any terminology as used on a national level in any of the NB8 countries.

Figure 4. Actors involved in Information Laundering networks⁹

Not all actors within influence networks know about or intend to participate in IL. They may simply be exploited by the architects of HICs.

The Framework

Understanding IL as a holistic process requires a comprehensive framework that qualitatively analyses the spread of

information influence in the NB8. The proposed framework was initially applied to 52 representative case studies. Due to allowance of space, this report includes 32 such case studies, 4 for each country. The well-known differences between the pro-Kremlin media environments in the eight countries were used to test the adaptability of the framework.



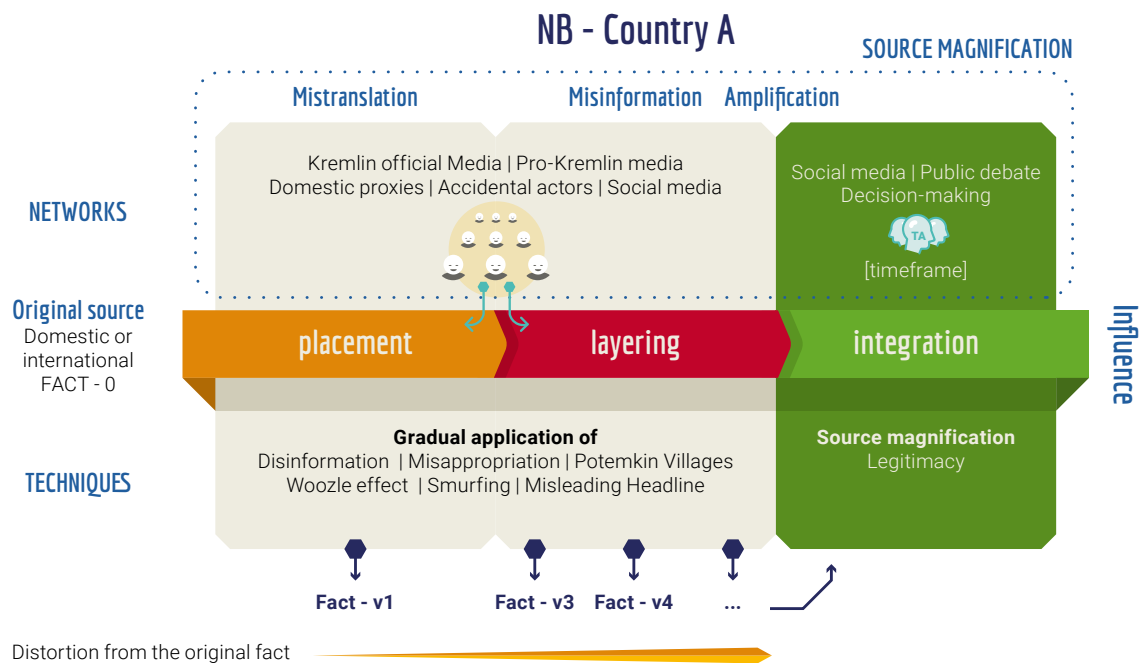


Figure 5. The framework for understanding Information Laundering processes in the Nordic-Baltic region

The research method included interviews with national experts in combination with manual keyword-based advanced online research and the collection of data supported by software developed for such purposes, such as *WayBack Machine* and *Archive.is*, *InVID Mutlimodal Analytics Dashboard*, and *BuzzSumo*. For each case, research was conducted in three languages: a) in the domestic language, i.e. Danish, Estonian, Finnish, Icelandic, Latvian, Lithuanian, Norwegian, or Swedish, b) in Russian, and c) in English. The case studies were selected according to the following criteria: a) Kremlin-official media (foreign or domestic) was involved; b) different techniques were applied, simultaneously or in quick succession, in order to gradually

distort and disseminate the original information;¹⁰ c) a network of various types of actors participated in the process.

Source magnification (SM), i.e. the process of increasing the number of information sources to enhance the impact of a manipulated piece of information regardless of quality or veracity¹¹, is necessary for effective IL as it supports the construction of legitimacy. Since SM does not necessarily involve distortion, it is not considered an IL technique. Simple shares without altering content or translations may be SM, but not IL.

This study did not seek to analyse: a) narratives spread within the NB8; b) the impact of IL on a target audience; c) the aims

or motivations of the actors involved in IL; or d) social media analysis and monitoring. This paper acknowledges the limitations regarding attribution in HIICs. The proposed framework was created to expose the techniques and networks involved in IL, and the dynamics that exist between them. Governments, strategic communications practitioners and researchers must further study the motivations and functions of the

actors identified in this paper. An internal database compiles the full catalog of actors that participated in all IL cases studied, specifying the role that each actor played, their country of origin/domain, the NB8 country where they intervened, as well as individual characteristics. The chronology of the IL cases, which registers the exact time when the laundered pieces were published, is also listed in an unpublished document.

KEY FINDINGS

IL research allows to scan and visualise the hostile information landscape in the NB8.

1. Cases have been identified in all researched countries, allowing us to envisage the ecosystem of HIICs in the region:


1.1. Domestic media outlets considered as pro-Kremlin or proxy actors were

seen to enable the spread of pro-Kremlin influence in every country.








1.2. Techniques, networks and themes are contingent on each country's idiosyncrasies.

1.3. Forty seven domestic media outlets participated in various IL processes.

Table 1. Domestic media outlets identified by Information Laundering research

Media outlet	Type	Media outlet	Type	Media outlet	Type
 Denmark					
<i>24NYT</i>	Proxy	<i>Den Korte Avis</i>	Proxy	<i>Jyllands-Posten</i>	Accidental actor
<i>NewSpeak</i>	Proxy	<i>Indsiget Udsyn</i>	Accidental actor	<i>Document</i>	Accidental actor



Media outlet	Type	Media outlet	Type	Media outlet	Type
 Latvia					
<i>Mixnews</i>	Proxy	<i>Baltijas Balss</i>	Pro-Kremlin	<i>Delfi</i>	Accidental actor
<i>Gorod</i>	Proxy	<i>Sputnik Latvia</i>	Kremlin-official	<i>Baltnews Latvia</i>	Pro-Kremlin
<i>Focus</i>	Pro-Kremlin	<i>Baltija.lv</i>	Proxy		
<i>Press.lv</i>	Proxy	<i>LMHO Club</i>	Pro-Kremlin		
 Estonia					
<i>Baltnews Estonia</i>	Pro-Kremlin	<i>Sputnik Estonia</i>	Kremlin-official	<i>Seti.ee</i>	Proxy
<i>Õhtuleht</i>	Accidental actor	<i>Postimees</i>	Accidental actor	<i>Njuzz.ee</i>	Proxy
<i>Stena</i>	Proxy	<i>Delfi</i>	Accidental actor	<i>Pilguheit.ee</i>	Proxy
 Finland					
<i>MV-Lehti</i>	Pro-Kremlin	<i>Nykysuomi</i>	Proxy	<i>Ylilauta.org</i>	Proxy
 Sweden					
<i>The World News</i>	Proxy	<i>NewsVoice</i>	Accidental actor	<i>Offensive</i>	Proxy
<i>Fria Tider</i>	Proxy	<i>Sv.technocracy.news</i>	Accidental actor	<i>White TV</i>	Proxy
<i>Svensk Press</i>	Proxy	<i>Nyheter Idag</i>	Pro-Kremlin		
 Iceland					
		<i>The Saker</i> ¹²	Pro-Kremlin		
 Lithuania					
<i>Sputnik Lithuania</i>	Kremlin-official	<i>Socialistupartija.blogspot.com</i>	Proxy	<i>Peticijos.com</i>	Proxy
<i>Baltnews Lithuania</i>	Pro-Kremlin	<i>Izbltkauno.wordpress.com</i>	Proxy	<i>Peticijos.com</i>	Proxy
 Norway					
<i>Friheten</i>	Proxy	<i>Derimot</i>	Proxy	<i>Journalen</i>	Accidental actor
<i>Folkediplomati Norge</i>	Pro-Kremlin				



” The study reveals that the most effective combination of Information Laundering techniques is misappropriation with woozle effect, since it is the most difficult to unmask.

2. By leveraging pro-Kremlin and proxy media, Kremlin actors are seen to attain plausible deniability, deflecting criticism while still manipulating information processes and public opinion.

3. Russian is the primary language used by IL actors, followed by English, the domestic languages of each country, and lastly - domestic languages of other NB8 countries.

3.1. Most IL networks are transnational, with a combination of Russian language, English language and domestic language outlets.

3.2. Russian speakers in the region and Russian domestic audiences are identified as high priority targets of pro-Kremlin HICs.

3.3. Non-Russian speaking NB8 nationals and international audiences are also commonly targeted by IL activities.

4. IL processes are supported by cyber capabilities and benefit from inauthentic amplification through social media.

4.1. Use of fake and burner accounts to support SM and smurfing, increasing the engagement and visibility of a laundered piece.

4.2. Self-publication software like IFTTT, and the forgery, hacking or leaking of documents were other practices utilised to enable or reinforce IL activities.

4.3. Although this study did not focus on social media, the results prove that social media are key for an effective IL process: the sources of 20% of the cases studied by this report were social media posts, with *Facebook* being the main platform for IL networks and techniques.

5. The study reveals that the most effective combination of IL techniques is misappropriation with woozle effect, since it is the most difficult to unmask.



5.1. The average reader, who generally commits a short time span to look through a news piece, will be highly unlikely to identify that a real, accurate quote from a reliable public figure (woozle effect) is being misused to provide credibility to misleading information achieved through misappropriations.

5.2. Potemkin villages and smurfing found throughout the study are indicators of coordinated activity.

5.3. The most common technique utilized by IL actors targeting the US military or NATO is misappropriation. It involves more or less precise reporting of news events, such as military exercises, followed by the artificial addition of an unrelated paragraph at the end. The information contained in that paragraph has the intended aim to undermine NATO or shape perceptions on the Alliance, depicting it as a global threat.

5.4. The use of disinformation as an IL technique was remarkably low in comparison to other techniques. This is likely caused by a shift in the manipulation methods, moving towards subtler techniques and higher sophistication.

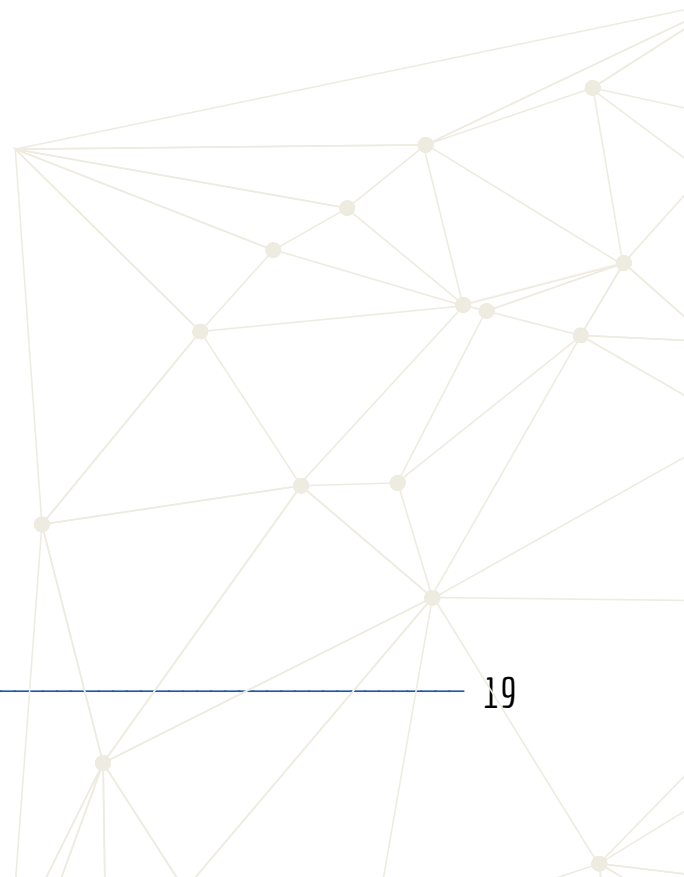
6. *Sputnik* is the most active Kremlin-official outlet in IL outside the Russian information sphere.

6.1. Out of the eight regional languages, *Sputnik's* international version operates in Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian. These editions also participate in IL targeting other NB8 countries.

7. NATO's activity in general, and NATO military exercises in particular, are identified as the events that originated the highest level of activity in IL networks across the entire NB8 region.

7.1. *Trident Juncture 2018* held particular relevance in Latvia, Finland, Sweden and Norway.

7.2. The exploitation of human errors and misconducts of NATO soldiers is commonly seen in the placement of IL.



COMPARATIVE STUDY

Denmark

Most IL networks targeting Denmark strategically exploit domestic news stories to disseminate anti-Western narratives, mainly linked to the idea of alleged Western moral decay, among English- and Russian-speaking audiences. Domestic proxies have been seen to enable and/or disseminate Kremlin's influence in the country: *24NYT*, *Den Korte Avis*, *NewSpeek*.

Latvia

Latvia has one of the highest percentages of domestic actors involved in IL activities in the NB8. Latvian pro-Kremlin actors (*Baltijas Balss*, *Baltnews Latvia*, *Focus*) and domestic proxies (*Press.lv*, *Mixnews*, *TV Net*) have particular relevance when disseminating pro-Kremlin influence among Russian-speaking audiences, both within and outside the country.

Estonia

IL networks in Estonia are complex, with an average of 50 actors actively involved per case. Estonian domestic actors have been identified at the core of laundering processes, mainly - *Baltnews Estonia* and *Stena*. Latvian pro-Kremlin media and proxies also play a relevant role in Estonian IL, while mainstream media have accidentally amplified foreign IL targeting the country.

Finland

Finland is a country resilient to IL. However, domestic and foreign IL actors target Finnish news events to disseminate anti-NATO narratives. Relevant activity from domestic pro-Kremlin media (*MV-Lehti*), individual actors and proxies, and the frequent use of SM are key characteristics of IL targeting the country. Mainstream media have been efficient in exposing and fact-checking.

Sweden

IL networks composed by actors with foreign domains are very active in the country, with important participation of national pro-Kremlin (*Nyheter Idag*) and proxy actors (*Fria Tider*, *Svensk Press*, *The World News*, *White TV*, *Offensive*). Russian and English-language pro-Kremlin and proxy actors leverage Swedish news to support the idea of alleged Western moral decay and right-wing narratives.

Iceland

IL cases in Iceland are uncommon. However, research found that Russian-language networks are very active in utilising news about Iceland in IL cases that revisit the Cold War history. Although no domestic media were seen involved in IL in the country, *The Saker* – a very active pro-Kremlin outlet with Icelandic domain '.is' – was seen to participate in IL in other NB8 countries such as Latvia.

Lithuania

In Lithuania, IL cases are linked to the activity of domestic and foreign pro-Kremlin and proxy media outlets, especially *Baltnews Lithuania*. However, it is the country where Kremlin-official media have the most relevance (31% of the total) with *Sputnik Lithuania* playing a key role. It is also the NB8 country where domestic language is the most used for laundering purposes.



Foreign and domestic pro-Kremlin and proxy actors actively participate in IL activities targeting Norway, with some cases involving over 100 actors. Domestic pro-Kremlin and proxy outlets (*Fiheten* and *Folkediplomati Norge*, respectively) spread content aligned with anti-NATO narratives and give support to Crimean separatists, respectively. Ukraine is a relevant topic for Norwegian IL networks.

This study identifies three sub-regions within the NB8, according to the characteristics of the IL networks involved and the news stories laundered by them:

Baltic States

Key actors: Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media.

Throughout the NB8, the most active pro-Kremlin IL networks are found in the Baltics: Latvia is the country with the highest percentage of pro-Kremlin media outlets conducting IL, while Estonia has the largest number of single actors involved in IL cases (Graphic 2), and Lithuania registers the highest activity from Kremlin-official media of the whole NB8 (Graphic 1). In Latvia and Estonia, sizeable online news portals like *Mixnews*, *TV Net*, or *Stena* perform as proxy actors. According to *SimilarWeb*, on August 2020 *Mixnews* and *TV Net* received 23M and 10M visits respectively. *Stena* is a smaller portal with 190K visits in the same month. Conversely, in Lithuania, proxies are found mainly in the blogosphere (*Socialistupartija*, *blogspot.com*, *lzbtlkauno.wordpress.com*, *Peticijos.com*).

Ethnic Russians in the Baltic States were one of the main targets of IL processes,

with Russian-domain Russian-language and domestic-domain Russian-language media outlets at the center of influence processes in the three countries. *Baltnews* and *Sputnik* (in their Latvian, Estonian, and Lithuanian versions) were seen to conduct IL not only in the Baltics, but across the whole NB8 territory.

Sweden, Finland, and Norway

Key actors: pro-Kremlin media and proxies.

This group of countries hosts the most dynamic IL networks outside the Baltic States, with domestic proxy actors playing a role by translating Russian and English language IL processes into the domestic language. Whereas IL actors in Norway and Sweden appear to also be active in promoting political narratives aligned with a particular ideology (mainly far-right values in Sweden and communist ideas in Norway), in Finland, pro-Kremlin IL processes are conducted by individuals that set up platforms that openly support the Kremlin's agenda. Interestingly, the behaviour of IL networks in Norway and Sweden is similar, with analogous activity of pro-Kremlin and proxy actors (Graphic 2). IL in Finland involves the highest number of pro-Kremlin actors outside the Baltic countries, while

” In Sweden, diverse issues are utilised to disseminate the narrative of alleged Western moral decay, represented by cannibalism, Greta Thunberg, or radical islamism.

Swedish domestic actors are also taking part in IL processes that target other NB8 countries.

In addition to NATO military exercises, Ukraine and EU sanctions are also important IL themes in this territory. In Sweden, diverse issues are utilised to disseminate the narrative of alleged Western moral decay, represented by cannibalism, Greta Thunberg, or radical islamism. Finally, while other NB8 countries are portrayed as aggressive powers allowing NATO troops on their soil to allegedly threaten Russia, Sweden and Finland are depicted as paranoid and vulnerable for reinforcing their national defense capabilities in order to protect themselves from any Russian threat. In these two countries, it is common to find a manifest dichotomy between the idea of a 'harmless Russia' and a 'militarily superior and dangerous Russia' which will attack if provoked.

Denmark and Iceland

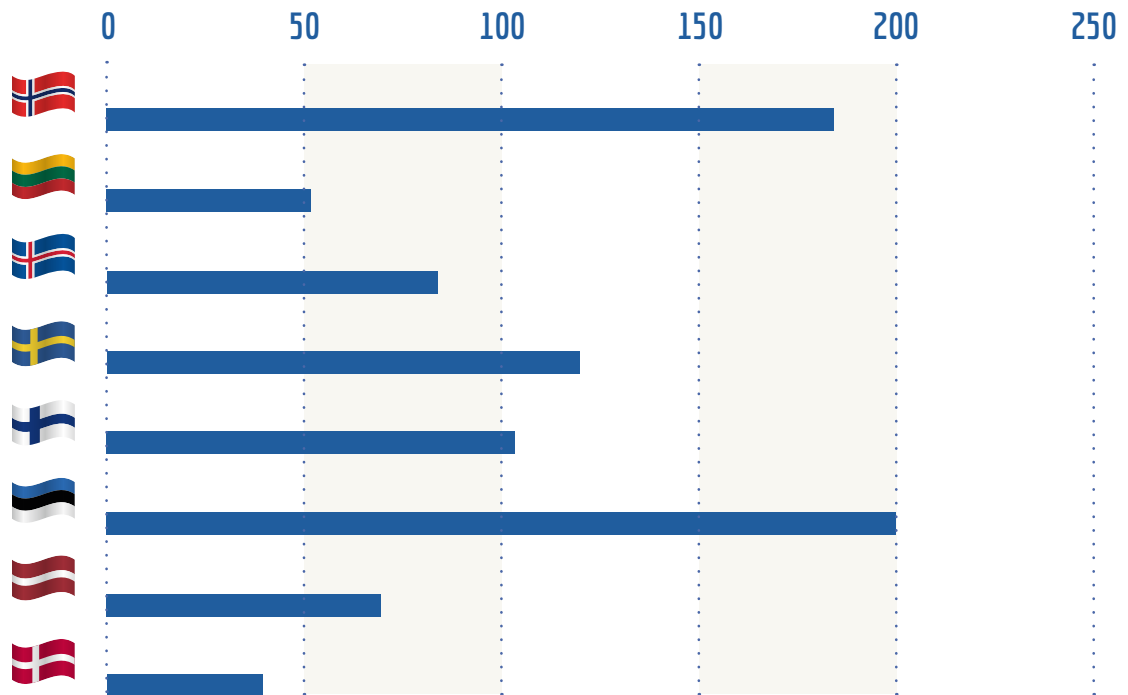
Key actors: proxies and accidental actors.

Domestic actors have lesser weight in IL networks that target these two countries. However, foreign IL actors commonly

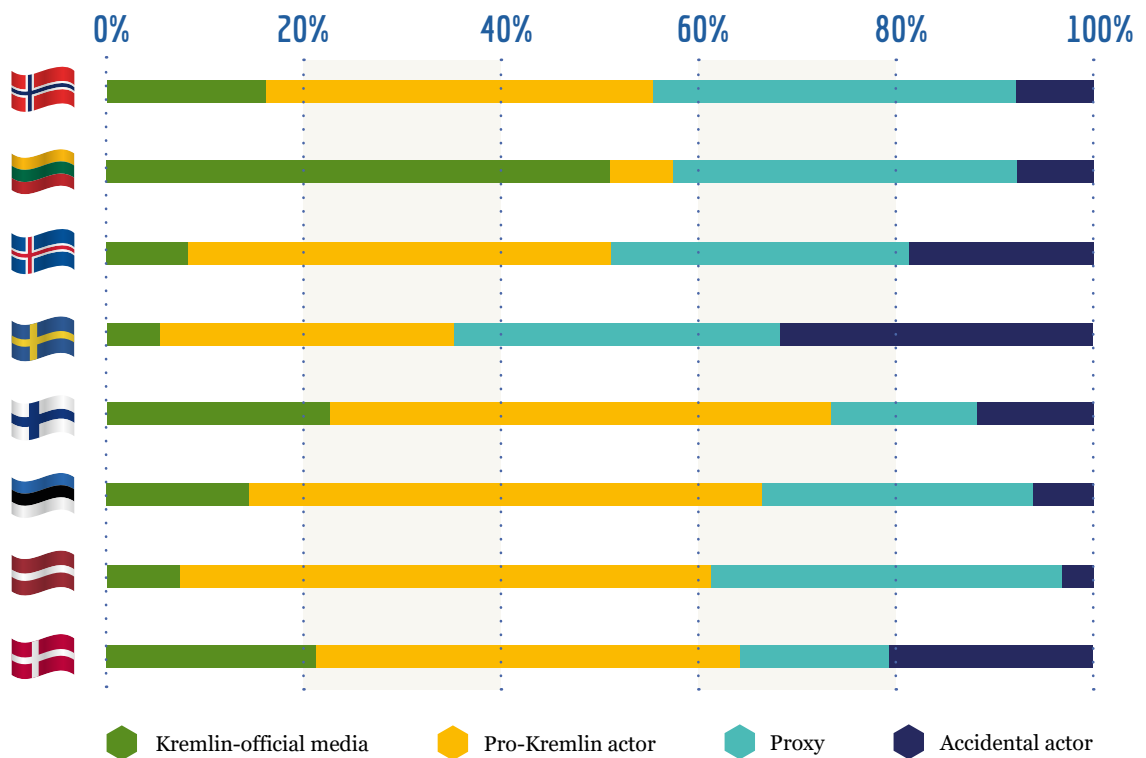
launder and disseminate Danish or Icelandic news stories to support certain narratives and propagate anti-Western messages to international Russian- and English-speaking audiences. Remarkably, the SM of IL targeting these countries via translations into other EU languages (e.g. French, Spanish, German) is the highest in the NB8 region. Generally, the topics of IL in these two countries are suitable for reaching a wider audience, for example, the alleged corruption of Western moral values through depraved practices like bestiality in Denmark or economic incentives for foreign men to marry Icelandic women. These stories are used to shape perceptions about the West in European and neighbouring countries. This also explains the high number of accidental actors involved in SM processes in both countries.

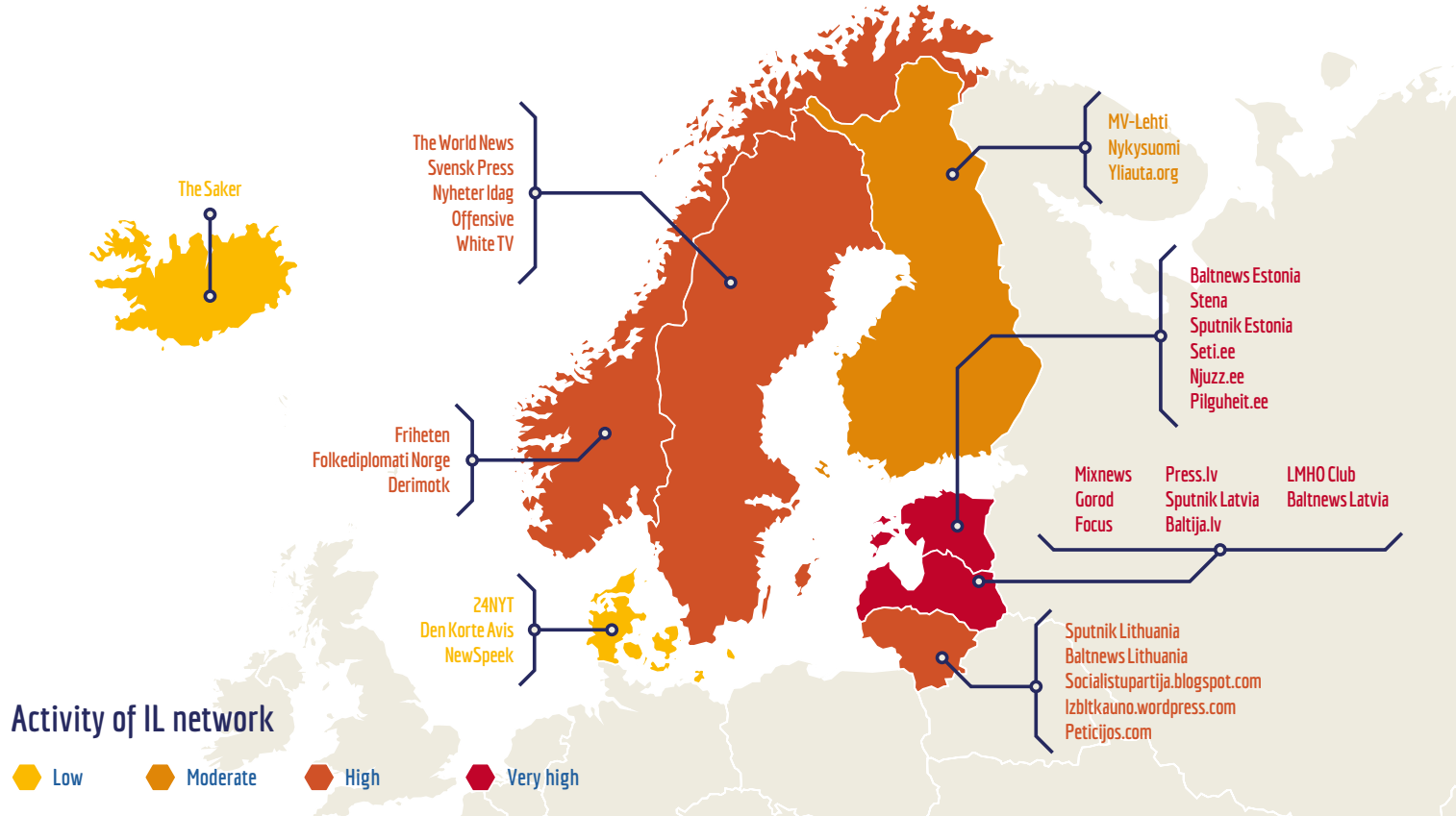


Graphic 1. Proportion of each media type per the total number of actors involved in each country.



Graphic 2. Number of actors participating in Information Laundering processes per country





Map 1. Activity of Information Laundering networks and domestic Kremlin-official, pro-Kremlin and proxy platforms per country¹³

A comparative analysis of case studies reveals three types of IL conducted in the NB8, according to the role that media outlets play during the placement and layering phases. The more relevant the role played by Kremlin-official or pro-Kremlin media, the greater the probability of an influence campaign. This distinction separates:

- The 'A' type IL (IL-A)** is driven by Kremlin or pro-Kremlin sources. The manipulation and spread of news by a foreign actor to disseminate messages to international or foreign audiences. In cases of IL-A, **Kremlin-official or pro-Kremlin media are responsible for the placement phase** of information laundering, first distorting domestic news in order to further promote it elsewhere. Most of the cases researched are found in this category.

- The 'B' type IL (IL-B)** is initiated by domestic actors independently of their affiliation to the Kremlin and strategically exploited by Kremlin or pro-Kremlin actors. Homegrown or foreign stories that have been already distorted by a domestic outlet (*placement*), which are then **opportunistically exploited** by a Kremlin-official or pro-Kremlin source to conduct IL. Here the Kremlin-official or pro-Kremlin actors enter the process at the **layering phase**.

- The 'C' type IL (IL-C)** where the participation of Kremlin and pro-Kremlin actors is merely accidental. Homegrown or foreign actors use Kremlin-official or pro-Kremlin news together with other non-Kremlin-related sources to support their arguments. **Here, the involvement of Kremlin-official or pro-Kremlin media is unintentional.**



Signs of coordinated activity in Information Laundering networks

Potemkin villages

Potemkin villages are indicative of coordinated behaviour and a key to consolidate IL networks. This study detected several Potemkin villages that enable and intensify the effects of Kremlin information influence activities in the region. Three types of Potemkin villages were recognised in this study:

Potemkin village Type 1: Kremlin-official media – Kremlin-official media

A Kremlin-official media outlet shares a laundered piece from another Kremlin-official media outlet (in the same language or translates it), commonly referencing and including a hyperlink to the first piece.

- Aim: providing credibility to the news while increasing its visibility, geared towards audiences that generally engage with Kremlin-official content.
- The most common Potemkin village of this type can be found in Russian-language *RIA Novosti* and various versions of *Sputnik* (e.g. NOR 30).

Potemkin village Type 2: Kremlin-official media – pro-Kremlin media / Pro-Kremlin media – Kremlin-official media

A dynamic relationship whereby pro-Kremlin media (frequently in Russian or English) amplify directly a distorted piece within a

short timeframe, coming from a Kremlin-official medium, or vice versa.

- Aim: endorsing the content of the source.
- Most common Potemkin Villages found involving:
 - *Sputnik News – Infowars* (LVA 6)
 - *Sputnik News – NewsFront* (LVA 6, FIN 13)
 - *RIA Novosti – NewsFront* (FIN 13)
 - *Sputnik News – SouthFront* (DNK 1).

Potemkin village Type 3: Pro-Kremlin media – Domestic Proxy/pro-Kremlin media

Content from pro-Kremlin media is repetitively amplified by proxies or other pro-Kremlin sources, generally from one of the NB8 countries.

- Aim: amplification and content syndication.
- The most common Potemkin villages involving pro-Kremlin and proxy actors are engaged in the amplification on *TV Net* of content laundered by *Lenta* (LVA 25, ISL 29), or proxies sharing *Baltnews* and *News-Front* content.
- A prime example of a Potemkin village between two pro-Kremlin media platforms is the one established between *The Saker* (ISL) and *SouthFront* (Image 1).





- ALL NEWS
- SOUTH FRONT
2020-09-17
- WATCH
2020-09-18
- SANDBOX
2020-08-12
- SELECT CMMT
2020-06-17
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- NON MSM NEWS

SOUTH FRONT NEWS

This section contains reports produced by our South Front partners.



SEPTEMBER 17, 2020 22 COMMENTS

Russian Clouds Over Turkish-Backed Jihadi Paradise In Idlib

South Front On September 16, hundreds of protesters gathered near those Turkish military positions in Greater Idlib, which are surrounded by the Syrian Army, demanding the full withdrawal of the Turkish Army from Syria. The largest protests took place near Turkish observation posts at Murak and Alsurman. Both these posts were surrounded by Syrian troops during the military operation against Turkish-backed al-Qaeda terrorists in southern

Idlib. A majority of the



SEPTEMBER 17, 2020 11 COMMENTS

Averting Barbarossa II: The Liana Space Radioelectronic Surveillance System

Written and produced by SF Team: J.Hawk, Daniel Deiss, Edwin Watson At the end of the Cold War, the level of international tension has considerably declined for at least a decade, thanks to widespread multilateral disarmament bolstered by a variety of arms control regimes for conventional and nuclear armaments. That decade also saw the rapid deterioration of Russia's early warning and surveillance systems as satellites launched during the Soviet era

warning and surveillance systems as satellites launched during the Soviet era



SEPTEMBER 15, 2020 5 COMMENTS

Saudi Air Force Is Leveling Yemeni Capital To Ground In Response To Houthi Strikes On Riyadh

South Front The Saudi-led coalition has been bombing Yemen with a renewed energy following the recent missile and drone strikes on the Kingdom's capital by the Ansar Allah movement (also known as the Houthis). According to pro-Houthi sources, Saudi warplanes conducted over 60 airstrikes on different targets across the country during the past few days. They insist that the most of

the targets that were hit were objects of civilian

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Terminology

Image 1. Amplification of content from *South Front* on *The Saker's* website



Potemkin villages between domestic actors to disseminate the Kremlin's influence in the country are rarely seen. However, they were identified in countries like Finland, between the *Toimittajaliitto* (New Union of Journalists), and *MV-Lehti* (16).

Smurfing

The technique of smurfing is highly indicative of deliberate laundering by a single actor to further the Kremlin's strategic aims, while simultaneously supporting content syndication. This technique is commonly conducted on Russian and English-language self-publishing platforms like *Indybay*, *Indymedia*, *News2ru*, and *Newsland*. It can also occur in larger media outlets.

a. Smurfing conducted by pro-Kremlin journalists

Effect: to increase the credibility of the laundered piece by publishing it in different popular outlets.

Example: FIN CASE 13: The smurfing technique was utilised when *Sputnik* journalist Vladimir Bychkov authored two articles on the same process, one for *Radio Sputnik* on 17 July and the other one for *Sputnik Estonia* on 18 July.

b. Smurfing conducted by fake personas and burner accounts on English and Russian-language platforms

Effect: to allow the spread of the same information across several platforms, increasing its visibility, while at the same time protecting the identity of the author.

Examples were found in almost every NB8 country:

1. In Estonia (see EST Case 9), an author called 'Mikhail Afonin' (Михаил Афонин) published the same laundered piece on the Russian-language news aggregator *Newsland* and the self-publishing platform *Maxpark* at the exact same time.
2. Research on Sweden (SWE Case 21) revealed that user 'Arri Gibs' circulated an article on the platform *Indymedia.org.uk* declaring that Swedish authorities were unwilling to collaborate with the European fight against the Islamic State for political reasons. On the same day, another persona called 'Steven Laack' disseminated the same content on two other English language platforms: *News Participation* and *Scoop.it*. 'Steven Laack' was revealed by Graphika as a fake persona utilised in *Secondary Infektion*¹⁴.
3. In Lithuania (LTU Case 29), an IL author conducted an impersonation, pretending to be a representative of the Lithuanian community and disseminating laundering content





Andry Kut

Translation of news from authors: life.ru lenta.ru social networks E-mail: ilzolikl@gmail.com Blog: <http://handofmoscow.com>

Image 2. Description found in Hend of Moscow

while starting petitions on several platforms such as English language *Care 2 Petition* and Lithuanian language *Peticijos.com*. The petition was also allegedly posted on the website *Change.org*¹⁵, however it has been currently removed¹⁶.

4. In Sweden (SWE Case 22), signs of coordinated activity were identified when the same article was posted on the platform *Hend of Moscow* and *Newsde.eu* at the same time by the same user. These two identical platforms disseminate translations into English and German from Russian-language media. Although they do not link or reference to each other, they both share the same contact email address (yazolik@yandex.ru) and are described as a machine translation website (Image 2).

Information Laundering Themes and Topics

This research found two major themes utilised in IL processes in the NB8: NATO and alleged Western moral decay.

Regarding NATO, the topics more often exploited were NATO presence in the Baltics and Poland through the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) and NATO military exercises, principally *Trident Juncture* (TRJE18), which had vital importance for IL processes in Latvia, Finland, and Sweden. Human errors and misconduct by NATO soldiers were also targeted. In the non-NATO countries, i.e. Finland and Sweden, IL actors focused on boosting anti-NATO sentiments and depicting their governments as vulnerable and lacking the military infrastructure needed to face external security threats, making them paranoid about a possible Russian attack (FIN Case 13, SWE Case 17). Lithuania (Case 26) and Iceland (Case 23) were portrayed as NATO's vassals.

Within the theme of Western moral decay, IL actors created and amplified unconventional stories about the corruption of morality, for example, Denmark allegedly endorsing bestiality, Sweden allegedly turning to cannibalism in order to fight climate change, or Iceland allegedly paying foreigners to marry Icelandic women. Another frequent topic in this category was the alleged ineptitude and untrustworthiness of Western authorities and institutions, portraying them



as authoritarian figures that punish their own citizens when they hold views that are not entirely aligned with the perceived 'Western values' or 'mindset'. For example, this could be observed in Denmark (Case 1 and Case 3), Latvia (Case 9), Finland (Case 16), and Norway (Case 30).

Networks

Networks in the NB8 countries are diverse. However, there are some patterns and common characteristics in the IL networks across the whole region, such as constant activity by certain Russian language media or the transnational nature of IL networks marked by the activity of Baltic pro-Kremlin media across the whole NB8 region. This

study identified the main types of actors involved in IL in the region.

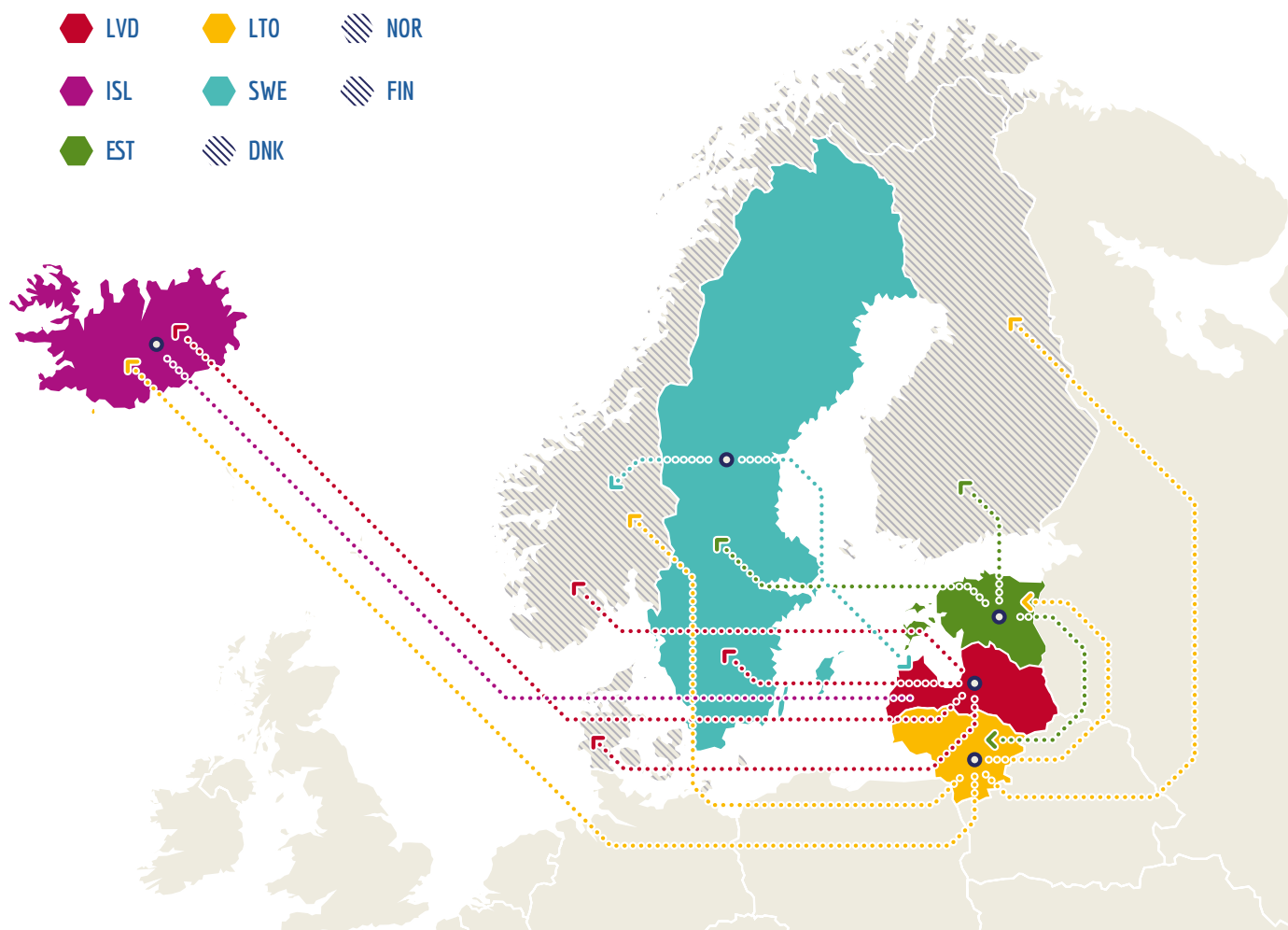
Information Laundering actors in the Nordic-Baltic region

- *Guardians of ethnic Russian rights in the Baltic countries*

Narrative: NATO is an occupying force and ethnic Russians' rights are being violated in the region

The political party Latvian Russian Union (Русский союз Латвии) was identified as an actor that amplified and laundered content on its *Facebook* page on several occasions during IL processes targeting in the Baltic

Map 2. Domestic actors participating in Information Laundering in other Nordic-Baltic countries



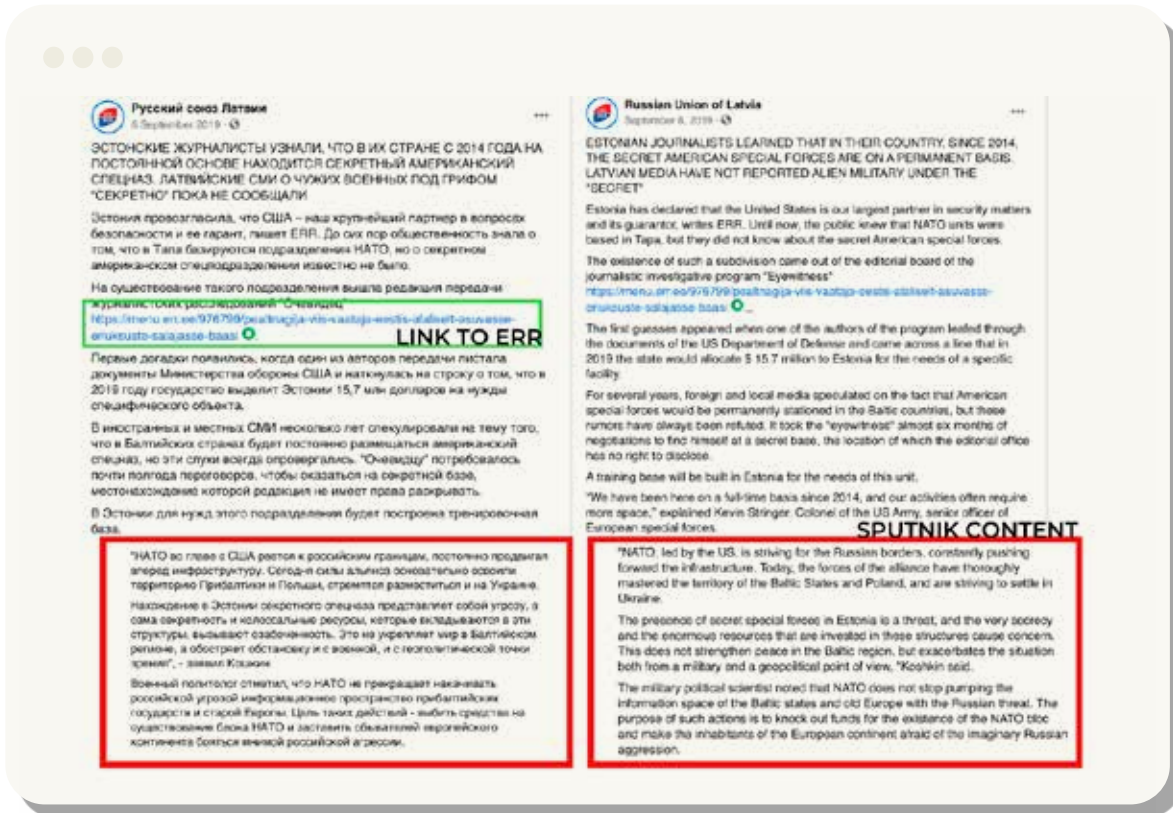


Image 4. Latvian Russian Union party's post on Facebook

States¹⁷ e.g. EST Case 10, LVA Case 8. The behaviour of this particular actor within IL networks reveals some of the advantages of IL. As we can see in EST Case 10, the political party shared an article from the *Estonian Public Broadcasting service (ERR)* on its Facebook page, reporting the news of a US military base recently discovered in the Baltic country. Even though the post linked to Estonian mainstream media, the content utilised was provided by *Sputnik*. The post utilised quotes from *Sputnik News* contributor Andrei Koshkin to claim that the mere presence of US Special Forces in the country was a threat. In this case, information laundering allowed the Latvian

Russian Union party to share information from a foreign version of *Sputnik* (in this case, Armenia) that was distorted through IL techniques while leading their readers to believe this was content from a source which not only proclaimed pro-Kremlin views but was trusted by a wider audience, attributing the information to mainstream Estonian media *ERR*. IL techniques facilitate a gradual distortion of the facts which align non-partisan news with distorted information published in a Kremlin-official medium by a pro-Kremlin actor.



- *Supporters in Finland and Norway of the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation*

Narrative: The rights of people living in the Crimean Peninsula (“legitimately Russians”) are being violated by Western powers and EU sanctions

In Finland and Norway, active and open advocates for Crimean self-determination and independence frequently appeared to be pro-Kremlin actors and proxies. Specifically, Finnish journalist Janus Putkonen, founder of *MV-Lehti* and *DoniNews*, and Hendrik Weber, founder of the *Folkendiplomati Norge*, a Norwegian organisation which organises trips to the Crimean Peninsula.

- *The far-right in Denmark, Iceland and Sweden*

Narrative: Western moral values are being corrupted by the left.

Platforms in Denmark (*Den Korte Avis, Newspeek*), Sweden (*White TV*) and Iceland (*The Saker*) promoted pro-Kremlin stories within an IL process that criticised Western values, which are allegedly being corrupted by a left wing, declining society. These stories were widely disseminated and further laundered by far-right groups, mainly in English and with particular relevance of the American far right (SWE Case 20). These platforms were especially active when a story could be potentially linked to anti-immigration content or conspiracy theories, such as

the Western powers allegedly promoting cannibalism.

- *Russian-domain networks*

In most of the cases, the networks use Russian as their main language and English as a secondary one. Russian-domain media played a key role in most of the cases identified and they were linked by the publication of identical articles within a very short timeframe and with very minor modifications. *RosBusinessConsulting (RBC)* and *Vzglyad* conducted several placements in different NB8 countries.

- *RBC* is the news web-portal of *RBC Group*, a large Russian media group headquartered in Moscow. In 2016, the leadership of *RBC* allegedly changed after an inquiry from the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation.
- *Vzglyad* is a Russian-language online newspaper owned by a supporter of President Putin - Konstantin Rykov, who has connections¹⁸ to former V.Putin’s aide Vladislav Surkov¹⁹, Kremlin’s propagandist who organised the campaign ‘Glory to Russia!’ (Слава России!) and Deputy of the State Duma of the Russian Federation.
- *TV Zvezda*: owned by Russian oligarch Konstantin Kosachev²⁰, who is the current chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Federation Council of Russia²¹.



Other relevant Russian-language, Russian-domain, pro-Kremlin outlets include *Tsargrad TV* (owned by Kremlin-affiliate Konstantin Malofeev²²), and Kremlin-founded institution *Ruskiy Mir* (Russian World). *Zavtra* (Tomorrow) is a far-right medium whose editor-in-chief, Russian nationalist Alexander Prokhanov, is also a member of the secretariat of the Writers Union of the Russian Federation and former co-chairman of the National Salvation Front. During the 2014 conflict in Ukraine, Prokhanov praised Alexander Borodai, prime minister of the self-proclaimed pro-Russian Donetsk People's Republic, as a 'true White Russian nationalist'.

■ Proxy platforms

→ NB8 proxies

TVNet is a Latvian mainstream medium with over 10 million monthly views²³, owned by the Estonian *Postimees Grupp*. Although it is not committed to disseminating content aligned with Kremlin-official or pro-Kremlin actors, it has been seen in many cases to participate in IL and SM.

Mixnews not only amplified and shared pro-Kremlin content, but also conducted placement by picking social media posts and transforming them into news.

Press.lv appeared as a proxy in all NB8 countries: According to an investigation conducted by *Re:Baltica* in 2017, *Press*.

lv's domain (formerly *ves.lv*) is registered to the son of a member of the Latvian political party *Saskaņa* (Harmony), which represents the ethnic Russian minority in Latvia.²⁴ *Saskaņa* terminated a cooperation agreement with V.Putin's *Yedinaya Rossiya* (United Russia) party after joining the Party of European Socialists (PES) in 2015. Allegedly, this decision was taken for pragmatic reasons, since relations between PES and other parties are 'centralised'.²⁵ The agreement with *Yedinaya Rossiya* was one of the main reasons why other political parties refused to collaborate with *Saskaņa* in the Latvian Parliament.²⁶

SvenskPress and *Stena* were both identified in the Graphika report as media outlets that took part in the *Secondary Infektion*²⁷.


















→ Russian language blogs and self-publishing platforms:

Users commonly translate, spread, and launder content in self-publishing platforms such as *Mirtensen*, *Livejournal* and *Smi2*. Some of these users were identified as fake personas, while others are active users with different social media profiles connected to their blogs, where they also amplify content, e.g. **Sensei Yoda Blog**. This practice is directly linked to smurfing. *News2* has been identified as a site where user profiles are created merely to launder and disseminate content through deceitful translations. No further activity is then registered by these users (LTU Case 24).

















Summary of cases



















Table 2. Summary of cases

Case	Summary	Techniques (in order of appearance)	Overview of IL networks	Theme/s
 Denmark				
1. Danish bill proposes a twelve-year prison sentence for expressing pro-Russian opinion.	An op-ed is laundered through Kremlin official and pro-Kremlin media which condemns the Russophobic and restrictive Western media environment.	 Misleading headline;  misappropriation;  woozle effect;  disinformation;  Potemkin village.	Total media involved: 21 19% Kremlin- official and 71% pro-Kremlin media. No domestic media involved. Main language: Russian (81%).	Russophobia and Western moral decay.
2. Animal brothel opens in Copenhagen.	A satirical article is distorted and disseminated as news through international intermediaries to demonstrate the moral decay of European values.	 Misappropriation;  deceitful translation;  woozle effect;  misleading headline;  disinformation.	Total media involved: 6 50% pro-Kremlin media. No domestic media involved. Main language: Russian (81%).	Western moral decay.
3. Facebook suspends the Danish periodical 24NYT for its anti-immigration views.	A Danish news story is laundered through Kremlin-official and far-right media outlets to convince international audiences about the censorship of anti-Western ideas in Western countries.	 Disinformation;  misappropriation;  misleading headline.	Total media involved: 6 Placement conducted by domestic proxy. Main language: English.	Migration and Anti-EU sentiment.
4. Global Compact for Migration Conspiracy.	An Austrian news article is picked up by <i>Sputnik News</i> and other domestic media to create false alarm about the possibility of an invasion of migrants.	 Disinformation;  misleading headline;  misappropriation.	Total media involved: 6 84% domestic outlets, 16% Kremlin-official media. Main language: Danish.	Migration.






















Case	Summary	Techniques (in order of appearance)	Overview of IL networks	Theme/s
 Latvia				
5. NATO sends an aircraft carrier to the Russian coast.	The participation of the <i>USS Harry S Truman</i> in the <i>Trident Juncture</i> military exercise was used to depict growing tensions between NATO and Russia to Russian-speaking Latvian audiences through domestic proxies and other intermediaries.	 Woozle effect;  misappropriation;  Potemkin village;  misleading headline.	Total media involved: 6 67% Russian- and 33% English-language media. No Latvian language media identified.	Anti-NATO/ anti-EU, focusing on NATO military exercises.
6. NATO soldiers swap the Ādaži barracks for luxury hotels in Riga.	A <i>Facebook</i> post reproduced a story related by a taxi driver about NATO soldiers stationed in Latvia. This was laundered mainly through the Russian-language Latvian media.	 Misappropriation;  misleading headline.	Total media involved: 6 100% Russian-language media (mainly domestic).	Anti-NATO.
7. NATO StratCom COE meeting minutes leaked.	In 2015, minutes from a coordination meeting at the StratCom COE were distorted and leaked to allegedly Romanian blog. This started a complex international IL campaign, mainly in Russian and English.	 Misappropriation;  deceitful translation;  disinformation;  misleading headline.	Total media involved: 21 80% pro-Kremlin media. Main language: Russian and some English.	Anti-NATO/ anti-EU, and Ukraine.
8. Latvian children to be fined for speaking Russian during school breaks.	A radio interview with pro-Kremlin politician Miroslav Mitrofanov was spread through Russian and Latvian websites to denounce Latvia's alleged repression of ethnic-Russian minorities.	 Misappropriation;  misleading headline;  disinformation.	Total media involved: 12 60% pro-Kremlin media. 1/3 domestic outlets. Language: Russian.	Russophobia and oppression of ethnic Russian groups in the NB8.



















Case	Summary	Techniques (in order of appearance)	Overview of IL networks	Theme/s
 Estonia				
9. Estonian citizen confronts a NATO soldier: 'I am Putin's agent!'	A confrontation between an Estonian national and a British soldier in a NATO mission enabled the spreading of anti-NATO content across domestic and foreign Russian-language media.	 Misappropriation;  misleading headline;  disinformation;  smurfing.	Total media involved: 19 16% domestic media. Main language: Russian (100%). 42% pro-Kremlin media and 47% proxies.	Anti-NATO/ anti-EU.
10. A US Special Forces military base is discovered in Estonia.	Estonian investigative journalists discovered a secret US special forces military base. This was opportunistically exploited to disseminate distorted information, reinforce Russian victimization, and develop various conspiracy theories.	 Misappropriation;  misleading headline;  woozle effect;  disinformation.	Total media involved: 90 Only 7% domestic media. 60% pro-Kremlin media, 14% proxies, 12% Kremlin-official media. Main language: Russian. Also identified: English and Estonian.	Anti-NATO/ anti-EU, NATO troops on the NB8 soil.
11. Spanish Eurofighter accidentally fires a missile over Estonia.	During military exercise, Spanish Eurofighter unintentionally fired a missile over Estonia. This was reported by international and domestic media. Russian-language pro-Kremlin media and public figures initiated an IL campaign that questioned NATO's role in Estonia.	 Woozle effect;  misleading headline;  disinformation;  misappropriation.	Total media involved: 50 36% pro-Kremlin media, 32% proxy, 26% Kremlin-official media. Main language: Russian. Secondary language: Latvian. 10% domestic media.	Anti-NATO/ anti-EU, NATO troops on NB8 soil.
12. Estonia plans to buy missiles that can reach St. Petersburg to deter Russia	An op-ed from an Estonian journalist in <i>Eesti Päevaleht</i> proposing arming Estonia with missiles that could get to St. Petersburg for deterrence purposes is laundered by Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media and portrayed as an imprudent idea from a Russophobic, paranoid Estonia.	 Misappropriation;  deceitful translation;  misleading headline;  disinformation;  woozle effect.	Total media involved: 41 56% pro-Kremlin media, 24% proxy, 20% Kremlin-official media. Main language: Russian, Estonian. 17% domestic media outlets.	Russophobia.









Case	Summary	Techniques (in order of appearance)	Overview of IL networks	Theme/s
 Finland				
13. Finland builds a tunnel system beneath Helsinki to prepare for a possible Russian attack.	Russian-language media leveraged an already inaccurate story published in <i>The Wall Street Journal</i> about a tunnel network beneath Helsinki to protect Finns from the Russian threat. This was used to denounce and ridicule Russophobic Western paranoia.	 Deceitful translation;  disinformation;  misleading headline;  misappropriation,  woozle effect,  Potemkin village.	Total media involved: 69 58% pro-Kremlin media, 20% Kremlin-official media. No domestic media involved. Main language: Russian (90%).	Russophobia.
14. Finland is opposed to EU sanctions against Russia.	Finnish President Sauli Niinistö's speech to the <i>YES Forum</i> in Ukraine was used by Russian-language media to discredit the effectiveness of the EU sanctions against Russia.	 Woozle effect;  misappropriation;  misleading headline;  disinformation.	Total media involved: 24 75% pro-Kremlin media. No domestic media was involved. Language: Russian.	Anti-NATO/ anti-EU, and undermining EU sanctions.
15. <i>Trident Juncture</i> 2018 military exercise: close ties between NATO, Finland and Sweden.	Russian-language media used comments from the Spokesperson of the Russian MFA Maria Zakharova to legitimise and denounce NATO's and the US' attempt to bring Finland and Sweden closer to the Alliance.	 Woozle effect;  misleading headline;  misappropriation.	Total media involved: 10 50% pro-Kremlin media, 30% Kremlin-official media. No domestic media were involved. Main language: Russian.	Anti-NATO/ anti-EU, undermining NATO military exercises.
16. New Union of Journalists established in Finland.	A Union of Journalists for alternative media was registered in Finland, with a URL imitating the well-established Union of Journalists' URL in order to deceive audiences. The story and reactions were laundered and disseminated by domestic pro-Kremlin media and proxies.	 Potemkin village;  woozle effect;  misappropriation;  disinformation;  misleading headline.	Total media involved: 4 Purely domestic story disseminated in Finnish language by domestic pro-Kremlin media and proxies.	Anti-EU.



Case	Summary	Techniques (in order of appearance)	Overview of IL networks	Theme/s
 Sweden				
17. Swedish navy shelters underground to hide from a possible Russian nuclear strike.	Swedish government's decision made in 2019 to restore Muskö naval base, was subject of a laundering process that emphasised Western Russophobic paranoia.	 Deceitful translation;  misleading headline;  disinformation;  misappropriation.	Total media involved: 38 53% pro-Kremlin media, 26% accidental actors. Main language: Russian; Secondary: English. No domestic media involved.	Russophobia.
18. Sweden turns to cannibalism to fight climate change.	Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media exploited Professor Magnus Söderlund's controversial statements about cannibalism to conduct a laundering process to portray Western moral decay.	 Misleading headline;  disinformation,  misappropriation.	Total media involved: 45 58% accidental actors, 24% proxy. Main language: English, Swedish. 13% domestic media involved.	Western moral decay.
19. Sweden is indirectly supporting ISIS.	After a report on how Swedish criminal Mohamed Belkaid joined ISIS, fake personas disseminated (mainly via proxies) the content of an automated video stating that Sweden could have prevented ISIS attacks in Brussels but it failed to do so for political reasons.	 Misappropriation,  disinformation,  smurfing,  deceitful translation.	Total media involved: 11 82% proxy actors. Main language: English. Swedish and Russian also registered. No Kremlin-official media was involved. One domestic media involved.	Western moral decay.
20. Russian showman Stanislav Baretzky says Greta Thunberg is his daughter.	In a video posted on social media, the Russian public figure claimed that Greta Thunberg was his daughter given over for adoption by her real mother. This started a laundering process in Russian media that emphasised how Baretzky wanted to bring Greta back to Russia to save her from Swedish bad people that were trying to gain profit out of her.	 Misappropriation,  smurfing,  automated translation,  misleading headline.	Total media involved: 26 69% Russian pro-Kremlin media. Main language: Russian. Also, German and English. No Kremlin-official media was involved. No domestic media were involved.	Western moral decay.



Case	Summary	Techniques (in order of appearance)	Overview of IL networks	Theme/s
 Lithuania				
21. Lithuania is a NATO vassal.	<i>United Russia</i> politician Konstantin Kosachev wrote a post on his <i>Facebook</i> page commenting on a meeting held between Lithuanian President and Belarusian Foreign Affairs minister. This was shared and laundered by Russian-language media.	 Misleading headline,  woozle effect,  misappropriation.	Total media involved: 6 (all in Russian language). Mainly, foreign and domestic pro-Kremlin media. The most relevant technique used was woozle effect.	Anti-NATO/anti-EU.
22. Klaipėda LNG FSRU project will fail.	Russian, Latvian, and Lithuanian media laundered news about a meeting between Estonia, Latvia, and Finland to discuss the harmonization of the regional gas market. The news was depicted as an act of strategic revenge from these three countries against Lithuania's LNG port facility.	 Misleading headline,  misappropriation,  disinformation.	Total media involved: 8 Languages: Russian and Lithuanian. 2 domestic media involved.	Split in the NB8 region and Western moral decay.
23. Resolution adopted by the European Parliament unfairly equates USSR with Nazi regime.	A resolution adopted by the European Parliament on the occasion of the 80th Anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact is portrayed by an IL campaign in the Russian, Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian media as an act motivated by Russophobia, which is institutionalized in the EU. The process is aimed at defending the USSR and condemning the Baltic States as Nazi collaborators or benefactors from the Soviet invasion during the war.	 Misappropriation,  misleading headline,  disinformation,  woozle effect.	Total media involved: 33 61% Pro-Kremlin media, 30% Kremlin-official media. Domestic media were involved. Languages: Russian and Lithuanian.	WWII revisionism and anti-EU Russophobia.
24. A German NATO tank desecrates Jewish cemetery in Kaunas.	A false story and a forged image of a German tank in a desecrated cemetery in the city of Kaunas is utilised to spread anti-NATO messages on Lithuanian, Russian, and English-language platforms.	 Disinformation,  smurfing,  misleading headline.	Total media involved: 5 Mainly proxies. Languages: Lithuanian, Russian, English. Two domestic media were involved.	Anti-NATO/anti-EU, and NATO troops on NB8 soil.



Case	Summary	Techniques (in order of appearance)	Overview of IL networks	Theme/s
 Iceland				
25. Iceland becomes a US vassal.	Through a Joint Declaration between Iceland and the USA to enhance defence cooperation between the two countries and restore Keflavik military base, English- and Russian-language media stated that Iceland has become (again) a USA/NATO vassal, posing a threat to Russia.	 Deceitful translation,  disinformation,  misappropriation,  woozle effect,  misleading headline.	Total media involved: 16 (81% Russian language). 63% pro-Kremlin media and 25% proxy. No domestic media was involved.	Anti-NATO/ anti-EU, and NATO troops on NB8 soil.
26. Iceland pays male immigrants to marry Icelandic women.	Since 2016, news about the Icelandic government paying 5,000 dollars to men who want to move to Iceland and marry an Icelandic woman in order to acquire Icelandic citizenship have been laundered in Russian-language media, with most of the domains registered in Russia and Ukraine.	 Disinformation,  misleading headline,  misappropriation.	Total media involved: 16 (90% Russian language). 50% accidental actors, 50% pro-Kremlin media. No domestic media was involved.	Migration and Western moral decay.
27. The US planned to secretly deploy nuclear weapons to Iceland during the Cold War.	Russian-language media conducted IL after the National Security Archive (NSA) released confidential documents revealing that during the Cold War the USA contemplated secretly deploying nuclear weapons to Iceland.	 Deceitful translation,  misappropriation,  Potemkin village.	Total media involved: 51 (90% Russian language). 56% pro-Kremlin media; 16% Kremlin-official media; 16% proxy. From the English-language media 60% were Kremlin-official media. No domestic media was involved but one domestic media was mentioned.	Anti-NATO/ anti-EU, and NATO troops on NB8 soil.



Case	Summary	Techniques (in order of appearance)	Overview of IL networks	Theme/s
 Norway				
29. Norway spreads false information about Russian troops on Norwegian soil.	A post published in the domestic outlet <i>AldriMer</i> about Russian special forces on Norwegian soil and the reaction of the Russian embassy in Norway started a laundering process where mainly Russian language outlets condemned a Russophobic operation.	 Misappropriation,  misleading headline,  disinformation,  smurfing,  Potemkin village.	Total media involved: 108 53% Pro-Kremlin media, 26% proxy actors, 14% Kremlin-official media. No domestic media involved. Main language: Russian.	Russophobia.
30. Norwegian government is violating rights of a Crimean.	The denial of a visa to a Crimean journalist Aleksandr Mashchenko to attend a conference in Norway started a laundering process in the Russian language to disseminate the idea that the EU countries have abandoned Crimean people.	 Disinformation,  misleading headline,  misappropriation,  smurfing.	Total media involved: 30 40% pro-Kremlin media, 27% Kremlin-official media, 27% proxy. 10% domestic actors. Main languages: Russian, Norwegian, and English.	Anti-NATO/ Anti-EU, and Ukraine.
31. A Norwegian official delegation recognises Crimea as Russian.	The Norwegian organisation <i>Folkediplomati Norge</i> organised a visit to Crimea, where Hendrick Weber supported the separatists and criticised EU sanctions. Some Russian media used this story to create a false impression that the Norwegian government was recognising Crimea as Russian.	 Misappropriation,  disinformation,  misleading headline.	Total media involved: 38 50% pro-Kremlin media, 26% proxy. Main languages: Russian and English.	Ukraine.
32. Norwegians take to the streets to protest against <i>Trident Juncture</i> .	Protests from groups opposed to <i>Trident Juncture</i> 2018 were covered in a way that portrays Norway as a battleground in a possible war and a territory occupied by NATO.	 Misappropriation,  deceitful translation,  misleading headline.	Total media involved: 6 50% proxy actors. One domestic outlet involved. Languages: Norwegian, Swedish, Russian, Georgian.	Anti-NATO/ Anti-EU, and undermining NATO military exercises.



CASE STUDIES

DENMARK






Denmark is considered to be at the forefront of the European response to Russian disinformation.²⁸ Strong protections for freedom of speech and a vibrant media environment make Denmark largely resilient to hostile foreign influence,²⁹ including Kremlin’s information influence.³⁰ Denmark’s domestic media environment, in which freedom of speech is highly valued, is still shaped by the controversy over the cartoon depicting Muhammad that was published by *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005.³¹

In preparation for the 2019 Danish General elections, a Government Task force was











established to reduce the risk of electoral interference. Fact-checking mechanisms and other preventive measures were initiated, but no major Russian influence was detected.

This raises the question of whether any Kremlin HIICs are being conducted in Denmark. The proposed framework aims to determine how IL takes place in the Danish domestic media environment, to understand how Kremlin influence spreads within the country, and to identify any actors that could participate in the process.

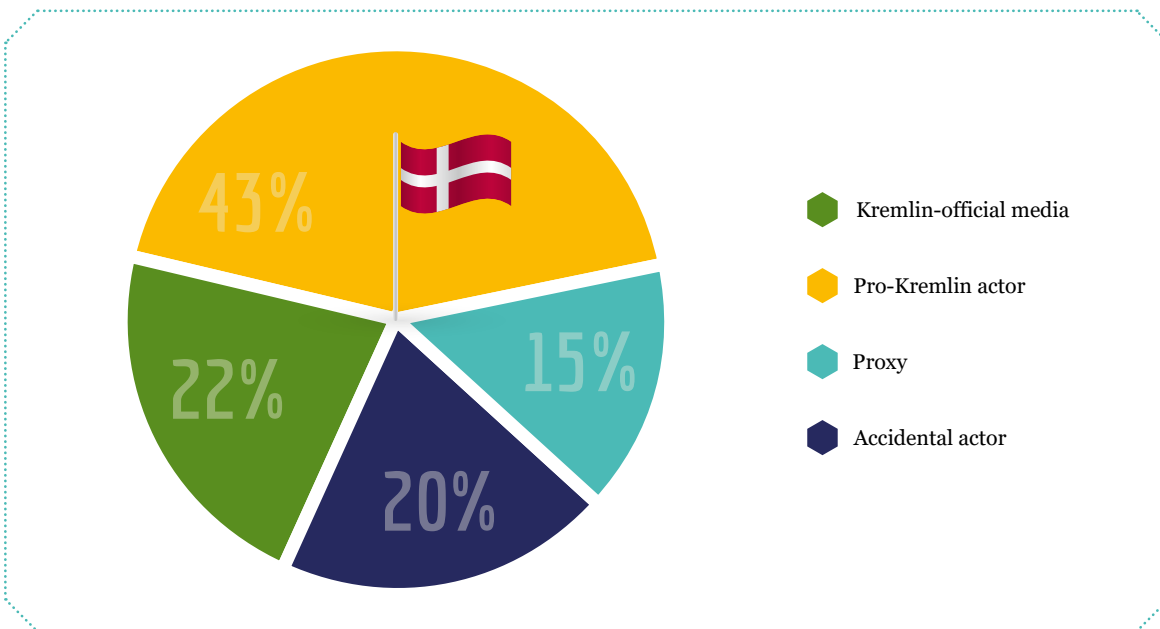
Table 3. Summary of IL Cases in Denmark

Case	Techniques (in order of appearance)	Overview of Information Laundering networks
Danish bill proposes a twelve-year prison sentence for expressing pro-Russian opinion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Misleading headline;  misappropriation;  woozle effect;  disinformation;  Potemkin village. 	<p>Total media involved: 21</p> <p>19% Kremlin-official and 71% pro-Kremlin media. No domestic media involved.</p> <p>Main language: Russian (81%).</p>



Case	Techniques (in order of appearance)	Overview of Information Laundering networks
Animal brothel opens in Copenhagen.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Misappropriation;  deceitful translation;  woozle effect;  misleading headline;  disinformation. 	<p>Total media involved: 6</p> <p>50% pro-Kremlin media. No domestic media involved.</p> <p>Main language: Russian (81%).</p>
Facebook suspends the Danish periodical 24NYT for its anti-immigration views.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Disinformation;  misappropriation;  misleading headline. 	<p>Total media involved: 6</p> <p>Placement conducted by domestic proxy. Main language: English.</p>
Global Compact for Migration Conspiracy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Disinformation;  misleading headline;  misappropriation. 	<p>Total media involved: 2</p> <p>50% Kremlin-official media, 50% domestic proxy.</p> <p>Main language: Russian and Danish.</p>

Summary of findings



Graphic 3. Actors involved in Information Laundering cases in Denmark



- Research suggests that Denmark is a low priority target for IL conducted by Kremlin and/or pro-Kremlin actors.
 - However, evidence indicates there are actors strategically utilising news about Denmark to disseminate anti-EU narratives and the idea that Western values are corrupted.
- IL processes are shorter and less complex than in other NB8 countries.
 - Key relevance of domestic proxy actors (*24NYT, Newspeek, Den Korte Avis*).
 - These domestic actors **do not** have connections with other NB8 media that also participate in laundering processes.
 - Presence of **accidental actors** that unwittingly enable the spread of Kremlin-influence in the country.
- The main language used is Russian, followed by Danish and English.
 - SM identified in several languages (e.g. Spanish, French).
- Themes: anti-Western and Western moral decay, anti-immigration, and Russophobia.
- Main actors participating in IL processes to spread the Kremlin's influence within Denmark: Russian language pro-Kremlin media.
- Kremlin-official media exploit news about Denmark to attack Western values and to disseminate misleading information among international audiences rather than domestic Danish-speaking audiences.

Information Laundering Case 1 – Danish bill proposes a 12-year prison sentence for expressing pro-Russian opinions

Exposed by: EU versus Disinfo (13 October 2018)
 Placement by misleading headline and misappropriation
 ■ *InoSMI* (Kremlin-official media)

Background. On 13 September 2018, the Danish government proposed a bill³² designed to reinforce existing legislation by stating that any collaboration with foreign intelligence services aimed at influencing public opinion was a crime³³. The proposal prompted a backlash from some Danish politicians and journalists. Flemming Rose, the former foreign affairs editor at *Jyllands-Posten*, authored an op-ed for *Berlingske* (one of the oldest and most reputable Danish newspapers) on 8 October,³⁴ criticising the bill for potentially obstructing the freedom of speech.

Laundering. Placement was executed on 12 October 2018 by *InoSMI* (ИноСМИ), the service used by Kremlin-official news agency *Rossiia Segodnya* to translate media content into Russian.³⁵





Image 5. South Front's Visual Support. Source: *South Front*

The resulting Russian-language news item included a translation of F.Rose's article, with the addition of a modified headline and an introductory paragraph condemning the bill as a repressive move by the Danish government directly attacking freedom of speech. Allegedly, any Danish citizen who expresses an opinion about Russia different from that of the government could face up to 12 years in prison (Techniques used: misleading headline and misappropriation). On 13 October, the Kremlin-official media outlet *RIA Novosti* (РИА Новости)³⁶ initiated the layering phase by publishing an article that referenced F.Rose's op-ed as a position shared by *Berlingske* in criticism of the Danish government's decision. This resulted in two parallel layering processes - one primarily addressing an international English-speaking readership and one addressing a Russian-speaking audience.

The Kremlin-official media outlet *Sputnik News*, and the pro-Kremlin English-language news outlet *South Front*, translated³⁷ and shared *RIA*'s article within just a few hours. The IL techniques identified include **woozle effect**, i.e. citing *Berlingske* as a source to build credibility; **misappropriation**, i.e. questionably relevant visual support added by *South Front* (see *Image 1*) and

its quote that '*Berlingske*, the country's oldest newspaper, had bashed the bill'; and **disinformation**, i.e. the promotion of the idea that the Danish bill was just another instance of anti-Russian activity within a wider Russophobic operation conducted by the Western powers.

RIA's article was also laundered on the same day by a number of pro-Kremlin media



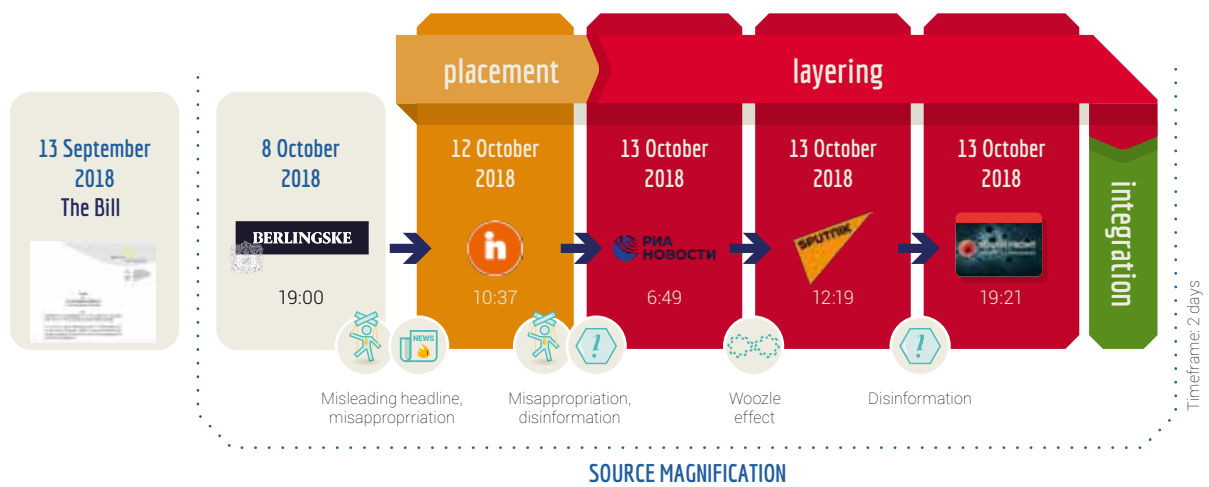


Figure 6. Information Laundering Case 1 in English

outlets. For instance, *News.ru* included a blunt piece of disinformation stating that Danish residents could be jailed if, during the upcoming electoral campaign, their statements disagreed with the official position of the authorities. The article also claimed that Danish government officials had proposed attacking Russia in cyberspace. *Komsomolskaya Pravda* framed the bill as part of a long-term Russophobic operation ('anti-Russian campaign') conducted by the West. Media outlets such as *Riafan*, *Independent-Press.ru*, and *Life.ru* incorporated several additional misappropriations presenting Danes as xenophobes, sometimes accompanied by misleading headlines and disinformation such as the assertion that a Muslim woman had been fined for wearing a niqab. SM was conducted by media outlets such as *Rambler*, *Vesti* and *Izvestia*.

Observations

- IL techniques were mainly conducted by Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media. The absence of Danish-language media indicates that Danish-speaking audiences were not targeted.
 - The media involved, the techniques applied, and the source magnification suggest that Danish news stories were used strategically to influence international and Russian-speaking audiences.
- Two parallel IL operations were detected: one primarily in English involving four media outlets, and another in Russian with 17 outlets participating in IL or SM operations.



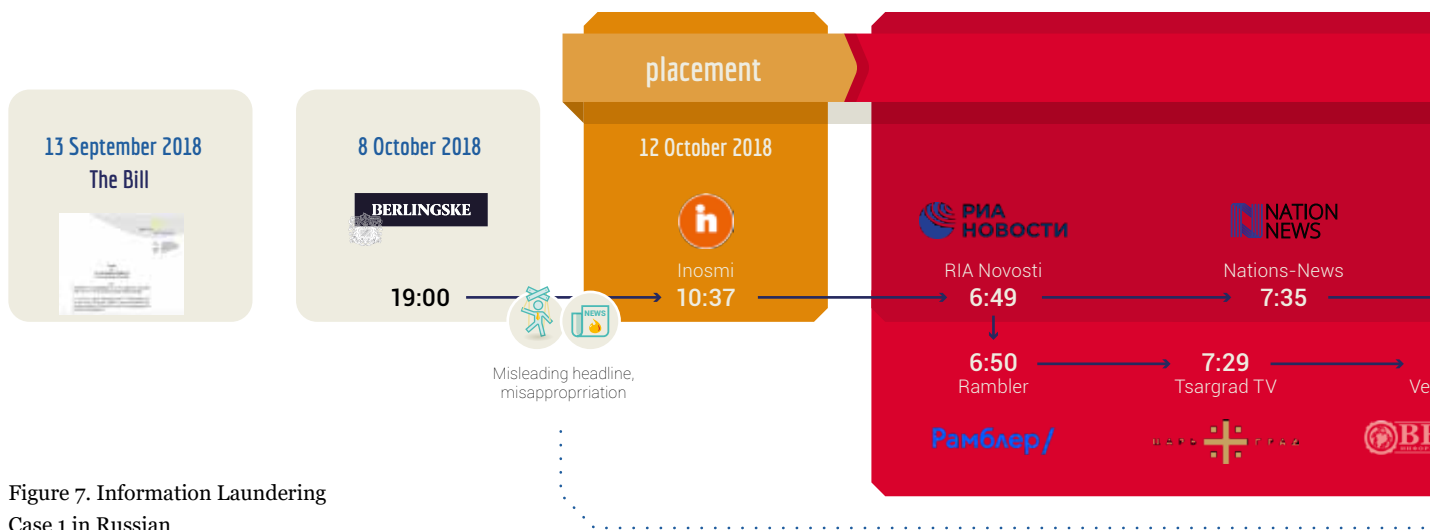


Figure 7. Information Laundering Case 1 in Russian

- The timeframe for both IL operations was practically the same (2 days).
- The level of distortion from the facts was high, transforming an opinion piece about a controversial bill into a news story about a Russophobic operation in which Danish authorities were proposing legislation against such basic human rights as freedom of speech.
- SM was also high. The manipulated information reached news outlets in several different languages, including Spanish³⁸ and Latvian.³⁹
- In Russian-language media, there were more instances of SM than of IL. SM was mostly done by pro-Kremlin media with domains registered in the Russian Federation, such as Konstantin Malofeev's *Tsargrad TV*.

Information Laundering Case 2 - Animal Brothel Opens in Copenhagen

Exposed by: EU versus Disinfo (9 September 2017)
 Placement by misappropriation
 ■ *Webcoolmag* (accidental actor)

Background. Denmark was one of the last European countries to ban animal sex tourism, with a law proposed by former Minister for Food, Agriculture, and Fisheries Dan Jørgensen in 2015.⁴⁰ In 2017, the satirical French website *Secretnews* published a false and humoristic article⁴¹





SOURCE MAGNIFICATION

about Danish authorities allegedly approving the opening of an animal brothel in Copenhagen, which would become the first animal brothel in Europe. In the article, the Danish minister's first name was modified from 'Dan' to 'Vlad' Jørgensen.

Laundering. In June 2017, the French-language website *Webcoolmag* (currently unavailable for unknown reasons) republished *Secretnews'* story describing it as real news (placement by means of misappropriation).

On 13 August 2017, the Russian website *Kolokol Rossii* (Колокол России)⁴² translated and provided a hyperlink to *Webcoolmag's* article, which was then shared and further distorted on Russian, Belarusian, and Georgian websites through a combination of deceitful translations mixed with disinformation (layering).

When published on the Georgian pro-Kremlin website *Geworld*, the translation appeared in a longer piece together with other examples of alleged Western immorality. The disinformation was embellished with details that had not appeared in the

Kolokol's article, for example - descriptions of the animals and clients that the brothel would have. The article was also published on the bilingual Russian-Georgian pro-Kremlin website *Gruzinform* (Грузинформ), which used a misleading headline to imply that animal prostitution is connected to European values. The Belarusian outlet *Zametki* (Заметки) published a translation of the *Gruzinform* story, which simply amplified its visibility.

The woozle effect was applied by means of repeated citations to statements attributed to minister 'Vlad' Jørgensen, with the



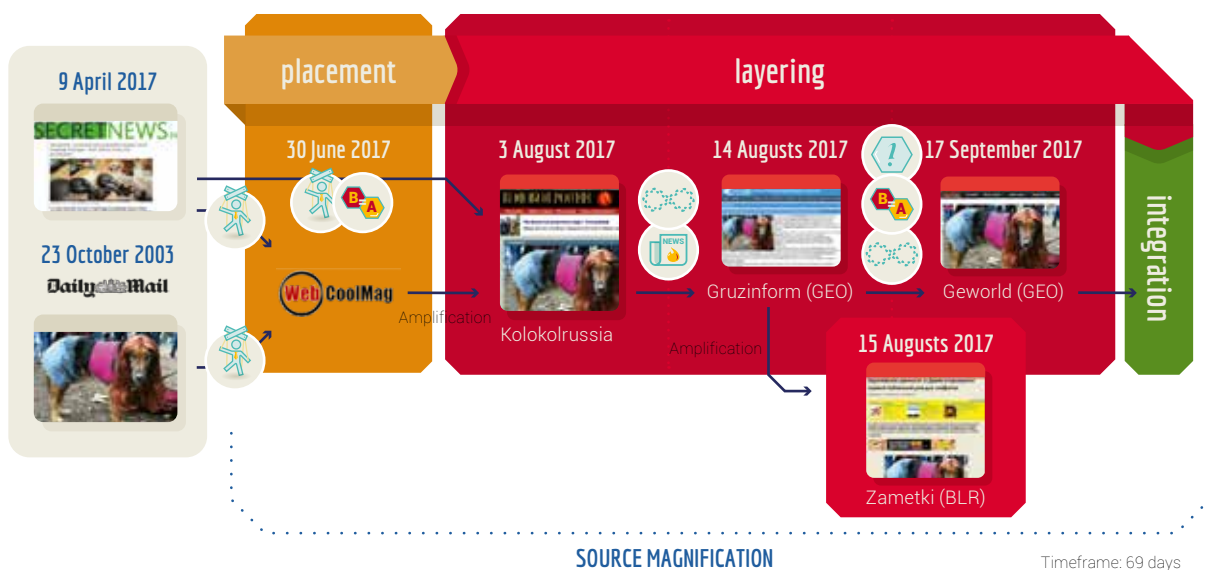


Figure 8. Information Laundering Case 2

intention of giving legitimacy to the story. Misappropriation was also committed by illustrating the article with a picture of a dog dressed up in women's clothes and a wig, with a caption identifying the animal as Mirza, 'one of the dogs prostituted in Copenhagen'.⁴³ The picture was actually taken during the 13th annual Dog Halloween Parade in New York in October 2003. The dog's real name, as revealed by a *Daily Mail* article from 2016,⁴⁴ is Rose.

Observations

- No Danish media participated in this IL case, one of the most famous cases of disinformation targeting Denmark.
- The outlets and techniques used indicate that international audiences were prioritised over Danish audiences.
- The level of distortion from the facts was low, as the original piece published by *Secretnews* was satirical.
- There was no SM in the European media. The article was disseminated mainly in Russian.⁴⁵
- In this case, the layering phase took one month and three days.
- The institutions that uncovered the false story did not mention *Webcoolmag*, even though a hyperlink to that version appeared in *Kolokol Rossii*.
- *Geworld* and *Gruzinform* have been identified by the Georgian fact-checking organisation Myth Detector as platforms that spread pro-Kremlin content.⁴⁶



Gruzinform's editor-in-chief, Arno Khidirbegishvili, is a regular contributor to the Russian version of *Sputnik*.⁴⁷

- *Kolokol's* former editor-in-chief, Vadim Rogozhin [Вадим Рогожин], is now

Secretary of the Russian Union of Journalists [Союз журналистов России] and was elected to the Saratov Regional Duma in 2017 as a member of the right-wing political party United Russia [Единая Россия].⁴⁸

Information Laundering Case 3 -

Facebook shuts down 24NYT's page for anti-immigration views

Exposed by: *Danish Radio (DR)* (10 April 2019)

Placement by disinformation

- 24NYT (domestic proxy)

Background. In April 2019, *Danish Radio* journalists contacted *Facebook* warning that 24NYT's page received 18K likes in a single day. Following an investigation, *Facebook* shut down the page alleging 'inauthentic behaviour', i.e. purchasing likes.⁴⁹

24NYT, which publishes anti-immigrant content,⁵⁰ was created in 2017 by journalist Jeppe Juhl. It has been called a 'junk news outlet'⁵¹ by the Danish newspaper *Politiken*.⁵²

Laundering. 24NYT published an article condemning *Facebook's* decision as an ideologically motivated act of censorship, but it avoided any mention of its thousands of artificially acquired likes as a possible cause for the closure. It also criticised *DR's* investigation as a 'violent attack' on democracy, and accused *Politiken*, *Berlingske*, and *DR* of colluding against 24NYT (placement by means of disinformation).

The layering phase began with an article published by *Sputnik News*. IL techniques applied include misappropriating a statement made by the US Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) accusing big tech companies of abusive behaviour and promoting left-wing values, and adding a misleading headline

that connected shutting down 24NYT's *Facebook* page to the Danish government's actions in the run-up to the 2019 general elections.

The spread continued mainly among American far-right and anti-immigration



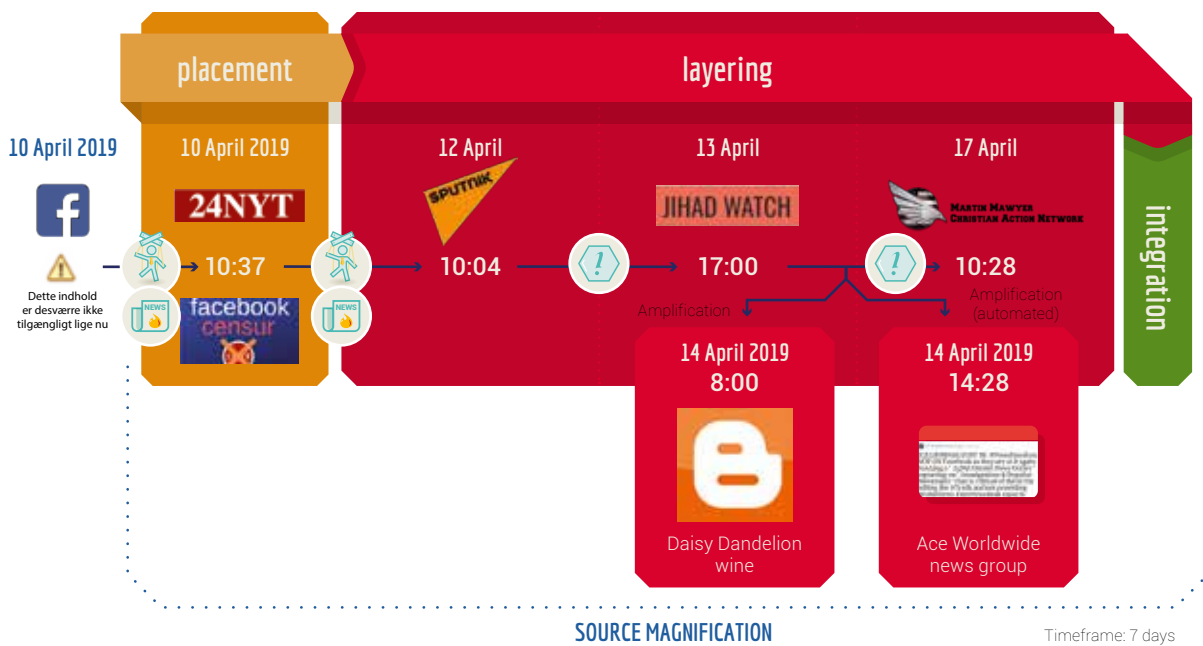


Figure 9. Information Laundering Case 3

websites. The anti-Muslim outlet *Jihad Watch* published a version of *Sputnik's* article one day later, which introduced further distortion by exaggerating the 'chaos' Muslims bring to Europe (disinformation) and stating that the EU's permissive migration policies have caused the rise of a new far-right. Finally, the platform *Christian Action Network* wrote about the 'insurgent-levels of immigration by Islamic agitants' in a piece under the headline 'Facebook Aids Dutch State Media, Bans Competitor 24NYT'. The confusion of 'Dutch' and 'Danish' illustrates the lack of fact-checking by some media outlets participating in IL processes. SM was carried out in parallel by automated news services such as *Ace Worldwide News Group*.

Observations

- The study suggests that 24NYT was the originator and enabler of an international IL process, allowing *Sputnik* to opportunistically disseminate distorted information to foreign audiences.
- The research identifies a number of journalists and media outlets as anti-immigration and far-right actors that are part of the IL network for this story.
- The layering process was completed in seven days.



Information Laundering Case 4 – Global Compact for Migration (GCM) Conspiracy

Exposed by: *Altinget* (14 January 2019)

Placement by disinformation

- *Krone Zeitung* (foreign accidental actor)

Background. The United Nations' GCM, aimed at addressing all dimensions of international migration,⁵³ was drafted on 13 July and signed on 19 December 2019. During the period of negotiations, the agreement was present on the international political agenda, receiving pushback from far-right and other anti-immigration activists.⁵⁴ Before the agreement was signed in Marrakech, almost 30 countries withdrew, including Austria.⁵⁵

Laundering. In November 2018, the Austrian online newspaper *Krone Zeitung* published an article stating that, according to an unnamed official source from the Ministry of the Interior, 20K armed migrants were trying to cross the Bosnian-Croatian border. This data was proven false by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), according to the Danish platform *Altinget*⁵⁶ (*Krone Zeitung* conducted placement by the means of disinformation). However, the article started a far-reaching process of international IL, primarily in the far-right media. The Kremlin-official outlet *Sputnik* linked the claims in its article directly to the GCM (misappropriation).

The information was also laundered and disseminated in the Danish media. The Danish anti-immigration outlet *Den Korte Avis* shared the article with a misleading headline that read '20 000 Armed Migrants are Ready to Storm the Border to Reach Denmark, Among Other Countries'. *Den Korte Avis'* content was amplified by the platform *Indsigt Udsyn*. *Kronen Zeitung's* article successfully reached the Danish mainstream via *Jyllands-Posten*, which distorted the news through the wozle effect, transforming the unnamed source used by *Kronen Zeitung* into a statement from 'the Austrian government'. *Jyllands-Posten* also included disinformation stating

that the group of 20K had already tried to cross the border with Croatia several times.⁵⁷ The layering continued from *Jyllands-Posten* to the far-right website *Document.dk*.

Observations

- *Kronen Zeitung's* misleading article initiated an IL process that was taken up by the Danish media.
- Laundering occurred rapidly, requiring only 4 days from placement to integration into the public debate.
- Although *Sputnik* was part of the



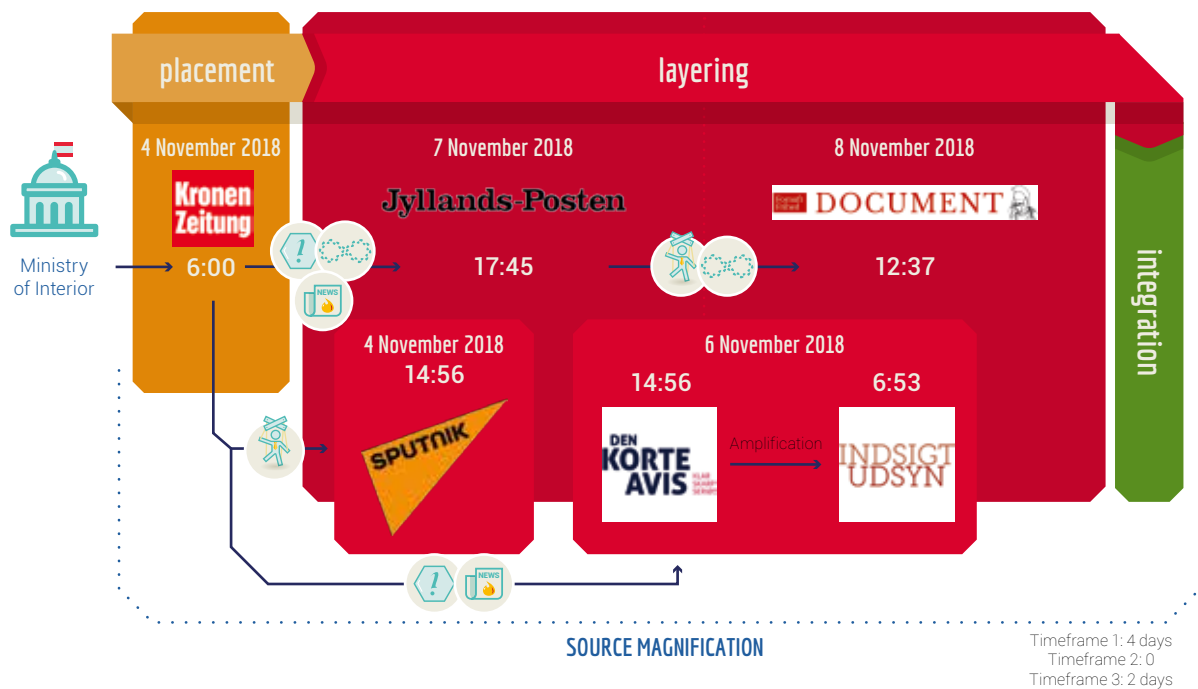


Figure 10. Information Laundering Case 4

international IL, there is no evidence that connects the Kremlin-official media to Danish outlets.

- The proposed framework makes it possible to distinguish IL processes with relevant Russian influence from those where Kremlin-official media play an accidental role.
- Separating IL processes leveraged in Kremlin's or pro-Kremlin influence activities (IL types A and B) from those that are part of the natural dynamics of the information environment (IL type C) allows communicators to prepare an appropriate response for each scenario.

Involvement of domestic media networks in Information Laundering in Denmark

The experimental framework exposed the actors participating in IL activities within Denmark or internationally by distorting news published in Danish newspapers.

No exclusively domestic IL cases were detected. Evidence suggests that the media involved in IL targeting Denmark are mostly foreign. Although there are no Danish versions of Kremlin-official media, outlets such as *Sputnik News*, *RIA Novosti*, or *RT* have been observed to exploit news about Denmark to attack Western and liberal values and to disseminate misleading



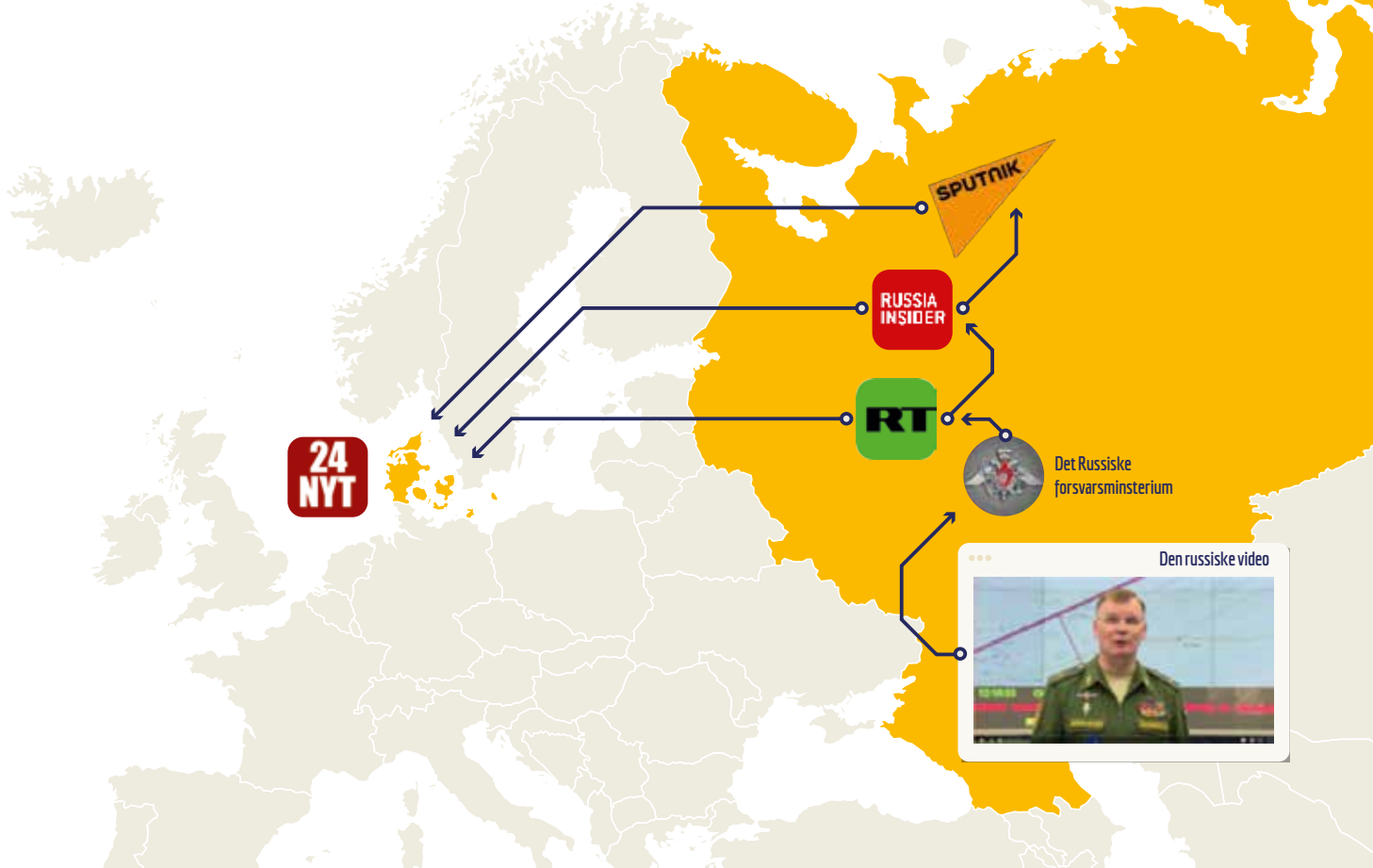


Image 6. Spread of Kremlin-official media content by 24NYT (2017)
 Source: EU versus Disinfo61

information among international audiences rather than domestic, Danish-speaking, audiences.

After a comprehensive investigation into the actors exposed by the framework, this paper considers that three domestic media outlets (*24NYT*, *NewSpeek*, and *Den Korte Avis*) acted as proxies. These three outlets have already been implicated in spreading false,⁵⁸ low quality news⁵⁹ by several reliable sources (*Berlingske* and *EU versus Disinfo*). In 2017, *EU versus Disinfo* and the investigative Danish platform *Zetland*⁶⁰ exposed *24NYT* for sharing Kremlin-official media content with misleading information about the chemical attack in Idlib of April 2017.

Further research demonstrates that these are not isolated events and the three media have shared *RT* content on repeated occasions, especially when they publish about migration.

In each case, the application of the framework demonstrates that IL conducted within or targeting Denmark takes place through international and domestic intermediaries that distort, spread, and legitimise false information; it also clarifies the role of Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media in IL. Taken together, these findings verify that Information Laundering campaigns are among the stratagems used by the Kremlin to conduct HIICs and influence public debate in Denmark.

” Latvia is considered a high priority target for Information Laundering conducted by the Kremlin and/or pro-Kremlin actors. Main actors participating in the Information Laundering processes to spread Kremlin’s influence within Latvia are Russian language pro-Kremlin media.

LATVIA

The country’s historical links to Russia, its geographical location, and its sizable ethnic Russian minority have made Latvia a priority target for Kremlin HIIcs. Current research shows that Latvia is the most vulnerable of the NB8 countries because of Russia’s so-called compatriot policy, which the Kremlin uses to justify its attempts to influence ‘ex-Soviet compatriots’ living in Latvia.⁶² This strategy is supported by a number of domestic media outlets that magnify pro-Kremlin news within the country.⁶³ Although Latvia has strong laws supporting freedom of the press,⁶⁴ the complexity of Latvia’s geopolitical situation has encouraged national authorities to limit the influence of Russian state-sponsored media and to strengthen the quality of news reporting.⁶⁵ Furthermore, Latvia hosts institutions committed to researching information activities and the media environment within the NB8, such as the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE) and the Baltic














Centre for Media Excellence (BCME). This expertise has been exported over the last few years, placing Latvia at the forefront of the European response to the Kremlin’s information influence campaigns.

To better comprehend IL conducted in Latvia, this study aims to determine the extent to which Kremlin or pro-Kremlin IL exploits two of the countries’ peculiarities that are most likely to be the focus of the Kremlin’s strategic efforts: NATO’s presence in the region, and the large ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking community in the country. For this reason, a careful evaluation is given to the choice of languages (primarily Latvian, Russian, or English) in the cases studied.

The framework was applied to cases of IL in Latvia identified by *DFRLab* and *Re:Baltica*, i.e. institutions researching disinformation in the region, and other key experts.

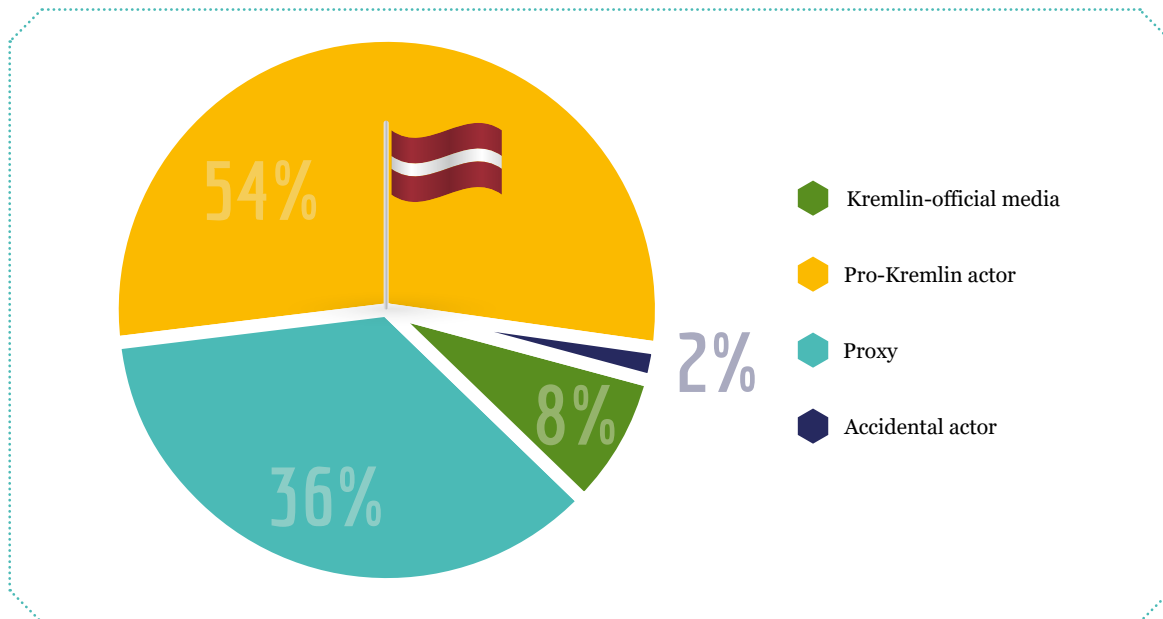


Table 4. Summary of Information Laundering Cases in Latvia

Case	Techniques applied (in order of appearance)	Information Laundering networks overview
NATO sends an aircraft carrier to the Russian coast.	 Woozle effect;  misappropriation;  Potemkin village;  misleading headline.	Total media involved: 6 67% Russian- and 33% English-language media. No Latvian language media identified.
NATO soldiers exchange the Ādaži barracks for luxury hotels in Riga.	 Misappropriation;  misleading headline.	Total media involved: 6 100% Russian-language media (mainly domestic).
NATO StratCom COE meeting minutes leaked.	 Misappropriation;  deceitful translation;  disinformation;  misleading headline.	Total media involved: 21 80% pro-Kremlin media. Main language: Russian and some English.
Latvian children to be fined for speaking Russian during school breaks.	 Misappropriation;  misleading headline;  disinformation.	Total media involved: 12 60% Pro-Kremlin media. 1/3 domestic outlets. Language: Russian



Summary of findings



Graphic 4. Actors involved in Information Laundering cases in Latvia

- Latvia is considered a high priority target for IL conducted by the Kremlin and/or pro-Kremlin actors.
 - Foreign and domestic Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media use IL techniques to spread influence in the Latvian media environment.
 - In most of the case studies, the networks involved are made up of three main types of media: a) international English language media, b) Latvia-based Russian language media, and c) Russia-based Russian language media.
- IL processes are complex.
 - Key relevance of domestic proxies (*Mixnews, Press.lv, TV Net*) and pro-Kremlin actors (*Baltijas Balss, Focus*).
 - Domestic actors have participated in IL processes conducted in other NB8 countries.
- Networks use Russian as the main language and English as the secondary one; Latvian is rarely employed.
 - SM especially relevant in Russian language.
- Themes: NATO troops in Latvia (eFP), NATO military exercises, Rights of Russian-ethnic groups.
- Main actors participating in IL processes to spread Kremlin's influence within Latvia: Russian-language pro-Kremlin media.



Information Laundering Case 5 - NATO sends aircraft carrier to the Russian coast

Exposed by: *DFRLab* (19 November 2018)

Placement by misappropriation

■ *Sputnik News* (Kremlin-official media)

Background. In order to support the *Trident Juncture 18* military exercise (TRJE18), the *USS Harry S. Truman* became the first US aircraft carrier to sail the Norwegian Sea since 1987. TRJE18 was hosted by Norway and Iceland between 25 October and 7 November 2018,⁶⁶ and was NATO's largest military exercise since the end of the Cold War.

Laundering. On 13 October 2018, *Sputnik News* initiated an IL campaign sharing an article from *Sky News*,⁶⁷ which reported that America's highest-ranking commander in Europe (EUCOM) and Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), General Curtis Scaparrotti, regarded the participation of the *USS Harry S. Truman* in TRJE18 as a demonstration of NATO's capability to counter the growing Russian threat. *Sputnik* depicted the presence of the aircraft in the Norwegian Sea as a sign of escalating tensions between Russia and NATO (placement by means of misappropriation). This standpoint was supported with a woozle effect applied to quotations from General Scaparrotti, e.g. 'We are ready and we are trained and we will protect the Atlantic'.⁶⁸ This was then amplified by *InfoWars*, which included a misleading headline stating that SACEUR was 'glad' the US carrier put Russia on notice, and by simple amplification in *News Front*, forming a Potemkin village to endorse *Sputnik*'s content.

The Pro-Kremlin website *Lenta.ru* (Лента.Ру) translated⁶⁹ the article into Russian, adding the title 'U.S. Will Deploy an Aircraft Carrier to a Russian Neighbour's Coast'. This was directly amplified by the Russian-language *TVNet*⁷⁰ and further laundered by the pro-Kremlin news website *Baltijas Balss (BB)*, formerly *Vesti.lv*. *BB* introduced disinformation by deleting the word 'neighbour' from *Lenta*'s headline. Now, it read 'US will deploy an aircraft carrier to the Russian coast', when in fact Russia has no coastline with the Norwegian Sea. The woozle effect quoting Scaparrotti

was maintained throughout the whole IL process, reinforced after the translation by removing the link to the original quotes (misappropriation).

Observations

- IL was conducted mainly by international English language and domestic Russian language media. The absence of Latvian language media suggests that Latvian-speaking audiences were not targeted by the campaign.



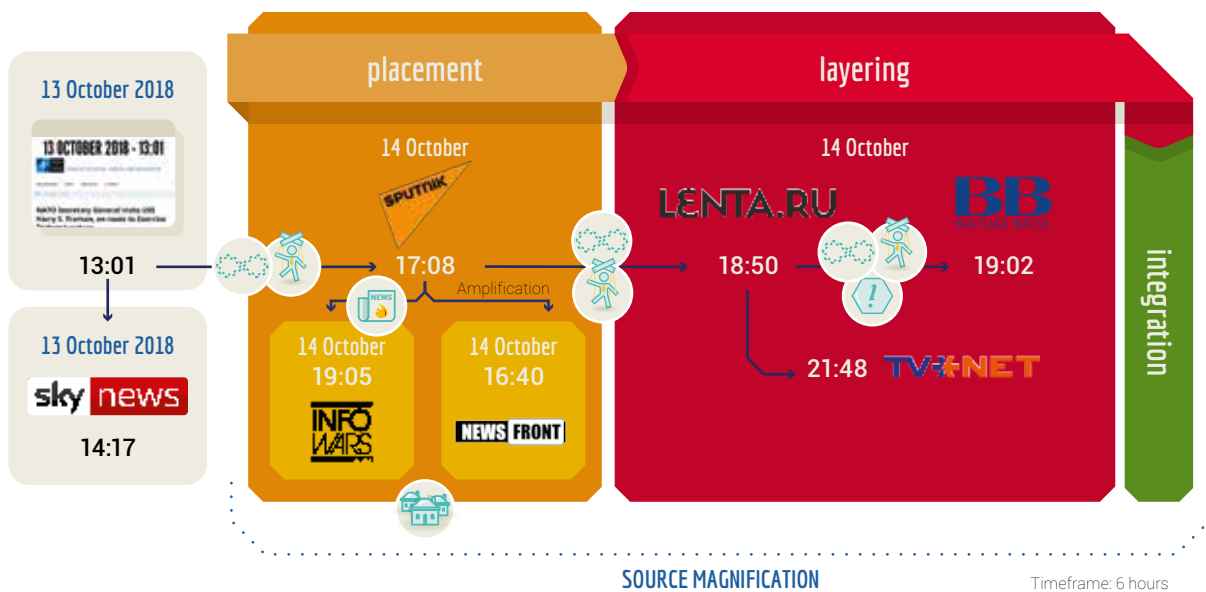


Figure 11. Information Laundering Case 5

- The IL techniques identified were mainly carried out by Russian state-owned (*Sputnik*) and pro-Kremlin media (*Lenta* and *Baltijas Balss*).
- The entire process took just six hours from placement in *Sputnik*.
- In contrast to other cases in which the use of IL techniques is more evident, the distortion of facts was primarily introduced by *BB*'s subtle removal of the word 'neighbour' from the story headline.
- The failure to maintain a hyperlink to Scaparrotti's original statements reinforced the woozle effect.

Information Laundering Case 6 – NATO soldiers in Latvia exchange Ādaži barracks for luxury hotels

Exposed by: *DFRLab* (20 October 2017)
Placement by misleading headline and misappropriation
■ *Mixnews* (domestic proxy)

Background. On 5 October 2017, a *Facebook* user named Kristine Liepina shared a conversation that she claimed to have had with a taxi driver in Riga about the NATO soldiers stationed in Ādaži military base⁷¹. Allegedly, the taxi driver remarked that instead of staying in barracks on the base, NATO soldiers stay in Riga’s luxury hotels, moving around the city by taxi and spending the taxpayers’ money.⁷²

Laundering. On 8 October 2017, the platform *Mixnews* translated Kristine Liepina’s post from Latvian into Russian and published it with a misleading headline which stated that NATO soldiers were living at the expense of Latvian citizens. The article also included posts from other *Facebook* users who ostensibly shared similar opinions or experiences, without providing any factual data (misappropriation). The reasons why the news platform decided to report on this particular *Facebook* post are not known. The article was amplified rapidly by other Russian-language Latvian websites such as *Gorod.lv*, *Eurasia Daily*, and *Press.lv*.

The pro-Kremlin website *Focus* reproduced the content from *Mixnews*, deleting the words ‘social networks’ from the headline, thereby removing the essential context indicating where the discussion was taking place (misleading headline and misappropriation). Finally, the pro-Kremlin media outlet *Komsomolskaya Pravda* shared the story, including two comments written by *Press.lv* readers. These comments expressed the idea that NATO soldiers were reckless and incapable of defending Latvia, and that the Latvian government is dysfunctional and wastes taxpayers’ money (misappropriation). Other IL techniques applied included a headline stating that

NATO soldiers in Latvia live like ‘sheikhs’ (misleading headline) and illustrated it with a photo of soldiers happily clinking bottles of beer. A search on Google Images confirmed that the picture was not of NATO soldiers in Latvia or elsewhere, but from an article written in 2013 on the American website *Rally Point* (Image 7) discussing whether 18-year-old soldiers should be allowed to drink alcohol.⁷³

Observations

- IL techniques were applied to legitimise a story based on hearsay that originated on social media, using





Image 7. Picture used by *Komsomolskaya Pravda*
Source: *Rally Point* (2013)

seemingly credible intermediaries (news platforms such as *Mixnews*).

- IL techniques and SM were conducted mainly in Latvia-based Russian language media.
- The story was disseminated over the course of a single day.
- Results show how social media platforms can play a significant role at any stage of IL.
- The reason *Mixnews* reported on this particular *Facebook* post is still unknown. Research confirms that *Mixnews* has not reported any other stories that include information from the same user.
- The application of a tool developed by the NATO StratCom COE to investigate

malicious activity on social media verifies that the *Facebook* account does not present signs of systematic malicious behaviour.

- Further research into the publicly available data of Liepiņa's *Facebook* account shows that the user is highly active in spreading conspiracy theories and distorted information about topics such as 5G and anti-vaccination campaigns.⁷⁴
- The failure of *Mixnews* to exercise due diligence in this case calls into question the platform's rigour and critical engagement with the news it reports. This suggests an arbitrary selection of content based on its alignment with the interests of its contributors, regardless of the credibility of their sources or the accuracy of the information.



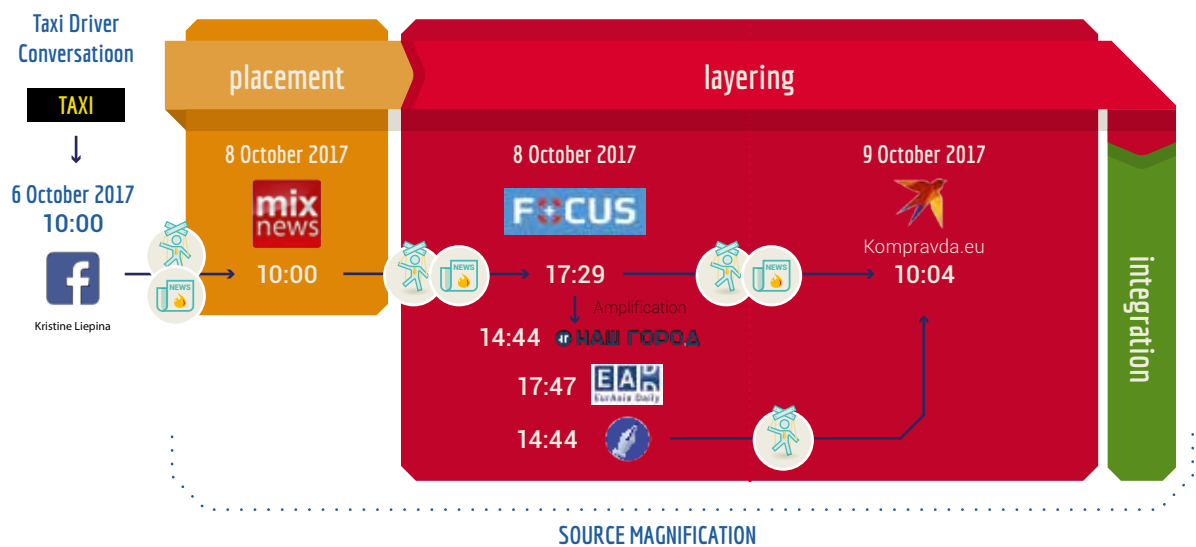


Figure 12. Information Laundering Case 6

Information Laundering Case 7 - Meeting Minutes Leaked

Exposed by: Steve Tatham (July 2015)
 Placement by disinformation and misappropriation
 ■ *Drakula's Blog* (foreign proxy)

Background. A document from a coordination meeting on 'StratCom Training for Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova' held by the NATO StratCom COE in February 2015 was either leaked to or hacked by the Romanian website *Drakula's blog*. When published, a bullet point was added at the end of the section 'Challenges for Ukraine' and one of the contact persons removed.

Laundering. The fake bullet point stated that one of the topics discussed as a challenge for Ukraine was the 'increased popularity of the Russian leadership among the population of the south/east of the country'.⁷⁵ However, such topic was never noted in the original minutes, and the research conducted at the time suggested that the people living in the east and south of Ukraine did not support either Kiev or Moscow (placement by means of disinformation and misappropriation). Layering and source magnification were high in English, and even higher in Russian.

The process took place primarily in Russian, with the participation of at least twenty news outlets.



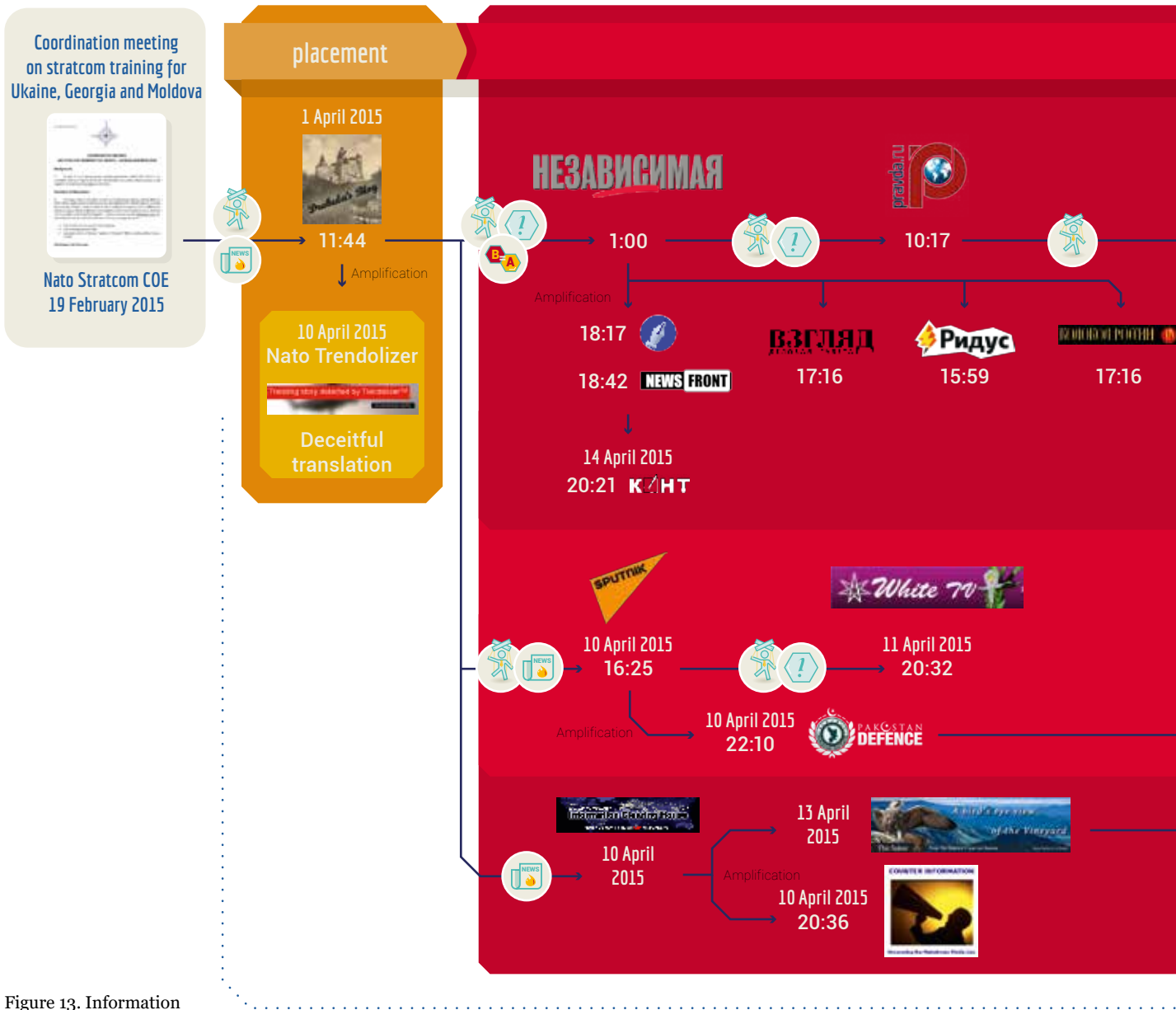


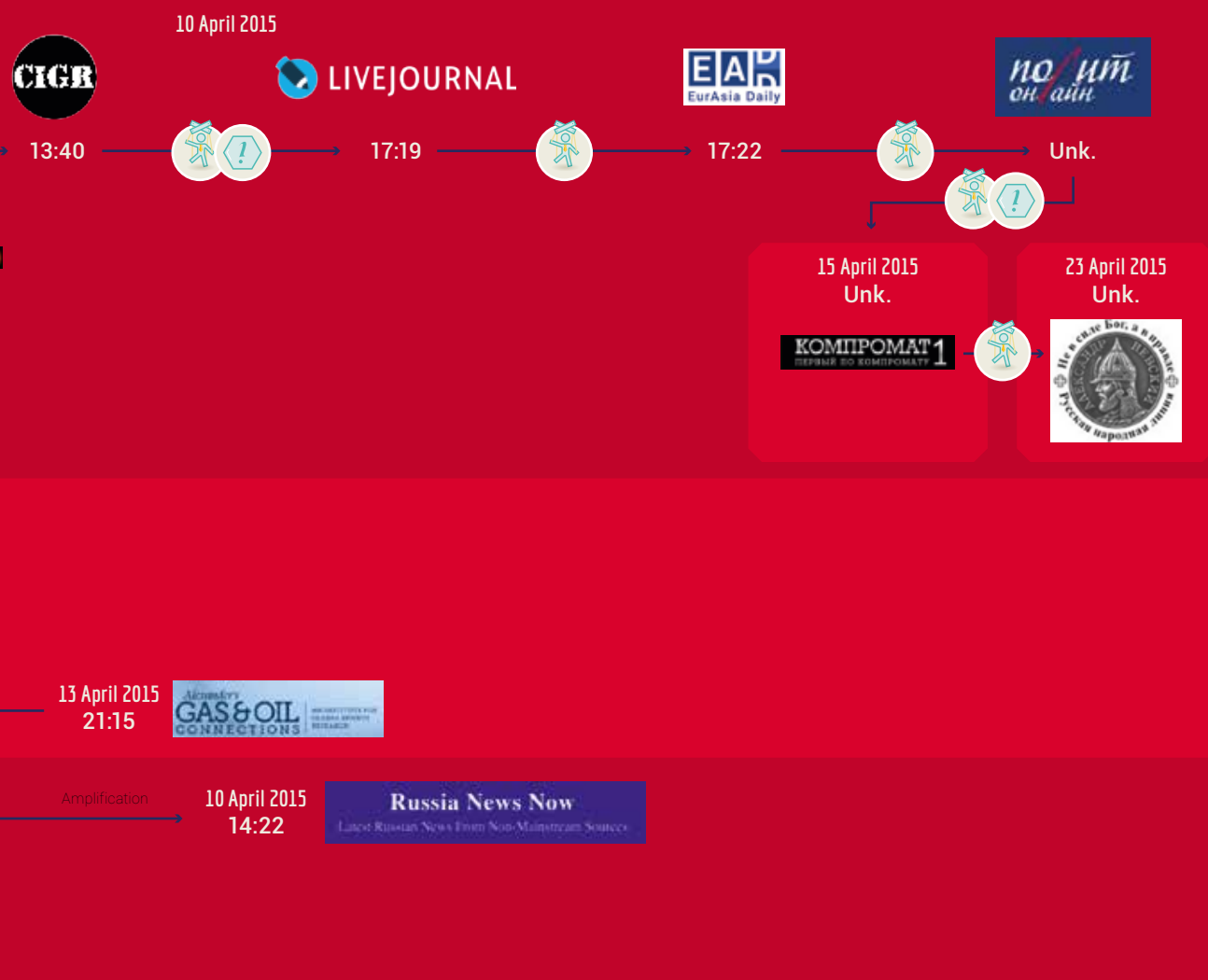
Figure 13. Information Laundering Case 7

In English, the information was directly amplified by international platforms such as *NATO Trendolizer*.⁷⁶ *Sputnik News*⁷⁷ also included the story in a longer piece about a 'NATO Propaganda war in Ukraine' (misappropriation and misleading headline), which was disseminated internationally by websites such as *Alexander's Gas & Oil*

Connections (USA)⁷⁸ and *Defence.pk* (PAK). The anti-immigration, anti-Western Swedish website *Whitetv.se* (SWE) used it to imply that a war in Eastern Ukraine was imminent, caused by the Russophobia of the 'Nazi' government in Kiev and its Western allies.⁷⁹ The article included three videos, one of them from *RT*.⁸⁰



layering



Timeframe: 10 days / Timeframe 2: 9 days / Timeframe 3: 22 days

SOURCE MAGNIFICATION

The last step of layering was conducted by the website *Information Clearing House*, which shared the *Drakula's Blog* article with a misleading headline that changed 'the West' to 'the Empire'.⁸¹ This was amplified in a short timeframe by the blog *Counter Information*,⁸² and the websites *The Saker* (USA)⁸³ and *The Russophile.org*.⁸⁴

Observations

- Results reveal high SM and four parallel IL layering processes: one through a complex network of Russian language intermediaries, two international IL processes (with *Sputnik News* as one of the intermediaries), and a direct



” Research confirms that in Latvia, Information Laundering strategically exploits the country’s own characteristics, such as the NATO presence and the large ethnic Russian population and other Russian speakers.

amplification through *NATO Trendolizer* and similar websites.

- More research on the nature of the amplification is needed to determine if there was orchestrated activity behind the SM. However, the number of media outlets involved within a short period does suggest a coordinated activity.
- The level of distortion was higher in Russian-language sites, where NATO StratCom COE was portrayed as conducting a propaganda war to help Ukraine overthrow V.Putin.
- The extra bullet point added by *Drakula’s Blog* was included by most of the news outlets as an alleged revelation of NATO’s main concern in the Ukrainian conflict, e.g. on the Russian website *Vzglyad* (Взгляд.ру). Headlines in Russian distorted the original information considerably, e.g. *Ridus* (Ридус): ‘NATO Trying to Get Rid of Putin’.
- The news was laundered not just by the media but also by Russian scholars that cited the *Drakula’s Blog* post in their research, e.g. by *Russian People’s Line* (Русская народная линия).
- Although the original event took place in Latvia, IL was conducted mainly through an international campaign. No Latvian language media were seen to participate at any stage of the process. The only Latvian news source that conducted SM was *Press.lv*. In this case the laundering took from 10 to 22 days, which is considered a rather lengthy time frame, meaning that the story was not treated as sensational, but rather the proxies republished it for reasons other than hitting the news cycle.



Information Laundering Case 8 – Children to be fined for speaking Russian during breaks between classes

Exposed by: Unpublished research (2018/2019)
Placement by misleading headline
■ *Mixnews* (domestic proxy)

Background. Miroslav Mitrofanov (Мирослав Митрофанов), co-chairman of the Latvian Russian Union party (in Latvian: Latvijas Krievu savienība; in Russian: Русский союз Латвии), declared in an interview for *Radio Baltkom* that forced linguistic conformity could result in a prohibition on socially conversing in Russian in schools.⁸⁵

Laundering. On 15 January 2018, *Mixnews* rebroadcasted the *Baltkom* interview adding the headline ‘Mitrofanov: Soon There Will be Fines for Speaking Russian During Breaks’. However, what Mitrofanov really said was, ‘Perhaps I am exaggerating, but it is likely that in the future students will be fined for using Russian during breaks’.⁸⁶ The *Mixnews* article was amplified by pro-Kremlin news sources *Baltijas Balss*, *Ukrainian Uaport*, *Baltijalv*, and by the independent Latvian news portal *Delfi*.

The following day, *RIA Novosti* shared the piece but removed Mitrofanov’s name from the title, simply calling their source ‘a politician’ (misleading headline and misappropriation by means of removing context). *RIA*’s coverage was disseminated by the Russian news agencies *Izvestia* (Известия) and *Rambler* (Рамблер), which made subtle changes to the title and manipulated the context. *RIA*’s article was also shared by *Sputnik*, which published a piece stating that ‘nationalists’ want to get rid of the Russian language in schools (disinformation and misappropriation). The *Russkiy Mir* foundation also shared *RIA*’s article, exaggerating it to imply that Latvian politicians supported a total ban on speaking Russian in schools. Finally, *Komsomolskaya*

Pravda (Комсомольская правда) added disinformation that speaking Russian would also be forbidden in workplaces.

Observations

- This IL campaign was dedicated to a topic important to the Russian minority in Latvia.
- The bulk of the IL process took place in Russian-language media in both - Russia and Latvia.
- SM was significant in the domestic media.
- The timeframe was five days.



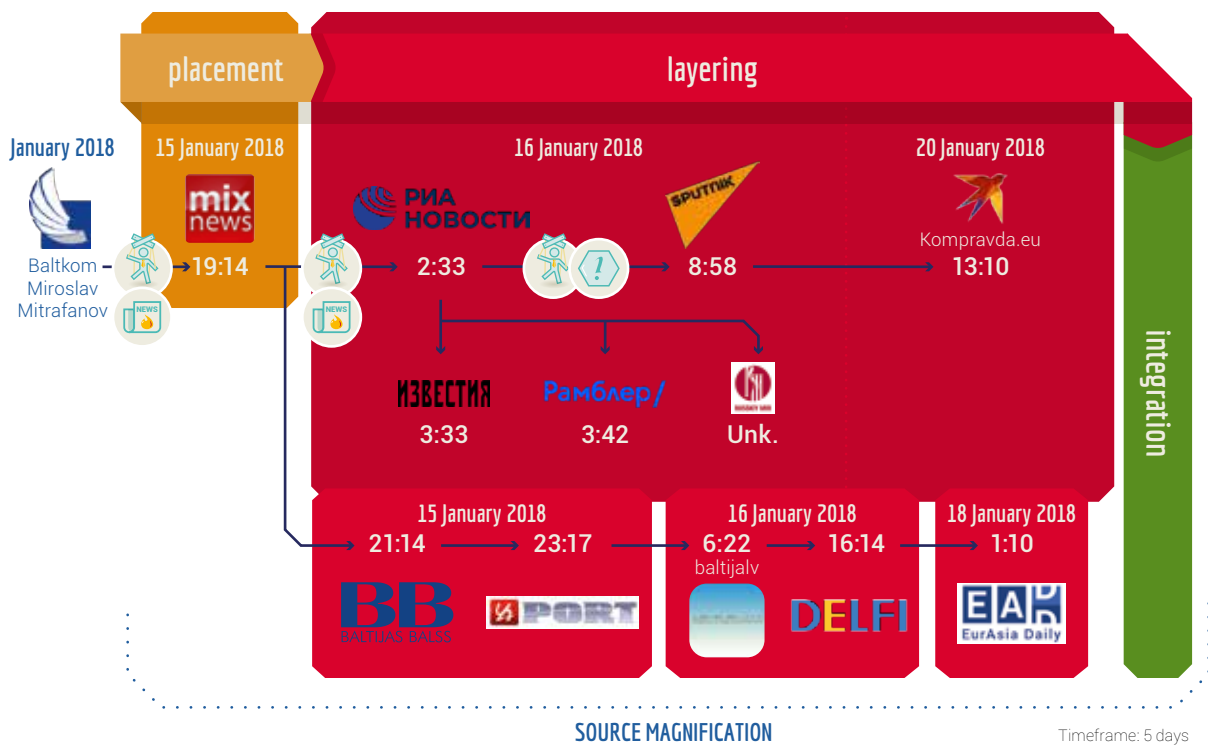


Figure 14. Information Laundering Case 8

Involvement of domestic media networks in Information Laundering in Latvia

The application of the framework uncovered actors who participated in the IL in Latvia, discussing Latvian topics or targeting domestic audiences. Our study shows that the networks involved in each case share the following qualities:

- a. The network is complex, with several media participating at different stages of the IL process.
- b. IL actors use Russian as the main language and English as the secondary one; Latvian is rarely employed.
- c. Various types of online media participate in the process of IL. Pro-Kremlin domestic media play a significant role, mainly during the layering phase.
- d. A greater number of news outlets simply picked up and republished disinformation (SM) instead of actively participating in the IL process.
- e. Despite their complexity, Latvian IL processes are easier to identify than the Danish ones.

Our study shows that two types of actors participate in Latvian networks of influence:



pro-Kremlin domestic media and domestic proxies. First, Latvia has openly pro-Kremlin media that spread Kremlin information influence in the region, both by creating original content and by reposting news articles from official Kremlin sources. The results of this study and the categories proposed for the analytical framework are consistent with research conducted by institutions such as *DFRLab*, *EU versus Disinfo*, and *Re:Baltica*. The most active pro-Kremlin media identified are: *Baltijas Balss* (formerly *Vesti.lv*), *Lenta.ru*, *News Front*, and *Rubaltic*.

Second, *Press.lv*, *TV Net*, and *Mixnews* were identified as domestic proxies that participated in SM (*Press.lv* and *TV Net*) and in the placement phase (*Mixnews*). Interestingly, of the five cases analysed, two of the placements were executed by *Mixnews*. *InfoWars* is an important pro-Kremlin actor oriented to international audiences (10.6 million visits monthly⁸⁷, according to *SimilarWeb*). According to an investigation conducted by *Re:Baltica* in 2017, *Press.lv*'s domain (formerly *ves.lv*) is registered to the son of a member of the Latvian political party *Saskaņa*.⁸⁸

For most of the case studies, the networks involved are made up of three main types of media: a) international English language media, b) Latvia-based Russian language media, and c) Russia-based Russian language media. This finding is supported by the accidental participation of media in different languages that used the laundered

information to fit their own purposes (e.g. *Swedish White TV* in Case 7).

Research confirms that in Latvia, IL strategically exploits the country's own characteristics, such as the NATO presence and the large ethnic Russian population and other Russian speakers. NATO's presence in the country was used to launder manipulated information to portray an image of an aggressive, incompetent, and corrupt West. The ethnic Russian minority in Latvia is considered to be the target of IL, since the campaigns were largely conducted in Russian-language media. English-language media were also used consistently; conversely, the Latvian language appeared rarely.

In most of the cases, SM was important as a supporting process parallel to the IL. The timeframe for laundering and amplification was short, generally under a week.



” The main themes of Information Laundering processes targetting Estonia are NATO and US troops in the Baltics, and ethnic Russian rights.

ESTONIA

The Estonian approach against foreign interference is shaped by the 2007 cyber-attacks that targeted the country. Allegedly, these attacks were politically motivated, following the Estonian government's decision to relocate a Soviet-era monument in Tallinn that commemorated World War II fallen Soviet soldiers. This incident is believed to be one of the first modern information warfare attacks in history and explains Estonian strict approach against HICs⁸⁹. Currently, the Baltic country stands at the forefront of the European response against information influence operations and cyber-attacks.

Similar to Latvia, the sizeable Russian-speaking population within Estonia may become a target for Kremlin's information influence activities. The government's naturalization policies in Estonia (as well as in Latvia)⁹⁰ have been a controversial factor, often exploited by pro-Kremlin actors as a tool to criticise the alleged violation of

the rights of ethnic Russian Estonians and reinforce the Kremlin's so-called 'compatriot policy' in the region. To better reach Russian speakers and contain the influence of Kremlin-official media in the country, in 2015 the Estonian Public Broadcasting service launched a Russian-language free-to-air channel (*ERR*). Nonetheless, other Russian language media are still more popular among the Russian-speaking population living in the country. On January 2020, Kremlin-official media *Sputnik Estonia* suspended activities as a consequence of the imposition of EU sanctions against the Russian Federation⁹¹.

Some private initiatives are also aimed at countering the Kremlin's hostile influence in the region. The online ⁹² software to search for the word 'Эстония' (Estonia) and its variants to track news mentioning the country in Russian language media.

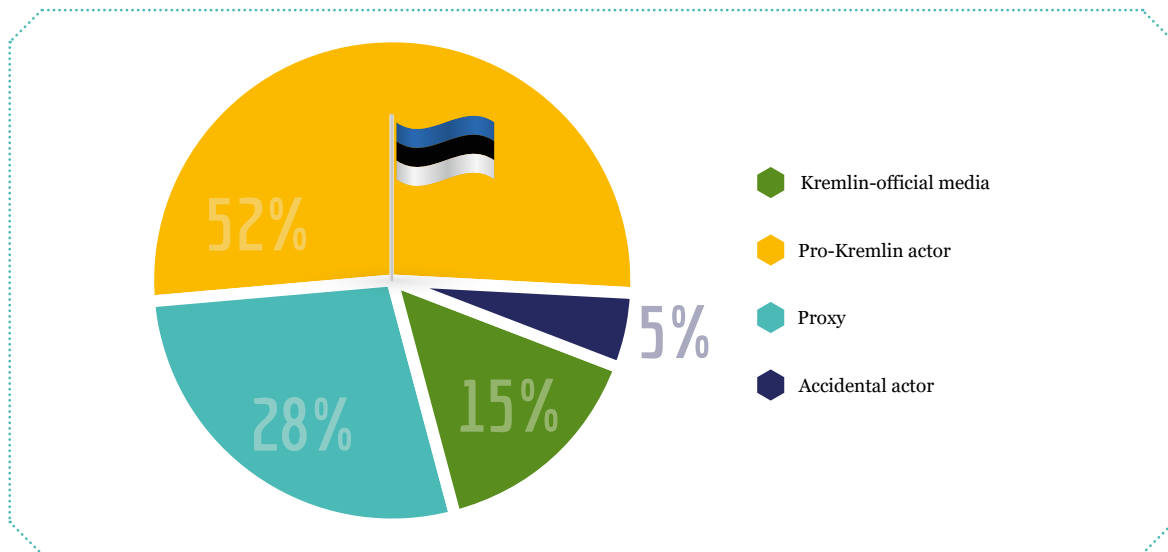


Table 5. Summary of IL cases in Estonia

Case	Techniques (in order of appearance)	Overview of Information Laundering networks
Estonian citizen yells at a NATO soldier: 'I am Putin's agent!'	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Misappropriation,  misleading headline,  disinformation,  smurfing. 	<p>Total media involved: 19</p> <p>16% domestic media. Main language: Russian (100%). 42% Pro-Kremlin media and 47% proxies.</p>
A US special forces military base is discovered in Estonia.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Misappropriation,  misleading headline,  woozle effect,  disinformation 	<p>Total media involved: 90</p> <p>Only 7% domestic media. 60% Pro-Kremlin media, 14% proxies, 12% Kremlin-official media. Main language: Russian. Also identified: English and Estonian.</p>
Spanish Eurofighter accidentally fires a missile over Estonia.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Woozle effect,  misleading headline,  disinformation,  misappropriation. 	<p>Total media involved: 50</p> <p>36% pro-Kremlin media, 32% proxy, 26% Kremlin-official media. Main language: Russian. Secondary language: Latvian. 10% domestic media.</p>
Estonia plans to buy rockets that can reach St. Petersburg to deter Russia.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Misappropriation,  deceitful translation,  misleading headline,  disinformation,  woozle effect 	<p>Total media involved: 41</p> <p>56% pro-Kremlin media, 24% proxy, 20% Kremlin-official media. Main language: Russian, Estonian. 17% domestic media outlets.</p>



Summary of findings



Graphic 5. Actors involved in Information Laundering cases in Estonia

- Estonia is considered an important target for IL conducted by Kremlin and pro-Kremlin actors.
 - IL processes share similarities with Latvian IL. However, a higher number of actors per case are involved in Estonian IL networks (50 actors on average).
 - Estonia is the country with highest participation of IL actors within a short timeframe.
- Although the majority are foreign Russian language media, domestic Kremlin-official (*Sputnik Estonia*), pro-Kremlin (*Baltnews Estonia*) and proxy actors (*Stena*) play a key role in reaching domestic audiences.
 - Almost all placements in Estonia were started by a domestic media outlet.
- Foreign and domestic Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media use IL techniques to spread influence in the Estonian media environment.
 - For example, Lithuanian and Latvian pro-Kremlin (*Baltnews*) and Kremlin-official (*Sputnik*) media.
 - For example, Latvian proxies disseminating Russian language pro-Kremlin influence (*Mixnews*, *Press.lv*, *TV Net*).
- Networks use Russian as the main language and English as the secondary one. Estonian is rarely employed.
 - SM is especially relevant in Russian language.
 - Mainstream, reputable Estonian media (e.g. *Õhtuleht*, *Postimees*) become accidental actors by spreading laundered content from Russian language foreign pro-Kremlin and proxy actors.
- The main themes of IL processes targetting Estonia are NATO and US troops in the Baltics, and ethnic Russian rights.
- The most common actors participating in IL processes to spread Kremlin's influence within Estonia are Russian language pro-Kremlin media.
 - Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media account 67% of the total, with only 4% in languages other than Russian.



Case 9 – Estonian citizen to NATO soldier: “I am Putin’s agent!”

- Exposed by: *Propastop* (2 January 2017) and *DFRLab* (20 October 2017)
 - Placement by misappropriation and misleading headline - *Baltnews Estonia* (domestic pro-Kremlin media)

Background. On 3 November 2016, a *Facebook* user called ‘Julia Adams’ commented on a post on the *Facebook* profile of the Estonian pro-Kremlin journalist and former editor-in-chief of *Baltnews Estonia*, Jeugeni Levik. ‘Julia’s’ post and her *Facebook* profile are now unavailable for unknown reasons. She relayed a dramatic story, a confrontation at the Estonian Mustamäe hospital with British soldiers stationed in Estonia as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP). The *Facebook* comment read⁹³:

‘Today I did blood tests to get new documents and filled out forms for doctors. There were many British soldiers who had come for medical check-ups and vaccinations in Mustamäe hospital. An old lady came in and was standing, but these douchebags had taken up all the chairs and were sitting like on a sofa.

*I asked them in English to offer the old lady a seat. They started to look at me and said to each other, what strange people Estonians are. That blew me up: Why u r here? In Estonia? Do u really think that people are happy that u fc **ass *** are occupying our country and coming here to destroy peace and normal life??? U r not welcome here!!! And never will be!*

I kicked a chair. They jumped and formed a crowd. I helped the old lady to sit down. When I went to the doctor’s room, I said: I will be right back! And yes! I am an agent of Putin and we are everywhere!!! Everywhere!!!

Laundering. Research conducted by the investigative platforms *Propastop*⁹⁴ and *DFRLab*⁹⁵ revealed that on 3 November, just a few hours after ‘Julia’s’ comment, *Baltnews Estonia* released a news article reproducing ‘Julia’s’ post and reporting on the events which allegedly occurred at the Mustamäe hospital. At that time Jeugeni Levik was the editor-in-chief of *Baltnews Estonia*. The news article depicted British soldiers as inconsiderate and ill-mannered toward Estonian citizens. While the headline quoted ‘Julia’s’ last remark to the soldier – ‘Yes, I am Putin’s agent and we are everywhere. Everywhere!’ – a closing paragraph was added about the alarming increase of NATO troops in the Baltic States (placement by means of misappropriation and misleading headline). The laundering process involved nineteen media outlets in total, all of them in Russian.

On 4 November, the Latvian version of Kremlin-official media outlet *Sputnik* initiated the layering phase by reproducing the

Baltnews piece and adding an extra paragraph about NATO’s deployment to the Baltics (misappropriation). This shifted the





Image 8. Visual support utilised by Press.lv
Source: Press.lv

focus of the news from an isolated incident in a hospital to a concerning increase of NATO troops, who are irresponsible and impolite toward locals. On the same day, the pro-Kremlin Russian-language news website *Slovo / Delo* claimed that the event was a clear example of Western Russophobia (misappropriation).

On 5 November, *Puls-Planeta* continued the layering phase by transforming the coverage of the event into a piece that depicted NATO as a weakening organization whose only hope of survival is unjustly labelling Russia as an existential threat (misappropriation). It also framed the

NATO's presence in the region as an excuse for the Western European powers to abuse the Baltics and 'fight [Russia] on foreign soil' (disinformation). Russian language pro-Kremlin media outlet *EurAsia Daily* intervened with a misleading headline which concluded that 'NATO wants to destroy the world'. Thereafter, proxy platform *Bazaistoria.ru* and the pro-Kremlin Russian language platform *Cont* amplified the story on 6 November (SM). Latvia-based Russian language platform *Press.lv* amplified through SM the exact content from *Baltnews Estonia* and supplemented the piece with an image taken from the Chinese series 'Soldiers sortie' (士兵突击),



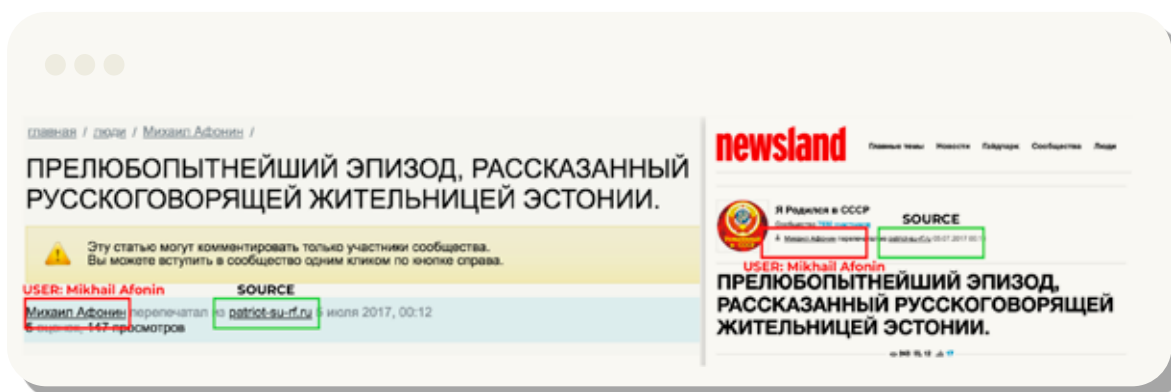


Image 9. Activity of 'Mikhail Afonin' in *Maxpark*⁹⁶ and *Newsland*⁹⁷

which has been frequently used as a meme and shared on *4Chan* (Image 7).

Estonia's largest daily newspaper, *Õhtuleht*, shared the article on the same day (SM). Russian language pro-Kremlin outlet *Komsamolysaya Pravda* further laundered the story on 11 November, including misappropriation by citing an unconnected incident in which British soldiers were aggressive toward Latvian citizens. Another Russian language source, *Hollivisor* (ХОЛЛИВИЗОР), who publishes on the platform *Mirtensen*, contributed to SM.

Finally, the domestic proxy website *Stena* re-shared the piece on 7 January 2017, mixing the hitherto laundered news with a news article by *Delfi Estonia* that described 'the largest deployment of American military staff since the Cold War' (misappropriation). In July 2017 (nine months after the first IL technique was applied) another *Mirtensen* user called 'Patriot of Russia and the Soviet Union' (Патриот России и Советского

Союза), with 80 335 followers, reposted the news article for unknown reasons. This was spread using smurfing technique in the Russian language news aggregator *Newsland* and the self-publishing platform *Maxpark* by an author called 'Mikhail Afonin' (Михаил Афонин). It is not known whether the *Zemliaky.info* post was also made by 'Mikhail'.

Observations

- IL techniques were applied to legitimise a story purely based on a comment made by an unknown user to a *Facebook* post authored by former editor-in-chief of pro-Kremlin outlet *Baltnews Estonia*, Jeugeni Levik.
- The IL process is aimed at discrediting NATO, depicting the organisation as an occupying force which, under the pretext of providing security to the Baltic States, has selfish interests and poses risks to global stability.





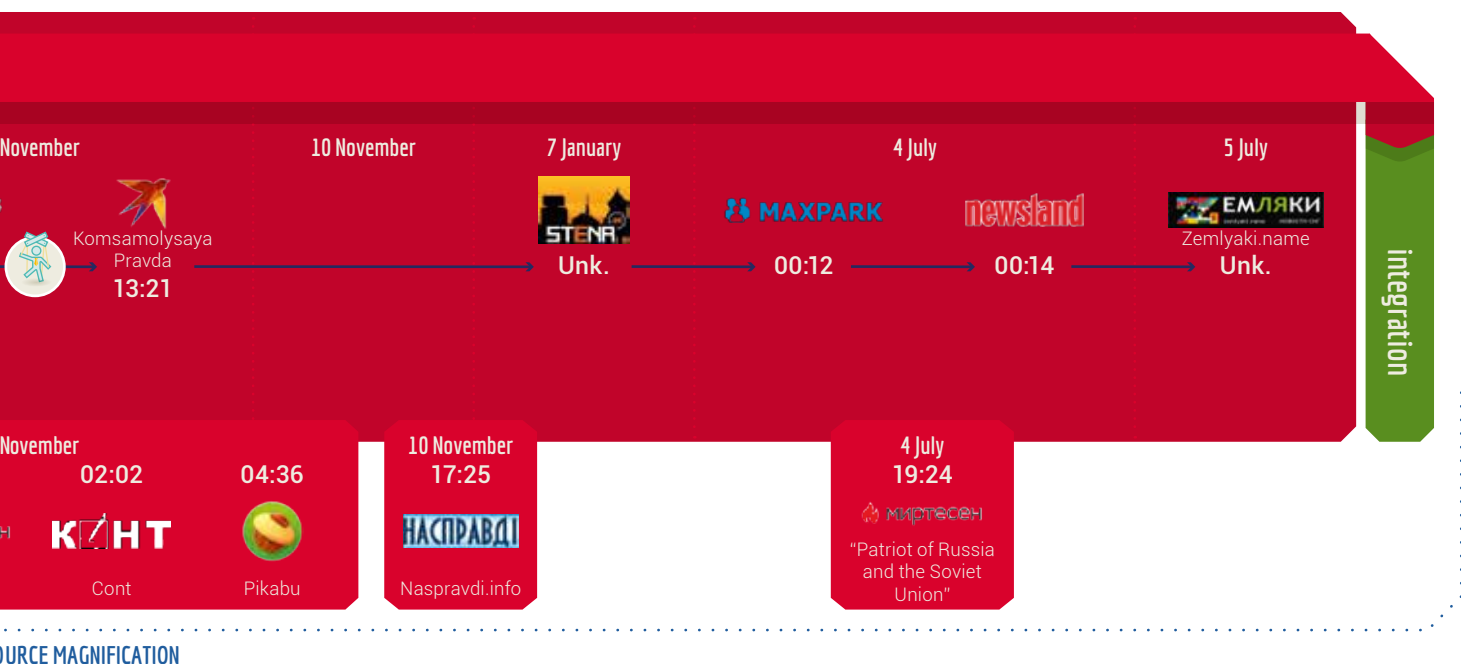
Figure 16. Information Laundering Case 9

- IL techniques and SM were conducted mainly in Russian-language media.
 - Most of the media involved have a predominant presence in Estonia and Latvia. IL was highly likely targeted at the ethnic Russian populations in these two countries.
 - Research identifies a relatively short SM.

- The story was disseminated over the course of nine months.
 - On 7 January 2017, around two months after the laundering process stopped, Russian-language Estonian medium *Stena* reposted the article. Graphika⁹⁸ and *Insikt Group*⁹⁹ have both identified *Stena* as an outlet involved in the *Secondary Infektion* operation.
 - On July 2017, *Livejournal* user 'Patriot of Russia and the Soviet Union' picked up the news event again and re-started the laundering process. User 'Mikhail Afonin' conducted smurfing by disseminating the same piece of information in two different Russian-language platforms, *Newsland* and *Maxpark*.

- When the platform *Propastop* revealed the case just two months later, the comment on the post and the *Facebook* profile of 'Julia Adams' had been already deleted.





SOURCE MAGNIFICATION

Case 10 - US Special Forces secret base discovered in Estonia

- Exposed by: *Propastop* (13 September 2019)
- Placement by misappropriation and disinformation - *Sputnik Estonia* (Kremlin-official media)

Background. *The Pealtnägija* (Eyewitness) is an Estonian investigative television programme that has been aired since 1999. It is retransmitted by the *Estonian Public Broadcasting service (ERR)* which broadcasts in the Estonian¹⁰⁰ and Russian languages¹⁰¹. At the beginning of September 2019, the program revealed the existence of a United States Special Forces base in the country, which generated diverse reactions from the audience which were widely spread by different media inside and outside the country.

Laundering. According to *Propastop*¹⁰², the show's content was quickly picked up and distorted by Russian language and pro-Kremlin media: in total, 90 media outlets were involved in the process from 4-13 September, with higher SM than IL (Figure 17).



SUMMARY OF THE LAUNDERING PROCESS



Figure 17. Summary of the laundering process – Case 10

- Baltnews Estonia: The Baltics are US outposts in the borders with Russia
- Estonia is a bully backed and protected by the US infrastructure in the country

9-12 SEP

- Russia could destroy the US military base, as well as gather the necessary intelligence to show the world about the preparation of a particular anti-Russian special operation

4

7-8 SEP

5

- Izvestia: NATO troops in the region are not welcomed by locals as they are seen as a threat and as a destabilising power

6

13 SEP

*Timeline shows the main outlets involved
Total outlets involved: 90
Timeframe: 70 days

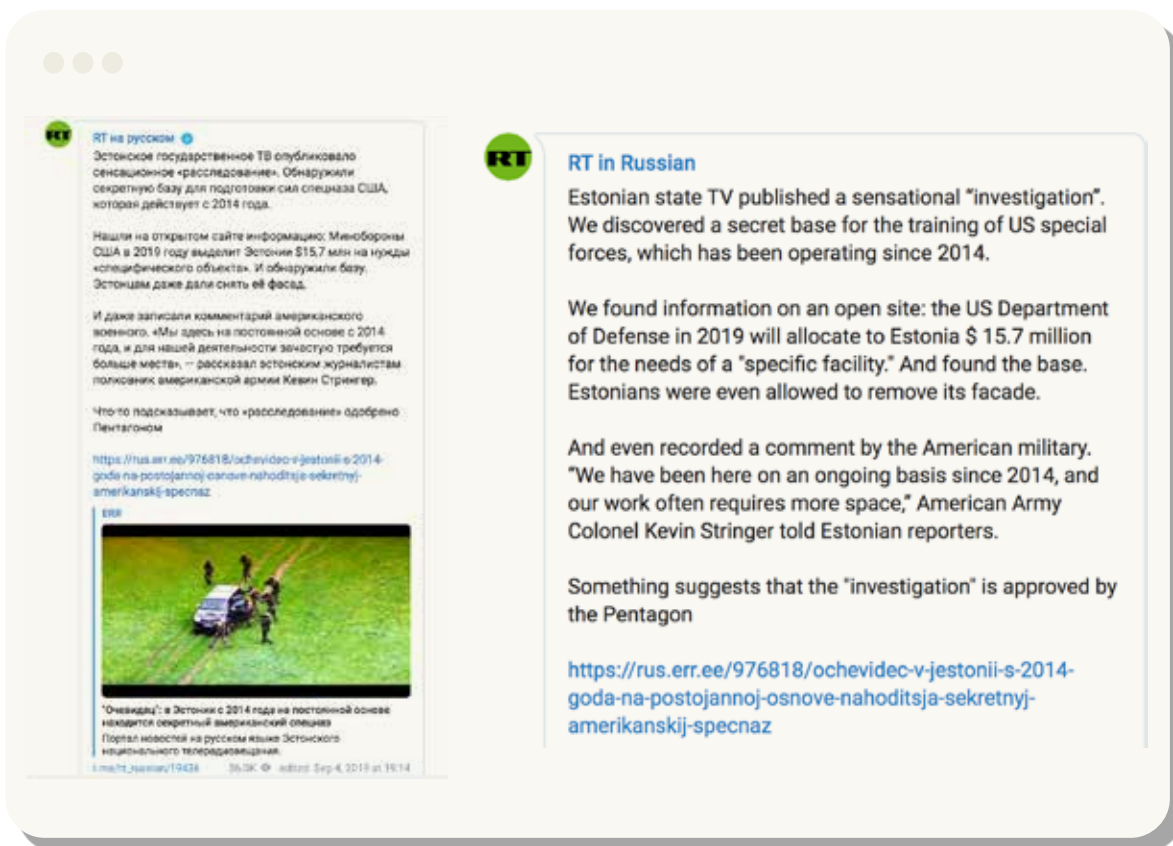


Image 10. RT's post on Telegram
 Source: https://t.me/rt_russian/19436¹⁰³

On 4 September, placement was conducted by *Sputnik Estonia*, through misappropriation mixed with a woozle effect. The author included statements from Russian authorities (i.e. Sergei Lavrov) to discredit the presence of US troops in the Baltic country. The article claimed that this was a Russophobic operation, deliberately undertaken by NATO and the US to pressurise Russia. The woozle effect was started by utilising some of the statements made by Colonel Kevin Stringer to *Pealtnägija's* journalists (e.g.:

'We have been here on an ongoing basis since 2014, and our work often requires more space') to boost the perception of a threatening expansion of the US activities in the Baltics. It was amplified by Russian outlets such as *Interfax*, *Ren TV*, *Rambler News Services*, *Gazeta.ru*, *NTV*, and *RosBusinessConsulting*, among others. On this day, 29 media outlets were involved in IL or SM practices, and Russian pro-Kremlin media applied some of the most significant techniques. State-owned newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*





Image 11. Doctored image used by *Morning-news.ru*
Source: *Morning-news.ru*

included a paragraph expressing Russia's concerns about growing NATO's activity close to the Russian border, including misleading data claiming an increase of 25 000 NATO troops stationed on the Western borders of the Russian Federation (from 15 000 to 40 000) over a two-year period, without naming the data source (misappropriation and disinformation). Mainly Russian language media were involved, consolidating the wozle effect started by *Sputnik*. Kremlin-official media *RIA Novosti* shared a comment made in the Russian version of *RT's Telegram* channel (Image 10) that considered there were inconsistencies in the investigation, which had been most likely approved by the Pentagon (misappropriation). This was

subsequently laundered by pro-Kremlin media outlets like *Baltnews Estonia*.

The laundering continued in the layering phase in order to depict NATO as an intruder and invader. Kremlin's *TV Zvezda* published an article with a misleading headline, stating that NATO was 'creeping up' on the Russian borders, while *Morning-news.ru* mixed Col Stringer's quotes with a photoshopped image that placed NATO troops on the Red Square in Moscow (Image 11). Russian language pro-Kremlin media outlet *Komsamolysaya Pravda* circulated another misleading article with the following declarations from an 'expert' named Mikhail Friben: 'Tactics of such units may be covert aggression – for example, the transfer of well-trained

Dmitri Linter (Дмитрий Сергеевич Линтер) is an Estonian-born advisor to the deputy director of the Russian Military Historical Society and a pro-Kremlin political activist, who has worked at the Coordination Centre 'Novorossiya' on human rights and humanitarian activities. He was one of leaders of the Nochnoy Dozor advocacy group that opposed the relocation of the Bronze Soldier in Tallinn in 2007.

troops to conflict zones in Ukraine, if you need to plant firewood in it to disrupt the ceasefire in the Donbass. Or participation in unauthorized mass rallies (already in Russia) in order to turn them into an armed clash at the right time'. It also specified that the cost of the base was 17.5 million dollars, and not 15.7 million as indicated by *Pealtnägija* (misappropriation, disinformation).

5 September was the day with the highest SM and IL activity, involving 52 media outlets, all of them in the Russian language. Many outlets were seen to further distort RT's story via misappropriation. SM was conducted by media outlets such as *EurAsia Daily*, while *RIA Novosti* emphasised the idea of the military base being another example of unjustified Western Russophobic paranoia (disinformation). Later in the day, *Sensei Yoda Blog* included an interview with Dmitri Linter, who affirmed that *Pealtnägija* was affiliated with the Estonian Security Police, an 'equivalent of the Estonian FSB'. He claimed that NATO was plotting together with the EU to hurt Russia and condemned the US base as a part of an illegal criminal conspiracy (disinformation).

Another outlet that conducted IL was *Slovo / Delo*, including several misappropriations

and disinformation. For example, at the end of a piece it was stated that Russia had become Turkey's guarantor, ousting the country from NATO. The Latvian version of *Sputnik* included disinformation by asserting that although NATO was aware of the absence of offensive plans in Moscow, it used the pretext to place more military equipment and troops near the Russian borders. *Baltnews Estonia* conducted more disinformation and misappropriation by claiming that the US Special Forces were only interested in the proximity to Russia and not in the region's security, and that probably they aimed to counter the brigades of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU). It also called Estonia a 'semi-occupied state, just like Germany'.

On 6 September, the Armenian version of *Sputnik* continued the IL by publishing an article with a misleading headline: 'The secret base in Estonia exacerbates the geopolitical situation' and also by adding disinformation and misappropriation through quoting a regular contributor to *Sputnik News*, Andrei Koshkin. A.Koshkin, presented as an expert, asserted that the US Special Forces in Estonia are a threat, and that NATO wants to increase its presence



near Russia's borders, seeking to deploy troops in Ukraine on top of its presence in the Baltics and Poland. *Rusvesna.su*, *Inform-ua.info*, and *Politpuzzle.ru* were some of the media which amplified it with SM.

From 7 until 29 September, the IL and SM processes continued, decreasing the level of distortion and increasing the proportion of those media that only amplified content (SM) previously published by the Russian language pro-Kremlin media. The focus moved from primarily Russian outlets with Russian domains to domains from Estonia and Ukraine. The laundering continued with disinformation from *Baltnews Estonia* on 8 September and on 9 September, with *Izvestia* alleging that the locals are discontent with the presence of the NATO troops due to their misconduct, such as sexual harassment (disinformation/misappropriation). On 13 September, *E-news* shared the piece, framing the case as a contentious situation in which 'the Russian SSO GRU has enough forces and means to not only destroy the base, but also to get all the necessary intelligence and information in advance, which will subsequently be used as an evidence for the international community about the preparations of a particular anti-Russian special operation' (misappropriation and disinformation).

Observations

- Research identified a large and intricate IL conducted mainly in Russian language media registered under

Russian and Estonian domains. It involved 90 outlets.

- IL and SM were observed in Russian-language media with Estonian, Latvian and Ukrainians domains, as well as outlets covering news from Central Asia.
 - The highest volume of activity from Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media was observed on 5 September, with 52 outlets involved.
- Some Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media (*Baltnews*, *Sputnik*) participated in this IL process more than once, reinforcing both IL and SM.
- Misappropriation was conducted through the use of 'experts' who supported the laundering narrative (Viktor Baranets or Viktor Litovkin, Mikhail Friben, and Estonian publicist Vladimir Ilyashevich).
 - A woozle effect repetitively quoting US Colonel Kevin Stringer and losing the hyperlink to the *Pealtnägija* obscured the source and made it difficult for the reader to place the quotes in their real context.
 - A report by NATO Defense College released at the time of the IL was utilised to support the idea that NATO is contemplating an imminent armed conflict with Russia.
- The process targeted mainly Russian-speaking audiences which engage with



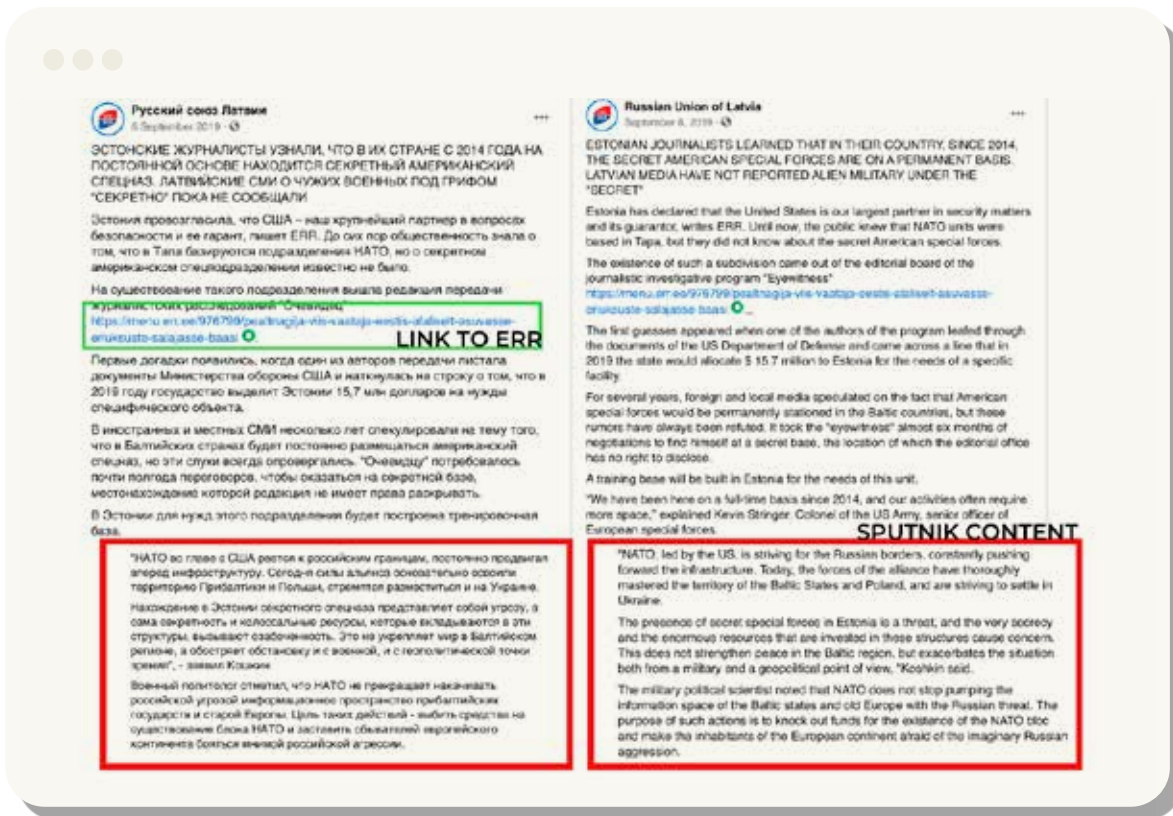


Image 12. Latvian Russian Union Party's post on Facebook
Source: Latvian Russian Union's Facebook page

pro-Kremlin or Kremlin-official media. IL techniques were likely aimed at disseminating the image of the Baltic States as countries occupied by NATO and the Western powers, mainly the UK and the US.

- Russia's own victimization and the idea of Western Russophobia were also utilised by mentioning that NATO is increasing troops on the border, even though it is known that Russia does not pose a threat.
- The level of distortion was high, from the discovery of a US base in Estonia to NATO conducting a special operation

against Russia to destabilise the region, ultimately leading to a global conflict.

- Research on social media identifies that Facebook was the platform with the highest SM. One of the relevant actors who spread (and further distorted) this story was the political party Latvian Russian Union (Русский союз Латвии)¹⁰⁴. Although the party linked an article from the ERR, in their post they utilised information laundered by Sputnik Armenia, using Andrei Koshkin's quotes to claim that the simple presence of the US Special Forces in the country was a threat.



- This is one of the greatest advantages of IL techniques. The laundering process allowed the Latvian Russian Union party to share information from a foreign version of *Sputnik* (in this case, Armenia) that was

distorted through IL techniques and, at the same time, make their readers believe this was content from a source trusted not only by Kremlin-sympathising views but also a wider audience, i.e. *ERR*.

Information Laundering Case 11 – Spain accidentally fires a missile over Estonia

- Exposed by: *Propastop* (10 August 2018)
 - Placement by wozzle effect
 - *Izvestia* (foreign pro-Kremlin media)

Background. On 7 August 2018, the Spanish Eurofighter Typhoon EF2000, part of NATO’s Baltic Air Policing, accidentally fired a medium-range air-to-air missile (AMRAAM) over Estonia. The event was initially reported on *ERR*¹⁰⁵. The missile was configured to self-destruct and had not been found as of October 2018¹⁰⁶. A fire was later reported in the place where the missile fell, however, there was no confirmation that the missile caused it. The accident received different reactions from Estonian and Russian media and authorities.

Laundering. Although there was no distortion of the information when stating that the Spanish aircraft had launched a missile over Estonia, according to the *DFRLab*¹⁰⁷ and *Propastop*¹⁰⁸, pro-Kremlin media outlets used the event to portray the Baltic States as NATO’s training ground. That supported the narrative of NATO being an occupying force. Aleksey Pushkov (Алексей Константинович Пушков), Chairman of the Information Policy Commission of the Russian Federation, tweeted right after the event calling for Estonian authorities to monitor NATO’s air activities instead of the Russian ones (Image 13). The tweet received 223 retweets and 627 likes. Even though the incident originated a high volume of messaging, this study focuses on the laundering process that started with a wozzle effect from Pushkov’s declarations. The placement was conducted by Russian language pro-Kremlin media *Izvestia*, including Pushkov’s tweet to emphasise NATO’s mistake and portray the organisation as a threat to its own allies. SM was predominant during the layering process. In total, 50 outlets were seen to participate in the laundering process.





Image 13. Aleksey Pushkov's tweet regarding the incident
Source: Pushkov's official *Twitter* account¹⁰⁹

On 8 August, Russian TV channel *Tsargrad* TV continued the laundering process with a misleading headline. It stated that the Estonians should be afraid of missiles coming from NATO. The outlet also affirmed that the missile had entered the territory of the Russian Federation (disinformation). This last disinformation was taken up and amplified by foreign proxies such as the website *Regions.ru*. Further, *Vesti* conducted misappropriation by claiming that at the time of day when the missile was launched, there were several passenger aircrafts in the air. No source was linked to back up this information. *Sputnik Estonia* amplified this. Estonian media outlet *Postimees* also incorporated misappropriation by combining Pushkov's declarations with the comment of

a Russian official made to the newspaper *Vzglyad*, suggesting that the missile had been launched intentionally. Consecutively, Kremlin-official media *RIA Novosti* mixed misappropriation with woosle effect by including remarks from Russian figures such as Stanislav Byshok, alleging that Russia would be blamed for the incident regardless of who was actually responsible for the missile launch. The platform *Global War News* included several misappropriations, claiming that the incident was a result of Estonians' Russophobia and their paranoia about being attacked. This was mixed with the argument that Russia has repeatedly denied any intention to invade or attack the Baltics, hence, their paranoia is groundless. Later that day, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*



published two consecutive pieces (with 2 minutes of separation) by different authors. The author of the first one ironically considered it strange that Russian hackers had not been blamed yet for interfering with the aircraft, while the second conducted amplification through SM. *Argumenti i Fakti* included misappropriation by disclosing the declarations of two supposed Estonian witnesses who saw the rocket and 'thought a war had already begun'. Since no source was provided, it is considered disinformation. The piece also stated that the Baltics have become a tension zone due to NATO aircrafts frequently flying over the Russian border. A final paragraph warned that this situation could be repeated in the future, with less luck for civilians. Finally, *Sputnik Latvia* compared the event to an incident that happened two years ago, when two British air missiles almost hit a civil aircraft (misappropriation). On 9 August, domestic proxy *Seti.ee*, and Russian Internet agency *Ura News* re-shared the article, thereby conducting SM.

Observations

- A woozle effect utilising Alexey Pushkov's tweet to support the discrediting of NATO was crucial to start the laundering process.
 - The most common technique was misappropriation mixed with woozle effect, highlighted by this study as one of the most recurring and effective combinations of techniques in IL.
- Kremlin-official, pro-Kremlin media and proxies took part in the process in an analogous way. The absence of Estonian language coverage indicated low interest in Estonian-speaking audiences. However, Latvian language was detected as part of the IL.
 - In total, 50 media outlets were involved in the IL and SM over a timespan of two days.
 - The media involved, the techniques applied, and the source magnification suggest that Pushkov's tweet was strategically used to discredit NATO in the eyes of the Russian-speaking audiences inside and outside of Estonia.
- During the whole process, SM was higher than IL. Only eleven media outlets were seen to apply IL techniques, while the rest simply amplified the laundered content.
 - The lack of IL techniques could be explained by the nature of the event, which did not need great distortion
 - the actual event allowed for the spread of anti-NATO messaging. The operation focused on depicting the event as a humiliation for NATO, which is a threat to the Baltic States.
 - Proxies –domestic and foreign– were seen to amplify the content.
 - This case shows how efficiently Kremlin and pro-Kremlin media can leverage human error, spinning the narrative in their favour. *Sputnik Estonia* created a whole section





Image 13. Russian MFA's tweet on the issue

Translation: 'We told you that the #NATO military bloc is useless. #MFAknew'

Source: Russian MFA's official *Twitter* account

titled 'Accidental Launch of Spanish Air Rocket - Who Really Threatens Estonia' with a compilation of all the articles on the issue, and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a tweet openly criticising NATO (see Image 13).

- The event also reached English language and Spanish Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media.

- Mainstream, reputable Estonian media such as *Postimees* and *ERR* were seen to become accidental actors



by amplifying the anti-NATO content published by Russian figures and media such as Alexey Pushkov or Russian pro-Kremlin newspaper *Vzglyad*.

▪ Allegedly, Russian authorities used the hashtag #MIDznal (#MFAknew) to talk about the incident on *Twitter* (source: *Gazeta.ru*).¹¹⁰

Information Laundering Case 12 - Estonia plans to buy rockets that can reach St. Petersburg to deter Russia

- Exposed by: *EU versus Disinfo* (22 January 2019)
- Placement by misappropriation and deceitful translation - *Sputnik Estonia* (Kremlin-official media)

Background. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania became independent in 1918. The three countries were occupied and illegally incorporated first by the Soviet Union, then by Nazi Germany from 1941 to 1944, and again by the Soviet Union from 1944 to 1991, when they regained their independence. Since the occupation of Crimea in 2014, NATO has increased support to the Baltic States by bolstering their defense capabilities and deterrence mechanisms.

Laundering. On 18 January 2019, reporter Vahur Koorits of the daily newspaper *Eesti Päevaleht* published an opinion piece suggesting that the Estonian authorities should equip the country with missiles that could reach St. Petersburg in order to deter Russia.

The Russian-language version of *Sputnik Estonia* conducted a placement by means of misappropriation and deceitful translation by stating that the author was proposing to strike St. Petersburg, when in fact V. Koorits was speaking about obtaining the missiles for deterrence purposes. The article included a section analysing the 'Russian threat' as a concept invented by NATO and nourished by the Western anti-Russian paranoia. Forty-one media outlets partook in the process from 19 to 23 January. An isolated outlet retook the laundered article

on 7 July. The day with the highest volume of laundering in the media was 20 January.

On 20 January, Kremlin's *TV Zvezda* included misappropriation suggesting that the Estonian journalist strategically chose St. Petersburg because of the city's military significance. *Gazeta.ru* continued the layering phase with a misleading headline and disinformation, claiming that the Estonian journalist was indeed proposing to strike St. Petersburg, and that the Estonian President had already suggested breaking



” Our study reveals that Latvian and Lithuanian pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-official media are also very active in Estonian networks, creating a Baltic network of Information Laundering.

the border treaty with Russia. Later that day, the Russian language outlet *Utro.ru* laundered the article through another highly misleading headline which claimed Estonia had called for destroying Russia. This was amplified by *Tasnews.ru* and *Slawyanka.info*. *Moscow 24* conducted misappropriation and disinformation by incorrectly quoting Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid supposedly announcing the start of a war in Europe after Russia seized three Ukrainian ships in the Kerch Strait in November 2018¹¹¹. *Sputnik Estonia* published again on the issue, including a misleading headline that read: ‘St. Petersburg at gunpoint’ (Петербург под прицелом). The piece was a reproduction of the placement article. It also included declarations by Russian Senator Franz Kintsevich calling V. Koorits a delusional provocateur who should be checked by doctors (woozle effect). This wozzle effect was amplified by other pro-Kremlin media such as *Lenta.ru*.

On the following day, Russian language pro-Kremlin media *Rubaltic* stressed that the

article had been published by the largest online news media outlet in Estonia, without clarifying that it was exclusively an opinion from an author (misappropriation). This piece was supported by statements from the president of the Russian Association for Baltic Studies and St. Petersburg State University’s Professor Nikolai Mezhevich (woozle effect) calling V. Koorits’ article a provocation connected to the upcoming Estonian Parliament elections. *Baltnews Lithuania*, *Baltnews Latvia*, and *Sputnik Estonia* further amplified this.

Throughout the process, especially on 20 January, several media (e.g. *RT* in Russian) included misappropriation by adding unrelated information about the increase of the US troops on the borders between the Baltics and Poland with Russia. On 23 January, the laundering intensified, as *Baltnews Estonia* ran a misleading headline claiming that Estonia pays to protect the US (disinformation). Online media platform *Anna-news.info* retook the story in July and performed SM.



Observations

- IL techniques were mainly conducted by Russian language pro-Kremlin media (56%) and Kremlin-official media (20%), supported by domestic and foreign proxies (24%).
 - The percentage of domestic media involved was relatively high compared to other cases and countries (17%). Twenty-four per cent of the media outlets involved were registered in the Baltic countries.
- Russian was the primary language, followed by Estonian. The media involved and the languages used suggest that the laundering process was aimed mainly at Russian speaking groups within the Baltics (not just in Estonia), and also to Estonian-speakers.
- Recurring participation of *Sputnik Estonia*, which created a highlighted section within the website called: 'Estonian journalist suggested sending missiles to St. Petersburg', compiling all its articles on the issue¹¹².
- The timeframe for IL was 4 days. However, 7 months later (9 July), Russian-language outlet *Anna-news.info* re-shared the laundered information for unknown reasons.
- The level of distortion was high, transforming an opinion piece from a

journalist into bombing St. Petersburg as part of Estonian strategic military planning. In total, 32% media outlets conducted IL, the rest amplified through SM.

- According to *EU versus Disinfo*, this case is an example of the so-called 'Straw man narrative'.¹¹³

Involvement of domestic media networks in Information Laundering in Estonia

Estonia is the NB8 country with the most active IL networks, which share the following qualities:

- a. IL actors targeting Estonia or Estonian news produced the highest volume of interactions in the whole NB8.
- b. Russian appears as the main language, followed by English and, only thirdly, Estonian.
- c. Domestic pro-Kremlin medium *Baltnews Estonia* and Kremlin-official *Sputnik Estonia* are seen to commonly start IL processes targeting the country, playing an important role during the placement phase.
 - Estonia has openly pro-Kremlin media that spread Kremlin information influence in the region, both by creating original content and by reposting news articles from official Kremlin's sources.



- d. Foreign pro-Kremlin media also play a significant role, mainly during the layering phase.
- e. Domestic and Russian-domain outlets are seen to retake IL cases after months of inactivity (see Cases 9 and 12).

Our study reveals that Latvian and Lithuanian pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-official media are also very active in Estonian networks, creating a Baltic network of IL. Research suggests that Estonia is considered a high priority target for Kremlin information influence operations due to the high activity of Kremlin and/or pro-Kremlin actors within IL networks targeting the country. Domestic pro-Kremlin media (*Baltnews Estonia*) and proxy actors (*Stena*) are key players, usually supported by Latvian proxies (*Mixnews*, *Press.lv*, *TV Net*) and Latvian pro-Kremlin media (*Baltnews Latvia*). *Sputnik Estonia* actively participates in IL processes in other NB8 countries (e.g. Finland).

Mainstream online newspapers (*Õhtuleht*, *Postimees*, and *Delfi*) have taken part in IL processes as domestic accidental actors. These media have unintentionally connected

to Estonian IL networks, spreading pro-Kremlin media content, and sometimes they have even further laundered the information. National journalists should be aware of these cases in order to prevent future involvement by reputed media outlets in IL processes. Finally, while the most active pro-Kremlin source was *Baltnews Estonia*, *Stena* performed as a domestic proxy. The latter has been recently reported by Graphika¹¹⁴ and *Insikt Group* as a platform utilised in the *Secondary Infektion* operation.

Certain Russian and pro-Kremlin domestic public figures, i.e. politicians and journalists, participated in the IL as experts collaborating with Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media. One of the most recognized names was Dmitri Linter (Дмитрий Сергеевич Линтер). Similar to Latvia, country's specific characteristics are strategically exploited during the IL: for example, the presence of NATO international troops and the seizable Russian-speaking population. NATO's presence in the country was seen as a topic at the core of the IL, with networks portraying an image of an aggressive, volatile, and corrupt West aiming to attack Russia and risking global stability. The Baltics appeared as states occupied by NATO.



” Finland is a country resilient to Information Laundering. However, foreign and domestic actors still launder news stories to boost anti-NATO sentiments and misleadingly portray the country as aligned with Russia and against the EU on selected topics.



















FINLAND

Finland is often considered one of the countries with the freest media in the world¹¹⁵ and a ‘resilient front’ to Kremlin HII Cs¹¹⁶. Experts highlight the strong education system as a reason for Finland’s high resilience to external information influence. The *Finnish National Broadcasting Company (YLE)*, as well as mainstream media and other independent websites¹¹⁷ facilitate it by regularly exposing false information to the public. In terms of relations with Russia, Finland’s pragmatic yet cautious approach can be attributed to its history of conflict with the Soviet Union and their long-shared border. Maintaining constructive bilateral relations with Russia can be difficult, especially after the annexation of Crimea back in 2014 and the following EU sanctions that Finland has subscribed to.¹¹⁸ Recent events have highlighted the range of Kremlin’s attempted influence activities within the country, including the harassment of Finnish journalist Jessikka Aro, the trial of Kremlin sympathisers Johan

Bäckman and Ilja Janitskin, and the creation of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. Furthermore, Finland’s status as a non-NATO member inside the EU constitutes a target for pro-Kremlin information influence activities, e.g. when the country participates in joint military exercises with NATO.

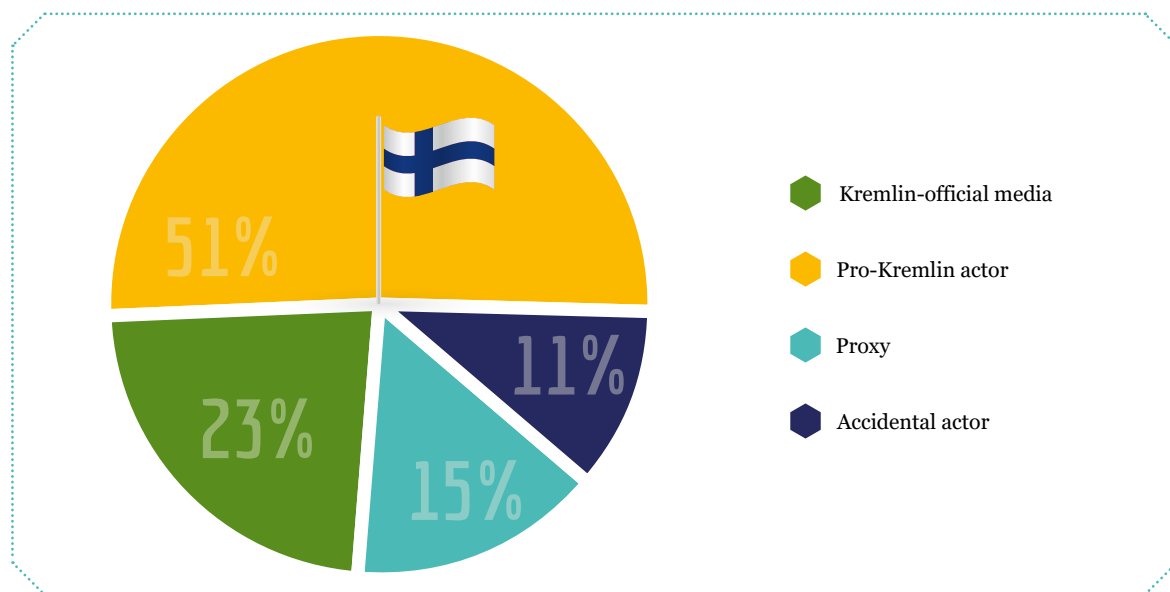


Table 6. Summary of cases in Finland

Case	Techniques (in order of appearance)	Overview of networks
Finland builds a tunnel system under Helsinki to prepare for a possible Russian attack.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Deceitful translation,  disinformation,  misleading headline,  misappropriation,  woozle effect,  Potemkin village. 	<p>Total media involved: 69.</p> <p>58% pro-Kremlin media, 20% Kremlin-official media. No domestic media involved. Main language: Russian (90%).</p>
Finland is opposed to EU sanctions against Russia.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Woozle effect,  misappropriation,  misleading headline,  disinformation. 	<p>Total media involved: 24.</p> <p>75% pro-Kremlin media. No domestic media was involved. Language: Russian.</p>
<i>Trident Juncture 18</i> brought Finland and Sweden closer together.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Woozle effect,  misleading headline,  misappropriation. 	<p>Total media involved: 10.</p> <p>50% pro-Kremlin media, 30% Kremlin-official media. No domestic media were involved. Main language: Russian.</p>
New Union of Journalists established in Finland.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Potemkin village,  woozle effect,  misappropriation,  disinformation,  misleading headline. 	<p>Total media involved: 4.</p> <p>Purely domestic story disseminated in Finnish language by domestic pro-Kremlin media and proxies.</p>



Summary of findings



Graphic 6. Actors involved in Information Laundering cases in Finland

- Finland is a country resilient to IL. However, foreign and domestic actors still launder news stories to boost anti-NATO sentiments and misleadingly portray the country as aligned with Russia and against the EU on selected topics such as EU sanctions against Russia, for example.
 - Finnish and Swedish IL processes share similarities.
- IL processes are complex, with 26 actors involved on average per case, mainly foreign (4 % domestic).
 - Very few domestic media were involved in the IL cases identified, which suggests that Finnish audiences are not the priority targets. However, domestic pro-Kremlin media (*MV-Lehti*) and proxies (*Nykysuomi*, *Yliauta*) are particularly relevant, as they translate foreign IL processes into Finnish language IL processes.
- The networks use Russian as the main language and English as the secondary one; Finnish is rarely employed.
 - SM is especially relevant in the Russian language.
 - Domestic mainstream media and journalists are efficient in identifying and exposing Kremlin's HIICs.
- The most common IL topics are NATO military exercises and the rights of the inhabitants of the Crimean Peninsula.
- The main actors participating in IL processes to spread the Kremlin's influence within Finland are Russian language pro-Kremlin media (foreign).



Case 13 – Finland builds a tunnel system beneath Helsinki to prepare for a possible Russian attack¹¹⁹

- Exposed by: *EU versus Disinfo* (28 July 2017)
- Placement by deceitful translation and disinformation
- *Radio Sputnik* (Kremlin-official media)

Background. The construction of Helsinki’s vast underground network began in the 1980s, and its development is still ongoing under the state project Underground Master Plan, which came into force in 2011. As of today, the network encompasses almost 10 million square meters of underground spaces and tunnels that conceal different facilities. Some of them can be used for civil protection purposes. However, the network also includes amenities such as a subterranean art museum, a church, shops and even a gocart track inside a civil defence shelter.

Laundering. On 14 July 2017, *The Wall Street Journal (WSJ)* published an article titled ‘Beneath Helsinki, Finns prepare for the Russian Threat’¹²⁰, highlighting the role of the tunnels as training facilities for the Finnish military and their usefulness for defense purposes. In the article, the author alleged that the tunnels were being developed to counter the ‘Russian threat’, particularly in relation to the Russian military exercise *Zapad 2017* that took place between 14 and 20 September 2017. A few days after the publication, Finnish media corrected the article, stating that it did not distinguish accurately between the concepts of ‘national defense’ and ‘civil protection’¹²¹, and all the tunnels were not linked to Russian activities or designed solely to face a crisis. Some of the underground tunnels are in civil protection use, not for national defense purposes.

This study deems DNK Case 1 as an example of IL wherein inaccurate or confusing information published in a reputable newspaper is taken by pro-Kremlin actors and modified strategically, generally by adding contextual information not included in the original piece, in order to attain credibility and visibility when disseminating the laundered article. The bulk of media that took part in the laundering process used Russian language. The peaks of articles that included IL techniques were observed on 16

July (16 outlets) and 17 July (26 outlets). In total, 63 Russian language media outlets were seen to participate in the laundering process via IL techniques or SM.

Although *EU versus Disinfo*¹²² stated that the first Russian-language media to appropriate the *WSJ* story was Kremlin-official media *Radio Sputnik*, research on the chronology of the events reveals that it was the pro-Kremlin medium *Vzglyad* on 14 July, through deceitful translation and disinformation. The



mistranslation of *WSJ*'s title into Russian changed the concept of 'Russian threat' to 'Russian invasion' (misleading headline, deceitful translation). This subtle change allowed pro-Kremlin media to denounce Western anti-Russian paranoia, as it was factually wrong that Russia had plans to invade Helsinki. This idea was reinforced by mentioning that President Putin had affirmed that Russia did not want to fight with anyone. On the same day, Russian-language Kremlin-official media (*Sputnik* and *Ino TV*) conducted SM, amplifying the content laundered by *Vzglyad*.

On 15 July, Russian-language pro-Kremlin medium *Ura.ru* conducted misappropriation and disinformation by claiming that the Finnish authorities believed that Russian military exercise *Zapad 2017* could 'end with a military invasion'. *Ekspress-Gazeta* took the distortion from the original facts further with disinformation and misappropriation by stating that the Finnish authorities were so scared of a Russian attack that they had developed this underground network. The author compared the tunnel system with the Mannerheim Line established in the Karelian Isthmus by the Finns against the Soviets during the Winter War. The piece also included a misleading headline mocking the irrational Western fear of the Russian 'occupiers'¹²³. Later in the day, the Estonian version of *Sputnik* published a news piece with information taken from *InoTV*, incorporating a whole section dedicated to explaining why the concern

in the Baltic countries and in NATO about the Russian *Zapad 2017* exercise was a manifestation of Western hysteria.

On 16 July, the most applied laundering technique was misappropriation. *RIA Novosti* laundered a quote from the Policy Director of the Finnish Ministry of Defence that was initially used in the original *WSJ*'s piece, explaining the tunnel system as a result of lessons learned from the Second World War. This initiated a woosle effect that helped to reinforce the argument about alleged Finnish paranoia and schizophrenia. *Politexpert* shared the news piece with a highly misleading and bellicose headline stating that Russian concrete-piercing bombs BETAB-500 could 'get Finns out of the ground'. The rest of the article bragged about Russian military prowess and defense capabilities, claiming that Russia would beat Finland in any setting. *Realnoe Vremya* conducted misappropriation including an unrelated final remark that the US did not ratify the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 2017.

17 July saw the highest number of media outlets involved in the process, mainly from well-established Russian outlets. Pro-Kremlin *Izvestia* continued the woosle effect, which was started by *RIA*. *Gosnovosti*'s sensationalised the news and used a misleading headline which claimed that 'Finland is preparing for the bombing of Helsinki'. A picture of a nuclear explosion was tied in with the title (Image 14).





Image 14. *Gosnovosti's* visual support
Source: *Gosnovosti* (2017)

Svobodnaya Pressa continued the layering phase by affirming that the Finnish Ministry of Defense had already commented on the possibility of a Russian aggression due to tense relations between Russia and the West (disinformation). It included an interview with Finnish pro-Kremlin voice Johan Bäckman, who made strong, unsourced allegations that Finns could shoot anyone dressed in camouflage clothes instead of civilian clothes (disinformation). Kremlin-official newspaper *Rossiskaya Gazeta* started with a highly misleading headline that could be translated as 'Seized by panic' (Охватила паника), while *Russian Dialogue* stated that all Finnish tunnels would be useless since Russian warheads could penetrate the reinforced concrete.

Like *Politexpert*, it extensively listed Russian weapons that could penetrate the underground tunnels.

The layering continued from 18 to 25 July. For example, *Xacak* stated that the hysterical West believed that Russia wanted to provoke a World War Three (disinformation); *Slovo i Delo* claimed that Finns are scared of Russian Iskanders, mobile short-range ballistic missiles. Throughout the whole process, the news websites *Rambler* and *Sputnik* conducted SM. Both are generally used as news engines to compile articles published by different Russian language online media outlets. The most relevant English language media that participated in IL and SM were *Sputnik News*¹²⁴ and



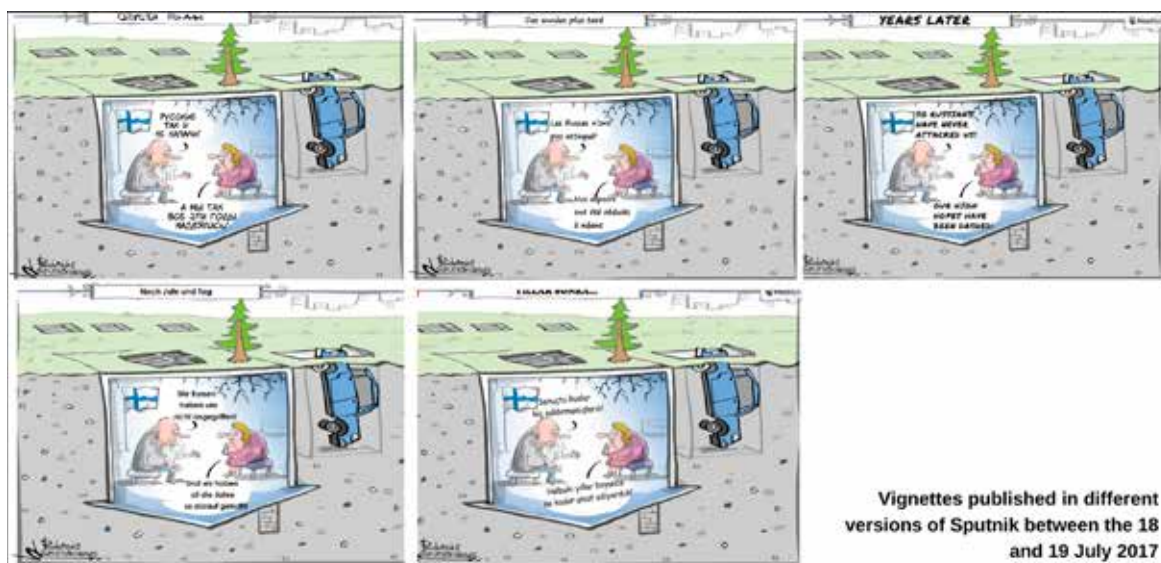


Image 15. Sputnik's cartoons
Source: Sputnik News

*News Front*¹²⁵ (both on 18 July), forming a Potemkin village. Another Potemkin village structure was seen between the Russian version of *News Front* and *RIA Novosti*.

Observations

- 58% of the IL techniques were applied by Russian language pro-Kremlin media. The absence of Finnish language media highlights that Finnish-speaking audiences were not targets in this campaign.
- This is a particularly relevant case because of its extensive SM. 60% of the Russian media involved conducted SM and not IL.
- Outside the Russian-speaking sphere, the manipulated information also

reached English, Spanish, and French outlets. Surprisingly, it was not detected in Finnish language.

- The level of distortion from the facts was high, starting from Finald expecting to be bombed by Russia and ending with World War III.
- Pro-Kremlin media outlet *Vzglyad* was seen to conduct the placement.
 - *Sputnik* translated the same vignette into several languages, portraying the alleged hysteria of the Finns: Russian language for *Sputnik Kyrgyzstan*¹²⁶, French for *Sputnik France*¹²⁷, English¹²⁸ for *Sputnik International*, German for *Sputnik Deutschland*¹²⁹, and Turkish for *Sputnik Turkey*¹³⁰.



- The process from placement to integration took 11 days. However, 62% of the IL was concentrated between 16 and 17 July (2-3 days after *WSJ* published the original article).
- The media involved, the techniques applied, and the SM process suggest that Finland was used strategically to deliver an image to foreign Russian-speaking audiences.
 - Western paranoia about the Russian 'imaginary threat' is a recurrent narrative that Russian language media exploit to increase influence within the NB8 region.
 - A group of Russian-language media also pushed and laundered a secondary narrative, emphasizing the role of Finland as a 'bridge' between Russia and the West.
- Prominent Finnish pro-Kremlin figure Johan Bäckman was mentioned by *EU versus Disinfo* as one of the promoters of this disinformation narrative. Pro-Kremlin media *Svobodnaya Pressa* included an interview with him.
- The smurfing technique was utilised when *Sputnik's* journalist Vladimir Bychkov authored two articles on the same process: one for *Radio Sputnik* on 17 July and the other for *Sputnik Estonia* on 18 July.
 - Many bloggers disseminated and further distorted the information on the Russian language blog *Livejournal*.
- Differences exist in the amplification of the news between international mainstream media outlets and pro-Kremlin media. The latter's reaction was fundamentally twofold. As Keir Giles commented on *Twitter*: a) Russia is not a threat to anyone and Western countries are paranoid b) but Russian weapons are invincible¹³¹.
- Some Finnish media (e.g. *Helsinki Sanomat* on 17 July¹³² and *Aamulehti* on 18 July¹³³) were seen to correct the *WSJ's* information. However, these corrections had no coverage in media in other languages.
 - In 2018, CNN and other English-language media published again on the topic. CNN's headline read: 'Helsinki's bunker city: How Finland has survived in Russia's dark shadow'.¹³⁴ The fact that this article was also laundered by Russian language media illustrates how some Western media ecosystems' vulnerabilities facing hostile information threats are produced or aggravated by sensationalized headlines and journalistic embellishment.



” Comments such as ‘Europe extends from Lisbon to Vladivostok’ and suggestion to invite Russia to re-join G-7 were detached from their original context and utilized to argue for the ineffectiveness of sanctions, which should be removed to restore a good Russia-West relationship.

Case 14 - Sauli Niinistö affirms: Finland is against EU sanctions

- Exposed by: unpublished research
- Placement by misappropriation and woozle effect
- TASS (Kremlin-official media)

Background. In March 2014, the European Council agreed on the first diplomatic measures in response to annexation of Crimea by Russia. One year later, EU leaders agreed to link the duration of these diplomatic and economic sanctions to the implementation of the Minsk agreements.¹³⁵ According to the EU’s official website, ‘the EU remains ready to reverse its decisions and reengage with Russia when it starts contributing actively and without ambiguities to finding a solution to the Ukrainian crisis’¹³⁶.

Laundering. On 13 September 2019, Russian news agency TASS announced that Finland opposed EU’s sanctions against Russia, using a de-contextualisation of a speech given by the Finnish president Sauli Niinistö¹³⁷, who spoke after Volodymyr Zelensky at the Yalta European Strategy (YES) Forum in Ukraine. According to the Russian news agency, the Finnish president advocated lifting sanctions against Russia, after criticising their inefficacy (placement by means of misappropriation and woozle effect). However, as reputable Finnish media outlet *Ilta-Sanomat* later clarified¹³⁸, S. Niinistö explained after the speech that his words were aimed at highlighting that the sanctions had proven to be less effective than initially hoped for – and any different interpretation would be willfully misleading. Thus, TASS had created a woozle effect, using the Finnish president’s quotes to push the idea of lifting sanctions, which was consolidated through 24 Russian language actors that partook in the IL process. On that same day, several Russian outlets continued the layering phase. First, *Izvestia* mixed S.Niinistö’s speech with a quote from the Director-General of the Association of European Businesses in the Russian Federation, Frank Schauff, to claim that the sanctions were unsuccessful and to condemn the Ukrainian Euromaidan outcome as a coup supported by the West. Afterwards, subtle misappropriations were applied to build a rhetorical link between Russia and Finland. For example, *Pravda* named the Finnish



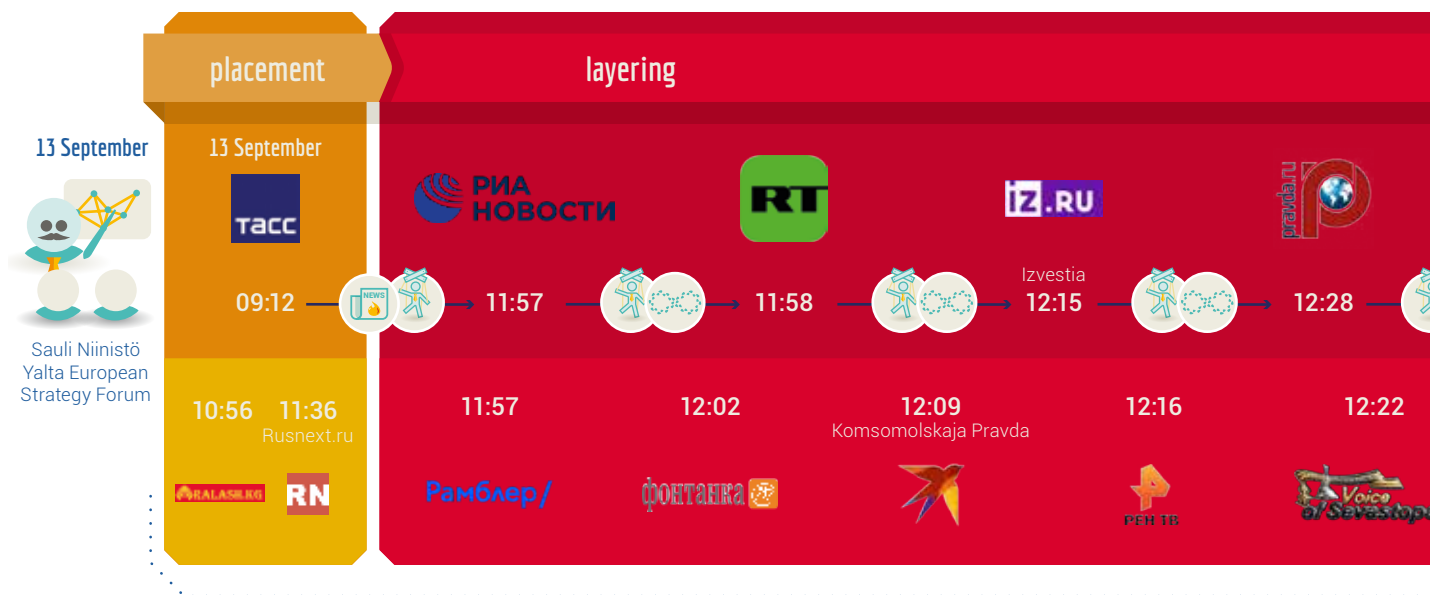


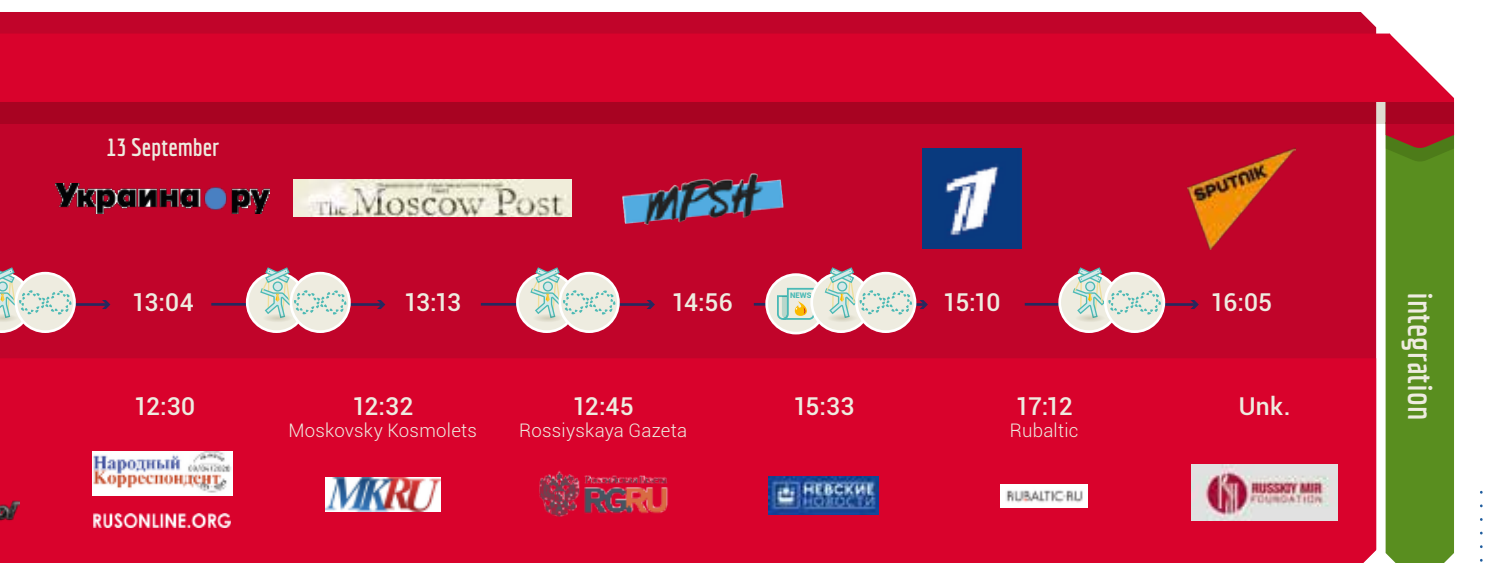
Figure 17. Information Laundering Case 14

president ‘the head of the post-Soviet republic’, and *The Moscow Post* alluded to an earlier meeting between V.Putin and S.Niinistö to highlight the good relationship between the two countries. The author linked a press release from the Russian government that described the constructive relationship between the two countries after their meeting¹³⁹. To conclude, *Sputnik Lithuania* included past statements from French president Emmanuel Macron and U.S president Donald Trump about the relationship between the West and Russia. Comments such as ‘Europe extends from Lisbon to Vladivostok’ and suggestion to invite Russia to re-join G-7, were detached from their original context and utilized to support the whole aim of the article, i.e. the ineffectiveness of sanctions, which should be removed to build a positive relationship between Russia and the West.

Observations

- Research identified IL activity strategically aimed at misquoting a trustworthy figure of international prestige in order to support Russia’s strategic aims, i.e. lifting sanctions.
- 24 media outlets were involved in a one-day laundering process.
- The most relevant technique utilized was the woozle effect, quoting S.Niinistö’s comments on sanctions to support the argument about the ineffectiveness of the EU measures against Russia, mixed with several misappropriations.





SOURCE MAGNIFICATION

- Domestic Finnish language media was only involved in the topic by exposing and fact-checking the distorted information.
 - Laundering techniques were applied exclusively by Russian language media with domains across Russia and Ukraine.
- Indeed, the whole IL case can be considered a wozzle effect consolidated and reinforced by different Russian language media, accompanied by other timely IL techniques (such as misappropriation) in order to further distort the original facts.
 - Finland was portrayed as a mediator and Russian partner, which could be bringing the two blocs closer together in the near future.
- The level of distortion from the facts was low, since it was a misleading representation and de-contextualisation of the original quotes of the Finnish PM.
 - SM was higher than IL, with actors more focused on increasing the visibility of laundered articles than on manipulating the content further.
- Results suggest that IL did not involve Finnish-speaking audiences or target Finland to spread a certain image. Media used the Finnish president's quotes opportunistically in order to spread stories that aligned with Kremlin's objectives and pro-Kremlin view of the EU's economic sanctions against Russia.



Case 15 – Trident Juncture 18 brought Finland and Sweden closer to NATO

- Exposed by: Ari Pesonen for *Uusi Suomi* (27 October 2018)
 - Placement by woozle effect
 - TASS (Kremlin-official media)

Background. The *Trident Juncture* military exercise (TRJE18) took place between 25 October and 7 November 2018 with the participation of 29 NATO members, plus Sweden and Finland. It was held in central and eastern Norway, and the surrounding areas of the North Atlantic and the Baltic Sea, including Iceland and the airspace of Finland and Sweden. Its objective was to train NATO forces and to ensure they are ready to respond to any threat.¹⁴⁰ Although Sweden and Finland are not NATO members, both countries participated through an agreement signed in May 2018 with the US.¹⁴¹ On 25 October 2018, coinciding with the start of TRJE18, a spokeswoman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Maria Zakharova, commented on Finnish and Swedish participation during her weekly briefing:¹⁴²

Original Russian-language text	English translation
<p>Российская сторона квалифицируют все происходящее, о чем Вы сейчас сказали, как целенаправленную работу НАТО по втягиванию Финляндии и Швеции в практическую деятельность Североатлантического блока, включая регулярное участие воинских контингентов этих стран в натовских учениях, а также задействование вооруженных формирований государств-членов альянса в военных маневрах, которые проводятся на финской и шведской территориях.</p> <p>[...]</p> <p>Мы рассматриваем действия Североатлантического альянса как попытку использовать военно-политический потенциал Финляндии и Швеции для реализации собственных конъюнктурных задач по сдерживанию России под абсолютно надуманными, вымышленными предложениями. Мы исходим из того, что в Хельсинки и Стокгольме это тоже понимают, а также отдают отчет о реальных угрозах и о том, откуда эти реальные угрозы европейской безопасности исходят. Точно не от России.</p>	<p>The Russian side qualifies everything that is happening now, as you said, as the deliberate work of NATO to involve Finland and Sweden in the practical activities of the North Atlantic bloc, including the regular participation by military contingents of these countries in NATO exercises, as well as the involvement of the armed formations of the Alliance member states in military maneuvers, which are held on Finnish and Swedish territories.</p> <p>[...]</p> <p>We consider the actions of the North Atlantic Alliance as an attempt to use the military-political potential of Finland and Sweden to implement tasks of their own conjuncture, to contain Russia under absolutely far-fetched, fictitious pretexts. We proceed from the fact that in Helsinki and Stockholm they also understand this, and also give an account of the real threats and where these real threats to European security come from. Definitely not from Russia.</p>





Image 16. *Inforeactor's* image

Laundering. On 25 October, TASS selected quotes from M.Zakharova's speech in order to create an article that emphasised attempts by NATO and the US to bring Finland and Sweden closer to their sphere of influence (placement by the means of woozle effect). Russian language pro-Kremlin medium *Inforeactor* included a misleading headline twisting M.Zakharova's words to claim that the participation of Sweden and Finland in NATO exercises threatened security in Europe. Under the headline, there was an image inspired by warfare (Image 16) (misappropriation).

Rossiskaya Gazeta also conducted misappropriation (together with the ongoing woozle effect) as it mixed the idea of NATO and the US pulling Finland and Sweden closer to the Alliance with allegations about NATO willingly escalating tensions with Russia, i.e. discussing that the nature of TRJE18 was not only defensive but also offensive. In total, ten Russian-language media took part in the IL process, including SM from *Rambler*, *RIA Novosti*

and *Gazeta.ru* which shared the laundered news, reinforcing, endorsing and providing credibility to the IL.

Finnish mainstream media *Ilta-Sanomat*¹⁴³ and *Italehti*¹⁴⁴ published articles uncovering and explaining the reasons for Finland's participation in TRJE18. The Russian-language version of Estonian *ERR* accidentally contributed to the process with SM.



Figure 18. Information Laundering Case 15

Observations

- In total, ten media outlets were involved in the process, which lasted two days.
 - The distortion of the events was low, since Russian media were acting as loudspeakers of Maria Zakharova, including subtle modification through IL techniques.

- IL was mainly conducted by pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-official media. The absence of Finnish language

media indicated that Finnish-speaking audiences were not targeted in the process.

- The recurrent laundering of a news story linked to TRJE18 indicates that NATO military exercises are valuable targets for Kremlin’s information influence campaigns.



Case 16 - New Union of Journalists established in Finland

- Exposed by: *EU versus Disinfo* (17 December 2019)
 - Placement by wozzle effect and disinformation
- *MV-Lehti* (domestic pro-Kremlin media)

Background. The Union of Journalists in Finland (UJF)¹⁴⁵ is an independent trade union that negotiates collective agreements and is aimed at furthering the financial, social and professional status of its members, both salaried and freelancers. The Union is not a member of but cooperates with trade union confederations. In 2016, a copycat NGO was officially registered with the name 'Suomen vapaa sana riippumaton toimittajayhdistys ry', imitating UJF's URL address¹⁴⁶. The vice-chair of the copycat organisation was Janus Putkonen, editor-in-chief of pro-Kremlin *MV-Lehti* and *DONi Donbass News Agency*, which is based in Donetsk.

Laundering. On 17 December 2019, the Finnish pro-Kremlin news portal *MV-Lehti* shared an article amplifying an original publication by the copycat Union of Journalists, *Toimittajalitto*¹⁴⁷. In the publication, *Toimittajalitto* was described as an altruist organization that advocates new changes in the Finnish media environment and supports all journalists in Finland. *MV-Lehti* promoted this association stating that 'alternative media activists' were constant victims of (hate) crimes from a one-sided, repressive society. This information was directly taken from *Toimittajalitto* (SM). Connections between the Union and *MV-Lehti* via Janus Putkonen, and a short time span between the publications of the two articles, suggest a placement by the means of Potemkin village. *MV-Lehti*'s sole purpose for publication was to increase the visibility of *Toimittajalitto*'s article. Janus Putkonen, also the author of the piece, mentioned that the time for the 'defenders of the truth' had arrived, calling all alternative journalists in Finland to unite and counterbalance a 'media war' with a new Union that would protect them against centralized and aggressive information machinery. Four domestic media were involved in the laundering process.

On 18 December, *MV-Lehti* retook its publication from the previous day and further laundered it to victimise the so-called 'alternative journalists', claiming that mainstream media's dictatorship was spreading hate speech to block independent media initiatives such as *Toimittajalitto* (disinformation). The article de-contextualised quotes from different

media and public figures, such as the response of the President of the (real) Union of Journalists, Hanne Aho, to the copycat Union, to depict mainstream media as spreading hate against alternative media (wozzle effect, misappropriation). Later that day, alternative media *Nykysuomi* shared *MV-Lehti*'s story, including an interview with the new Union's editor-in-chief, Juha



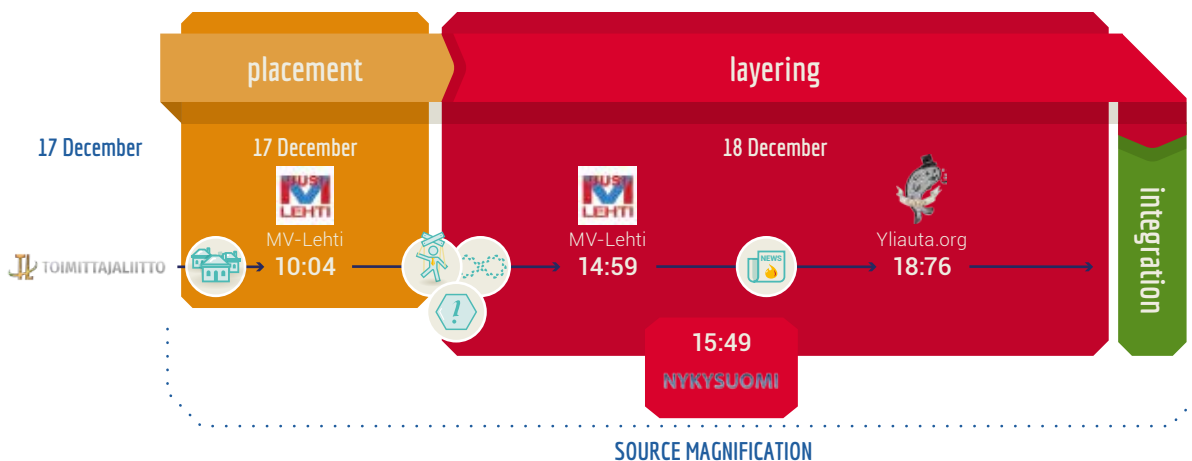


Figure 19. Information Laundering Case 16

Korhonen, endorsing the association. Finally, self-publishing platform *Yliauta.org* shared the content with a highly misleading headline, stating that the time [for an independent media organisation] had arrived, so mainstream media should be scared.

Observations

- Uniquely, this is a domestic laundering case. The purely domestic nature of the networks could be explained by the very specific aim of this IL, i.e. discrediting Finnish mainstream media and supporting alternative journalism.
 - IL techniques were mainly conducted by a pro-Kremlin domestic medium, *MV-Lehti*.
 - *MV-Lehti* is an outlet considered pro-Kremlin, founded by Janus Putkonen who energetically supports the separatism of Donbass (East Ukraine).
- Techniques used by *MV-Lehti* suggest strategically organised activity.
 - Janus Putkonen has close links to pro-Kremlin activists Johan Bäckman and Ilja Janitskin. Putkonen created *MV-Lehti*, *Doni News* and *Verkkomedia.org*, describing himself as a challenger to Western mainstream media.¹⁴⁸
 - An article published in 2016 in Finnish mainstream medium *Yle* connects *Nykysuomi* with Juha Korhonen¹⁴⁹, the chairman of the copycat Journalists Union, *Toimittajaliitto*.
- The exclusive use of Finnish language suggests that the targets of the process were Finnish-speaking audiences, potentially sceptical of Finnish mainstream media.
 - The story used the fallacy 'you're either with us, or against us', transforming alternative media journalists into freedom fighters and





Image 17. Tweet from Laura Halminen (*Helsingin Sanomat*) uncovering the copycat organisation

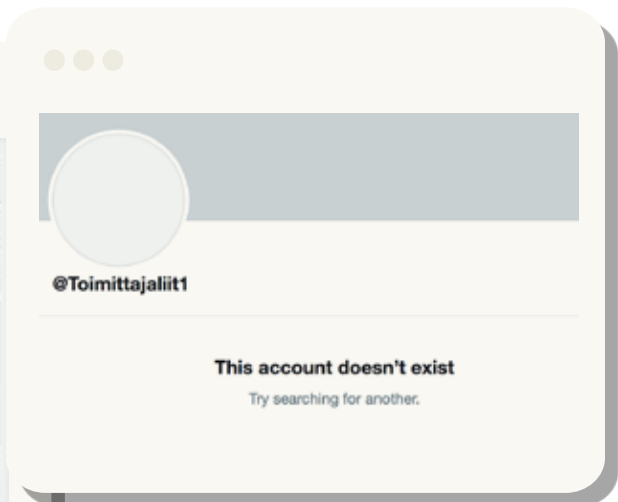


Image 18. Twitter suspended the account of *Toimittajaliitto*

- mainstream media into oppressive forces subject to the dictatorship of Finnish decision-makers.
- This aligns with Kremlin's narrative that European societies are obsessed with a Western-centric world and do not accept differing views.
- The plagiarised URL, copied from the real UJF, is relevant for deception purposes. This was an attempt to confuse audiences into visiting the new association, instead of the well-established, original UJF.
- A similar operation occurred in 2016, when *MV-Lehti* published an article claiming that the NATO Hybrid Centre had 'a license to kill'.¹⁵⁰ A copy website was created with a very similar URL than the original one (<http://hybridcoe.ru/>).
- Finnish journalists were seen to uncover and expose laundering processes (Image 17).¹⁵¹ Twitter was also efficient in responding to the malicious replica of the Union of Journalists, suspending their account (Image 18).
- Potemkin villages are signs of coordinated activity.
 - A Potemkin village was created between the *Toimittajaliitto* and *MV-Lehti*, where the latter reinforced the former within a short timeframe.
- The timeframe was long for the few media involved.
 - SM was practically non-existent, as the story was restricted to very specific online platforms and audiences.



” Russian and Ukrainian domain Russian language networks target Finland to strategically exploit its non-NATO status and influence international public opinion on topics such as NATO exercises, Ukraine, and the EU sanctions.

Involvement of domestic media networks in Information Laundering in Finland

This research proves that Finland is a country resilient to IL. Laundering processes in Finland are connected to defence and military issues. Notable pro-Kremlin information influence cases such as the campaign against Jessikka Aro, the falsification of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats' website, or the declarations about mass shootings in Sandarmokh were also studied, finding that rather than the laundering of a news story, it more frequently involved a wide amplification of different disinformation pieces concerning the same topic, without structured, chronological, and progressive distortion. However, this study identified that Russian and Ukrainian-domain Russian language networks target Finland to strategically exploit its non-NATO status and influence international public opinion on topics such as NATO exercises, Ukraine, and the EU sanctions.

Russian and English language outlets applied most of the IL techniques. Russian

foreign pro-Kremlin actors were seen to utilise largely Finnish news stories in order to disseminate anti-NATO narratives to Russian and English-speaking audiences. Meanwhile, domestic actors carried out internal IL activities (Case 16). The most frequently observed behavioural trend in the IL networks targeting Finland was the application of a few IL techniques supported with a large SM process that amplified and legitimised the laundered content. Half of the actors involved in IL cases in Finland conducted SM.

The most relevant domestic pro-Kremlin media exposed by this research was *MV-Lehti*, whose editor-in-chief, Janus Putkonen, also founded the Donetsk-based *DONi News*. In Case 13, Russian pro-Kremlin media *Svobodnaya Pressa* posted an interview with a very well-known Finnish pro-Kremlin voice, Johan Bäckman. He frequently appears on Russian media as a representative for Northern Europe at the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS). Bäckman also acquired the status of a *persona non grata* in Estonia. J.Putkonen and J.Bäckman have close ties with Ilja Janitskin. I.Janitskin



and J.Bäckman were indicted for online harassment conducted against Finnish journalist Jessika Aro.¹⁵² Tight connections between the three men can also be observed via *MV-Lehti*: I.Janitskin is the founder of the medium, J.Putkonen is its editor-in-chief, and J.Bäckman is a frequent contributor. *MV-Lehti* describes itself as a 'nationalist, politically independent, anti-globalist and patriotic news service'.¹⁵³ Outlets *Nykysuomi* and *Ylilauta.org* were identified as domestic proxies.

The media outlets from other NB8 countries that were seen to spread pro-Kremlin influence targeting Finland were Kremlin-official media *Sputnik Lithuania* and *Sputnik Estonia*, and Latvian proxy actor *Press.lv*.

This paper reveals that pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-official outlets are the most active type of actors involved in IL networks targeting Finland, making 75% of all the interventions in the IL processes. IL techniques had particular relevance when placing out-of-context quotes by reputed public figures (Case 14) in the mainstream international media (Case 13). This way, the laundered content seemed more credible and difficult to debunk. However, Finnish mainstream media such as *Yle*, *Ilta Sanomat*, and *Helsingin Sanomat* were efficient exposing the distorted information (Cases 14, 15, 16). As most of the IL processes had Russian and English as the main languages, it would be desirable to do such exposure also in those languages.



” Sweden is considered a high priority target for Information Laundering conducted by Kremlin and/or pro-Kremlin actors. The Information Laundering processes in Sweden share similarities with Finnish cases.

SWEDEN




Sweden’s status as a non-NATO EU member state has been the key when defining country’s approach to Kremlin’s influence activities. For decades, relations between Sweden and Russia were shaped by the former’s doctrine of nonalignment in peacetime and neutrality in wartime. However, according to experts, since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, Swedish public opinion has increased in favour of Sweden joining NATO.¹⁵⁴ Moreover, in 2016, Sweden signed a host-nation agreement with NATO and subsequently facilitated the joint Sweden-NATO *Aurora 17* exercise on the island of Gotland and on the mainland Sweden the following year.

The country’s free and independent press is one of its most important assets for combatting information influence activities.

Since 2014, there have been increasing efforts by the Swedish academia and government through the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) and The Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) to tackle Kremlin or pro-Kremlin information influence activities¹⁵⁵. Academia, government agencies and civil society organisations worked to avoid election interference during the Swedish general elections in 2018. As the election results saw a rise in the fortunes of the *Sverigedemokraterna party* (Sweden Democrats), the political context poses some challenges with the rise of anti-immigration parties and an increasing number of voters turning to anti-establishment parties. This could open a window of opportunity for Kremlin-official or pro-Kremlin narratives to permeate the audience more easily.

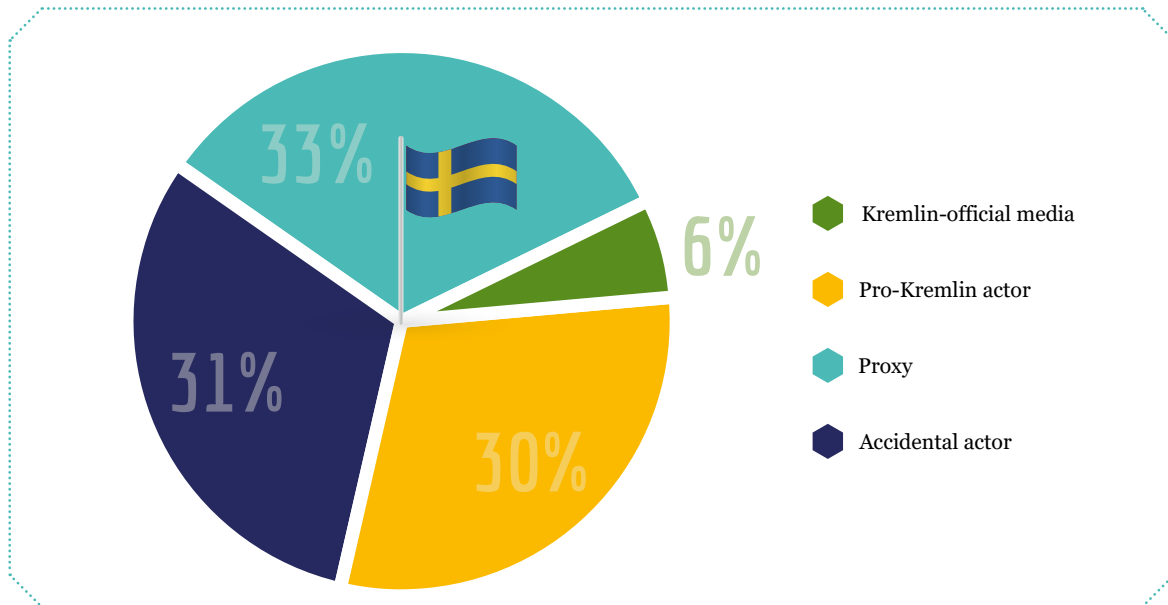


Table 7. Summary of IL cases in Sweden

Case	Techniques (in order of appearance)	Overview of Information Laundering networks
Swedish navy hides underground to hide from a possible Russian nuclear strike.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Deceitful translation,  misleading headline,  disinformation,  misappropriation. 	<p>Total media involved: 38.</p> <p>53% pro-Kremlin media, 26% accidental actors. Main language: Russian; Secondary: English. No domestic media involved.</p>
Sweden turns to cannibalism to fight climate change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Misleading headline,  disinformation,  misappropriation. 	<p>Total media involved: 45.</p> <p>58% accidental actor, 24% proxy. Main language: English, Swedish. 13% domestic media involved.</p>
Swedish government could have prevented ISIS attacks in Brussels.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Misappropriation,  disinformation,  smurfing,  deceitful translation. 	<p>Total media involved: 11.</p> <p>82% proxy actors. Main language: English. Swedish and Russian also registered. No Kremlin-official media was involved. One domestic media involved.</p>
Russian showman Stanislav Baretsky says Greta Thunberg is his daughter.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Misappropriation,  smurfing,  automated translation,  misleading headline. 	<p>Total media involved: 26.</p> <p>69% Russian pro-Kremlin media. Main language: Russian. Also German and English. No Kremlin-official media was involved. No domestic media were involved.</p>



Summary of findings



Graphic 7. Actors involved in Information Laundering cases in Sweden

- Sweden is considered a high priority target for IL conducted by Kremlin and/or pro-Kremlin actors.
 - IL processes in Sweden share similarities with Finnish IL cases. However, Swedish domestic outlets are slightly more active in enabling the spread of pro-Kremlin influence.
 - IL activity appears equally distributed among proxy, pro-Kremlin and accidental actors.
- IL processes are complex, with an average of 30 actors involved per case.
 - Although few domestic media are involved in the IL, Sweden is the country outside the Baltic region with the most activity by national pro-Kremlin (*Nyheter Idag*) and proxy actors (*Fria Tider*, *Svensk Press*, *News Voice*) participating in the IL processes.
 - Swedish proxies *White TV* and *Offensiv* participated in IL processes in Latvia and Norway, respectively.
- The networks use Russian as the main language and English as the secondary one.
 - IL processes targeting Swedish news events have been translated and further laundered in many different languages, such as Estonian, French or German.
 - High relevance of English language actors.
 - Research identified an overlap between right-wing American conspiracy theories websites and pro-Kremlin outlets.
 - SM especially relevant in Russian language.
- Themes: NATO and its military exercises, Western moral decay (cannibalism, terrorism).
- Main actors participating from IL within Sweden: Russian language proxy actors. However, the IL activity appears equally distributed among proxy, pro-Kremlin and accidental actors.



Case 17 – Swedish navy hides underground from a possible Russian nuclear strike

- Exposed by: *EU versus Disinfo* (5 October 2019)
- Placement by deceitful translation and misleading headline
- *RossBusinessConsulting*

Background. During the Cold War, the naval base on Muskö served as a military base to survive nuclear attacks. When Sweden's defence decreased, the Swedish navy moved headquarters. In 2019, the Swedish government decided to restore the base.

Laundering. On 30 September 2019, British newspaper *The Guardian* published a news article commenting on Sweden's defensive moves to face a belligerent Russia.¹⁵⁶ The news piece was laundered in English, Russian and Estonian between 30 September and 7 November, with 1 October being the day that saw the highest volume of activity, both concerning IL and SM, with 27 out of the 38 total media involved.

RossBusinessConsulting (RBC) is the news web-portal of *RBC Group* or *RosBusinessConsulting*, a large Russian media group headquartered in Moscow. Allegedly, in 2016, the leadership of RBC changed after an inquiry from the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation.

On 30 September, a woozle effect started with a deceitful translation by *RossBusinessConsulting* of *The Guardian* article. Sweden's alleged fear of Russia was illustrated by quoting Niklas Granholm (senior analyst at the Swedish Defence Research Agency) and Rebecca Landberg (head of communications for the Swedish Navy). This started a woozle effect, sustained during the whole laundering process.

On 1 October, the layering phase started with the highest volume of laundering registered, mainly in Russian language pro-Kremlin media. The layering began with pro-Kremlin *Kommersant's* use of a misleading

headline and disinformation followed by *Lenta.ru's* deceitful translation of *The Guardian's* article. This was amplified (SM) by online platforms and media such as *Rambler*, *Sputnik Tajikistan* and *Kar Newz*. The layering on this day included deceitful translations and misappropriations from *Pravda*, *Vzglyad*, *Inosmi*, *TopWar*, and *Popular Mechanics*. All the techniques were seeking to distort the original news article in a way that linked Swedish paranoia about a Russian threat with the lack of national defence capabilities making the country look vulnerable against Russia. They also claimed that the event was a result of Russophobic behaviour prompted by



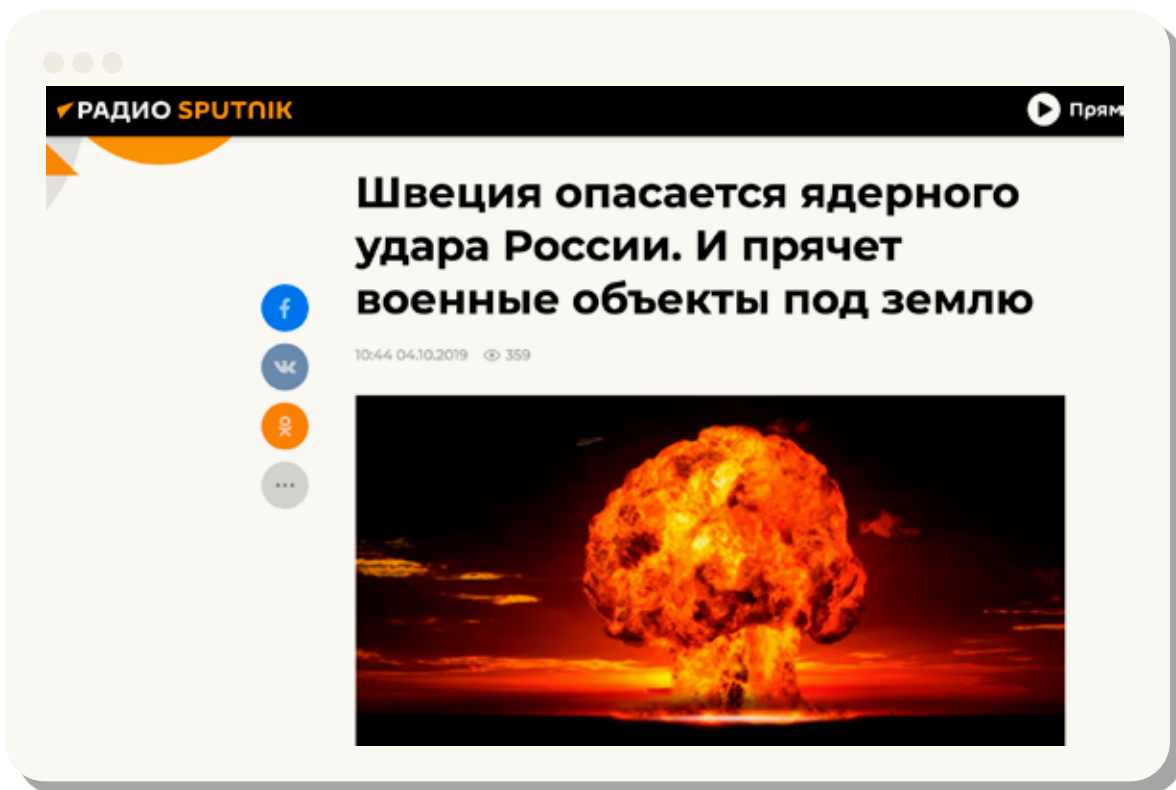


Image 19. Radio Sptunik's image

NATO and the EU. Often, 'Crimea' appeared linked to 'Swedish paranoia' in a way that combined ridiculing these Western anti-Russian stances with a threatening rhetoric describing Russian military prowess as able to defeat Sweden, or any other country within Europe. On this day, author Alexander Ponomarev published the same news article in Russian language *Popular Mechanics* and *PC News* (smurfing), including misleading headlines and misappropriation of factual and contextual data. Later in the day, the IL techniques and distortion became more evident. For example, while *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* wrote about Sweden urgently preparing for a major war with Russia,

Kavkaz Centre focused on the Swedish government's decision as a 'symbol of the revival of the spirit of the Cold War' and the recent increase in defence expending by the Swedish government as evidence of escalating tensions. *InoTV* used misappropriation, depicting 'unjustified Swedish paranoia' as a recurrent issue due to the Swedish reaction when a Russian submarine was allegedly spotted in the Swedish territorial waters. The news medium *Delfi* contributed to SM in its Latvian and Estonian versions. In the platform *Chto-proishodit.ru*, similar articles were written by the same author, Alexander Zuev (smurfing). This platform receives



around 57 000 visits per month, according to *SimilarWeb* data.

On 2 October, *Sputnik Estonia* continued the laundering process with a misleading headline and disinformation, claiming there is an increasing threat of a global nuclear conflict. It also used misappropriation by claiming that ‘the base was frozen 15 years ago due to the growth of optimistic sentiments and a faith in the minds of the mankind, which would not allow for a nuclear war’. That allowed for an insinuation that societies representing the corrupt West will allow for a nuclear war to happen.

On 4 October, *Radio Sputnik* attached a highly misleading image of an explosion to the laundered article and claimed that the Western propaganda was to blame for the Swedish paranoia (disinformation, misappropriation).

Topwar retook the news on 7 November, authoring an extensive article about Muskö base as a military facility capable of surviving nuclear attacks. According to the pro-Kremlin platform, Sweden’s decision was the result of a shift in the European approach to Russia (misappropriation).

Although the main language of IL was Russian, as *EU versus Disinfo* points out, the news was also laundered in the Estonian language, after being shared by *Sputnik Estonia* on 5 October¹⁵⁷. It included a variety of IL techniques such as misleading headlines, disinformation and misappropriation. Through these, the author

portrayed the alleged Russian threat as a chimera imagined by the West, as a result of Russophobic propaganda campaigns. This article was amplified by other Estonian platforms such as *Pilguheit.ee*.¹⁵⁸

The news was also amplified in the English language media such as *Sputnik International* (RUS), *The Trumpet* (USA), *Daily Express* (GBR), *The National* (UAE), and *Defence.pk* (PAK).

Observations

- This study identifies IL conducted by foreign media in several languages. The process encompassed 38 media sources, in three languages – Russian, English and Estonian.
 - No spread was seen in Swedish language media. Hence, Swedish-speaking audiences were not the prime targets of this IL case.
- IL techniques identified were mainly perpetrated by the Kremlin-official (mainly *Sputnik* in several versions) and pro-Kremlin media.
- Contrary to other cases with a predominance of Russian-language media, IL in this case was larger than SM.
 - The peak of activity was observed on 1 October, with 70% of the media involved.
- Timeframe: 38 days.



Case 20 – Liberal democracies support cannibalism to fight climate change¹⁵⁹

- Exposed by: *EU versus Disinfo* (10, 15 and 17 September 2019)
 - Placement by misleading headline
- *Fria Tider* (domestic proxy)

Background. In an interview with *TV4* on 3 September 2019, Magnus Söderlund, professor and director of the Consumer Marketing Center at the Stockholm School of Economics, suggested that a time might come when we have to re-examine our taboos, using examples such as human meat consumption within the context of the ‘Gastro Summit – about the future of food’ festival in Sweden.¹⁶⁰ Conspiracy theories to portray Western moral decay are recurrent topics to discredit the EU countries and their liberal democratic models. M.Söderlund argues that he merely gauged the audience’s response to the theoretical prospect of cannibalistic practices.

Laundering. The content discussed in the interview was laundered and widely spread in Swedish, English, French and Russian. English language laundering was conducted on a wide spectrum of online platforms, from fringe outlets to popular media such as *Fox News*, *Breitbart*, *London Evening Standard*, and *The New York Post*. In total, 45 outlets took part in the process.

On 4 September 2019, anti-immigration, and right-wing oriented Swedish-language medium *Fria Tider* (Free Times) conducted the placement, including a misleading headline which stated that there was a proposal on *TV4* (public broadcaster) to use cannibalism as a way to fight climate change. The body of the text was presented in a highly sensationalised way, including a selection of M.Söderlund’s most provocative quotes. On the same day, this was amplified through SM by Swedish proxies *The World News* and *Svensk Press*. According to the Atlantic Council, *Fria Tider* ‘enjoys a symbiotic relationship with *Sputnik*, frequently sourcing material from and providing material to the Russian propaganda outlet’.¹⁶¹

Hence, *Fria Tider* is considered as a proxy by this study.

The translation from Swedish to English was also conducted on 4 September. The first media identified to share the news in English was Alex Jones’ *Infowars*, which included IL techniques such as misleading headline and disinformation. The piece affirmed that the Swedish professor had proposed ‘eating humans to save the planet’ and included comments such as ‘no doubt Greta Thunberg and Prince Harry will be first in line for when cockroaches and human flesh is being dished out at the next international climate summit’, in order to exaggerate the unpleasant content of the professor’s alleged proposal and use it to



Although it is unknown whether *The Epoch Times* has any alignment with pro-Kremlin media, it is considered by some sources (such as the *NBC News*) to be a far-right medium that helps to spread conspiracy theories. Recently, *NBC News* published a news article stating that *The Epoch Times* had used artificial intelligence to create fake personas and push conspiracies. According to media reports, *Facebook* took down more than 600 accounts tied to this outlet. The network was called 'The BL' and run by Vietnamese users posing as Americans, using fake photos generated by algorithms to imitate real identities.

discredit Western public figures. *Infowars'* article was amplified through SM on the same day by the blog *Choosing-him* and the media outlet *United America First*. The author of *Infowars'* article, Paul Joseph Watson, is also a collaborator for Kremlin-official media *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*). He published the exact same piece on the American website *Summit News*, without referencing *Infowars* as a source (smurfing).

Later that day, English-language newspaper *The Epoch Times*¹⁶² further laundered the content with a misleading headline that included disinformation ('Cannibalism as an "emergency measure" to fight climate change'). It also incorporated misappropriation - M.Söderlund's arguments were contested by commenting on the consequences of cannibalism for Papua New Guinea's Fore tribe and the 'kuru'¹⁶³.

On 5 September, the laundering continued in English and Swedish language media. The international version of *Sputnik* published a news article emphasizing how Swedish society had rejected the declarations from M.Söderlund. To support this claim, *Sputnik*

had included tweets by some selected Swedish *Twitter* users with less than 200 followers.

The Swedish version of *NewsVoice* conducted misappropriation by stating that Swedish citizens should expressly reject organ donation to prevent them from being eaten by cannibals; if there is a demand in human flesh, then patients in coma are at the risk of being killed:

'What price will be set for a human flesh? What will be the price per kilo? Will the price differ if the meat comes from a younger person or, for example, an old and sick person? Will athlete meat or celebrity meat be of a higher price? If a Swedish Prime Minister dies, will the meat be sold to the highest bidder on the open market or will the party leadership get the first hand?'

Christians for Truth followed the layering process with misappropriation and disinformation, linking this news event to the ideas of radical progressive liberals, who seek to attain a Marxist Utopia. The article finished by quoting the prophet



Jeremiah (19:9) who foretold a time when the Israelites would embrace cannibalism, 'so let's not pretend we are shocked or outraged when the most atheistic country in the "advanced" Europe proposes this to solve its social maladies'. Later that day, *Voice of Europe* introduced a misleading headline and misappropriation by depicting M.Söderlund as a radical-left environmentalist and stating that it was just a matter of time before cannibalism became a trend for luxury restaurants. The *New American* coverage connected the proposal with Swedish meatballs and the country's suicide rates: "the real threat is that the greenies will continue burying us with propaganda and create a dystopian, leftist society lacking in innovation and wealth creation". *PJ media* conducted disinformation that created a dichotomy between the 'cannibals and the non-cannibals': 'They want to take away your plastic straws, your cars, your burgers. Then there are the behavioral scientists in Sweden who want us to eat human flesh to deal with the effects of climate change'. The same author translated *PJ media's* article into Swedish and published it on the Swedish language platform *Sv.technocracy.news*, adding references to the dystopian American film *Soylent Green* (misappropriation).

On 5 September, the English-language version of *NewsVoice* published an article stating that Swedish public television was promoting 'cannibalism as the solution to the climate threat'. This article was published by the same author as for the

Swedish version on the same platform, however it incorporated some nuances directed at international audiences: 'The Swedish people with an international reputation of always being nice and loyal to their government, answered politely that they would gladly eat an arm or a leg, and some more fastidious Swedes answered they would start light, with a finger or a nail'. *Breitbart* continued the laundering. *Breitbart's* article was amplified by the American platforms *Your News*, *Climate Change Dispatch*, and *Watts Up With That*. The latter also conducted misappropriation by mentioning the Andes tragedy of Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571. British newspaper *The Evening Standard* conducted misappropriation by mentioning Soylent Green again, referencing the article published in *The Epoch Times*, but including also the content that had been published by *Sputnik*.

On 8 September, *Pluralist* used a picture of congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez together with a picture of M.Söderlund in order to state that cannibalism to attain sustainability would be cheaper than Ocasio's Green New Deal. The right-wing anti-immigration Swedish medium *Nyheter Idag* published about the controversy on 9 September. Chang Frick, editor of the newspaper, used to be a collaborator for *RT*.¹⁶⁴ It connected the event with an idea formulated in the 18th century to avoid child starvation in Ireland (misappropriation). *Fox News* and the *Daily Mail* shared the coverage from *The Epoch Times*. The former included



a video with some disgusting images and disturbing music. The same author published the same article in *The New York Post* (smurfing). *Twitchy* shared *The New York Post's* article with a highly misleading headline that begun with 'Have your kid and eat it, too [...]'. On *Fox News* commentator's Sean Hannity's website, the author connected this to Mayor Pete Buttigieg's declarations regarding the climate change in order to discredit him. In *The Resurgent*, the author uses the argument of reducing meat consumption as a new form of neo-colonialism (misappropriation).

On 10 September, the French version of *Sputnik* translated the article including disinformation by stating that 'Söderlund et d'autres écologistes d'extrême gauche aiment accuser les industries et l'agriculture du réchauffement climatique'. *The Vigilant Citizen* included disinformation stating that Western public figures such as Katy Perry and Netflix series are promoting cannibalism and making it look 'cool'. 'If you're asking yourself "why is cannibalism being promoted?", the true answer to this question is not "to save the environment". Indeed, the answer to this question is the answer to the question "why are children being sexualized in mass media?". The answer: To normalize the sick perversions of the occult elite.'

On 17 September, *Fort-Russ* established that 'liberals have gone so insane that not eating human flesh is now considered "conservative" in their depraved libtard

minds'¹⁶⁵ (disinformation). It also shared a video from *Vesti.ru's* coverage of the news.

Observations

- The placement of this case was conducted by the domestic right-wing anti-immigration domestic medium *Fria Tider*.
 - Other domestic news platforms participated in the SM.
- Both, IL and SM were large and adopted a global dimension, without a particular focus on pro-Kremlin angles but highly exploited by Russian-language pro-Kremlin media and Kremlin-official media.
 - The use of the smurfing technique allowed IL actors to amplify and translate the laundered piece to different languages (e.g. *NewsVoice*).
- The most important technique was a constant woozle effect mixed with misappropriation. Logical leaps were conducted by repeatedly removing M.Söderlund's quotes from context and laundering the news to announce an imminent collapse of the Western moral values and Western societies.
- Research identified an overlap between right-wing American conspiracy theory sources and pro-Kremlin media.
 - This Swedish case was a niche for conspiratorial theorists more than a story pushed by Kremlin-official or



pro-Kremlin media. However, it was opportunistically taken by pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-official media to depict the decadence in the West (IL-C).

- Far-right (anti-American left) narratives merged with pro-Kremlin narratives demonizing Western liberal values and painting Europe as a continent of degrading moral standards.
- Discredit liberalism, progressist ideas, and traditionally left-wing movements.
- Misappropriation was used to shame prominent leftist figures such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

- Swedish media who participated in the IL were also categorised as right-wing and anti-immigration.

- IL was higher than SM, which is likely caused by the character of the news – prone to be sensationalised and an easy target for conspiratorial discussions.
- This laundering process could be considered effective, since it made its way to the mainstream media and reached a high number of accidental actors, who amplified the news through SM and increased their visibility.

Case 21 - Sweden is indirectly supporting ISIS

- Exposed by: Graphika (16 June 2020)
- Placement by disinformation and misleading headline
 - User 'Arri Gibbs' on *YouTube* (domestic proxy)

Background. On 23 March 2016, Swedish daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*¹⁶⁶ published a news article stating how a known criminal in Sweden, Mohamed Belkaid, who had been to prison four times before he radicalised and joined ISIS in 2014, played a key role in the 2016 Brussels bombings.

Laundering. The placement was conducted by user 'Arri Gibbs' on 28 March, releasing a *YouTube* video where he explained how Sweden could have prevented the attacks. The video is produced with an automated voice (placement by means of misappropriation and disinformation).

The same user created an article and disseminated the information of the video in the platform *Indymedia.org.uk*

(smurfing). The article stated that the Swedish authorities were unwilling to collaborate with the EU in the fight against





Image 20. Visual support shared by *Indymedia*

ISIS and suggested that perhaps in that case Sweden should cease being part of 'United Europe'. On the same day, another persona called 'Steven Laack' conducted smurfing by disseminating the content on two other English language platforms: *News Participation* and *Scoop.it*. On 29 March, the article was disseminated in Swedish language on the alternative platform *Svensk Press* through a deceitful translation of the already laundered piece, implying that the political constellation and the political party in power (Social Democrats) was about to change. Two users from the Russian self-publishing platform *Mirtensen* disseminated

the content through SM. *Ridus* included deceitful translation and misappropriation by transforming some parts of 'Arri Gib's' article into quotes by either an invented or not-sourced expert called 'Vladimir Kireev'.

Observations

- The laundering process involved 11 outlets over 2 days; in English, Swedish and Russian languages.
 - Outlets and techniques used indicate that international audiences were prioritised over Swedish audiences.
 - This case was also exposed by

Graphika when uncovering the *Secondary Infektion* operation.

- IL aimed at portraying Sweden as incapable and unwilling to deal with the terrorist crisis together with European allies.
 - Boost the perception of the failure of 'EU solidarity'.
- The level of distortion from the facts was high, since the Swedish government was portrayed as a government that did not care about

terrorist attacks in other countries and just focused on retaining power, i.e. it could have prevented the attacks but it did not do so (Image 20).

- *Indymedia* was used for smurfing purposes.
 - The use of smurfing techniques suggests a coordinated type of activity.
 - User 'Arri Gibs' who placed the article (and own *YouTube* video) on *Indymedia* has become inactive since.

Case 22 - Greta Thunberg is Stanislav Baretzky's daughter

- Exposed by: *EU versus Disinfo* (17 December 2019)
- Placement by misleading headline and disinformation
 - *Verchernyaya Moskva* (foreign proxy)

Background. Stanislav Baretzky is a Russian showman known for his aggressive behaviour and strong anti-Western views.

Laundering. On 17 December 2019, Stanislav Baretzky posted a picture¹⁶⁷ and a video¹⁶⁸ on his *Instagram* profile, falsely claiming that Greta Thunberg was his daughter, and that her mother (who abandoned her) was from St. Petersburg. According to the post, he claimed paternity to save the young activist from 'bad Swedish people' and bring her to Russia. Russian media *Ren TV* and *Life* amplified the content of the video. The first IL technique was applied by *Verchernyaya Moskva* (placement by means of disinformation and misappropriation). It included unsourced information allegedly from S. Baretzky's lawyer stating that they were requesting paternity examination 'taking similarity in appearance as a start'. *Rambler News Services* distorted the article, covering events in Greta's life in a negative way, such as leaving school and endorsing President Donald Trump's reaction to Greta being named *Time's* person of the year as ridiculous, calling on Greta to learn how to control her emotions. *Lenta.ru* added a paragraph that ridiculed Greta's address at the UN Climate Summit (misappropriation).



Moika78.ru emphasised S.Baretsky's words about Greta looking like his grandmother, while platforms such as *Hend of Moscow* and *Newsde.eu* conducted automated translations into English and German, respectively. Both platforms are set by the same user translating the same articles from Russian media (automated translation, smurfing).

On 18 December, *Ria Fan* and *Potitexpert* continued the layering in an article whose headline stated that Baretsky was claiming the paternity to save Greta from dishonest people (misleading headline). *Tsargrad TV* praised Baretsky for wanting to save Greta from being bullied on the Internet and to make her Minister for Ecology (misleading headline).

Observations

- This IL case did not see Swedish media involved. Russian language media targeted a Swedish public figure Greta Thunberg to criticise Sweden.
 - Swedes were portrayed to Russian-speaking audiences as dishonest people exploiting a poor girl (aligned with the spread of anti-Western views).
- No Kremlin-official media was involved in the process.
- No media conducted a particularly relevant distortion since the story was already false. It just got amplified, supporting the legitimacy-building process and emphasising the angle of unacceptable Western 'values' and Western moral decay.
- The laundering process took two days, excluding the isolated publication in *greta-tunberg.ru* on 29 December.
- Amplified on *Twitter* by pro-Kremlin journalist and *RT* columnist Bryan MacDonald (@27khv).¹⁶⁹
- Laundering process purely amplified and further sensationalised the activity of S.Baretsky.
 - S.Baretsky's activity on this topic has continued.
 - Whether S.Baretsky truly believes this or it is his understanding of a joke which helps to undermine Sweden, the idea of climate change and Greta Thunberg herself (which could be possible due to his openly anti-Western views) – that remains unknown.
- Signs of coordinated activity were identified in the translation of the news to English and German languages. The same article was posted in *Hend of Moscow* and *Newsde.eu* at the same time by the same persona.
 - This was the only SM detected on European platforms.
 - The users' role on both platforms is to disseminate translations in English and German from Russian





Andry Kut

Translation of news from authors: life.ru lenta.ru social networks E-mail: ilzolikk@gmail.com Blog: <http://handofmoscow.com>

Image 21. Profile of *Hand of Moscow* and *Maxpark* (smurfing)

media. In both sites, when clicking 'Contact', a statement appears that it is a machine translation site and the contact email is yazolik@yandex.ru. They are two identical platforms with different names in different languages (Image 21).

- Research on this case located a Russian website aimed at discrediting the young Swedish activist: *gretatunberg.ru*. It amplified the content 12 days later, the bulk of the laundering process happened on 29 December.
- Media generally posted pictures of both personalities together to assess their similarity.

Involvement of domestic media networks in Information Laundering in Sweden

The study of IL within or targeting Sweden uncovered the foreign and domestic actors involved in the spread of Kremlin's influence within the country. IL processes in Sweden share similarities with those relating to Finland. However, Swedish domestic media outlets have a slightly more relevant

role in enabling the spread of pro-Kremlin influence. Proxies, accidental actors, and foreign pro-Kremlin media are equally relevant, when spreading influence in the Swedish media environment.

Sweden was identified as the country outside the Baltic region with the most pro-Kremlin (*Nyheter Idag*) and proxy (*Fria Tider*, *SvenskPress*, *NewsVoice*) actors involved in information laundering processes. According to the Atlantic Council's publication 'The Kremlin's Trojan Horses'¹⁷⁰, Chang Frick, the editor of online newspaper *Nyheter Idag* (News Today), previously worked for *RT*. Closely affiliated at its inception with the Sweden Democrats, *Nyheter Idag* has become more independent in the past few years. *Fria Tider* is registered in Estonia. Although there are no proven connections to the Kremlin, researchers have identified it as a domestic medium that is more aligned to Kremlin's views¹⁷¹. There are also certain links to *Sputnik News*, which has been seen to translate and launder *Fria Tider's* publications¹⁷². Swedish media have participated in IL processes in other NB8 countries: *White TV* (LVA), *Offensiv* (NOR). Other pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-official media



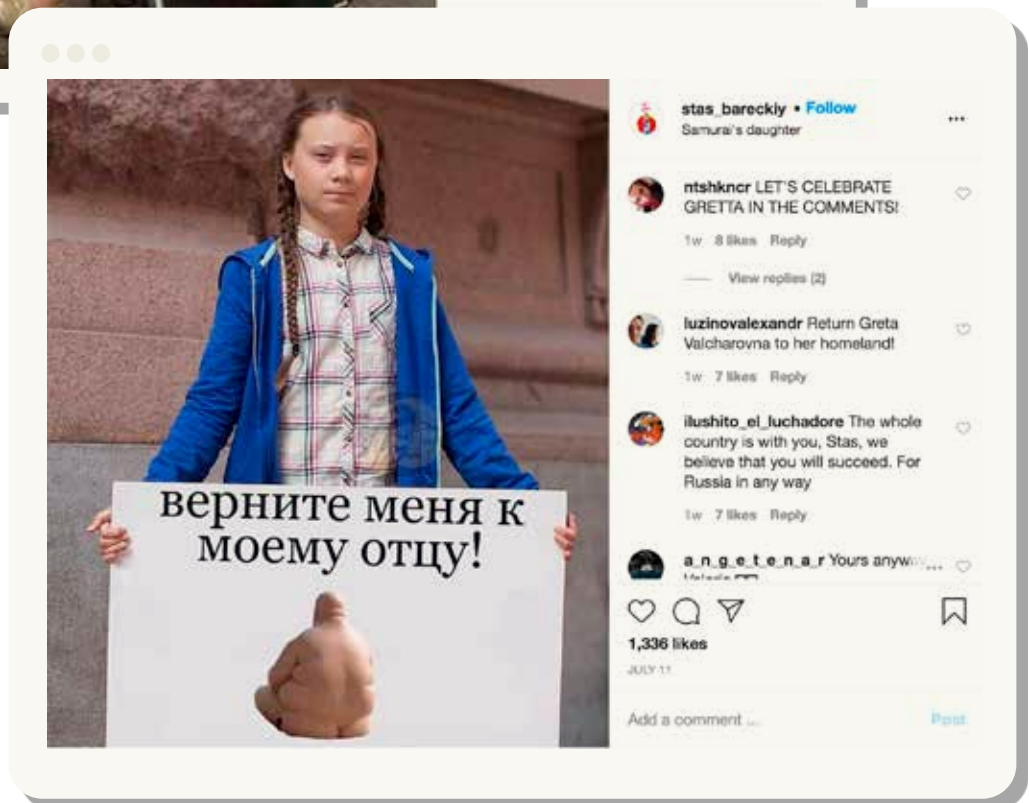
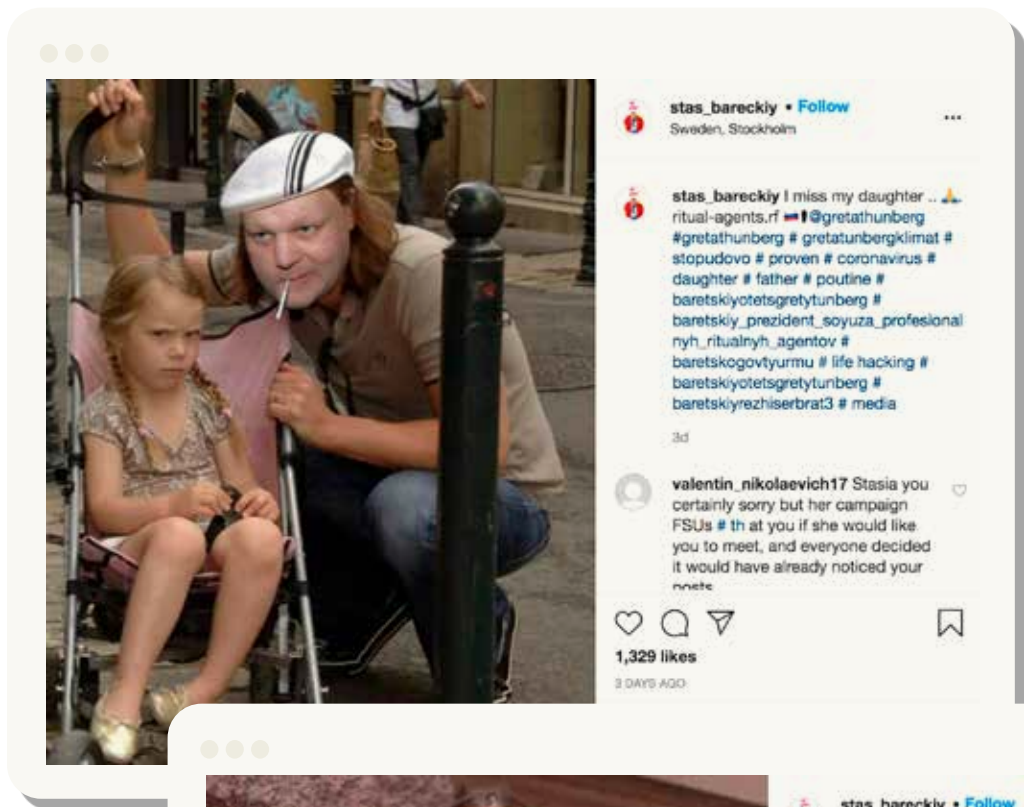


Image 22. Examples of Baretsky's posts on *Instagram* with doctored photos



from the NB8 also participated in the IL cases targeting Sweden, such as *Sputnik Estonia*.

IL networks use Russian as the main language and English as the secondary one. However, IL processes targeting Swedish news events have been translated and further laundered in also in other languages, such as Estonian, French or

German. Interestingly, English language actors are highly relevant in IL targeting Swedish news, with an overlap between right-wing American conspiracy theory sources and pro-Kremlin media. The IL cases researched seemed to be effective, reaching mainstream international media and accidental actors that amplified the laundered content.



” Evidence suggests there are actors strategically utilizing news about Iceland to recover Cold War perceptions of an ongoing two-bloc confrontation and portray NATO as an aggressive actor constantly threatening Russia.

ICELAND












Iceland became the world’s best protector of Internet freedom in 2019, registering no civil or criminal cases for acts of expression online. Icelandic citizens enjoy near-universal connectivity, minimal restrictions on online content, and strong protections of their rights online. Furthermore, Iceland is one of the most connected countries in the world and there are few obstacles to accessing the Internet. However, as Freedom House reports, current challenges include potentially inappropriate links between elected representatives and business interests, as well as media consolidation.¹⁷³

Iceland is generally considered a low priority target for Kremlin’s information influence operations. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that themes such as the role of Keflavik military base during and after the Cold War, as well as Iceland’s relations with the US and the interest to counterweight NATO’s influence, have

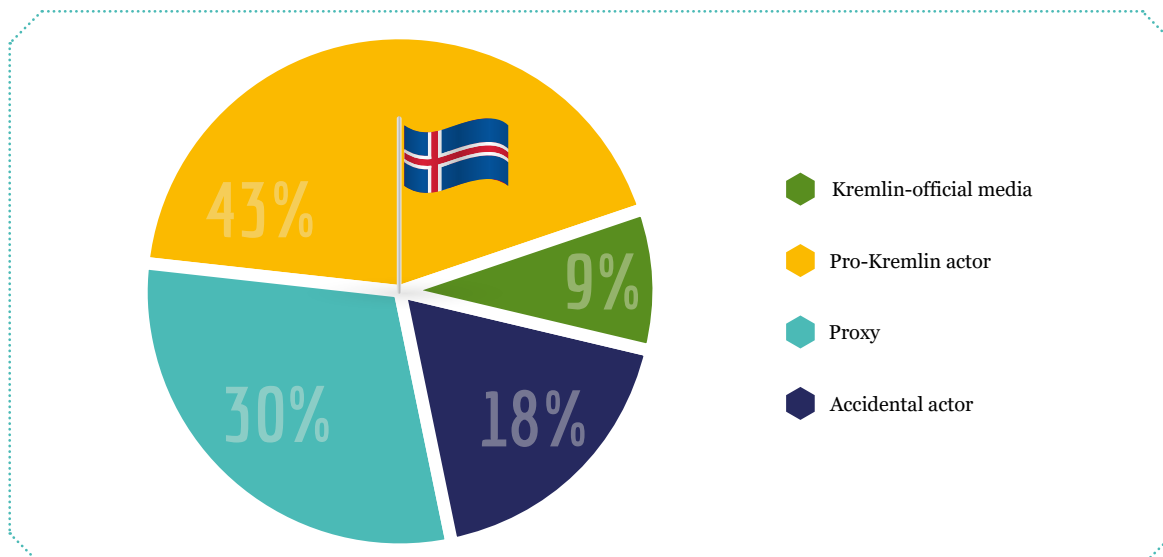
motivated IL processes involving Iceland. Research suggests that there is also a rising interest in Iceland’s role in the Arctic region. As Baldur Thorhallsson and Pétur Gunnarsson write, ‘in 2015, the Icelandic government considered withdrawing its support for the sanctions against Russia over Ukraine. That came as a surprise to many, as Iceland had otherwise tended to align itself closely with the USA and the EU in such matters. The Icelandic fishing industry lobbied hard for the sanctions to be lifted, to avoid Russian counter-sanctions on Iceland. After considerable internal debate, the government decided to uphold the sanctions, but settled on a policy of not taking part in EU declarations about the sanctions.’¹⁷⁴ Then, following the poisoning of Sergey Skripal in 2017, some Icelandic leaders boycotted the 2018 World Cup in Russia¹⁷⁵.



Table 8. Summary of Information Laundering cases in Iceland

Case	Techniques (in order of appearance)	Overview of networks
Iceland becomes a NATO/USA vassal instead of maintaining political neutrality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Deceitful translation,  disinformation,  misappropriation,  woozle effect,  misleading headline. 	<p>Total media involved: 16.</p> <p>(81% Russian language). 63% pro-Kremlin media and 25% proxy. No domestic media was involved.</p>
Iceland pays male immigrants to marry Icelandic women.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Disinformation,  misleading headline,  misappropriation. 	<p>Total media involved: 16.</p> <p>(90% Russian language). 50% accidental actor, 50% pro-Kremlin media. No domestic media was involved.</p>
The US planned to secretly deploy nuclear weapons to Iceland during the Cold War.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Deceitful translation,  misappropriation,  Potemkin village. 	<p>Total media involved: 51.</p> <p>(90% Russian language). 56% pro-Kremlin media; 16% Kremlin-official media; 16% proxy. From the English-language media 60% were Kremlin-official media. No domestic media was involved but one domestic media was mentioned.</p>

Summary of findings



Graphic 8. Actors involved in Information Laundering cases in Iceland



- Iceland is considered a low priority target for IL conducted by Kremlin and/or pro-Kremlin actors.
 - However, evidence suggests there are actors strategically utilizing news about Iceland to recover Cold War perceptions of an ongoing two-bloc confrontation and portray NATO as an aggressive actor constantly threatening Russia.
 - News stories about Keflavik naval base pay a key role in the IL.
- IL processes are simple – 28 actors involved in average per case, mainly foreign.
 - No domestic media are seen to actively participate in IL processes.
 - However, *The Saker*, registered in Iceland, is a well-known pro-Kremlin media outlet.
- Research found that Kremlin-official media, specifically *Sputnik News*, reuse laundered news years after the IL process has already ended.
 - This constitutes a unique characteristic when comparing IL results to other NB8 countries.
- Main IL languages are Russian and English.
 - SM reaches a wider range of languages than for other NB8 countries.
 - There is low participation of domestic outlets.
 - Although no domestic media were seen to be involved in the IL in Iceland, a very active pro-Kremlin outlet, *The Saker*, is registered in Iceland. It was seen to participate in the IL in other NB8 countries such as Latvia.
- IL targeting Iceland shares similarities with Denmark, but with a greater emphasis on NATO-focused stories.
 - NATO is depicted as a hostile, immoral actor.
- Arctic narratives are emerging as a target for IL techniques.

Case 23 - Iceland became a NATO/US vassal

Exposed by unpublished research
 Placement by deceitful translation and disinformation
 ■ *Bürgerstimme* (Foreign pro-Kremlin media)

Background. Naval Air Station Keflavik (NASKEF) is a US Navy base at Keflavik International Airport. The facility was built during the World War II by the US Army within the framework of a defense agreement between the US and Iceland. Part of its mission was to defend Iceland and to secure the North Atlantic air routes. NASKEF had a great strategic importance during the Cold War for the US and NATO Allies, playing a significant role in deterrence¹⁷⁶. The base was closed on 8 September 2006 and its facilities were taken over by the Icelandic Defence Agency. However, a month after the annexation of Crimea, Captain Jon Gudnason, Commander of the



Keflavik Airbase received orders to return to the former NASKEF¹⁷⁷. On 29 June 2016, a Joint Declaration was signed between the two countries to restore Keflavik military base¹⁷⁸, which was reported by German newspaper *Deutsche Welle* one day later¹⁷⁹.

Laundering. The placement was conducted by a German online newspaper *Bürgerstimme* on 13 August 2016 through a deceitful translation of *Deutsche Welle's* news piece from English to German. The news article included disinformation, asserting that Iceland had willingly decided to become NATO's vassal¹⁸⁰ - instead of maintaining neutrality – and that the country had 'never been free'. Misappropriation can also be found when the author pictures the contemporary global order as a bipolar world that has remained the same since the Cold War (BRICS versus NATO). He highlights the loss of 'drive' of Western countries and lack of support from their own citizens – unlike in BRICS. He adds that the West has created an image of the 'Russian aggressor' out of nowhere - Russia is a peaceful actor being constantly pushed by NATO. The laundering process in English included four media outlets.

In the layering process, *Sputnik News* formalized the laundered news, thus legitimizing *Bürgerstimme's* content to certain audiences, i.e. those who engage with Kremlin-official media. In addition, *Sputnik* created a woozle effect to consolidate evidence by continuously citing Joachim Sondern, who, in fact, is neither an expert, nor a well-known journalist. *Sputnik's* article amplified the content from the German newspaper by emphasizing that this was just another attempt by the US to counter Russia and influence other states – even own Allies. It also highlighted that by acting as a US/NATO's vassal, Iceland posed a threat to Russia. Thus, if provoked, Russia could and would respond accordingly to NATO's provocations. Positioning NATO as a direct threat and questioning Western moral standards, the article affirms that the US is trying to undermine the relationship between Iceland and Russia. This article was amplified by the pro-Kremlin English language media

Signs Of The Times on the same day, and two weeks later by a profile on *Blogspot* that generally shares Kremlin-official media content, *Lightmorelight.blogspot.com*.

IL in Russian language media involved 13 media outlets.

RT's InoTV shared a translation of *Bürgerstimme's* article including the misleading headline that Iceland had become a NATO vassal because of 'the Russian threat'. It repeatedly quoted J.Sonders to provide evidence (woozle effect). On the same day, *Vesti.ru* emphasized the Russophobic connotation of the reestablishment of the naval base with the headline: 'Iceland falls victim to NATO's anti-Putin tales' (misleading headline). *Vzglyad* conducted misappropriation by mentioning that Keflavik was often portrayed in several scenarios of a World War III during the Cold War, deepening the feeling that this could be



the beginning/evidence of a contemporary Cold War-like scenario. This was amplified (SM) on 15 and 16 August by pro-Kremlin online media outlets such as *Kolokol Rossii* and *TopWar.ru*.

On 18 August, *Vzglyad* shared the article again, adding some new information reported the same morning by *RIA Novosti*¹⁸¹ - about a set of documents released by the National Security Archive (NSA) on secret plans by the US in the Cold War to deploy nuclear weapons to Iceland. *Vzglyad* mixed these two pieces (on the one hand, the already laundered information that the US was restoring Keflavik and turning Iceland against Russia and, on the other hand, secret plans from the US to install nuclear warheads in Iceland during the Cold War), thus creating a new information piece (misappropriation). This was utilized as support to the theories that the world was on the verge of another two-block confrontation (disinformation). The piece from the NSA that was mixed by *Vzglyad* is part of another IL process targeting Iceland (see Case 3).

On 19 August, *Rueconomics.ru* published an even more distorted version of the article, stating that in 2016, it was yet to be decided if the deployment of nuclear weapons to Iceland would go ahead (disinformation). Also, on the same day, the website *Politrussia.com* published an article laundering the content from *InoTV*, dramatizing the storyline and including several disinformation techniques and misappropriations, i.e. the reason for the US to go back to Keflavik was to build tensions

with Russia and consolidate power in the Arctic region. It claimed that this case was another outcome of the West's 'absurd anti-Russian propaganda', since Russia would never pose a threat to Iceland. However, as other media reported before, Russia could and would respond: 'the more Iceland will participate in aggressive anti-Russian projects, the more attention they will be forced to pay to us'.

Observations

- IL techniques were mainly conducted by pro-Kremlin Russian language media. Networks were shorter than in other NB8 countries, with fewer actors involved.
 - Three different languages were detected, with translations made into German, English and Russian.
 - SM was also conducted in other languages such as Spanish and French.
- The absence of Icelandic language media involved suggests that Icelandic-speaking audiences were not targets in the process.
 - Iceland was used not to influence Icelandic audiences but to portray a bipolar global order and picture NATO as an aggressive power towards Russia.
- Two IL processes were detected: one in English and another in Russian. The former combined four media outlets, whereas the latter was larger with 13 outlets participating through IL or SM.





Image 23. Joachim Sonders collaborating with *News Front*

- The timeframe was shorter in Russian (6 days) and longer in English (27 days).
- Russia is depicted as a peaceful but powerful state: it does not want conflict, but it can respond and win.
- The level of distortion from the facts was not high. The US and Iceland were certainly restoring the naval base.
 - The emphasis relies on the twisted angle that Russian media gave to the news: Iceland as a vassal of the US; and the bipolar world order in constant tension, driven by NATO's Russophobia.
- SM was higher than IL.
- Some media highlighted the US's strategic interest in Iceland due to the Arctic region.

Notes on the author who conducted the placement: Joachim Sondern is a German journalist who closely collaborates with pro-Kremlin media such as the German and Russian versions of *News Front* (Image 23). According to his public profiles, he worked for 11 years for the German pro-Kremlin online newspaper *Bürgerstimme*. Research reveals that *Bürgerstimme* – founded in 2009 and now closed – held anti-Western views and used to feed content into Kremlin-official media such as *RT* or *Sputnik*. J.Sondern holds nationalistic views, being part of Germany's Identitarian Movement, promoting national and cultural survival against influences through refugees and migration and with influences in/support from AFD and Pegida in Germany. He also defends the rise of Vox in Spain. Although *Bürgerstimmee* is now closed, J.Sonders is actively sharing pro-Kremlin content and conspiracy theories (normally against the West) in platforms such as *Bichute* and social media¹⁸². For example, he recently created a Telegram channel exclusively on coronavirus.



Information Laundering Case 24 – Iceland pays male immigrants to marry Icelandic women

- Exposed by the *Reykjavík Grapevine* (1 July 2016), *Morgunblaðið* (14 July 2016),
 - Placement by disinformation
 - The Spirit Whispers (foreign accidental actor)

Background. Since 2016, manufactured news about Iceland paying 5,000 dollars to foreign men to marry Icelandic women circulated on several online media platforms. Already in 2016, dozens of men had reportedly contacted Iceland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to get information on the offer¹⁸³. Iceland's embassy in Moscow and the Danish embassy in Egypt had to release statements in order to debunk this story.¹⁸⁴ However, this process has continued until 2020.

Laundering. The placement was conducted by *The Spirit Whispers*¹⁸⁵ in June 2016, stating that male migrants could get 5,000 US dollars a month for marrying Icelandic women due to the shortage of men in Iceland. Allegedly, priority is being given to North African men (placement by means of disinformation). The layering occurred mainly in Russian language marginal websites. In total, research shows the participation of one English language and sixteen Russian language media over the course of four years.

In 2016, different Russian language media platforms with domains registered in Russia and Ukraine participated from the layering phase, amplifying *The Spirit Whispers'* content (e.g. *Tutitam* or *Ua-reporter*). In 2017, websites such as *Auto.mail.ru* took the news pieces from 2016 and further distorted the content by declaring that this offer also included the automatic acquisition of citizenship (disinformation). On 15 September 2017, the Russian-language pro-Kremlin news website *Pravda* shared the news again, including a misleading headline 'Iceland buys men for its women'. In addition, it included disinformation, stating that

since the average salary in Iceland was 10,800 euros, the 5,000 would be applied on top of that, 'according to the offer'. *Pravda* also included a final paragraph, declaring that 'handsome sexual men' will have a happy marriage and encouraged men to travel to Iceland to get married. On 20 November of the same year, *Niasam.ru* shared *Pravda's* article, adding a misleading headline and disinformation - alleging that Russians and Ukrainians were given preference in this offer, 'relying on the fact that they have a strong gene pool, so our men have the perfect opportunity to change their lives in one moment'.



” During the four years of laundering, the articles disseminated followed structural similarity and they just differ in small paragraphs or details. Hence, it can be assumed that the newer sources took the information from the older sources, following a logical sequence.

The process in 2018 focused mainly on the amplification of the content (SM). However, *Moipros.ru* included disinformation by adding that the Icelandic men did not feel motivated to marry Icelandic women because their salary was high enough. *Tsn.ua* included an interview with a Ukrainian woman that had allegedly been living in Iceland or ten years. Nonetheless, the access to the interview is only under a subscription and the general public only has access to SM of the laundered information.

On 20 January 2020, *Isroe.co.il* introduced a misleading headline with disinformation stating that Iceland pays that amount for ‘reproductive function’. Below, the article includes an interview with a Russian national by the name of Sergey, living in Iceland, where he debunked the fact that the 5,000 dollars were given for marriage purposes. However, the first paragraphs of the publication were direct SM from *Moirpos.ru*. The interview where Sergey presented a new version of the story was placed at the bottom. On the same day, *Ololo.ty* shared *Isroe*.

co.il's article, mentioning the interview but without including it, so the part where Sergey debunked the news was missing (misappropriation).

It is relevant to highlight that, during the four years of laundering, the articles disseminated followed structural similarity and they just differ in small paragraphs or details. Hence, it can be assumed that the newer sources took the information from the older sources, following a logical sequence. This laundering process is considered still to be ongoing.

Observations

- IL is continued and further laundered every year and disseminated on marginal Russian language websites.
- Despite the predominance of marginal websites, its effect has been tangible: after the multiple requests that the Icelandic government received, the Icelandic embassy in Moscow and the Danish embassy in Egypt had to debunk the story¹⁸⁶.



- Results suggest that the bulk of the process is accidental. However, it has been utilized by some pro-Kremlin media to support the narrative of Western moral decay.
- Some media that took part in the IL demystified/debunked the news at the end of the article or shared the information in a humorous way. However, they mixed this with highly misleading headlines, so the audience still believed that the information was real (e.g., *Isroe.co.il* and *Ololo.tv*).
- As *EU versus Disinfo* comments, the story is empowered by simultaneously combining two different narratives about the West: Western moral decay as a result of tolerant liberal views on family issues, and the pressure of migration¹⁸⁷.
- No reasonable original source was located for this IL process.
- SM is still very high, and the news has been translated to a variety of languages, e.g. English and Spanish.

Information Laundering Case 25 - The US was going to deploy nuclear weapons to Iceland

- Exposed by unpublished research
- Placement by deceitful translation and misappropriation

Background. During the Cold War, the US never deployed nuclear weapons in Iceland. However, the US State Department's records, declassified in August 2016 and published by the NSA, showed that US government officials debated whether they should do so, including the possibility of secret deployments. A letter from the US Ambassador to Iceland in August 1960, Tyler Thompson, was also released. He rejected such proposals, but the revelation of internal discussions on the subject ties into the broader issue of the practice of American nuclear deployments overseas during the Cold War.

Laundering. The placement was conducted by Russian pro-Kremlin media *Lenta.ru* on 18 August 2016, by reporting on the release of the documents from the NSA.¹⁸⁸ The article included a deceitful translation that exaggerated the fact that Iceland threatened to leave NATO, which was why the plans to install nuclear weapons stopped. Publications in the NSA and *Popular*



*Science*¹⁸⁹ (both mentioned as sources of the information) already commented on the role of the US Ambassador to Iceland Tyler Thompson in dissuading the US administration to avoid a possible withdrawal of Iceland as a NATO member (placement by deceitful translation and misappropriation). This relevant context was omitted by *Lenta.ru*. Thus, although the content was not totally inaccurate, it prepared the information by omitting essential information to be further laundered. In total, 51 online media outlets participated in the laundering process.

A few minutes after *Lenta's* publication, Kremlin-official media *RIA Novosti* amplified the content (SM). Although *RIA* does not reference *Lenta*, this is suggested by the almost identical structure of the text. *Riafan.ru* included disinformation by stating that the installation of nuclear weapons in Iceland was 'highly likely' known by the US Ambassador to Iceland, whereas the NSA and *Popular Science* publications stated that it was unknown whether Amb.Thompson knew about these secret plans. *Ren TV* decontextualized the information by including a picture of London (misappropriation). The pro-Kremlin media *Vzglyad* mixed the news with an article about the reestablishment of Keflavik naval base (see Case 1), retaking the theme of ongoing tensions between two blocs: emerging BRICS versus failing NATO allies (misappropriation and disinformation). The online media outlet *Bloknot.ru* combined misappropriation with disinformation, stating that nowadays the nuclear confrontation between the US and Russia continues, and mentioning North Korea's response to the US and South Korea's threatening manoeuvres. Kremlin-official news agency *TASS* amplified the content by referring to the Icelandic tabloid *Fréttablaðið* but not including any hyperlink

to the information. *Ridus* laundered two articles on the same day, one constituting pure SM at 7:32 a.m. and a succeeding one at 12:17 p.m.. The latter suggests that there were actually nuclear weapons in Iceland. It asserts that the scenario described by the released NSA documents was partially implemented, but not clarifying any detail (misappropriation). This research identifies a Potemkin village between *Lenta* and *TV Net*, and identifies *TV Net* as a channel to introduce news from Russian media in the Latvian domestic media environment.

Korrespondent.ru included misappropriation, twisting the already laundered content without really distorting it. Reykjavik threatening to withdraw from NATO after learning about Washington's plans was placed at the center of the story. Furthermore, the article stated that the World War III could have started on three occasions during the Cold War: in 1962, 1967 and 1983. Therefore, if the US continues pushing Russia, the war could start at any time.

Finally, *Rueconomics* included misappropriation in two different articles. The first one published at 11:55 a.m. speculated on the modernization of nuclear storage facilities



in Germany by the US. The following article was published at 13:27 p.m., with the same overlap of the IL processes that was observed in *Vzglyad*. Both misappropriations describe a reality where nuclear conflict is still ongoing.

Kremlin-official media *RT*¹⁹⁰ and *Sputnik News*¹⁹¹ translated and shared the laundered information in English, the former on 18 August and the latter on 20 August. No other English language media outlets were seen to spread this story. Nevertheless, for unknown reasons, *Sputnik News*¹⁹² rescued and re-shared the news on 30 December 2019, amplified by *World Military News* (foreign accidental actor)¹⁹³ and *Newstral*¹⁹⁴ (foreign proxy, ESP).

Observations

- Out of the 51 media outlets which participated in the IL 90% were Russian language media registered in Russia and different other countries across Eurasia with Russian-speaking population groups.
 - From the English language media that laundered the news, 60% were Kremlin-official.
- IL started and finished in 2016, but it was revived and re-posted by *Sputnik News* in 2019.
- During the research carried out in the NB8, *Lenta.ru* has been seen as the placement media on repeated

occasions (see, for example, Information Laundering in Latvia).

- High activity of media in sharing the news was demonstrated by the short timeframe of the process, which was completed within a day.
- Iceland was used to bring back perceptions from the Cold War and portray a world in constant tension and conflict.
 - The nuclear conflict is depicted as still ongoing.
- For the first time in the IL research, an overlap of two different IL process targeting the same country has been identified.

Involvement of domestic media networks in Information Laundering in Iceland

Iceland is considered a low priority target for IL conducted by Kremlin and/or pro-Kremlin actors. However, evidence suggests there are actors strategically utilizing news about Iceland to restore Cold War perceptions of an ongoing two-bloc confrontation and portray NATO as an aggressive actor constantly threatening Russia. News stories about Keflavik naval base play a key role in IL. The IL processes are simple – 28 actors involved on average per case, mainly foreign. No domestic media are seen to actively participate in the IL processes. However, *The Saker*, registered in Iceland, is a well-known pro-Kremlin media outlet.



According to *EU versus Disinfo*, it has become a loudspeaker for an international network of pro-Kremlin outlets, with branches in German, Italy, Latin America, and Russia. Allegedly, *The Saker* is highly integrated into pro-Kremlin networks and US conspiracy groups. *The Saker* and *South Front* syndicate content. Indeed, a special section of *The Saker* compiles, shares and amplifies reports from *South Front*.¹⁹⁵ Furthermore, pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-official media from other NB8 countries were involved, e.g. *Sputnik Estonia*, *Baltnews Lithuania*, and *TV Net* (LVA).

Research found that Kremlin-official media, specifically *Sputnik News*, reuse laundered

news years after the IL process has ended. This constitutes a unique characteristic when comparing IL results to other NB8 countries. The main IL languages are Russian and English. Source magnification reaches a wider range of languages than other NB8 countries. IL targeting Iceland shares similarities with Denmark, such as the predominance of English language networks. Nevertheless, a greater emphasis on NATO-related stories was put by IL networks targeting Iceland. NATO is depicted as a hostile, immoral actor. Also, Arctic narratives are emerging as a target for IL techniques.



” Lithuania is considered a moderate priority target for Information Laundering conducted by Kremlin and/or pro-Kremlin actors. The Information Laundering processes share similarities with Estonian and Latvia. However, Lithuanian networks are shorter.

LITHUANIA













Lithuania is – together with the other two Baltic States – at the forefront of the efforts to counter Russian disinformation and other forms of foreign hostile influence. Due to the country’s strategic location, bordering both Russia (Kaliningrad) and Belarus, Lithuania has been a frequent target of Russian information influence operations. The Baltic country supports a stronger EU/ NATO response to Russian aggression as well as increased aid to Ukraine. Overall, it maintains a strong internal political and social consensus on mitigating Russian aggression and on related security issues.¹⁹⁶ This is the reason why the Lithuanian government has set up the Strategic Communication Division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁹⁷

media outlets attempt to use their position to influence political processes, and local outlets are usually financially dependent on the local government.¹⁹⁸

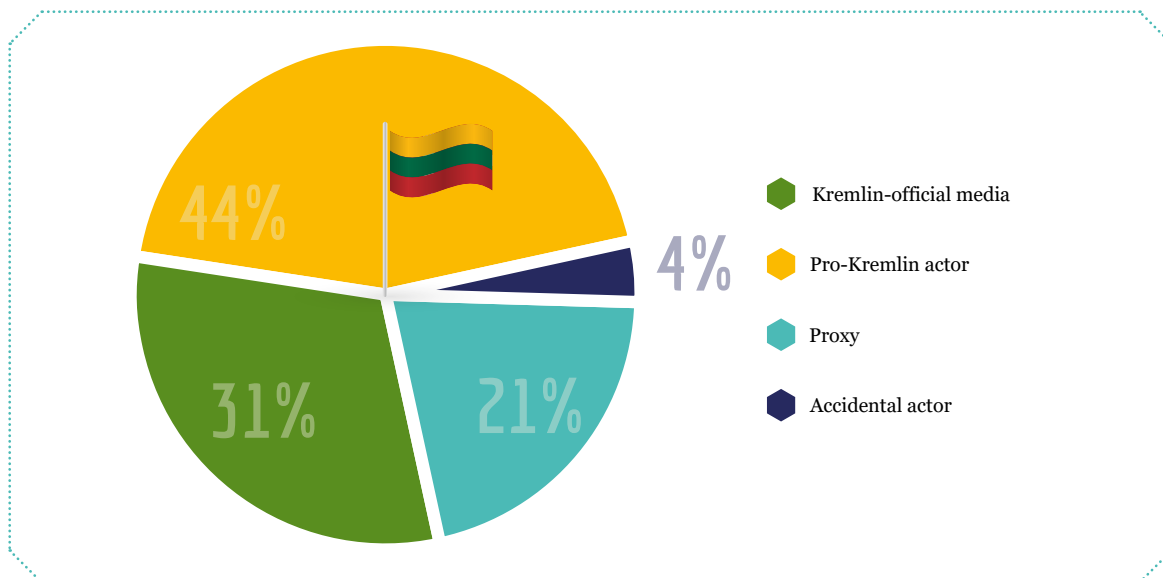
According to the Freedom House, freedom of speech and press are generally safeguarded in the country. However, some owners of



Table 9. Summary of Information Laundering cases in Lithuania

Case	Techniques (in order of appearance)	Information Laundering networks overview
Lithuania is a NATO vassal.	 Misleading headline,  woozle effect,  misappropriation.	Total media involved: 6 (all in Russian language). Mainly, foreign and domestic pro-Kremlin media. The most relevant technique used was woozle effect
Klaipėda LNG FSRU project will fail.	 Misleading headline,  misappropriation,  disinformation.	Total media involved: 8. Languages: Russian and Lithuanian. 2 domestic media involved.
Resolution adopted by the European Parliament unfairly equates USSR to Nazi regime.	 Misappropriation,  misleading headline,  disinformation,  woozle effect.	Total media involved: 33. 61% Pro-Kremlin media, 30% Kremlin-official media. Domestic media were involved. Languages: Russian and Lithuanian
A German NATO tank desecrated Jewish cemetery in Kaunas.	 Disinformation,  smurfing,  misleading headline.	Total media involved: 5. Mainly proxies. Languages: Lithuanian, Russian, English. Two domestic media were involved.

Summary of findings



Graphic 9. Actors involved in Information Laundering cases in Lithuania



- Lithuania is considered a moderate priority target for IL conducted by Kremlin and/or pro-Kremlin actors.
 - IL processes share similarities with Estonian and Latvian IL processes. However, Lithuanian networks are shorter.
 - Domestic pro-Kremlin media and pro-Kremlin media based in the Baltic States are particularly relevant, essentially *Baltnews* Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia.
 - Kremlin-official media have greater relevance than in the rest of the NB8 countries.
- IL processes are complex – 30 actors involved on average per case, mainly foreign (6 % domestic).
- Although few domestic media are involved in the processes, important national pro-Kremlin (*Baltnews Lithuania*) and proxy actors (*lzbtkauo.wordpress.com*) have been identified.
- Networks use Russian as the main language and English as the secondary one; Lithuanian is rarely employed, but more utilised than the domestic languages in the rest of NB8 countries.
 - SM especially relevant in Russian language.
- Themes: NATO, NATO military exercises, World War II revisionism.
- Main actors participating from IL processes to spread Kremlin's influence within Sweden: Russian-language pro-Kremlin media.

Information Laundering Case 26 - Lithuania is a vassal of the United States

- Exposed by: internal source
- Placement by misleading headline
 - *News Front* (foreign pro-Kremlin media)

Background. Konstantin Kosachev is the current chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Federation Council of Russia. He has spoken out on several occasions against Russophobia from the West. After a meeting in August 2019 between the Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėdas and the Belarusian Foreign Affairs Minister, Kosachev wrote a post on his *Facebook* page suggesting that Lithuania had never been independent and that these allegations by Mr Nausėda could be understood as a provocation by Minsk.



Original Russian-language text	English translation
<p>Президент Литвы Гитанас Науседа заявил, что поддержит Белоруссию в борьбе за независимость.</p> <p>По его словам, Белоруссия ведёт за эту независимость борьбу, а страны Евросоюза, и Литва в том числе, поддержат Минск в этой борьбе, поскольку интересы Белоруссии совпадают с европейскими.</p> <p>Насчёт независимости самой Литвы есть свои вопросы (что-то не припомню в последние три десятилетия хоть одну позицию этой страны, отличающуюся от американской, натовской или евросоюзовской, и не говорите мне, что в каждом случае это было «литовским выбором», скорее - демонстрацией лояльности любой ценой).</p> <p>Но гораздо интереснее будет посмотреть за реакцией Минска на это заявление, фривольно интерпретирующее характер суверенитета Белоруссии вот так «по-соседски», а на самом деле - из далекого далека, из Вильнюса. Либо оно будет оценено как провокационное, либо... что, неужели наши соседи сделают вид, что это их не касается?</p>	<p>Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda said that he would support Belarus in the struggle for independence.</p> <p>According to him, Belarus is fighting for this independence, and the EU countries, including Lithuania, will support Minsk in this fight, since Belarus's interests coincide with European ones.</p> <p>Regarding the independence of Lithuania itself, there are questions (I don't remember in the last three decades at least one position of this country that was different from the American, NATO or European Union, and do not tell me that in each case it was a "Lithuanian choice", but rather a demonstration of loyalty at all costs).</p> <p>But it will be much more interesting to look at the reaction of Minsk to this statement, which frivolously interprets the nature of the sovereignty of Belarus like this "in a neighborly way", but in fact - from a distance, from Vilnius. Either it will be evaluated as provocative, or what, will our neighbors pretend that this does not concern them?</p>

Original source: Konstantin Kosachev's post on his *Facebook* page¹⁹⁹:

Laundering. Kosachev's declarations were used on the same day by the Russian-language version of pro-Kremlin outlet *News Front*, which shared a fragment of the post, including a misleading headline.

On the following day, pro-Kremlin media *Riafan* began the layering process, integrating Kosachev's post content with a misleading headline that spun the angle of the article, and emphasised the idea that Minsk could take Lithuanian President's statement as a provocation. It

also included misappropriation by artificially adding context that was not directly linked to the topic, i.e., the controversy over the construction of the Belarusian nuclear power plant, Astravets²⁰⁰. Later that day, the Russian-language version of *Sputnik Lithuania* shared the same content,



mentioning Kosachev's post on *Facebook* as a unified, official stance by the Federation Council of Russia (misappropriation). It also expanded on the controversy of Astravets near Vilnius. *Baltnews Lithuania* published an article picking some of the information published in Sputnik without referencing the source but including the same data, structured in a very similar way. It also sustained the woozle effect mixed with misappropriation by inferring that Kosachev illustrated the way that (the entirety of) Russia as a country reacted to the Lithuanian President's comments. On 11 September, Eurasia.expert furthered the woozle effect by amplifying the content from Sputnik News. This was later copied (SM) and shared by a personal recommendations service created by Yandex, which uses the machine-learning technology *Yandex Zen*.

Observations

- IL techniques were mainly conducted by foreign and domestic pro-Kremlin media. The absence of Lithuanian-language media highlights that Lithuanian-speaking audiences were not targets in the process.
 - IL directed to Lithuanian Russian speakers and other Russian speakers outside the country.
 - The media that took part in the process was registered in three different countries with the Russian-speaking population: Lithuania, Belarus, and Russia.

- Important activity of media outlets registered in Lithuania: *Sputnik Lithuania* and *Baltnews Lithuania* – Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media, respectively.

- The process was short, with only six media outlets involved. Hence, the timeframe was considered long, taking three days in completing the process.
- The level of distortion from the facts was low, providing an alternative view for the audience do hold a different perspective of the meeting. SM was also brief.
- Wozzle effect was sthe most relevant technique, portraying Kosachev's opinion as a uniform standpoint from the Federation Council of Russia or, in some outlets, by Russia (i.e. official).
- This case is aligned with a recurring narrative of the loss of sovereignty and external influence in the Baltic States, after their independence and adhesion to NATO and the European Union
- This case follows a trend spotted in the Baltic States, where more content originated on *Facebook* makes its way to more popular, or even mainstream media.



Case 27 – LNG terminal is doomed to fail

- Exposed by: internal source
- Placement by misleading headline
- *Sputnik Latvia* (Kremlin-official media)

Background. In October 2018, Finland, Latvia and Estonia signed a Memorandum of Understanding demonstrating their commitment to harmonize the regional gas market. This action posed questions about how Lithuania and Klaipėda LNG FSRU would fit into all this. Klaipėda liquefied natural gas floating storage and regasification unit terminal started working on 3 December 2014. This was seen as an effort to reduce the country's dependence on Russia's Gazprom natural gas²⁰¹. Until 2014, Gazprom was the sole natural gas exporter to Lithuania and allowed Russia to have significant leverage on Lithuania's political agenda. Energy independence from Russia is a key aspect concerning post-Soviet spaces and their role within the European Union.

Laundering. The placement was conducted by the Russian-language version of *Sputnik Latvia*, one day after government-owned Estonian transmission system operator (TSO), Elering, released a statement on its website explaining the Memorandum of Understanding signed by the three countries²⁰². *Sputnik Latvia* indicated in the headline that the three states had agreed on a single gas market, leaving Lithuania aside, whereas in fact it was specified that other states could join in subsequent stages, so it had been a memorandum of understanding that Lithuania could join later (placement by means of misleading headline). The article also emphasized divisions between the Baltic States, concretely, Latvia and Estonia versus Lithuania. The article was laundered in eight media outlets: six in Russian language and two in Lithuanian.

Later, on the same day, *Sputnik Lithuania* conducted SM from *Sputnik Latvia*. The Kremlin-official media website published it first in Russian, and afterwards in Lithuanian. Three days later, on 16 October, Alexandr Nosovich, a well-known Rubaltic journalist, further laundered the news in the pro-Kremlin media outlet *Rubaltic*, claiming that this agreement destroys Lithuania's hopes that neighbors will buy products from its LNG terminal, so that it will receive

regional and European funding status in Brussels. The piece included a misleading headline that considered the meeting as an act of revenge from Latvia and Estonia, misappropriation by stating that Estonia and Latvia were insinuating that only they had historical links to Scandinavia and Lithuania could not relate to Northern Europe because it had always belonged to Eastern Europe. It also stated that this was made as retaliation by Estonia and Latvia against Lithuania for



kidnapping the LNG terminal, which was 'a fraud' (disinformation). It ridiculed Lithuania for trying to fool the other Baltic countries and failing so terribly.

On the following day, the Latvian version of Russian-language pro-Kremlin medium *Baltnews Latvia* continued the layering process. The article utilized a discussion by the President of the Russian Association for Baltic Studies, Nikolai Mezhevich, to provide authority to the arguments that the different versions of *Sputnik* and *Rubaltic* had previously given. It also contained a misappropriation that wrongly commented about uncertainty concerning the possibility of establishing a single market with Finland due to Brexit.

On 31 October, *Regnum* shared the article with a highly misleading headline: 'Baltic neighbors leave Lithuania with nothing'. The piece started amplifying part of the content from *Rubaltic* with some additional, manufactured information. The author discussed how the decrease in production and fossil fuel phase-out in the European Union would impact the Latvian economy deeply and the already existing energy-related relations between Latvia and Russia (misappropriation). The article also commented that Lithuanian businesses want to access the Russian market through Minsk and discussed the tense relations between Belarus and Lithuania. It included statements from representatives from the Liberal Movement party declaring that Lithuania should repair relations with

Belarus, otherwise this would be negative for the Lithuanian economy. This article was amplified by the Russian government's search engine *Sputnik* through SM.

On 11 November, Lithuanian socio-political organization *Socialistu Partija* amplified *Rubaltic's* content by including a misleading headline about the other two Baltic States taking revenge on Lithuania. *Socialistu Partija* is a far-left organization founded on Leninist principles.²⁰³

Observations

- IL techniques were mainly conducted by Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media.
 - IL conducted in Russian and Lithuanian languages.
- The message was intended at dividing audiences in the Baltic States: the event was revenge from Estonian and Latvian against Lithuania for its LNG affair.
 - There is no Baltic unity: 'The heroic epic about the victory over darkness coming from the East turned out to be a household fairy tale about a cunning village woman who decided to fool the neighbors. In the end the neighbors fooled her instead. Baltic folklore is replete with such plots - the blatant woman always turns out to be a fool and sits in the finale at the broken trough. Now in the collection of Lithuanian tales on this subject another tale has appeared'.



- It also emphasizes strong grievances between Lithuania and Belarus. built on political emotions rather than economic 'facts'.
- Therefore, LNG terminal was depicted as a Russophobic action and a decision
- Timeframe: 30 days. - IL was larger than SM.

Case 28 - Lithuania was a direct beneficiary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact

- Exposed by: internal source
- Placement by misappropriation - *Vzglyad* (foreign pro-Kremlin media)

Background. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocols was a non-aggression agreement signed between Nazi Germany and the USSR in August 1939. It grouped territories in Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania into spheres of influence to be divided between both totalitarian regimes. In 2019, with the occasion of the Pact's 80th Anniversary, the European Parliament (EP) adopted a resolution on the importance of the remembrance of European memory, highlighting the role that the Pact played at the beginning of the war:

'The Second World War, the most devastating war in European history, was started as an immediate result of the notorious Nazi-Soviet Treaty on Non-Aggression of 23 August 1939, also known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and its secret protocols, whereby two totalitarian regimes that shared the goal of world conquest divided Europe into two zones of influence.'^{204,205}

These remarks were received with divided opinions across Europe and Russia.

Laundering. The placement was conducted by the Russian-language pro-Kremlin medium *Vzglyad*. While the first part of the article was directed at narrating the content of the resolution, in the last paragraphs the author included misappropriation with the account that allegedly, European countries have been attempting to re-write history for a long time, e.g. claiming that Israel criticised Poland for re-writing Holocaust history. Moreover, a paragraph dedicated to the Baltics - specifically, Lithuania and Latvia - highlighted their participation and collaboration with the Nazi regime (disinformation). This was amplified through SM by public search engine Yandex. Since this topic is subject to sensitivities, our research focused on analysing the laundering techniques that purely distorted the content, character, and purpose of the European Parliament's resolution.



RossBusinessConsulting started the layering process on 19 September, laundering the news piece with a misleading headline that inferred that the resolution was an attack on Russia through a condemnation of the Soviet regime. Later that day, *Sputnik Lithuania* conducted misappropriation by emphasizing the responsibility of EU states for starting the Second World War. Declarations from Russian member of the Federation Council Oleg Morozov calling the resolution an act of “political trolling” were used to support the argument (woozle effect). It also included disinformation, mentioning that the resolution was a product of Russophobia in EU institutions and the ongoing information war of Europe against Russia aimed in this case at undermining the USSR’s contribution to the end of the World War II.

On 20 September, the Moldovan online platform *Publika.md* conducted SM. Subsequently, an established pro-Kremlin medium in the Baltics, *Baltnews*, published various articles on the issue, first in their Latvian version, followed by the Lithuanian one. The former added Brexit Party British MEP Claire Fox’s comments on the resolution – she had stated that it was just approved by the European People’s Party (EPP) to push an expansionist agenda²⁰⁶ – and Russian Union of Latvia’s MEP Tatyana Zhdanok’s disapproval of the resolution, who criticised the European Parliament for equating the Soviets to the Nazis, supporting the idea of a naturally Russophobic European Parliament (woozle effect). *Baltnews Lithuania* included the opinion of Lithuanian

Labour Party MEP Viktor Uspassky on the impracticalities of revisiting the past. The article highlighted the glorification of Nazi soldiers by Lithuanians (disinformation) Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas and Jonas Noreika, calling them Nazi accomplices who participated in the organization of the Holocaust in Lithuania –this information is unproven. *TASS* conducted misappropriation establishing that the resolution trampled the history ‘of those countries that suffered terrible losses during the Second World War’. And wozzle effect quoting scientific director of the Russian Military Historical Society (RVIO): ‘These deputies betray their national history and contribute to the revival of neo-Nazi sentiments in their countries’. Another article published on *TASS* quoted Maria Zakharova (woozle effect) mentioning the risks of the European Parliament favoring the Nazi memory. Interfax reinforced the wozzle effect using Zakharova’s declarations.

On 21 September, the Russian version of *RT* again used Maria Zakharova’s quotes to legitimize the idea that the EP was modifying history to blame Russia. The author of the piece included misappropriation by suggesting that the document was prompted by Polish MEPs, specifically the right-wing party Law and Justice. This was complemented with declarations by several experts stating that Poland signed a non-aggression agreement too and condemning the exclusion of any mention of the Munich Agreement. To conclude, it was pointed out that this action would worsen relations between Russia and the EU, labeling it ‘the



Zavtra is known as a far-right medium, whose editor-in-chief, Russian nationalist Alexander Prokhanov, is also a member of the secretariat of the Writers Union of the Russian Federation. Former co-chairman of the National Salvation Front. During the 2014 conflict in Ukraine, Prokhanov praised the Prime Minister of the self-proclaimed pro-Russian Donetsk People's Republic Alexander Borodai as a 'true White Russian nationalist'.

anti-Russian resolution' (disinformation). *Pravda TV*, and the forum websites *Mediamera* and *Sgvavia* amplified this.

On 23 September, *Sputnik Latvia* further distorted the article with a misleading headline stating that the resolution gave a green light to the denigration of the USSR's historical memory. Author Vladimir Linderman's angle denounced a frequent manipulation of historical facts by the European Parliament, with resolutions that denied the Munich Pact or anti-Soviet Polish-German/Baltic-German negotiations. He also declared that Lithuania had benefited from the partition of Poland, gaining a big portion of territory (Vilnius). This was amplified by the Russian platform *Smi2*. On the same day *Sputnik's* collaborator Olga Sukharevskaya, stated in an opinion piece that the resolution implied the revival of totalitarianism in Europe (misleading headline, disinformation). The piece commenced with a quote from George Orwell's novel, 1984: 'who controls the past, controls the future'. It compared the resolution to the anti-Comintern Pact (misappropriation). The author stated: 'totalitarianism in Europe is reborn – so far at the level of zoological anti-communism. But Hitler also began with that'. The

Estonian version of *Sputnik* also published an article with a sensationalized headline – 'The culprit of the war has been made a victim: the danger of a new resolution of the European Parliament' – and disinformation: 66 abstentions, when it was actually 52.²⁰⁷ It referenced the article from *Sputnik Latvia* and quoted Alexandr Nosovich, who was also an author for Case 28. Nosovich's quotes stated that the EU had been educated by the Baltics to think differently about World War II: 'earlier, the modification of history was made from Eastern European countries but not by leading Western powers'. Pro-Kremlin website *Katyusha.org* equated the resolution to a denial of Russian victims during the World War II (disinformation), claiming that the European Parliament was trying to impose a one-sided view of history, which is anti-democratic (misappropriation).

On 24 September, the right-wing Russian online newspaper, *Zavtra*, shared the article stating that this resolution gave an excuse to prosecute the crimes of Stalinism the same way that Nazis were prosecuted at Nuremberg (disinformation).

On 25 September, the online news media platform *Regnum* conducted



misappropriation when stating that with the resolution, the EP wanted Russia to regret 'the triumph against fascism', what was the result of the Russophobia embedded in EU institutions as a doctrine. This indoctrination would be conducted from schools to brainwash the population and keep them controlled like a 'Big Brother' (disinformation). Misappropriation was furthered when speaking about how states in fragmented Europe were losing sovereignty, mentioning conflicts such as the Catalan and Scottish independence issues. Later that day, *Topwar* called the resolution an act of 'ideological war' (disinformation). The author claimed that Russia should sanction the EU for creating an environment favorable to the growth of neo-Nazi and fascist organizations that also posed a threat to Russia. It also suggested the US, UK and France had collaborated with Hitler, referring again to the Munich Agreement. In the Russian Communist Party's blog, Igor Shishkin shared the article, focusing on the idea that the EP was trying to reinvent history and denying Russia's contribution to the World War II, indoctrinating the European population (disinformation, misappropriation).

On 27 September, Profiook.com stated that the resolution was just an interpretation of history and should not be taken as gospel. It also claimed that the content of the resolution was nothing but an 'outrageous lie', quoting Russian-Armenian journalist and TV presenter, Roman Babayan and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakharova (woozle effect). *Russian Folk Line* amplified

this through SM. *Regnum* again shared an article implying that the resolution denied the existence of the extermination of Jews in Sobibor and that all the EU countries supported the Nazis during the war (disinformation, misleading headline).

Observations

- IL techniques were mainly conducted by Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media with particular relevance.
- This is a very complex case, in which a high number of actors utilised several public figures' declarations to criticise the resolution. This provided legitimacy to the arguments pushed by Kremlin and pro-Kremlin actors, and at the same time, flooded the online media with different news pieces on the same story, in order to create confusion among readers.
 - Main strategy: wozzle effect mixed with misappropriation supporting the reaction of political leaders and Russian experts to the resolution.
 - Recurring allusions to other pacts, e.g. the Polish-Soviet non-aggression pact, the Munich Agreement, the anti-Comintern Pact.
 - This study suggests that the main target audiences of the IL process were Russian speakers in Russia and the Baltics.
- The IL process exploited the ideas of Russophobia, victimisation, and Cold War nostalgia.



Information Laundering Case 29 – A German NATO tank desecrated a Jewish cemetery in Kaunas

- Exposed by *EU versus Disinfo* (25 September 2019).
 - Placement by disinformation
 - *lzbltkauno.wordpress.com* (domestic proxy)

Background. The Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic States (eFP) is subject to criticism from pro-Kremlin actors that claim NATO troops on Baltic soil increases tensions near the border.

Laundering. On 25 September 2019, Lithuanian blog *lzbltkauno.wordpress.com* published an article that related how a German tank had desecrated a cemetery in the Lithuanian city of Kaunas. The article included forged pictures of a tank with a German flag entering the cemetery and blamed the German troops that were stationed in the country as part of the eFP (disinformation). Six media outlets in Lithuanian, English and Russian languages participated in the process between 25 September and 3 October.



Image 24. German tanks desecrating the cemetery.
Source: *lzbltkauno.wordpress.com*



Also, on 25 September, the post was translated into Russian by the proxy platform *News2.ru*. The piece included a misleading headline that replaced 'German tank' with 'German soldiers', stating that German soldiers had desecrated the cemetery (deceitful translation). Research on the author confirms that the user was created on the same 25 September, who translated and laundered the story and then became inactive.

The author conducted an impersonation, pretending to be a representative of the Lithuanian community and disseminating the same information by starting petitions on platforms like English-language *Care 2 Petition* and Lithuanian-language *Peticijos.com*. The petition was allegedly also posted on the website *Change.org*²⁰⁸, however it has been currently removed²⁰⁹.

Observations

- Six media platforms laundered and disseminated the false story between 25 September and 3 October (9 days).
- Outlets and techniques indicate that IL was aimed at very specific audience.
- The level of distortion was high, since *lzbtkauo.wordpress.com* created a blatantly false story with a visibly modified image.
- SM was low, only being amplified in the Russian-language portal *Yandex*.

- The disinformation message was promptly debunked by the Lithuanian media and representatives of the Lithuanian Jewish community.
- Research on the *News2.ru* author confirms that the user was created on the same 25 September, who translated and laundered the story and then became inactive (Image 26).
 - Similar activity has been observed by *News2.ru* in laundering processes that targeted other countries (Denmark).
 - Smurfing cases are indicative of coordinated behavior.

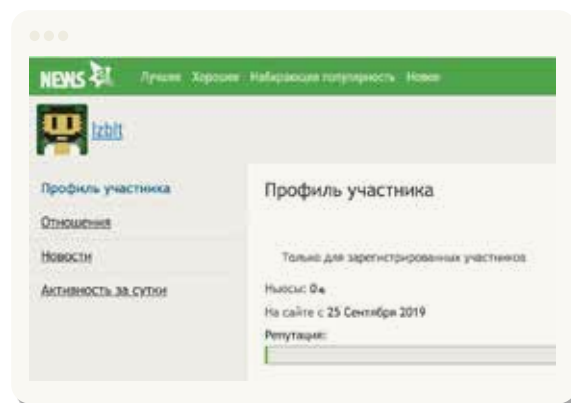


Image 26. *News2ru* author's profile and activity
Source: *News2.ru*²¹⁰



” Norway is considered a high priority target for Information Laundering conducted by Kremlin and/or pro-Kremlin actors. Information Laundering processes share similarities with Sweden and Finland. However, Norwegian networks are larger.

NORWAY

Norway is considered one of the strongest democracies in the world and an example of free and independent media.²¹¹ The country is, together with Iceland, the only NB8 country that is a NATO member outside the European Union, and NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg is Norwegian, strong ties with the EU are maintained. The Norwegian Sea has been the scenario of many NATO military exercises, recently and most importantly, *Trident Juncture 2018*, when US aircraft carrier USS *Harry S Truman* sailed the Norwegian Sea for first time since 1987.

Several points of tensions between Russia and Norway – e.g. the Spitsbergen archipeligo situation, regulated through the Salvard Treaty, and disputes in the Barents Sea resolved on 27 April 2010 have progressively worsened relations between the two countries, peaking in 2014 when Norway joined other European countries in implementing anti-Russian sanctions

following the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Since then, the countries have exchanged mutual accusations of espionage. In April 2019, a Russian court sentenced Norwegian national Frode Berg to 14 years in a strict-regime labour camp for spying on Russian navy submarines. In March 2020, Norway's public service broadcaster reported that at least eight major domestic media had been tricked by Russian troll accounts²¹².

The fictional political thriller TV series 'Okkupert' (Occupied) is based on hypothetical tensions in relations between the two countries after Norway ceases fossil fuel production in response to the climate crisis.²¹³

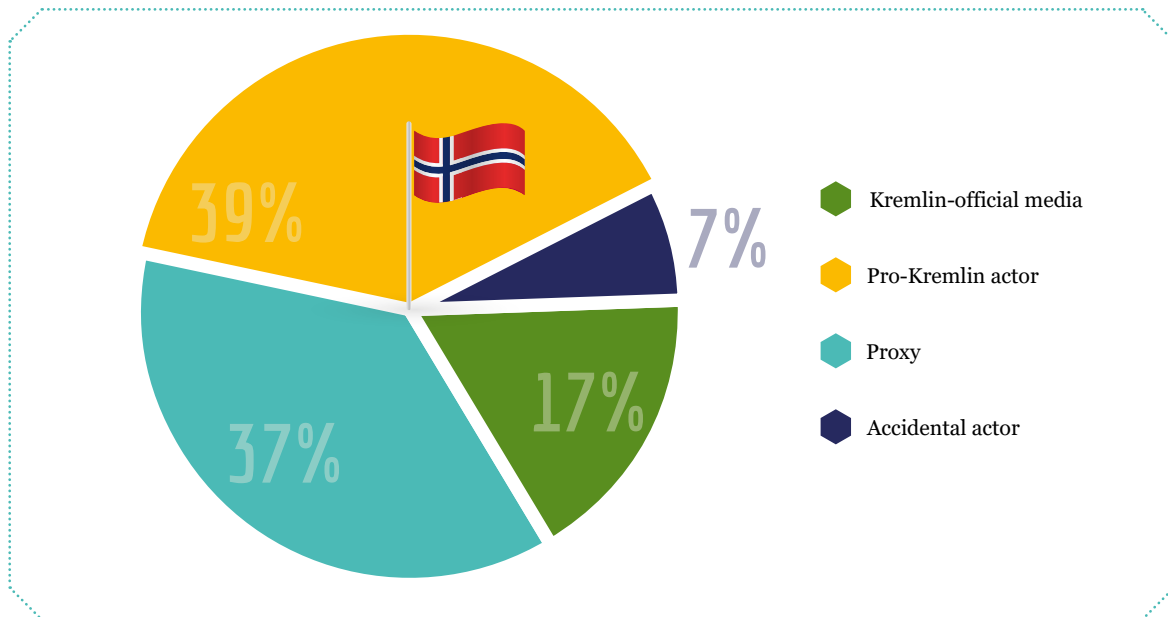


Table 10. Summary of Information Laundering cases in Norway

Case	Techniques (in order of appearance)	Information Laundering networks overview
<p>Norway spreads distorted information about Russian troops on Norwegian soil.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Misappropriation,  misleading headline,  disinformation,  smurfing,  Potemkin village. 	<p>Total media involved: 109.</p> <p>53% Pro-Kremlin media, 26% proxy actors, 14% Kremlin-official media. No domestic media involved. Main language: Russian.</p>
<p>Norwegian government is infringing Crimean's rights.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Disinformation,  misleading headline,  misappropriation,  smurfing. 	<p>Total media involved: 31.</p> <p>40% pro-Kremlin media, 27% Kremlin-official media, 27% proxy. 10% domestic actors. Main languages: Russian, Norwegian, and English.</p>
<p>A Norwegian official delegation recognises Crimea as Russian.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Misappropriation,  disinformation,  misleading headline. 	<p>Total media involved: 38.</p> <p>50% pro-Kremlin media, 26% proxy. Main languages: Russian and English.</p>
<p>Norwegians take to the streets to protest against <i>Trident Juncture</i>.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Misappropriation,  deceitful translation,  misleading headline. 	<p>Total media involved: 6.</p> <p>50% proxy actors. One domestic outlet involved. Languages: Norwegian, Swedish, Russian, Georgian.</p>



Summary of findings



Graphic 10. Actors involved in Information Laundering cases in Norway

- Norway is considered a high priority target for IL conducted by Kremlin and/or pro-Kremlin actors.
 - IL processes share similarities with Swedish and Finnish IL processes. However, Norwegian networks are larger.
 - Research has identified the longest IL processes within the NB8 in Norway, with great interest from Russian-domain and Ukrainian domain pro-Kremlin media and proxy actors.
- IL processes are complex – 46 actors involved on average per case, mainly foreign (4 % domestic).
 - Similar to Finland, it is more common to find pro-Kremlin actors and organisations than pro-Kremlin media. For example, *Folkediplomati Norge* is a platform to disseminate the activity of the organisation lead by Hendrik Weber.
 - Similar to Sweden, connections to the Communist Party.
- Although few domestic media are involved in the processes, important national proxy actors (*Friheten*, *Derimot*) have been identified.
 - Also participation of other NB8 actors (Swedish).
- Networks use Russian as the main language and English as the secondary one; Norwegian is rarely employed, but more utilised than the domestic languages in the rest of NB8 countries.
 - SM especially relevant in Russian language.
- Themes: NATO, NATO military exercises, Ukraine.
- Main actors participating from IL processes to spread Kremlin's influence within Sweden: Russian-language pro-Kremlin media.



Case 30 – Norway conducts information war against Russia by saying that there were Russian Special Forces on Norwegian soil²¹⁴

- Exposed by: *EU versus Disinfo*
- Placement by disinformation and misappropriation
- *Facebook* page of the Russian embassy in Norway

Background. Fighters of the Russian Special Forces were spotted on the Spitsbergen archipelago, as well as in mainland Norway. This was reported by Aldrimer, citing sources in Norwegian intelligence and NATO.

Svalbard is a Norwegian archipelago located in the Arctic Ocean. At the beginning of the 20th century, the USA, the USSR, Great Britain, France, Italy, Japan, Norway, the Netherlands and Sweden concluded the Svalbard Treaty, which secured the special status of the region. Thus, all countries that signed the document could conduct economic activity on the islands. The archipelago was also recognized as a demilitarized zone. On the island of Western Svalbard there is the Russian village of Barentsburg, as well as two other villages. Pyramid and Grumant. These settlements formally belong to Norway but are actually controlled by Russia.

The exercises of the Arctic group of the Northern Fleet of the Russian Navy began on August 5 and lasted about two months.

Laundering.

Russian embassy in Norway *Facebook* post:²¹⁵

Original Norwegian language text	Original Russian language text	English translation
27.09.2019 Kommentar fra Russlands Ambassade i forbindelse med artikkelen av nettsiden «Aldrimer.no» angående angivelig aktivitet av russiske spesialstyrker i Norge	27.09.2019 Комментарий Посольства в связи с публикацией сайта «Aldrimer.no» по поводу якобы действий российского спецназа в Норвегии	'27.09.2019 Comment from the Embassy of Russia in connection with the article of the website "Aldrimer.no" regarding alleged activity of Russian special forces in Norway



Original Norwegian language text	Original Russian language text	English translation
<p>Informasjonen om angivelig aktivitet av russiske spesialstyrker på Spitsbergen framstilt i artikkelen av «Aldrimer.no» er en falsk nyhet. Vi kan ikke karakterisere den som noe annet enn grov provokasjon.</p> <p>Vi oppfatter publikasjonen som en del av systematisk arbeid for å bygge fiendebilde av Russland som føres av visse kretser i Norge.</p> <p>Vi utelukker ikke at dette innspillet er et klossete forsøk på å rettferdiggjøre tilleggsressurser til kamp mot «russisk trussel» i forkant av lanseringen av forsvarsbudsjett og fagmilitært råd til langtidsplan for forsvarssektoren i oktober.</p> <p>Vi synes at slike metoder ikke tilsvarer journalistisk etikk.</p>	<p>Изложенная в статье «Aldrimer.no» 27 сентября 2019 г. информация о якобы действиях российского спецназа на Шпицбергене является фейком. Не можем характеризовать ее иначе, как грубую провокацию.</p> <p>Рассматриваем публикацию как часть ведущейся в Норвегии определенными кругами системной работы по насаждению образа врага в лице России.</p> <p>Не исключаем также, что данный вброс является неуклюжей попыткой оправдания выделения дополнительных ресурсов на борьбу с «российской угрозой» в преддверии представления в октябре оборонного бюджета и рекомендаций к долгосрочному плану развития Вооруженных Сил.</p> <p>Считаем подобные методы не соответствующими журналистской этике.</p>	<p>The information about alleged activity by Russian special forces at Spitsbergen presented in the article by “Aldrimer.no” is fake news. We cannot characterize it as anything other than gross provocation.</p> <p>We view the publication as part of systematic work to build an enemy image of Russia led by certain circles in Norway.</p> <p>We do not rule out that this response is a clumsy attempt to justify additional resources in the fight against the “Russian threat” ahead of the launch of the defense budget and the military’s long-term strategy for the defense sector in October.</p> <p>We think that such methods do not correspond to journalistic ethics.’</p>

On 27 September 2017, Norwegian outlet *AldriMer.no*²¹⁶ published an article stating that Russian troops were spotted on Norwegian soil. In a reply message on their *Facebook* page, the Russian Embassy in Norway conducted the placement by stating that the article was fake news, a gross provocation, and systematic work to build the image of Russia as an enemy (misappropriation and disinformation). *RosBusiness Consulting* conducted SM. In total, 109 media outlets were involved in a laundering process that focused on claiming this was a Russophobic information operation from Norway and depicting rising tensions between Norway/NATO and Russia. The highest volume of activity was on 30 September.

Several misappropriations were utilised to launder the information. *FederalPress* shared *RosBusiness Consulting* article including misappropriation when mixing these news items with other totally unrelated

news like Ukrainian security forces allegedly violating the ceasefire in Donbass. *Regnum* included misappropriation by stressing that Russian military exercises had been conducted since mid-September in the area



Naša Niva is one of the oldest Belarusian weekly newspapers, founded in 1906 and re-established in 1991. *Naša Niva* became a cultural symbol, due to the newspaper's importance as a publisher of Belarusian literature and as a pioneer of Belarusian- language journalism; the years before the October Revolution are often referred to as the *Naša Niva* Period.

so probably this was the reason of Russian Special Forces being seen there, thus the West was over-paranoid. Throughout 30 September, pro-Kremlin and Kremlin official media also amplified the Russian Embassy's *Facebook* post in reply to the article in the Norwegian media outlet. Russian language platform *News.liga.net* included misappropriation by stating that UK Special Forces were going to stop fighting ISIS to counter the Russian threat. *Tsargrad TV* cited expert Viktor Baranets, including a misleading headline and statements that the news had been invented by political provocateurs. Later that day, Malofeev's media outlet further distorted the news with a misleading headline, misappropriation and disinformation, stating that *Aldrimer's* article was aimed at worsening relations between Norway and Russia, and that for that purpose, the authors produced a series of fake stories. *Regnum* also added unrelated information about the US trying to implement a policy of isolation against Russia and exceeding territorial boundaries. *Izvestia* commented that the Norwegians were now more Russophobic than earlier, influenced by world events like Ukraine or the Syrian war (misappropriation). TVC stated that If Oslo recognizes that Special Forces of another state are walking freely

in Norway, it means that NATO's presence in this region does not give them anything (misappropriation). Kremlin-official media *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* stated that the publication was made on the same day that an Arctic Council meeting was being held. *Wek.ru* included disinformation stating that Russian Special Forces were not allowed in Norway. Ukrainian media UNN added to the coverage of the news that London said the UK was at war due to a cyber-attack from Russia. Belarusian mainstream newspaper, *Naša Niva*, conducted SM.

The same day, *Baltnews Latvia* and *Baltnews Estonia* included misleading headlines claiming that Norwegians were looking for Russian troops on their soil and did not find them. *Komsamolysaya Pravda* ironically stated that this case was another example of Western Russophobic paranoia, while *RIA Novosti's* cartoonist Vitaly Podvitsky, posted a cartoon with the title 'It seemed' thus insinuating that the information provided by the Norwegian site is not based on facts but someone's lively imagination (Image 27).

The layering phase continued over the next few days, increasing the level of distortion. For example, on 1 October, *RIA Novosti's*





Image 27. Vitaly Podvitsky's cartoon for RIA

collaborator Irina Alksnis wrote an article titled 'The Russians are coming again. This time in civilian clothes' (Русские снова идут. На этот раз в штатском) (misleading headline), followed by a satirical piece that tried to ridicule the event and portray Norwegians as paranoid. It claimed that the Norwegians had a toxic dependence on continuously looking for the Russian threat (rysskräcken), which is causing 'a collective mental disorder' (misappropriation, disinformation). The last paragraphs were added to discredit the West, including comments on the US Müller investigation.

Between 1–4 October there was smurfing conducted by Russian author Irina Alksnis

(Ирина Алкснис – the surname is actually of Latvian origin) authoring the same piece, first for RIA Novosti and then for different versions of *Sputnik* (i.e. *Sputnik Ossetia* and *Sputnik Uzbekistan*). This also corresponds with a frequent Potemkin Village that has been spotted across all the NB8 countries, between *RIA Novosti* and the different versions of *Sputnik*.

Observations

- IL aimed at spreading the notion of Western Russophobia, claiming that Norway invented the news to consolidate the image of Russia as the enemy.



” In this case the idea of an escalating conflict was promoted: the world is on the brink of chaos because of NATO.

- Misappropriation technique was frequently used when mixing Aldrimer’s information with another unrelated topics, e.g. Ukraine, or UK special forces stopping fighting ISIS to fight the Russian threat, framing Western military as an unreasonable and volatile threat.
 - Idea of escalating conflict – the world is on the brink of chaos because of NATO.
 - Undermining the credibility/sanity of Western decision-makers and the allegations that the West suffers from mass anti-Russian psychosis.
 - The laundering included allusions to the Arctic issue by Kremlin and pro-Kremlin media.
- The level of distortion was low, with higher SM than IL.
- 109 media outlets participated from a process that lasted 9 days.
 - Several media (e.g. ForPost news portal) were registered in Sevastopol.
 - The laundering process mixed with another story when Russian media *Novaya Gazeta* published an independent study on social media that allegedly verified the presence of troops.²¹⁷
- *Novaya Gazeta* is an investigative newspaper, focused on the coverage of Russian political and social affairs. Six *Novaya Gazeta* journalists, including Yury Shchekochikhin, Anna Politkovskaya and Anastasia Baburova, have been murdered since 2001 in connection with their investigations.
- Viktor Baranets was constantly used as a source/expert in Kremlin-official and Russian language pro-Kremlin media. He has been seen as an author of IL targeting other countries like Estonia.
- Large and complex process.
 - Russian media participated repetitively (some of them amplified or laundered the news stories more than once over this period).



Case 31 – Norwegian government is violating Crimean’s rights

- Exposed by *EU versus Disinfo*
 - Placement by disinformation
- *Parlamentskaya Gazeta* (Kremlin-official media)

Background. In 2014, Norway released a statement announcing that the country did not recognise Crimean independence.²¹⁸ According to *EU versus Disinfo*, Norway refused to allow Aleksandr Mashchenko (Александр Мащенко) the representative of the occupying Russian government of Crimea, to enter its territory. He intended to obtain a visa for a visit to Oslo through a ‘Russian Crimean’ passport, which is not recognised in all Schengen countries. The Embassy of Norway did not recognise Mashchenko’s passport, refused to issue a visa and offered him, as a citizen of Ukraine, to use Ukrainian biometric documents instead. At the same time, on February 27, during a meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna, the European Union once again emphasised that it would not recognise the occupation of Crimea or the ‘Russian citizenship’ issued by the Kremlin on the peninsula. The organiser of the event in Oslo was the so-called Norwegian Association of People’s Diplomacy (Folkediplomati Norge)²¹⁹ which was founded in 2017 and has two members, including Hendrik Weber. On its website, it is defined as an independent and cross-party association that works for peace and dialogue between Norway and Russia.

Laundering. On 27 March 2020, the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation’s newspaper, *Parlamentskaya Gazeta*, released a news article detailing how Crimean journalist and head of the International Affairs Department of the V.I.Vernadsky Crimean Federal University, Aleksandr Mashchenko (Александр Мащенко) was denied a Russian visa to Norway and told to use the biometric Ukrainian passport instead. Covering of the event, the Kremlin-official newspaper mentioned that the Crimeans are not needed by anyone in Europe, spreading anti-EU sentiments and the idea that Europe does not want to hear the voices of the Crimean people (placement by means of disinformation). *Infox* laundered this piece including with a misleading headline that stated the reason why Mashchenko had not been allowed into the country was because Norway was scared of Crimeans (В Норвегии завелись напуганные крымчанами ‘страусы’).

On the following day, pro-Kremlin media *Tsargrad TV* continued the layering process sharing *Parlamentskaya Gazeta*’s article under a misleading headline that sarcastically incorporated the concept of ‘Norwegian hospitality’. Russian-language

Russian and Ukrainian media outlets amplified the news through SM. *RIA Fan* included misappropriation, committing two paragraphs to the US’ position on the occupation of Crimea. *Russian RT* amplified the news stating that EU countries were



violating international law by not allowing residents of Crimea to enter the territory (disinformation). Most of the media outlets involved during the following days focused on SM. Russian pro-Kremlin media *Komsamolysaya Pravda* shared the news including Mashchenko's *Facebook* post content (see Image below) without sourcing it.

On 1 March, *Ukraina.ru* included a misleading headline and misappropriation by citing an article from *RIA Novosti* without including a hyperlink to a source that claimed the Norwegian authorities were pursuing a puppet policy, following the EU's position. *Rossaprimavera* shared this, adding that the reason why the EU did not let Mashchenko in was because Norwegian authorities are afraid of their citizens hearing the truth about the events in Crimea (disinformation). On 2 March, *Ren TV* included an ending paragraph with information on the Crimean referendum, stating that after the plebiscite, the peninsula became part of Russia (misappropriation). *RIA Novosti* included disinformation by calling Hendrik Weber a deputy of the Norwegian parliament (земельного парламента), which he is not²²⁰. This was rapidly shared by *Rueconomics*.

For a few days, the IL process seemed to stop but it was recovered in Norwegian language when Communist Party newspaper *Friheten* published an article by Folkediplomati Norge's founder Hendrik Weber. The article selectively translated

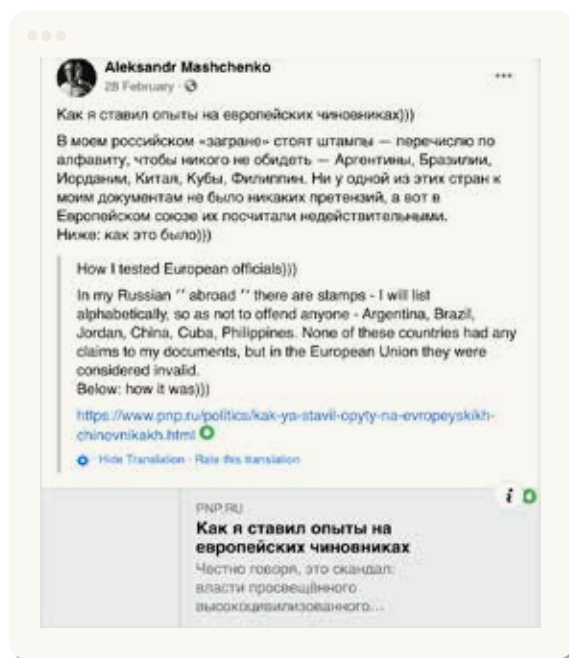


Image 28. Aleksandr Mashchenko's *Facebook* post²²⁷

the coverage of the issue by Russian media and mixed the information with criticism of EU sanctions against Russia and how the EU's position undermines Crimean people's fundamental rights (misappropriation, disinformation). This was disseminated by the same author (Hendrik Weber) in the website of the mentioned association. Norwegian blog *Derimot.no* amplified the article through SM.

Observations.

- IL was conducted mainly in foreign Russian-language media outlets, registered in Russia and in Ukraine.
- A small network of Norwegian outlets partook in the process.
- Languages used: Russian, Norwegian and English.



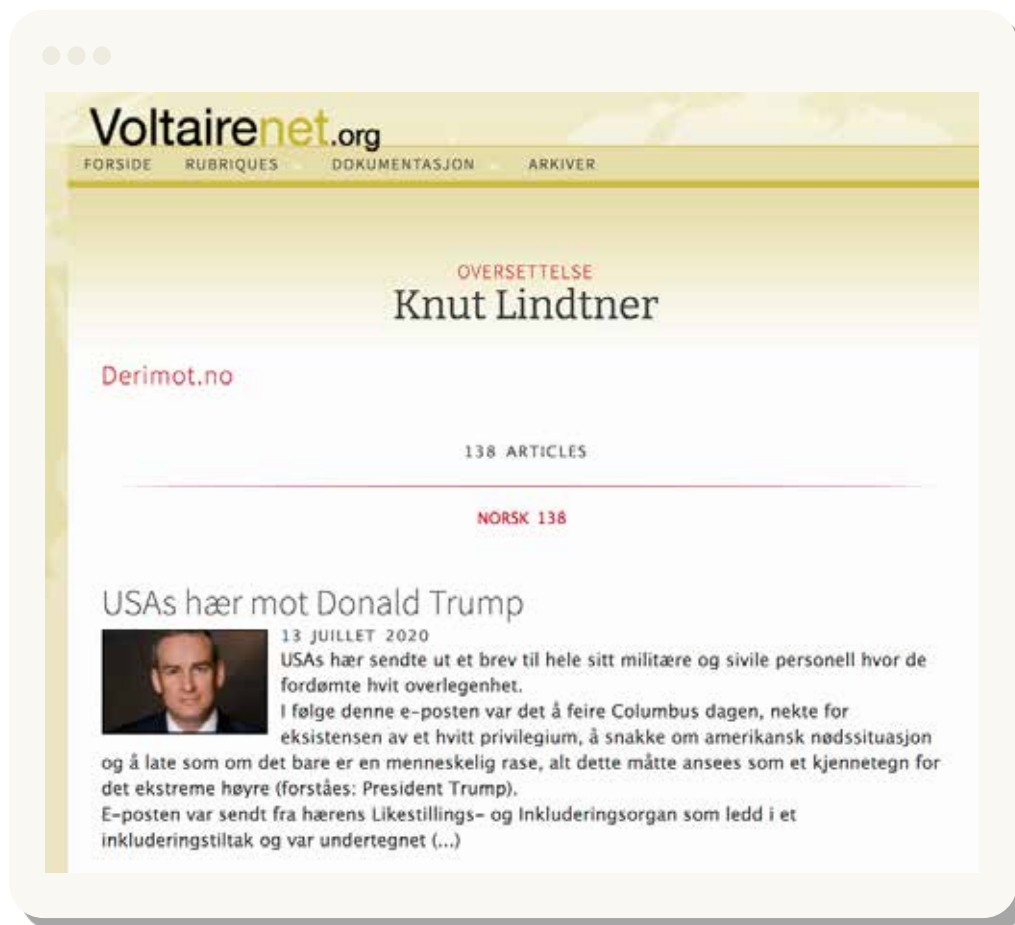


Image 30. Knut Lindtner's activity in *Voltaire.net.org*
 Source: *Voltaire.net*²²⁸

- Research shows important participation by Kremlin-official media. For example, *RIA Novosti* was involved in the laundering process several times.
- The entire process took around two months to complete.
- The distortion was high, since it went from a resident from Crimea being denied a visa because he presented a Russian passport to the EU countries infringing Crimean citizens' rights.
- *Friheten* is a newspaper published by the Norwegian Communist Party. It was founded illegally in 1941 during the German occupation of Norway. The founders were members of the communist wing of the resistance movement.
- IL aimed at disseminating the idea that EU countries have left behind Crimean people, therefore, Russia is their true ally.



- Research on Derimot shows that is a domestic proxy that constantly shares (SM) Kremlin-official content²²¹. The blog is administered by a user (Knut Lindtner) who describes himself as a

retired psychologist, and an ex-member of the Norwegian Communist Party. He amplifies the content published on his blog in other platforms such as the controversial *Voltaire Network*.

Case 32 – Norway officially recognises Crimea as Russian²²²

- Exposed by *Stop Fake*
 - Placement by misappropriation - *RIA Novosti* (Kremlin-official media)

Background. Hendrik Weber, the head of a Norwegian delegation that visited Crimea in September, said that this peninsula is an inseparable part of the Russian Federation. In his opinion, sanctions are ‘nonsense’ and Crimea doesn’t feel their impact. Weber and his delegation, a group of public figures, academics and entrepreneurs, arrived in Crimea on 30 September, and pro-Kremlin media immediately called the visit ‘official’ and its members ‘diplomats’. This was not the first visit by Weber to the territory after 2014. According to *Stop Fake*, Hendrik and his wife, Mette Rosenlund launched an organization called People’s Diplomacy Norway.

Laundering. On 3 October *RIA Novosti* covered the news of the visit to Crimea, framing the news in a way that seemed that this was an official delegation (placement by means of misappropriation) and that Norway’s position was that the referendum was legal and there were no human rights violations (e.g. A delegation from Norway is in Crimea on a six-day visit).

Later that day, *Izvestia* added disinformation stating that a delegation from the US had visited Crimea and also declared that independence was legal. The English version of *Sputnik News* included a subtle misleading headline, sharing the same information but making a statement by writing ‘Russia’s Crimea’. Pro-Kremlin outlet *Russian Dialogue* further distorted the news by including more disinformation pieces like the UN trying to ban pronouncing the word ‘Crimea’.

Segodnia introduced a misleading headline and misappropriation by relating how the Bulgarian delegation had supported Crimean independence, giving the impression that many European countries were visiting and giving support to the separatists. *Sputnik Radio* included an entirely misleading headline that read: ‘Trump’s policies are helping Europe to change their views on Crimea’ (Трамп своей политикой помогает Европе изменить взгляды на Крым)





Image 31. Hendrik Weber congratulated.

Source: Webpage of the self-declared Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Donetsk People's Republic²²⁹

(disinformation). Media outlets like *TV Zvezda* also included subtle disinformation, stating that the delegation had changed their minds after seeing the development of the Crimean Peninsula. According to *StopFake*, this was not the first visit by Weber to the territory.²²³

Observations

- Subtle use of techniques, fundamentally misappropriation – e.g. omitting that the so-called ‘delegation’ was unofficial – so the small change of Norway’s representative/Norwegian delegation makes the reader think that it is an official delegation when it was just a bunch of people visiting the region.
- Western sanctions portrayed as illogical and abusive (similar to case of Finland).
- *Folkendiplomati Norge* commonly uses the platforms *Steigan* and *Friheten*, and the blog *Derimot* (where Weber sometimes collaborates) to disseminate/support their articles.
- Norway’s following of the EU sanctions policies and position on Crimea’s annexation has been deeply criticised in pro-Kremlin circles because it brings the country closer to the EU (hence, anti-EU narratives).
- Research on the issue and Hendrick Weber’s activity reveals that the Norwegian activist has participated several times in the *Herland Report* by *Hanne*.²²⁴



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Case 33 – Norwegians take to the streets to protest against *Trident Juncture* (TRJE18)

- Exposed by: *Myth Detector*
- Placement by misappropriation
- *Journalen* (domestic accidental actor)

Background. The *Trident Juncture* military exercise (TRJE18) took place between 25 October and 7 November 2018 with the participation of the 29 NATO members, plus Sweden and Finland. It was held in central and eastern Norway and the surrounding areas of the North Atlantic and the Baltic Sea, including Iceland and the airspace of Finland and Sweden. Its objective was to train NATO forces and ensure they are ready to respond to any threat.²²⁵

Laundering. On 29 October, Norwegian outlet *Journalen* reported on protests in Oslo against TRJE18. These protests had been covered by mainstream media (e.g. NRK)²²⁶ on the previous days. The outlet included misappropriations such as de-contextualising a quote from a Norwegian officer and stating that participants had been encouraged to bring champagne bottles and using quotes from protesters giving the impression that the military exercise would increase tensions between the West and Russia, which could make Norway ‘a war zone’.

On 31 October, Social Justice Party’s (Rättvisepartiet Socialisternas) newspaper *Offensive* shared the same news, alleging that those protests should spill across national borders (perhaps to instigate Swedish audiences to do the same), and that the exercise should be compared with a bottle of champagne, as it trivialised and disrespected those killed in war and war

refugees, becoming just an entertainment activity. Anti-capitalist arguments are found like ‘instead of doing something about world hunger and poverty, capitalism spends huge sums on war and armaments’/ ‘In a socialist world, this madness will be history’. *RT Russian* translated the Swedish article into Russian, including an image taken from protests in Poland in 2016, depicting NATO





Image of a protest.
Source: RT Russia

as occupying forces. This was amplified by Russian language proxies *Cont* and *Eurasianews* (SM).

Finally, pro-Kremlin Georgian medium *Geworld* (see Denmark, Case 2) translated the piece into Georgian, including the picture as well. *Geworld* included a misleading headline disseminating the idea that, in general, Norwegian people are opposed to NATO troops in the country (misleading headline).

Observations

- Six outlets participated from the laundering process over nine days.
- The languages identified were Russian, Swedish, Georgian and Norwegian.
 - IL aimed at discrediting NATO to Norwegian, Swedish, Russian and Georgian speakers.
 - TRJE18 has been the subject of numerous IL processes across the NB8 – see, for example, LVA Case 5, and FIN Case 15.
 - Anti-NATO narratives exploited by communist and anti-capitalist organisations to support their message.
- Level of distortion was low, shaping the original news events through IL techniques to boost anti-NATO sentiments.



KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Analysis of the results

The substantial differences between media environments and IL networks of the NB8 countries were used to test the adaptability of the framework. The main differences identified are:

- The type and number of actors involved in the IL process;
- The way in which the layering phase was conducted in terms of techniques applied and the presence of SM;
- The audiences targeted, according to the topics and languages used.

Our research confirms that IL is conducted in every NB8 country and it is indicative of vulnerabilities of their domestic media environments:

Denmark

In Denmark, mainly foreign but also domestic media outlets, knowingly or unknowingly, enable Kremlin-official or pro-Kremlin HIICs to enter the Danish news environment. In three of the case studies, a Kremlin-official or pro-Kremlin news agency played a key role in the placement or layering phases. Even though there were no

Danish-language pro-Kremlin media detected and only six participating domestic outlets were identified (three accidental and three proxies), our findings challenge the initial preconception that Kremlin information influence hardly exists in Denmark.

Given the smaller number of news outlets implicated, the layering phase is less complex, with fewer actors intervening and requiring a longer period of time to develop. The use of English as the main language of these campaigns supports the assumption that IL in Denmark is used primarily to portray a negative image of Denmark or of the West in general for international audiences.

Vulnerability highlighted by the IL study: the high number of accidental actors, domestic but also foreign, involved in SM processes.

Latvia

Our research confirms that IL in Latvia is straightforward and does not call into question the existence of domestic and foreign actors that seek to influence Latvian domestic audiences, or promote a certain image of Latvia. Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media took part in every case examined; the IL process was supported by extensive SM conducted mainly by Russian-language media.



The topics and the main languages utilised allow to draw conclusions on the basic characteristics of the intended receivers of the laundered information. On the one hand, in the cases evolving around NATO as a main topic, Russian-language media were combined in the IL operation with English-language media, aimed at international readership. On the other hand, Case 8, which focused on the defence of the rights of the ethnic-Russian minority in Latvia, was laundered only by Russian-language media, both domestic and foreign.

Vulnerability highlighted by the IL study: consolidated pro-Kremlin outlets with stable readership that actively participate in IL not only in Latvia, but also in the rest of the NB8 countries.

Estonia

Estonia is one of the NB8 countries with the most complex IL networks and the largest number of single actors involved in IL cases. IL networks are essentially transnational and, like in Latvia, their activity focuses on laundering news to portray NATO and US troops in the Baltics as invaders. They also launder news to support claims that Western states are undermining Russian-ethnic groups' rights in the region. The most common actors participating in IL processes to spread Kremlin's influence within Estonia are Russian-language pro-Kremlin media which, together with Kremlin-official media and other pro-Kremlin media, account for 67% of the total actors. IL actors targeting Estonia utilise a wide range of techniques, including smurfing and Potemkin Villages, which indicate a certain level of coordination.

The role of domestic media in IL processes is significant, as almost all placements from the case studies in Estonia were conducted by a domestic media outlet. Regarding languages utilised, the primary language is Russian, followed by English and Estonian. SM is especially relevant in Russian language.

Vulnerability highlighted by the IL study: complex transnational domestic media that become accidental participants in IL processes.

Finland

Our study shows that in Finland, IL networks are moderately complex, with high activity of Russian-language actors and very few domestic media involved. However, domestic pro-Kremlin media (MV-Lehti) and proxies (Nykysuomi, Yliauta) are particularly relevant, as they translate foreign IL processes into Finnish language.

As a non-NATO country, Russian and Ukrainian-domain Russian-language networks target the country strategically to exploit its non-NATO status and influence international public opinion on the following topics: NATO exercises, Ukraine, and EU sanctions. In our research, Russian and English language outlets applied most of the IL techniques, frequently supported by an ample SM process – half of the actors involved in IL cases in Finland conducted SM. IL techniques had a particular relevance when placing out of context quotes of reputed public figures or mainstream international media. It has to be noted that the local media has played an important role in exposing disinformation attempts.



Vulnerability highlighted by the IL study: specific actors that publicly support pro-Kremlin agenda and enable the spread of Kremlin's influence in the domestic media environment by setting up platforms like MV-Lehti.

Sweden

In Sweden, IL activity appears equally distributed among proxy, pro-Kremlin and accidental actors. As it is the pattern for the whole region, networks use Russian and English as the main languages. However, IL processes targeting Swedish news events have been translated and further laundered in many different languages, such as Estonian, French, or German, contributing to a significant SM process. As seen with some of the cases, Swedish news stories are often laundered using the technique of smurfing. IL techniques are used essentially to deceive audiences about news stories within the topics of NATO's activity in the region (especially TRJE18) and Western moral decay (cannibalism, Greta Thunberg, or ISIS). Sweden and Finland are depicted by IL actors as vulnerable nations, trying to reinforce their national defence capabilities to shield themselves from any Russian threat. IL actors in Sweden also actively promote political narratives aligned with a particular ideology.

Vulnerability highlighted by the IL study: overlap between laundered news stories and ideologically charged narratives, which foments the involvement of accidental actors in the laundering process

Iceland

Iceland is the NB8 country with the least active IL networks. However, pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-official media from other NB8 countries, such as Sputnik Estonia, Baltnews Lithuania, and TV Net, target the country to launder and disseminate Icelandic news stories which propagate anti-Western messages to international Russian and English-speaking audiences. The topic of NATO is also important, with IL actors strategically utilising news about Iceland to retrieve Cold War perceptions of ongoing bipolar confrontations and to portray NATO as an aggressive actor constantly threatening Russia. Naval base Keflavik plays a key role as a target for IL concerning Iceland. Although no Icelandic-language media were seen involved in IL in the country, a very active pro-Kremlin outlet, The Saker, is registered with Icelandic domain. Interestingly, SM reaches a wider range of languages than other NB8 countries. Some indicators suggest that Arctic narratives are emerging as a target for IL techniques.

Vulnerability highlighted by the IL study: international actors targeting the country to influence wide international audiences, mainly (but not only) in English and Russian languages.

Lithuania

Lithuania registers the highest activity from Kremlin-official media within the NB8 but at the same time Lithuanian IL networks are generally shorter than in the rest of the Baltic States, with fewer actors involved. Similar to the whole region, the domestic language is



rarely employed, but still it is more utilised in Lithuania than in other NB8 countries. IL actors use techniques to portray Lithuania as NATO's vassal, bring accusations of Russophobia, and entertain Cold War nostalgia. IL narratives are emotional and politically charged, leveraging Lithuania's geostrategic position with Belarus or appealing to the memory of World War II. IL actors abuse a mix of woosle effect and misappropriation, making the information resulting from the IL process difficult to debunk, and the distorted information more credible.

Vulnerability highlighted by the IL study: in comparison to other NB8 countries, high activity of Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media, which have a stable readership.

Norway

Finally, our research on Norway's IL networks and their use of techniques found several similarities to Swedish and Finnish IL processes. However, Norwegian IL networks are larger and more complex – the IL case with the highest number of actors involved was detected in Norway. Like in Finland, it is more common to find pro-Kremlin actors and organisations than pro-Kremlin media involved in the IL. Like in Sweden, IL processes overlap with ideologically charged narratives. There is an interesting parallelism with Lithuania - Norwegian language is used more than domestic languages in other NB8 countries.

Vulnerability highlighted by the IL study: domestic actors with pro-Kremlin agendas enable the laundering of news in Norway.

Main characteristics of the examined cases of IL

Since the information environment lacks clear physical boundaries, IL networks are essentially transnational. Few exceptions are found in cases targeting purely domestic topics and spheres of interest (e.g., Case 8). This implies the intentional and/or unintentional spread and distortion of news by actors from different countries. Sometimes (not always) this spread could be intentional, which implies a certain level of collaboration between actors, which our research has highlighted by exposing, for example, cases of smurfing and Potemkin Villages. Media who target the NB8 in IL campaigns frequently use a Russian domain or come from an NB8 country.

The IL technique most frequently used was misappropriation by means of including, deleting, or modifying elements, so as to alter the context and thereby the meaning (this is consistent with the level of sophistication common to HIICs). However, IL was shown to make use of a wide range of techniques in order to further disseminate and mislead audiences. Yet, the use of more techniques does not necessarily mean larger distortion from the facts—for example, Case 1 (DNK) was simple and straightforward, with not many intermediaries implicated, but the level of distortion was high. Interestingly, woosle effects used throughout the laundering process involve removing hyperlinks to the original quotes, which—intentionally or unintentionally—reinforces the effect and increases the level of distortion, since audiences tend not to seek out independently the original source of the information. The use of woosle effects and



misappropriation has been seen as a highly effective combination of techniques that makes the laundered information very difficult to debunk. Readers generally commit a short time span to read a news piece, and it is highly unlikely that they will realise that a true, accurate quote from a trusted public figure (woozle effect) is being misused to provide credibility to misleading information. This allows malign IL actors to use the resulting information in a misleading way.

Differentiating Information Laundering and Source Magnification

To better understand IL processes, it is important to distinguish it from SM. However, they are intimately related since the latter is an essential parallel process that contributes to maximizing the effects of IL, and some IL techniques such as smurfing directly contribute to SM. A comprehensive analysis of SM requires the use of a combination of different search engines (for example, Google Search, Yandex) as their algorithms can provide dissimilar results with the same keyword-based search.

Analysis of the accuracy of the proposed framework

The framework confirms that IL is conducted in the whole of NB8, with both domestic and international media supporting and enabling the process. Our research reveals the significant differences that exist between the countries studied and concludes that IL processes can be adapted to the domestic particularities of each online media environment. To obtain optimum results from the application of the framework,

it is necessary to address each case separately, analysing the outcomes that can be deduced.

The adaptability of the framework has been proven, demonstrating that the complexity of laundering processes varies depending on the media environment, the type of information laundered, and the number of media involved in the process. It also makes it possible to identify and distinguish IL processes with relevant pro-Kremlin influence from those where Kremlin-official media play an accidental role.

The research on all NB8 countries, which was conducted during 2019-2020, allowed the framework to profit from the comparative value of this study. It allows to identify patterns and similarities among countries, which will increase awareness of the vulnerabilities of a particular domestic and also regional media environment. The framework tested in the NB8 can be (and already is being) adapted to analyse other processes of hostile information influence activities elsewhere in the world.

To conclude, IL research contributes to the study of Kremlin's information influence activities by adding a unique aspect to the mapping and assessment efforts. By exposing how the IL processes occur and who participates in them, national governments, as well as civil society and journalists, can build resilience against information influence activities, improving understanding of the vulnerabilities of specific domestic media environments, and uncovering repeated patterns and connections between actors, media outlets, and influence techniques.



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