

RUSSIA'S (DIS-)  
INFORMATION  
CAMPAIGNS  
VOL.2



# RUSSIA'S FOOTPRINT IN THE NORDIC-BALTIC INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

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# INTRODUCTION

By **Eliša Lange-Ionatamišvili**, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence

This is the second volume issued in the framework of the project 'Russia's (Dis-)Information Campaigns in Nordic-Baltic Countries'. This project was initiated in 2016 as an ongoing effort to monitor and analyse Russia's (dis-)information influence in the Nordic-Baltic region, which includes Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden (the NB8). The first volume was published in January 2018.

Since then, we have continued tracking trends in the information space of the NB8. On the basis of our regular biannual fact findings several trends have emerged. The stories pushed by the Kremlin most often revolve around:

- Manipulation with facts surrounding World War II;
- Attempts to rewrite the history of the NB8 states;
- Exaggerating the threat of immigration to the NB8 societies;
- Accusing the governments, media and opinion leaders of the NB8 countries of Russophobia;
- Accusing NB8 countries of discrimination against Russia's compatriots abroad\*;
- Framing NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltics and Poland as a threat to regional security;
- Questioning and undermining national or regional infrastructure projects.

This publication includes four chapters that help to understand information influence in the NB8.

The first chapter is a piece by **Scott Ruston**, Research Scientist with Arizona State University's Global Security Initiative (USA). He explains how narrative can be understood in the context of strategic communication and focuses on the important differentiation between 'story', 'theme' and 'topic'. This chapter will help to understand what are the key elements of a narrative logic that empower narratives.

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\* For explanation on 'Russia's compatriots abroad' please see the first project report '[Russia's Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment](#)' (2018), pp. 31-26



The second chapter is written by **Māris Cēpurītis** and **Austris Keiņš**, researchers of the Centre of East European Policy Studies (Latvia). After defining 'hostile narrative' the authors analyse the impact of such narratives based on a case study of Latvia. Applying the definition, they carefully examine the lengthy implementation of the education reform, namely switching to Latvian as the language of instruction in Russian-speaking public schools.

The third chapter is a research on stories pushed by Sputnik, RT (formerly Russia Today) and Perviy Kanal, conducted by the Estonian authors **Ivo Juurvee** and **Diana Marnot** (Estonia). This is a follow-up research to the one published in the first volume of this project providing a comparison of the 2016 and 2018 findings. The researchers conclude that the overall coverage of the NB8 has been toned down. Nevertheless, several new narratives have emerged, e.g. asserting that NATO causes a threat to security in Europe and in the NB8 in particular, or claiming that some of the NB8 countries have developed absurd extremes by fostering a too liberal understanding of human rights.

The fourth chapter is an innovative piece by **Belén Carrasco Rodríguez** (Spain) where she introduces the concept of 'information laundering' and lays out the methodology how to research it. Focusing on cases with Kremlin-sponsored media involvement, she tests the methodology on eight countries of the Nordic-Baltic region and provides an overview of the main conclusions. The full research covering all of the NB8 cases in detail is available in a separate publication on the NATO StratCom COE's website.



# NARRATIVE & STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

By Scott Ruston, Arizona State University's Global Security initiative, USA

Strategic communicators need concepts, methods and tools to both analyse the information environment in which they work and in order to craft communication campaigns that will resonate with audiences and accomplish organizational objectives. One of the most powerful rhetorical and analytic devices for these purposes is *narrative*. Narrative is so central to human understanding and decision making that communication theorist Walter Fisher proposed that humans should be called *homo narrans* or 'storytelling man' rather than *homo sapiens* ('thinking man'). He argues, in part, that human decisions and behaviours are driven more by narrative logic and that rational logic while it still applies to human thinking is subordinate to narrative logic.<sup>1</sup> Couple this assertion of fundamental human nature with a consideration of the presence of 'narrative' in reporting on any political contest or analysis of geopolitical conflict. For example, a recent article in *The Guardian* analysing the failure of the 'Remain' campaign to reverse the course of Brexit suggests that 'it has not noticed how the underlying political *narrative* has still been moving in Brexit's favour' (emphasis added).<sup>2</sup> Or, in self-critique of the decade following the 9/11 attacks, a US Department of Defense study observed, that 'the US was slow to recognize the importance of information and the battle for the *narrative* in achieving objectives at all levels' (emphasis added).<sup>3</sup> In addition, consider this headline from the Australian newspaper *The Sydney Morning Herald*: 'A weaponised

*narrative* menaces Sweden—and the world' (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup> Countless examples could be shared emphasizing the centrality of the term 'narrative' to appealing to voters, ensuring national security interests, and shaping societal perspectives.

Thus, narrative is clearly an important concept to arenas in which strategic communicators operate. Yet, it remains elusive as a concept and as a capability, despite centuries of academic analysis (beginning at least with Aristotle), and decades of adaptation and experimentation into military doctrine. This chapter proposes a definition of narrative, consistent with the academic literature that focuses on narratives as systems of components structured in such a way to make meaning. The chapter will identify these components, and explore their use in illuminating and defusing disinformation and propaganda.

## WHAT IS NARRATIVE

### Narrative and military strategic communications

*Narrative* in the context of strategic communications, however, is a fraught term, subject to a wide range of definitions and connotations. Multiple fields of academic study investigate exactly what narrative is and does (e.g., narratology, literary studies,



communication, etc.), yet do not produce a common definition and explanation in the same way that physics, chemistry and biology all share a common understanding of molecular structure. Other disciplines (e.g., medicine, sociology, even communication) use the term to distinguish between numerical, quantifiable data and data rendered in text or written form which only serves to introduce additional confusion when seeking a consistent academic definition.

Military doctrines also define narrative differently. US Joint Pub 3-61 Public Affairs defines narrative as 'a short story used to underpin operations and to provide greater understanding and context to an operation or situation'.<sup>5</sup> The NATO Strategic Communications Handbook offers a similar but slightly different definition:

**A concise but comprehensive written statement of an organization's situation and purpose, which can stand on its own as the principle context to strategic planning directives or be used to support the creation of individual culturally attuned stories that will resonate with particular audiences and foster cohesion within the organization.<sup>6</sup>**

Another example is drawn from United Kingdom joint doctrine which describes narratives 'as compelling story lines which explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn'.<sup>7</sup> These definitions are all similar, yet different: one equates narrative with story; the second specifies a written form, and the third collects multiple 'story line'. Two emphasize brevity, one emphasizes resonance with

audiences. As all are primarily focused on a unifying concept for an organization regarding its mission these definitions are less helpful in analysing and understanding the information environment. Furthermore, these doctrinal definitions do not apply well to Brexit, the global war on terror, and menace in Sweden, examples cited earlier. Thus, our goal here will be to retain compatibility with these doctrinal definitions, particularly the emphasis on the creation of meaning or shared understanding, while introducing elements that expand the utility of the concept of narrative.

### Differentiating from 'topic'

Further confusing the matter, colloquial uses of the term 'narrative' often equate it with 'topic' or 'theme' or 'story'. These more casual and vague definitions diminish the opportunity to harness the creative and analytic power of narrative.

'Topic' is an insufficient synonym. While it helpfully suggests that a narrative has a subject, a shared subject across a range of communication artefacts does not necessarily constitute a narrative. For example, news articles, speeches and Twitter announcements all on the topic of ballistic missile defence do not constitute a 'ballistic missile defence' narrative simply because of shared subject matter. Such articles and speeches might even all support a particular policy regarding ballistic missile defence system deployment. Again, these would exhibit shared topics, but as we will explore below narrative is much more. Similarly, the Russian government and Russia-aligned media outlets have shared at least 20 different explanations for the Skripal poisoning described



as ‘narratives’ in a 2018 Euromaidanpress.com article.<sup>8</sup> These explanations have appeared in Twitter messages, in speeches and in news articles and television broadcasts and share the same subject matter or topic, but they do not constitute a narrative solely because of the shared topic.

### **Differentiating from ‘theme’**

‘Theme’ is another common, but insufficient synonym. Theme refers to a unifying or dominant idea. As the military doctrine definitions imply meaning and understanding are central to narrative and hence its conflation with a term like ‘theme’. Consider this use of narrative from 2010 when American car company General Motors planned to introduce a plug-in hybrid automobile called the Chevy Volt: ‘What GM needs out of the Chevy Volt is a new narrative’. ‘Narrative’ is used here to mean that dominant idea that GM needed out of the introduction of this new model: the idea that GM was a technologically advanced and ecologically attuned car company. As implied by the doctrinal definitions and explored more deeply below narrative has some form of connection to stories, and thus to actions, events and characters. Theme, on the other hand, is much broader. The narrative associated with GM is far more complex than this theme of tech- and eco-savviness. It involves introduction of the Chevy Volt against a history of less efficient and advanced vehicles, complicated by the global financial crisis still gripping the world’s economy. The theme the GM marketers were looking for is a product of the narrative, not the narrative itself.

The Skripal case and the flooding of the information environment with statements,

accusations and explanations also illustrates how ‘theme’ is a useful term, but one that is broad in scope. For example, of the twenty explanations identified by Euromaidanpress.com, eight specify a different perpetrator, whether an individual (Theresa May, Bill Browder, Skripal’s mother-in-law), a country (the UK, Ukraine, the United States), or other (terrorists, drones). These explanations share a theme of ‘possible perpetrator’ but are otherwise unrelated. In fact, each of these explanations identifies a different key actor—and we will discuss below that actors taking actions are a key element of a narrative system. Four other explanations posit that Russia is unfairly accused because of some form of anti-Russian bias, plot to undermine Vladimir Putin, jealousy over success in Syria or revenge for Crimea. These four explanations share a theme of Russophobia. Identifying common themes within an information environment can be very useful. The shared theme of possible perpetrator seeds the information environment with confusion and doubt about the efficacy of the investigation; the theme of Russophobia plays upon notions of injustice.

Both of these related concepts, topic and theme, are important, as they illuminate aspects of the information environment. However, when narrative is synonymized with theme or topic, then narrative is left under-defined and its power overlooked. Too often, media monitoring, as a capability to aid strategic communicators, purports to offer narrative analysis when the extent of analytic work is to categorize the news articles and other media artefacts by keyword, topic or theme and call that basket of news articles a ‘narrative’. This categorization step can be quite valuable, but it is insufficient to illuminate how or why an audience may come to a specific understanding of the topic or an





organization's strategic intent—two inferences possible through the type of narrative analysis discussed below.

### Differentiating from 'story'

In these casual uses, 'story' at least connotes that actors and events are involved, but 'story' is frequently undefined itself, making the assumption that story is universally and specifically understood. And, 'story' may have connotations of fiction, or suggest a lack of importance as in the dismissive comment 'that's just a story'.

If we are going to say a *story* differs from a *narrative*, what, then, is a story? A story is a sequence of actions with an overt meaning or implied significance. A sequence of actions without that unifying element of significance would simply be a list. Very often when you hear someone recount a series of events, and your reaction is 'gee, that story had no point', this is precisely because it was not a malformed story, but rather something entirely different: a list. For example:

**I walked to the store. This is not a story. It is a single action.**

**I walked to the store and bought milk. Again, not a story, but rather a short list of actions. However, we start to see here the potential for a story: why did I buy milk, and not bread? Already in our minds we are starting to run through possibilities about what further relationships are necessary to make sense of this sequence of actions.**

**I walked to the store, bought milk and fed the stray kitten. Now we have a story with a point. The trip to the store was motivated by the desire to feed a kitten, and the story concludes with a successful errand. Moreover, additional layers of meaning can be interpreted based on our body of knowledge derived from our culture that can help further enrich our understanding of this simple story. Other stories of helping stray animals or people in need or similar relationships between story participants accumulate into broader systems that both convey meaning in specific (an individual helped another) and in general (helpfulness is a positive character trait or cultural value)—and that is the domain of narrative.**

### Defining narrative

If we limit our understanding of narrative to simply topic or theme or even story, then we do not have the capacity to understand or analyse how real-world events, speeches, policy documents and a whole range of phenomena actually *interact* to create meaning on the part of individuals and audiences. Most often, as communicators we have access to narrative material through some form of communication and some form of media artefact whether that is a text like a news article, or a video, or a speech made by a leader, or a social media posting whether brief like a tweet or longer form such as blog post. Understanding narrative as a system of components—that include actors and events and locations expressed in media artefacts as well as actors,



events and locations in the real world—helps us understand how they interact to resolve rhetorical conflicts and thus make meaning.

Mark Laity, Chief of Strategic Communications at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, has argued ‘a narrative is an organizational scheme expressed in story form and stories are often the basis for community identity as well as strategies and actions’.<sup>9</sup> Within this observation are two key elements that are necessary to unlock the power of narrative for strategic communications: the fundamental principle that narrative in some way organizes information and that somehow narratives are connected to actions and identities. These connections are critical whether the goal of the strategic communicator is to nest an organization’s goal within an audience’s worldview; elicit some action on the part of an audience; or understand how an adversary seeks to manipulate an audience.

This chapter provides a definition of narrative specifically for the strategic communications professional, suitable for the analysis of narratives within the information environment as well as the creation of communication artefacts for specific strategic effects within the information environment. The definition is complex, befitting a complex and powerful phenomenon.

### What is *narrative*?

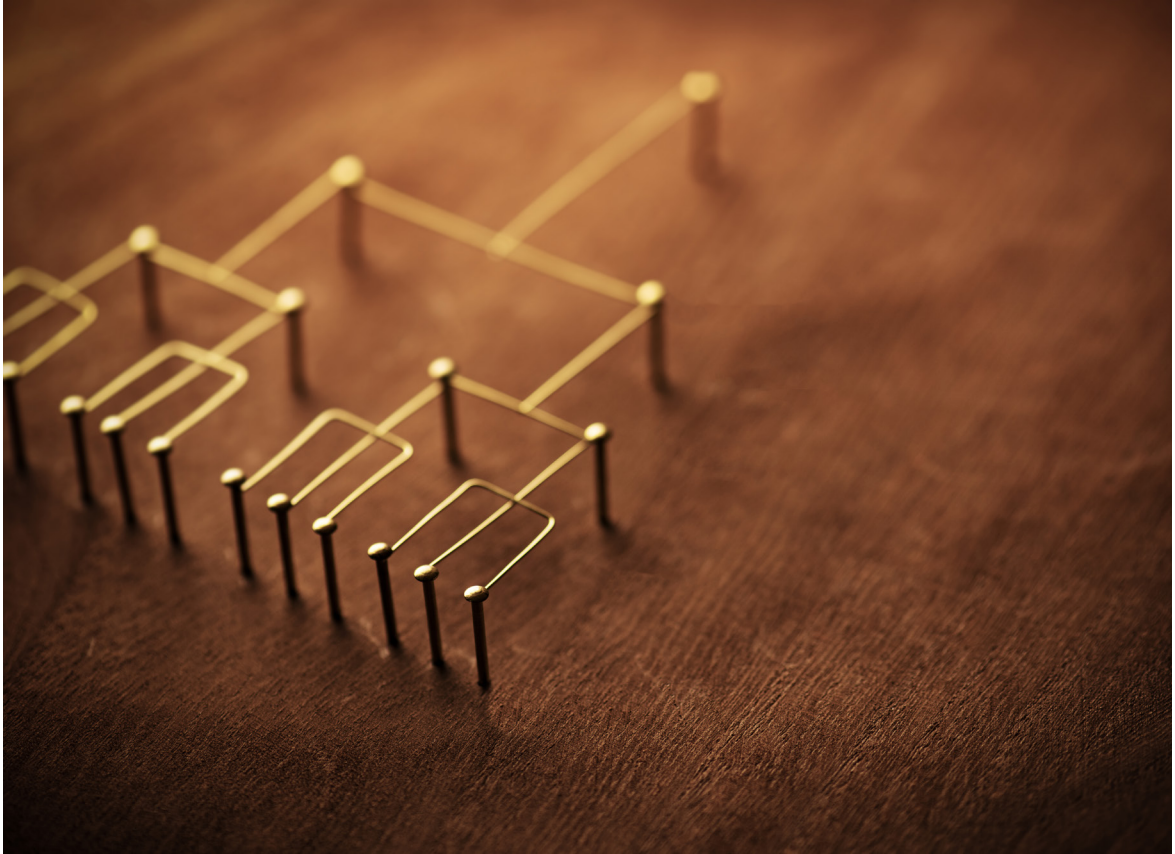
- 1 A cognitive process of ordering information into a structure of cause, effect and consequence.
- 2 A system of stories structured in such a way as to make meaning

The two definitions are not independent and separate, but rather work together and help illustrate why narrative is so important to understand in the context of strategic communications and influence.

The first definition provides an important fundamental basis for our understanding, analysis and use of ‘narrative’: most importantly, narrative involves how humans understand the world around themselves. This explains why there can be considerable debate about the components of a narrative and how a combination of events on the ground, press releases and news articles do not consistently create the same meaning—humans are inherently ambiguous, mutable and dynamic.

The second definition is of equal importance as the first: it tells us that narrative consists of components (stories and their elements) that inter-relate in some way. An image or a meme or a Twitter message could be a component of a narrative, just as a collection of news articles or a series of chapters in a single book. Understanding narratives as systems allows two things: first, it reveals that a given artefact (a meme, a Tweet, a TV advertisement, a speech) might, in fact, participate in multiple narrative systems; second, it illuminates that a key point to understanding the meaning created by the system is to understand the constituent components, but also what role they play in the system.





## KEY ELEMENTS OF NARRATIVE LOGIC THAT EMPOWER NARRATIVES

### Structure

Narratives, then, are systems made up of stories (themselves sequences of actions taken by actors in locations), characters, and the functional roles these stories and characters play—all of which participate in making meaning. The key functional roles that these stories play include: conflict, desire/goal, complicating actions, progressing actions and resolution. Key character functions include protagonist and antagonist.<sup>10</sup> The role any given component plays differs depending on the parameters of the system and the

interactions of other narrative systems present in a given narrative landscape.

*Conflict* may be the single most important component for both identifying and understanding a narrative system. The conflict may manifest as two entities in direct competition or tension, such as NATO and the Warsaw Pact nations during the Cold War. Moreover, the conflict may manifest as a lack, such as the lack of employment prospects faced by manufacturing workers as industrial economies transform into service and knowledge-based economies. In the former context, the entities in conflict are the *protagonist* (main actor or set of actors pursuing a desire or goal) and *antagonist* (main



actor or set of actors obstructing or contesting the protagonist). The conflict instantiates a *desire* or *goal* that the protagonist pursues. In pursuit of that goal, the protagonist encounters *complicating actions*, which deter achievement of the desire/goal, and *progressing actions*, which support or advance pursuit of the desire/goal. How the protagonist deals with these successes and obstacles is part of how a narrative system expresses values and cultural norms. The *resolution* can be an intended or anticipated method of satisfying the desire, in forward looking, aspirational narratives; or the resolution can be explanatory, in retrospective narratives.

An analysis of a group of Islamist extremist texts invoking the theme 'war on Islam' provides an example of how analysis of groups of media artefacts (in this case primarily blog and forum posts) can reveal this structural components of a narrative system.<sup>11</sup> These texts contained story clusters featuring actions of steadfast *mujahideen* ('holy warriors') and actions of victorious battles. Other clusters contained stories of a unified *ummah* (a term referring to the Islamic community, not limited by national geographic borders) under threat. These stories participate in a narrative system wherein the threat to the *ummah* was the core conflict. In some texts the threat came from the United States; in others the threat came from apostate regimes; in others the threat came from globalization; etc. This overall conflict of threat generates an overall desire by the protagonist *mujahideen* to defend the *ummah*. The stories of battles cluster into complicating actions (defeat, martyrdom) and progressing actions (victories, heroic acts). Multiple *potential* satisfactions of the

desire exist (establish caliphate for defence of *ummah*; defeat the West; etc.).

In order to understand the power of narrative, it is important to focus not only on the components, but especially on how the *system constructs meaning*. It is the interrelationship of the core conflict(s), goals, and how actions/events obstruct or progress the trajectory of actions toward the resolution. Consider two simplified abstractions of narratives of post-Cold War Russia:

**Example 1: Russian strength.** This simplified narrative system is an example of a lack as the core conflict, in this case Russia's lack of prosperity in the wake of transition from communist regime to a democratic and capitalist system. This places Russia as the protagonist of the narrative system, with a variety of antagonistic actors such as the US, NATO, EU, World Bank, etc. The Russian desire is the restoration or realization of prosperity and power. Complicating events are the struggles of the Russian economy, uneasy democratization and unsuccessful market reforms, with blame placed on the liberal international economic order. Heroes are the oligarchs who have (seemingly) succeeded in capitalist competition (progressing actions) by leveraging Russian natural resources. Vladimir Putin's actions contesting the rules-based order are seen as progressing towards the aspirational resolution of a resurgence of Russian power.



**Example 2: Russian corruption.** At the core of this narrative system is also a lack of prosperity and success, which gives rise to a desire to satisfy the lack. However, in this simplified narrative system, the oligarchs and their political allies who dominate the extractive industries through corrupt practices are the complicating actions. Progressing actions fulfilling the promise of democratization and free market activities are few and far between. Putin and the oligarchs become the antagonists, with political opposition leaders such as Navalny and Yashin representing the ideals of democracy potential.

Note that in these two simplified examples, each share the components of core conflict, key characters (Putin and oligarchs), activities (success of extractive industries) and desire (prosperity and strength). By virtue of their arrangement of elements and the functional roles they play these two narratives shape perspective of additional events. Understood within the first narrative system, the annexation of Crimea becomes a progressing action demonstrating Russia's defiance of the West and assertion of Russian power; understood in the context of the second, Crimea becomes a symbol of corruption and manipulation of democratic principles.

### Coherence and fidelity

As the two abstracted narrative system examples of contemporary Russia illustrate,

narrative can be seen as 'a mechanism that systematically tests certain combinations and transformations of a set of basic elements and propositions about events...not simply to enumerate causes but to discover the causal efficacy of an element'.<sup>12</sup> The two narrative systems share most of the same components, but in a different arrangement. Which narrative system is the more persuasive explanation of contemporary Russia depends significantly on causal efficacy while the causal efficacy depends on the arrangement within the narrative system and two principles of narrative validity: *coherence* and *fidelity*. These two principles are also useful for forecasting how new narrative elements (new stories told, new activities conducted, new events taking place) may integrate into the narrative systems present within a narrative landscape.

Coherence is the degree to which a narrative system maintains a sense of internal logic through consistency of action and consistency of relationships between the functional roles. Russian news outlets and government press releases regularly frame actions taken by NATO as belligerent and destabilizing to Europe, so a story articulating a sequence of events wherein a US operative poisons the Skripals maintains coherence within the context of Russian promoted narrative systems. Claims by Russia of military provocation following each new NATO military exercise such as Trident Juncture or BALTOPS are coherent within the first abstracted Russia narrative described above; such claims fit the role of NATO as part of the antagonistic forces obstructing Russia from rising to power, expanding its trade routes and controlling its sphere of influence.



Disrupting coherence is one method of eroding the persuasive power of an adversary's narratives. For example, in the Islamist extremist example described above, a key element of the component relationship in the system was the role of the *mujahideen* and the extremist groups like Al Qaeda and later ISIS in defending the *ummah*. However, stories of the number of fellow Muslims killed by Al Qaeda and ISIS attacks serve to displace the role of extremists as the protagonist-heroes and defenders thus disrupting the coherence of the narrative system.

Working in concert with this internal consistency, fidelity is the degree to which a narrative system rings true with narratives already believed to be true. At the core of fidelity is not only a consistency in actions, but also in the conveyed meaning and shared beliefs between those stories already accepted as true and any new stories encountered. In the first simplified Russia narrative above, reframing Vladimir Putin from a strong leader and saviour of Russia to an antagonist preventing Russia from achieving its full potential lacks fidelity. Russian history is full of stories of strong figures such as Peter the Great (late 17<sup>th</sup>-early 18<sup>th</sup> Century), Catherine the Great (late 18<sup>th</sup> Century), and Josef Stalin, leading Russia to greater levels of prominence, prosperity and power. Stories of Putin as a strong leader, standing up to powerful European neighbours, and leading Russia to greatness, fit this same mould.

Fidelity can be identified by looking for consistent story structures and looking for archetypes. Archetypes are recurring character types that have consistent, identifiable elements (either iconographic or

conceptual) and that represent certain cultural values. For example, the image of Vladimir Putin bare-chested on horseback, and the frequent referencing of his skill in judo along with his KGB background serve to position him as an archetypal powerful warrior. Strategic communicators can use fidelity to their benefit in crafting campaigns, identify stories with conflict/resolution patterns that align with strategic communications goals and seek out archetypes within the target audience culture that align with the values intended by the strategic communication campaign.

### Working with these concepts

The table below offers a depiction of three simplified narrative systems (one, familiar from above; another applying to NATO; and a third, more narrowly frame context with Russia). In a comprehensive analysis the information environment, numerous stories, events, and actions would populate the categories of the narrative components. In this example, the complexity of the narrative systems has been reduced. By charting narrative components in this way, areas that lack coherence and thus erode the potency, validity and persuasive power of the narrative system can be identified. Note, for example, the inconsistency of antagonist in the NATO system, denoted by the question marks. Inconsistency of antagonist and progressing actions (along with inconsistency of member countries' definition of conflict and desire) contribute to the potential instability of this narrative. A resurgent Russia has sharpened and focused NATO identity narratives; coherence within the NATO identity narrative became more challenging with the involvement in Afghanistan.



	Conflict	Antagonist	Desire	Complicating Actions	Progressing Actions	Resolution
Russia	Lack of power, prosperity	'the West'	Power, influence, economic improvement; weakened competitors	Failed return on democracy and capitalism; sanctions	Defiance of West in Syria; UK, US election meddling; return of Crimea	Aspirational: great power; control sphere of influence
NATO	Threats to stable, secure Europe	USSR (Cold War); ? (1990s); terrorism (2000s); Russia? (2019)	Maintain safe, peaceful secure and stable Europe; defeat aggressors	Cold War: Hungary, proxy wars, military build-ups, etc.; 2000s: 9/11, 7/7	Deterrence operations; interoperability exercises; NATO Expansion	Cold War: perseverance and victory
Russia in Syria	Rules based order dominated by US marginalize Russia	US & West	Protect ally from imperialist aggressor; assert power	US and coalition troops in Syria; chemical weapons confiscation	US withdrawal; increasing Assad regime control	Russia outmanoeuvres US

Pursuing a charting exercise such as this for a larger scale project with numerous stories can illustrate how proposed activities may fit in multiple narrative systems. For example, support of growing democracies, the rule of law, open market access, and protection of human rights are all elements of 'Western values'. Thus, military activities that support those goals would be coherent within a US-focused narrative maintaining the global rules-based order. So, for example, such a narrative of supporting western values and democracy justifies and explains US activity in a variety of contexts (Syria, NATO's eastern border, Kosovo, etc.) for a US audience. However, it does not necessarily persuade a Russian audience. The coherence doesn't apply if the narrative is Russia-focused. Russia has irregularly participated in this global order, and Russian society has largely not reaped the benefits of democratization and transition to capitalism. Thus, such military activities by the US are read as complicating actions obstructing Russian

society from its full potential within a Russian-oriented narrative.

Shaping an adversary's behaviour requires disrupting or reframing the narratives motivating the undesirable behaviour (actions within the narrative system defining the conflict, antagonist and desire/goals). One way to shape Russian state behaviour is to offer an alternative to one of their geopolitical narratives. Russia scholars agree that restoring Russia to great power status is a primary goal/aspirational resolution of the arc of Russian activities since the rise to power of Vladimir Putin. In this narrative system, the US, NATO and EU are the antagonists governing a world order stacked against Russian success and parity. Events such as the election meddling in US and UK, the annexation of Crimea, and engagement in Syria are all actions progressing towards a resolution of Russia as a power player on the world stage. An alternative narrative would maintain the aspirational resolution (great





power), but would reframe the core conflict and thus the chief antagonists. This narrative would require activities and events replacing US/NATO/EU as the chief antagonist, thereby changing the focus of Russia's combative activities (e.g., a new, mutual antagonist). Alternatively, a *counter-narrative* strategy would be to seed the narrative landscape with stories (i.e., sequences of actions by participants in locations, or military activities) that participated in the Russian narrative system as an overwhelming complicating action—a complicating action that would prevent the achievement of the narrative's resolution. If perceived as an insurmountable obstruction to achieving resolution, then this complicating action would disrupt the coherence of the Russian narrative arc (the theory of Mutually Assured Destruction rests on this very type of narrative incoherence).

## CONCLUSION

*Narratives* are systems of stories structured in such a way as to make meaning about the world around us. Understanding how the systems are structured, starting with identifying the possible relationships between stories such that an arrangement of conflict, desire, complication/progression and resolution become evident, are the keys to unpacking the power of narrative both from an analytic and also a creative perspective. By incorporating the principles of coherence and fidelity with this structural elements, strategic communicators can better understand the narratives circulating in the information environment, better understand their appeal with key audience cultures, and better craft communication campaigns that disrupt adversarial disinformation efforts and support allied strategic goals.





# Endnotes

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# HOSTILE NARRATIVES AND THEIR IMPACT: THE CASE OF LATVIA

By Māris Cepurītis and Austris Keišs, Centre for East European Policy Studies, Latvia

## THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION: DEFINING 'HOSTILE NARRATIVE'

Narrative often is compared to a story. But authors of NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence distinguish in their publication 'Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology' between a story and a narrative, defining story as 'a temporally, spatially, and casually connected sequence of events' and a narrative as 'morals drawn from stories'. Consequently, stories are a way how narrative is communicated and shared between individuals.

**Narrative is not the story itself but the moral or deeper meaning that individuals draw from a specific story.**

It is formed and maintained in human memory.<sup>1</sup> In social and political context, narrative can be described as a framework that allows humans to connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation.<sup>2</sup>

For individuals and society, narratives have their usefulness in that they help in comprehending phenomena in terms more easily understandable. Secondly, narratives provide a more simplified version of the

phenomenon – they reduce complexity and thus foster better understanding of the phenomenon, that would otherwise require specific knowledge. Thirdly, narratives offer a vision towards some sort of longterm aim.<sup>3</sup> By including a unified vision of a certain aim, narratives provide a solution to one of the central challenges in politics – the problem of collective action,<sup>4</sup> namely how to engage the community in cooperation to pursue common public goods. In any community this vision of a longterm target is imagined even in cases when it includes material and measurable criteria, for example an increase in the Gross domestic product (GDP) or welfare of society. By creating an imagined aim, narratives help in mobilizing society. Furthermore, common narratives with imagined longterm aim, can not only serve units like states but also communities united by ideas such as democracy or liberal values.

As this article examines 'hostile narrative', it is necessary to pay attention to the context of stories and narratives.

**Without a context or background, a story or narrative can't be considered negative or positive, hostile or friendly. Both gain their traits only in their context.**



” Information influence activities can be defined as an illegitimate attempt to influence opinion-formation in liberal democracies to benefit foreign powers, whether state, non-state, or proxies.

For example, the story ‘women and men are equal’ will be perceived differently in liberal democracies or in states with a more fundamental understanding of Islamic faith. In the first case, the narrative drawn from the story could be about equality in liberal democracies. In the second case, it can be perceived as an attempt to challenge established religious norms.

In order to understand the characteristics of a specific story or narrative, one must look at the context, for example, if specific stories are part of a marketing campaign, public diplomacy campaign or information influence activities. The analysis of ‘hostile narrative’ is most meaningful in the framework of information influence activities, which are examined further below.

In our interconnected environment, almost any purposeful communication activity done by a state or its proxy can be labelled as information influence activity. For example, public diplomacy campaigns may aim at specific target groups in foreign countries to further their own national interests. Despite this, public diplomacy is an integral part of the modern diplomatic toolkit used by the majority of states. Usually public diplomacy is distinguished from information influence activities, because it is implemented in transparent manner – more specifically, the author of a campaign is easily identifiable. If public diplomacy is a ‘gentlemen’s influence

activity’ then other, less open, and more importantly, less legal activities, namely information influence activities are used only by some states.

We will define activities that are taking place without knowledge or acceptance by the target country and activities that are knowingly hidden and that target opinion-forming as information influence activities. In addition, this article focusses on information influence activities that target liberal democracies. This doesn’t mean that authoritarian states can’t be targeted by such activities, but liberal democracies can become easier targets due to their transparency and openness.

This article adopts the definition of information influence activities developed by James Pamment, Howard Nothhaft, Henrik Agardh-Twetman, and Alicia Fjällhed.

**They describe information influence activities as ‘the illegitimate attempt to influence opinion-formation in liberal democracies. They are conducted to benefit foreign powers, whether state, non-state, or proxies. They are conducted in the context of peace, war and hybrid threat or grey zone-situations, i.e. situations of tension that are neither peace nor war’.**<sup>5</sup>



In the understanding of the abovementioned authors, the main difference between information activities such as public diplomacy and information influence activities is legitimacy.

Information influence activities are illegitimate for three reasons:

- 1 Although information influence activities look similar to public diplomacy, public relations or lobbying activities, they only mimic these activities in appearance. In this, they deceive people.
- 2 Information influence activities utilize and exploit the open system of opinion-formation of liberal democracies that is traditionally used for public debate.
- 3 Information influence activities break the rules of constructive and open debate, by trolling or other activities that sabotage constructive dialogue and problem-solving.<sup>6</sup> In liberal democracies, open public debate is part of opinion-formation and political discourse. Over time people become used to existing debates, its actors and its rules. However, new hostile actors use this trust in order to shape public debate in a way that is beneficial for the hostile actor.

The information influence system of opinion-formation has four dimensions:

- 1 Information influence activities attempt to influence by *deceptive* means, such as factually incorrect information in order to obscure, mislead and disinform.

- 2 The *intent* of the one who conducts, controls or instigates information influence activities is not to provide a constructive solution to a problem, but it is the *intent* to undermine or otherwise harm society to further own objectives.

- 3 Information influence activities are *disruptive* in that they not only intend to do harm, but really do.

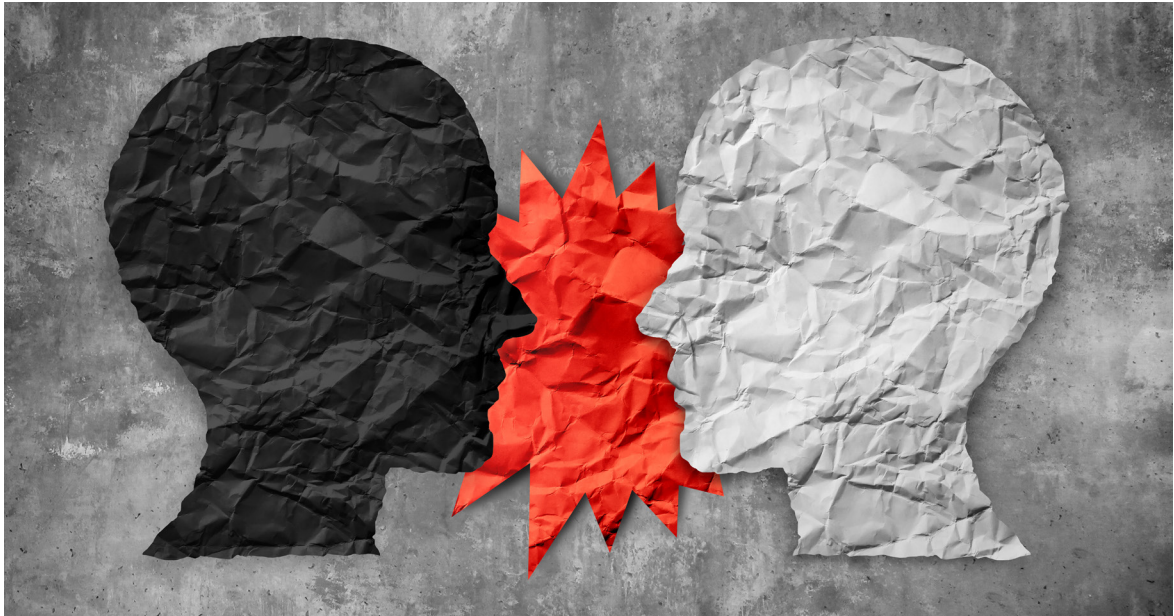
- 4 Information influence activities constitute *interference*, i.e. foreign information influence activities, sometimes via domestic proxies, interfere in domestic democratic processes and the sovereignty of foreign states.<sup>7</sup>

Information influence activities use stories to disseminate specific information in order to target audiences in liberal democracies. In information influence activities a story or sets of stories are used to communicate a narrative that serves the purpose of the hostile actor. In this understanding narrative becomes hostile when used in information influence activities.

**Hostile narratives are narratives constructed by stories used in an illegitimate attempt to influence opinion-formation in liberal democracies in the benefit of foreign powers, whether state, non-state, or proxies.**

Stories used in information influence activities to construct specific narratives can mimic in form and/or content stories already used by legitimate actors of public debate. Creating sets of stories





or by sheer magnitude of similar stories hostile narratives can easily be created. For example, the story 'food prices will rise' can be a regular part of public debate. At the same time, a hostile actor can supplement this story with similar ones – 'utility charges will rise' or different stories – 'government is discussing freezing wages in public sector' thus creating an overall narrative about worsening economic situation.

Foreign states can use information influence activities to interfere with already existing domestic discussions. Here, a foreign actor can use information influence activities to support one of the sides or several involved actors. In the latter case, the aim of the foreign actor is to sustain the existing discussion. Thus, the foreign actor can use the discussion to polarize opinions and increase tension between different domestic actors. Moreover, domestic actors with their deeds can help to support the spreading of narratives that are beneficial for the foreign actor. Here, the role

of the domestic actor can be either intentional (domestic actor acting as a proxy for foreign actor) or unintentional (domestic actor acts in its own interests without realizing that he/she is helping a foreign actor).

One example of information influence activities that strive to construct a hostile narrative is Russia's campaign in Moldova promoting the federalization of the country. The construction of narratives that 'emphasized the "nationalism of elites" in Moldova, and the "internationalism" of the Transnistrian population'<sup>8</sup> were used to support the unrecognized statelet of Transnistria in 1990/1991. The narrative is kept alive ever since using several different stories, for example, about Moldova's economic inability to compete with products from the EU and thus the negative consequences for Moldova signing the Association Agreement with European Union.<sup>9</sup>

In the case of Moldova this narrative is hostile, because it is promoted by a foreign actor,

namely Russia to promote Russian interests. Moreover, it has disruptive character since Russia promotes this narrative not to solve a specific problem in Moldova, but on the contrary, to keep this problem alive. In this case, the narrative can be labelled as a long-term narrative – one that has been present in the Moldovan information space over two decades and is reactivated for different purposes that can change over time.

A second case that utilizes hostile narrative is from Sweden, where in 2015 the government proposed a new National Defence Policy thus starting a wide public debate on rebuilding Sweden's defence capabilities and remilitarizing the strategically important island of Gotland.<sup>10</sup> Russia's state owned information outlet Sputnik published an article 'which directly accused Sweden of preparing to fire missiles from Gotland Island. The article used statements from the Governor of Gotland and a well-known military commentator, but removed context, and mistranslated and distorted their remarks.'<sup>11</sup> By deliberately publishing misleading information, the hostile actor strove to polarize the public debate on Sweden's defence by trying to label Sweden as potential aggressor. Russia tries to create similar narratives in other NATO member states as well.

## HOSTILE NARRATIVE IN PRACTICE: CASE STUDY OF RUSSIAN SCHOOL REFORM IN LATVIA

Since 1991 Russian-speaking public schools in Latvia have been one of the most topical subjects of political debate, which repeatedly has returned to the political and public agenda. The issue of Russian-speaking public schools

is multidimensional, influenced by a number of domestic, foreign and historical factors, such as the Soviet occupation lasting for half a century and the subsequent increased ethnic diversity of the Latvian population (in the 2018 National Census 25.2% of the total population identified as ethnic Russians<sup>12</sup>; in the 1920 National Census 7,8% identified as ethnic Russians<sup>13</sup>). Since the restoration of Latvia's independence, there have been two competing narratives in the public sphere, one emphasizing the importance of a common language of education for successful integration policies and the other asserting the rights of minorities to preserve and develop their language. The narrative on access to education in Russian is maintained in Latvia by parents of schoolchildren for whom the first language is Russian, some political parties, and non-governmental organizations supported by Russia. Furthermore, high-ranking Russian officials regularly disseminate allegations on obstacles to use Russian language in Latvia and use threatening rhetoric that attempts to impose certain policies on Latvian legislators.

This study will analyse hostile narratives targeting Latvia in the context of Russian-speaking public schools. It will look at main domestic and foreign political actors that drive these narratives in Latvia. This study covers the period from early 2004 to late 2019, while providing reference to earlier events that are relevant to the topic under discussion. The year 2004 is significant in that it marks a turning point in countering any reforms of Russian language schools in Latvia with the creation of powerful organizations in support for maintenance of the *status quo*. As a result, this topic became more prominent in public debate and the use of hostile narratives turned more effective.



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### **The School Reform in Latvia and Its Opponents**

Since the restoration of independence, Latvia has gradually moved to the general education curriculum in Latvian language. The goal of full transfer to instruction in the state language in all public schools was announced in 1998 with only five years to implement the reform by 2004. As one might expect, not everything went according to this rather ambitious plan. At the moment of writing this article, the instruction in Russian language public schools is split between 60% in Latvian and 40% in Russian language. The current legislation envisages a complete transfer to Latvian language instruction by 2021/2020 academic year.

According to the Latvian Sustainable Development Strategy 2030, the school reform is not only a precondition for preserving and developing the Latvian language, but also a crucial measure to strengthen the Latvian language information space.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, attempts to create the prerequisites for a successful integration of the population, especially of young people, have been met with strong opposition from both non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and political parties formed by Russian school advocates. These political parties and NGOs are using narratives of discrimination against Russian-speakers

and repressive methods in education thus preventing integration.

By 2004 the government should have prepared for the school reform for implementation.<sup>15</sup> However, in April 2003 the Latvian Council of Public Organizations, the umbrella organization of Russian compatriots abroad, established the Russian School Defence Staff (RSDS), aimed to mobilize opponents of the Russian-speaking public school reform and actively organize protests.<sup>16</sup> RSDS was created as a highly politicized association, as it included not only representatives of other Russian compatriot organizations and representatives of the Latvian Russian community, but also members of the political party For Human Rights in a United Latvia (FHRUL). In addition, RSDS was strongly supported by both Russia's and Latvia's Russian language newspapers and media. The first mass protests by the RSDS took place already in late 2003.<sup>17</sup> The newly established organization was able to mobilize thousands of Russian pupils, parents and teachers in a short period of time, actively campaigning against the reform of Russian-speaking public schools emphasizing that a full transition to Latvian curriculum should be seen as forceful assimilation of the Russian community. In contrast, the central message of the Latvian authorities was that the reform would promote the competitiveness



of Russian-speaking youth in Latvia and facilitate the integration process in the long run. In the protests organized by RSDS, terms such as 'assimilation', 'discrimination', and 'repressive state administration' all seeking to 'destroy the Russian language and culture' were regularly used.<sup>18</sup> The establishment of RSDS and the protests against the reform of Russian-speaking public schools in 2004 were important for several reasons:

**1** This is an illustrative example of how one and the same government policy can be perceived in radically opposite way by different audiences, resulting in opposite narratives around this policy. In this particular case, for Latvians, the full transition of Russian-speaking public schools to the curriculum in Latvian language generally implies the integration process and the unity of society. For Russians it is mostly felt as a form of discrimination and forceful assimilation.

**2** By using the aforementioned rhetoric against the Latvian state, the RSDS promoted ethnic division in society, claiming that Latvian parties in power seek to destroy the Russian language and culture by repressive means. Strengthening such narrative in the Russian-speaking community of Latvia is particularly dangerous as it erodes people's trust in the government and the democracy as a whole, which can lead to marginalisation and even radicalisation. The rhetoric used by RSDS corresponds to the scenario described in the theory section where narratives are deliberately used to have a potentially destructive effect on liberal democracy.

**3** The RSDS protests against the Russian-speaking public school reform were followed by a reaction from Russia. In February 2004, the Russian State Duma called upon Latvia not to adopt amendments to the Education Law, citing the interests of Russia's compatriots abroad and human rights violations, as well as emphasizing on the deterioration of bilateral relations between Latvia and Russia.<sup>19</sup> Thus Russia attempted to influence the policy-making of the Latvian government and to increase already existing tension between ethnic Latvians and Russians.

**4** Although previous studies have not detected overt direct support of Russian authorities to the protests in Latvia in 2004, their rhetoric and actions have been supportive through amplifying the issue internationally and including strengthening of the Russian language and compatriot education abroad in their own policy documents. In addition, Alexander Kazakov, who served as the aide to the President of Russian Duma Dmitry Rogozin, was participating in the RSDS' activities. In 2004 the Latvian Ministry of Internal Affairs took a decision to expel A. Kazakov from Latvia and deny right of entry into the country. Afterwards A. Kazakov denied having received any remuneration from the Russian State Duma for his activities, and added that he had become an assistant to D. Rogozin only after he had begun his activities as a member of RSDS.<sup>20</sup> The abovementioned activity by Russian officials and A. Kazakov's link with RSDS point to purposeful interference in the internal affairs of Latvia.







## Key Milestones and Main Actors in Opposing the Reform

### Latvia's Integration into the Euro-Atlantic Structures in 2004

The period from 2003 to the beginning of 2004 was paramount for Latvia as it was on its way to join the European Union and NATO. It was crucial for Latvia to have neither internal turbulence, nor have its policies and reputation being discredited internationally. Russian information influence activities that took place around the same period showed purposeful use of threatening rhetoric towards Latvia and deliberate polarization of society on ethnic grounds, including involvement of large numbers of minors (school children) in the protests organised by RSDS. It was

emphasized that the 'Latvianisation' of the Russian-speaking public schools contravenes the values of the European Union and the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia. All these measures further strengthened the narrative of institutionalized repression and inter-ethnic revenge against Russians in Latvia.

### Establishment of the Russkiy Mir Foundation in 2007

The next major milestone in Russia's information influence activities was the establishment of the government-sponsored Russkiy Mir Foundation in 2007 by Vladimir Putin, aimed at strengthening the Russian language worldwide. Russkiy Mir is one of the most active organizations supporting and promoting Russian culture outside Russia,



strengthening a Kremlin-friendly worldview and encouraging Russian-speakers to remain within the Kremlin-controlled information space.<sup>21</sup> Although Russkiy Mir positions itself as a cultural organization, the Foundation's beneficiaries and cooperation partners include prominent Russian-speaking politicians and other public figures in Latvia, including politician Tatyana Zhdanok who is an active supporter of Kremlin's policies<sup>22</sup>, activists Yakov Pliner and Valery Buhvalov,<sup>23</sup> all of whom have actively supported the cause of RSDS. Since 2007 Russia's involvement in the public school reform became more pronounced and regular, due to the financial resources allocated to RSDS and other Russian school advocates.

### State Language Referendum of 2012

In 2012, a referendum on constitutional amendments was held proposing Russian as the second official state language in Latvia. Prior to that, in order to move forward the stalled public school reform, Latvian nationalist party National Union had initiated a collection of signatures to ensure full transfer to the teaching in the state language as of September 1, 2012 (the beginning of a school year in Latvia). This initiative did not gain wide public support. It did, however, trigger a counter reaction by the youth movement United Latvia and the NGO Native Language which quickly gathered the necessary amount of signatures to initiate a referendum on the introduction of Russian as the second state language. This initiative was actively supported by the political parties FHRUL (now the Latvian Russian Union) and Harmony Centre (now Harmony).<sup>24</sup> It is worth mentioning that Harmony had a cooperation agreement with Vladimir Putin's party United

Russia until 2017 when this partnership was terminated prior to the revamping the party into a new social-democratic force, distancing its public image from the historic Russian-speaker voter base.<sup>25</sup> In the Russian-language mass media of Latvia, the narrative on the language referendum was combined with the issue of citizenship and the public school reform. Only the views of Russian-speaking activists such as Alexander Gaponenko, Yuri Sokolovsky, and Ilarion Girs were amplified which, as the results of the referendum showed, did not reflect the view of the majority of voters.<sup>26</sup> Following a high voter turnout, 24,88% had voted in favour.<sup>27</sup> The most prominent representative of the referendum initiators was pro-Kremlin activist Vladimir Linderman, who said that voting against Russian as the second state language would be a continuation of the Latvian government's crusade against Russian-speakers.<sup>28</sup> In addition, disinformation on the proportion of Russian-speakers in Latvia being 'nearly half of the Latvian population' was circulated in the Russian public information space in order to create the impression that Latvia is a truly bi-lingual country.<sup>29</sup> Emotionally charged language, appeal to history by calling the school reform a manifestation of fascism, simplistic and misleading explanations about the impact of the language referendum on the Russian-speaking public schools, offered an apocalyptic and polarising view on Latvia's future.

### Russia's Aggression in Ukraine in 2014

In 2014, following Russia's aggression in Ukraine resulting in annexation of Crimea and ongoing armed conflict in the Eastern Ukraine, Latvian government placed more emphasis on the security dimension and agreed to gradually



increase its defence budget to 2% of the GDP.<sup>30</sup> In the context of what had happened in Ukraine, the issue of Russian-speaking public language schools was raised again, now discussing security of the information space, political values being taught to Russian-speaking pupils and whether Russian schools are a potential channel through which Russia could manipulate the Latvian Russian community and strengthen Kremlin's influence.<sup>31</sup> The government shifted the central message of the public school reform from the increase the competitiveness of Russian-speaking youth to strengthening of national security, arguing that young Russian-speakers not fluent in the state language could be more easily manipulated through Kremlin propaganda channels. Following the resumption of the public school reform discussion, Russia's interest in the Russian language education in Latvia increased once more. Recognizing that Russian-speaking public schools could soon switch to Latvian, the Foreign Affairs Minister of Russia and subsequently the Russian Ambassador to Latvia said that Russia was planning to open Russian schools in Latvia, which would be based on Russian education standards and programmes.<sup>32</sup> Russia's second move was issuing a threat to impose economic sanctions on Latvia, claiming that the Russian-speaking public school reform constituted a discrimination of Russia's compatriots abroad whom Russia is compelled to defend.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Russian officials regularly reminded of Latvia's 'repressive system against Russians, which even punishes the use of the Russian language in schools during breaks'.<sup>34</sup> None of the messages had any real justification, but they did reinforce the impression in the public information space that Latvian government pursued discriminatory

policies against ethnic Russians. In addition, one of the aforementioned activists Alexander Gaponenko, who represents the interest group Congress of Non-citizens in Latvia, announced the intent to organise a 'local Maidan' in Riga (reference to the Maidan protests in Kyiv but with contradictory agenda) where among other topics the public school reform was going to be addressed. In his announcement he stated that 'The process of unification of the Russian nation, which has been divided 23 years ago between 15 countries, is on its way. This power will easily overthrow Yatsenyuk, Poroshenko, Timoshenko and other foreigners in Ukraine. This process will no doubt take place also in the Baltic States. Let's see what the local Russians are capable of.'<sup>35</sup> The event was not allowed by the local authorities and never took place.

### **Hostile Narratives: Intentions, Implementation and Long-Term Effects**

Since the restoration of independence, the reform of Russian-speaking public schools has been one of the issues flaring up inter-ethnic tensions, amplified by Latvian nationalist politicians on one hand and pro-Russian school proponents, including politicians who go for the ethnic Russian votes, on the other hand. The Latvian nationalist politicians frame the teaching in Russian language at public schools as remains of the Soviet occupation and call for preservation of the Latvian language. The pro-Russian school activist organisations present themselves as protectors of minority and human rights in Latvia and blame the government for implementing discriminatory policies aimed to eradicate Russian culture and identity in Latvia.





From the perspective of information influence activities, implementation of the Latvian government's reform of Russian-speaking public schools is challenged continuously through a local network of NGOs, individual activists, media and politicians. The forms of these activities include:

- Organisation of public protests;
- Initiation of legislative changes, even if clearly unachievable;
- Dissemination of disinformation through mass media and social networks;
- Promotion of polarisation in the society;
- Work with international organisations to promote own cause and discredit or demonise the opponent;

- Coordinated informational and financial support by the Kremlin.

Throughout the years, the cause of the pro-Russian school activists and politicians receives continued high-level support from the Kremlin, underscoring that their efforts are in line with Russia's information influence activities against Latvia's national interests. As a more recent example, when in 2018, twenty eight years after regaining independence from the Soviet Union, Latvian President Raimonds Vējonis signed a decree to make Latvian language the dominant language for instruction in public schools by 2021, the local activist protest was complimented by a reaction from Moscow. Ministry of Foreign



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Affairs of Russia claimed that it will appeal to international human rights organizations such as the United Nations, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Council of Europe to look into the discrimination of the Russian language in Latvia, thus discrediting the country internationally.<sup>36</sup> This has not been neither the first time nor the only context where the Kremlin has attempted to frame Latvia internationally as a country where human rights are not respected. The intent to frame Latvia as implementing deliberate policies targeting ethnic minorities is also present in the pro-Russian school activist protests since they use posters with slogans in the English language. Moreover, as the Digital Forensics Lab of the Atlantic Council reported back in 2017, the English language slogans specifically focused on human rights abuse and alleged Nazi ideology of the Latvian government.<sup>37</sup> This rhetoric taps into another narrative pushed by the Kremlin that there is a rebirth of Nazism taking place in Latvia, which is another separate allegation against Latvia pushed by the Kremlin on the international arena.<sup>38</sup>

polarizing the society and (b) weakening trust in the government, law enforcement, public administration, and democracy at large. The international attempts by the Kremlin and its proxies to frame Latvia as a neo-Nazi country implementing policies to eradicate the identity of an ethnic minority achieves two goals: (a) placing Latvia as an outsider to common European and liberal democratic values, unacceptable to the Western democratic family of countries, and (b) justifying Russia's foreign interventions (including military ones) to its home audiences by continuously maintaining a feeling of Russia's compatriots abroad being threatened.

The support of the Russian Federation to the cause of the pro-Russian school activists in Latvia and the populist simplification of the problem bears a long-term risk of (a)



# Endnotes

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# NARRATIVES ON THE NORDIC-BALTIC COUNTRIES PROMOTED BY RUSSIA

By Diana Marnot and Ivo Jurvee

## INTRODUCTION

A study done in 2016 on narratives officially promoted by the Russian Federation through Kremlin-funded media *Sputnik*, *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*), and *Pervyi kanal*, provided nuanced insight into the agenda regarding the Nordic-Baltic countries (NB8), which the Kremlin was trying to promote internationally. Although the research carried out in 2016–17<sup>1</sup> showed that *Sputnik* and *RT* are not popular among Nordic-Baltic audiences and that out of eight countries *Pervyi kanal* has higher ratings only in Latvia and Estonia, this selection of media still gives us an understanding about the Kremlin’s agenda and how this agenda has been framed in public communications.

This chapter will compare the narratives identified in a new study in 2018 with those identified in 2016, highlighting trends and new developments.

## METHOD

As in the 2016 study, the authors applied qualitative content analysis methods to evaluate the Russian news media outlets *Sputnik* (English-language version only), *RT*, and *Pervyi kanal*. For *Sputnik* and *RT* only textual information was analysed. In the case of *Pervyi kanal*, available video material was also analysed to identify the narratives in question.

In the 2016 study, samples of material published on the Nordic-Baltic countries were taken every fourth day starting on 4 January. For *Sputnik*, the methodology remained the same for the 2018 study. However, owing to a smaller amount of data found on *RT* and *Pervyi kanal* in 2018, all articles and news stories for that year were analysed.

**Table 1.** Number of articles included in the study vs total number of articles mentioning a given NB8 country.

	Nordic Countries					Baltic Countries			Total sample
	DK	FI	IS	NO	SE	EE	LT	LV	
Sputnik 2018	63/ 691	49/ 716	8/ 203	67/ 739	162/ 1294	20/ 218	19/ 255	18/ 219	406/ 4335
Sputnik 2016	111/ 704	101/ 689	28/ 276	105/ 873	225/ 1348	114/ 492	99/ 495	100/ 455	883/ 5332
RT 2018	70/ 70	43/ 43	53/ 53	64/ 64	44/ 44	36/ 36	33/ 33	34/ 34	377/ 377
RT 2016	64/ 136	10/ 222	30/ 110	66/ 184	61/ 127	16/ 1231	21/ 97	25/ 114	293/ 2221





The data analysed in 2018 were chosen based on the narratives identified in the previous study. Results showing only one match and no similarities to the 2016 narratives were discarded, as the theme did not recur. Results that had two or more matches, thus forming a narrative theme, were categorized under the most similar narrative cluster (see further section 'Results').

Articles in which the NB8 countries were named only as a part of some listing were not included in the analysis unless they contained a narrative theme specific to those countries. Moreover, it must be noted that for unknown reasons the sampling scan of *RT* was unable to detect all articles published regarding some of the NB8 countries—e.g. in the case of Finland no articles were found before 29 October.

For *Pervyi kanal* the search tool and tags of the channel's website<sup>2</sup> were used to find all news stories on the NB8 countries published in 2018. Compared with 2016, there were slight changes in the priorities of reports

concerning the NB8 (see *Figure AA*). In 2018, the NB8 countries ranked between 13 and 33 compared with 16 and 33 in 2016. When comparing coverage given to the NB8 with that for the other NATO and/or EU member states, the most important international organizations (NATO, the EU, and the UN), and such countries as Syria and Ukraine, which have ongoing conflicts that also involve the Russian military, these changes generally make sense. As the situation in Syria stabilized, this hotspot lost its leading position on the Kremlin's agenda to Russia's old adversary the United States. Furthermore, owing to the Skripal case, coverage of the United Kingdom almost doubled. Compared with the coverage of the refugee crisis in 2016, two years later the EU had lost much of its appeal for Russian news reporting.

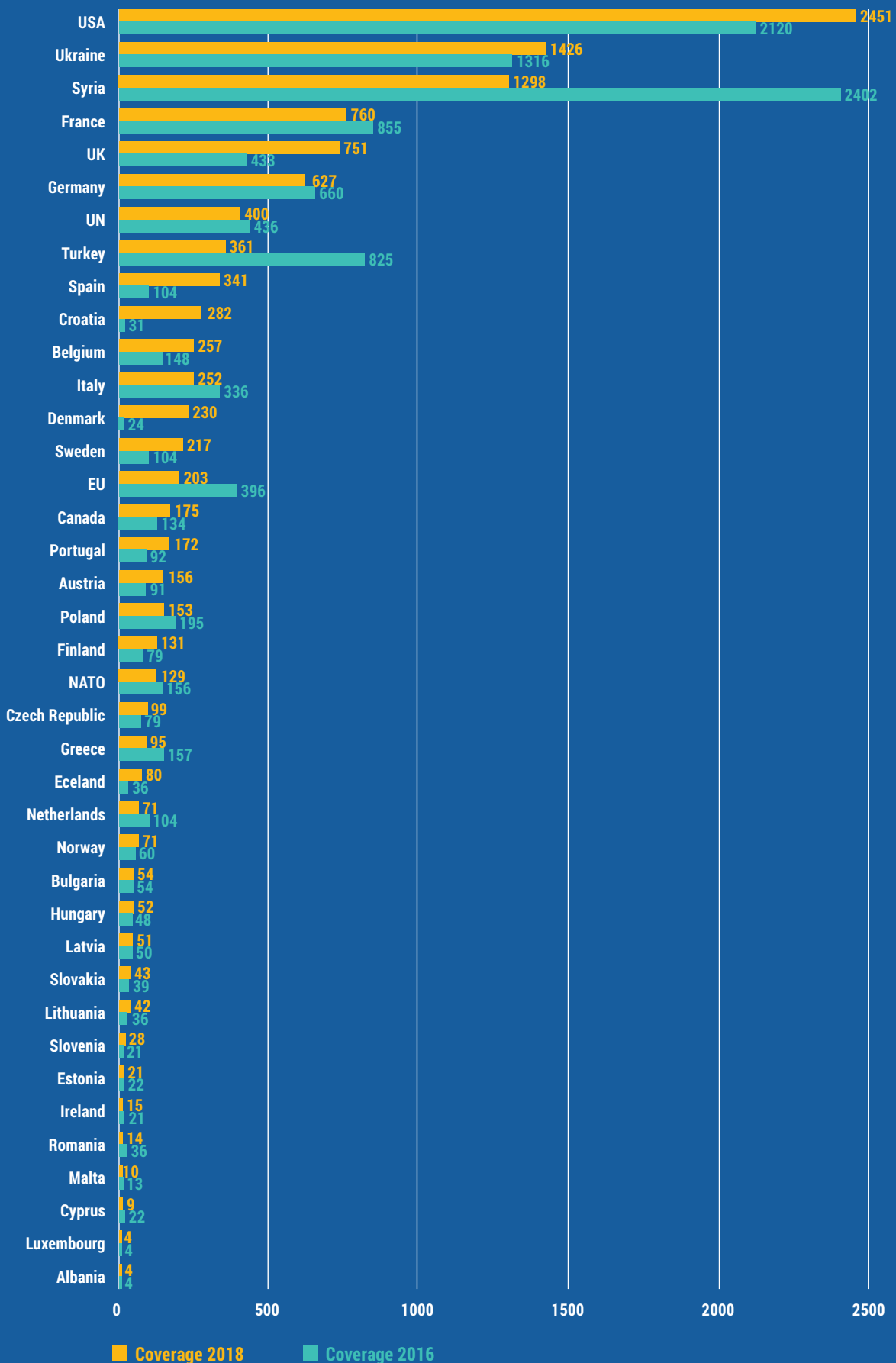
In *Pervyi kanal*, news stories about the NB8 could be divided into three categories: a) politics and economy, b) culture and curiosities, and c) sports. The samples in this study only include the category 'a'.

**Table 2.** Ratio of full coverage and the sample for the NB8 countries in *Pervyi kanal's* news reporting in 2016 and 2018. *N.B.!* As explained further in the text, only news stories concerning politics and economy were analysed. That explains the differences in sample sizes for each country.

	Nordic Countries					Baltic Countries			Totals
	DK	FI	IS	NO	SE	EE	LT	LV	
Pervyi kanal 2018	10/ 230	57/ 131	1/ 80	15/ 71	16/ 217	15/ 21	28/ 42	45/ 51	187/ 843
Pervyi kanal 2016	2/ 24	40/ 79	2/ 36	14/ 60	28/ 104	12/ 22	26/ 36	33/ 50	157/ 411



**Figure AA.** *Pervyi kanal* coverage from 2016 and 2018 of all states that are members of NATO and/or EU, plus coverage of Ukraine and Syria, plus coverage of the UN, NATO, and the EU as entities, ranked by volume of news stories.





Significant changes could be observed for individual NB8 countries, e.g. there was almost ten times more coverage of Denmark (230 news stories in 2018 compared to 24 in 2016). The rise of coverage for Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden occurred mostly due to sporting events, in particular the Ice Hockey World Championship held in Denmark and the FIFA World Cup in 2018. The latter, held in the Russian Federation, was connected with a number of narratives dealing primarily with the host country (promoting ideas such as ‘the best championship ever organized’, ‘everybody in the world is admiring Russia’, and the like) but not with other countries. The increased coverage of Finland can be explained by the Ice Hockey World Championship and the meeting of the US and Russian presidents at a summit held in Helsinki on 16 July 2018. Just like the Football World Cup, the bilateral meeting led to frequent references to the host

country without creating much of a narrative about it. For the remaining four countries—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Norway—overall coverage and sample numbers were similar for 2016 and 2018. In the case of the Baltic States, most of the coverage constituted political and economic news.

## RESULTS

In general, the articles in 2018 were much more diverse, and it was difficult to identify individual narratives. The stories often combined several different narratives, and in other cases the narratives evolved into bigger themes when compared with 2016.

The results of the two studies can be divided into three categories:



Categories	Narratives
<b>Narratives appearing in both 2016 and 2018</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Refugees and migrants as a destabilising factor</li> <li>The Nord Stream 2 project will not fail</li> <li>Child welfare issues in the NB8</li> <li>The idea of a Russian threat is ridiculous</li> <li>Radical Islam is a destabilising factor</li> <li>Rise of far-right nationalists</li> <li>Islamic culture is a destabilising factor</li> <li>Finland and Russia are good partners</li> <li>NB8 countries discriminate against minorities</li> <li>Some NB8 countries glorify Nazi collaborators</li> <li>May 9 is commemorated around the world</li> <li>NATO lures Finland and Sweden into joining<sup>3</sup></li> </ul>
<b>New and altered narratives appearing in 2018</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Baltics show disrespect for the Great Patriotic War and the Soviet legacy</li> <li>'Spy mania'</li> <li>Russophobia, anti-Russian sentiment</li> <li>NATO is incompetent and destabilising</li> <li>NATO's military build-up in Europe undermines regional stability</li> <li>Liberal gender policy</li> <li>Extreme human rights and liberalism</li> </ul>
<b>Narratives identified in 2016, but absent in 2018</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NATO is a threat to Russia</li> <li>Small European countries are vassals of NATO and/or US and/or the European Union</li> <li>If Finland and Sweden join NATO, Russia must react</li> <li>Diminishing European Union unity</li> <li>Finland does not see Russia as a threat</li> <li>Rearmament policies for NB8 defence budgets should be questioned</li> <li>Economic sanctions against Russia hurt the European Union, including the NB8</li> <li>Sweden is part of an unjust hunt for Julian Assange</li> <li>The Arctic is a territory of dialogue</li> <li>Russia does not violate borders</li> <li>The Baltics are an ideological playground for Soros and Washington elites</li> <li>The West does not consider Ukraine a fully sovereign country</li> <li>Fear of Russia is being used to justify an increase in defence spending</li> </ul>



## NARRATIVES APPEARING IN BOTH 2016 AND 2018

The narrative **refugees and migrants as a destabilising factor** was present in stories concerning all the eight countries: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden. Compared to the 2016 study, in 2018 this narrative evolved, especially with regard to the Nordic countries. In the first study, NB8 societies were reported to welcome refugees and migrants with so-called open arms even though crime rates allegedly rose because of the newcomers. Two years later, the overall tone had become more negative; Russian media now allege that Nordic-Baltic countries were fully aware of the problems migrants posed to their societies. Signs of political division were also reported: while left-wing politicians still wished to allow more immigrants into the country, right-wing politicians were found that opposing further immigration increased their popularity with voters.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, problems allegedly occurred when migrants lied and cheated to receive more or better benefits, or when organized crime exploited local legislation by setting up sham marriages.<sup>5</sup> According to the analysed media, Sweden faced problems with basic integration e.g. in elder care where newly hired personnel had virtually no knowledge of the Swedish language.<sup>6</sup> There was little coverage of this narrative in the Baltics. When mentioned, Latvia and Lithuania were presented as part of the migrant crisis,<sup>7</sup> and Estonia as being in disagreement with the UN migration deal.<sup>8</sup>

The narrative **the Nord Stream 2 project will not fail** was identified in stories about all NB8 countries except Iceland. Russian media

repeatedly assured their readers that none of the economic powers in Europe was opposed to the pipeline and that therefore Russia was growing ever closer to achieving its goal. A new subtheme to this narrative claimed that in order to promote its own gas companies in the European market, the US tried to impede the Nord Stream 2 project. In both studies, sampled articles characterized Eastern European countries as afraid of losing their transit revenues.<sup>9</sup>

The narrative on **child welfare issues** was identified in stories concerning Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. Although the narrative does not seem to have a specific subject, stories about child welfare issues had been common in previous years, claiming that the Nordic countries have serious problems with child abuse. However, the articles analysed in 2018 claimed that Nordic people had become more willing to report rapes, and Denmark had organized a national campaign to fight the problem.<sup>10</sup> Only one extreme example appeared in which Finland was portrayed as being too lenient in identifying and punishing sexual offenders, especially when Arab migrants were involved.<sup>11</sup>

The narrative **the idea of a Russian threat is ridiculous** was identified in stories concerning Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden. According to Russian media all fears of Russia's military actions should be considered paranoid. *RT* published ironic articles in which, e.g. Estonian Colonel Riho Uhtegi<sup>12</sup> and Lithuanian president Dalia Grybauskaite<sup>13</sup> were portrayed as being afraid of an imaginary enemy. The article alleging Lithuania's president of unfounded fear of Russia ended with the sentence: '[B]ut



when you're dealing with the Russian threat, apparently nothing is impossible.' Sweden was also targeted with this narrative. It was reported that Sweden had identified underwater activity perceived to be a Russian submarine, but later it turned out that there had been no 'bogeyman Russian submarine'.<sup>14</sup>

The narrative **radical Islam is a destabilising factor** was identified in stories about Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. In contrast to the above-mentioned narrative on refugees and migrants, these stories portrayed only societal problems in coping with radical Islam, such as the question of who was responsible for children of DAESH fighters. 'While the [Danish] Immigration and Integration Ministry stresses that the so-called 'children of the caliphate' are Danish citizens and have the same rights as ordinary Danish kids, the Justice Ministry and the Security and Intelligence Service (PET) both regard them as a threat.'<sup>15</sup> The media also reported that Sweden faced problems with the radical Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir 'which has been forbidden in a number of countries but remains active in Scandinavia'; the group was urging Swedish Muslims not to vote, because 'Allah forbids it'.<sup>16</sup> *Sputnik* reported that, since the summer of 2017, Daesh had been adapting its propaganda to recruit new members in Finland and therefore the threat of terror remained elevated.<sup>17</sup>

The narrative **rise of far-right nationalists** was identified in stories about Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Norway, and Sweden. This narrative occurred more frequently in the 2016 study. In 2018 it turned up only once for Finland, Iceland, and Latvia, and twice for Denmark and Norway. It appeared most frequently in stories about Sweden, mainly in

articles focused on the 2018 parliamentary elections and on the participation of the national-conservative, populist Swedish Democrat party. The narrative explained that the rise of this party was a reaction against Islamic values and against the liberalism that was blamed for problems involving refugees and migrants. *Sputnik* reported that the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement had rallied against immigrants in Sweden<sup>18</sup> and that in Norway Nazi-themed banners had been used to commemorate the Nazi invasion of the country.<sup>19</sup>

The narrative **Islamic culture is a destabilising factor** was identified in stories about Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. This narrative claimed that Nordic societies found it difficult to adjust to Islamic culture, because immigrant Muslims regarded their own values as equal or superior to those of the host countries. Apparently, one of the biggest changes and source of potential conflict was the decision of the Danish Parliament to ban Muslims from wearing burqas and niqabs in public. Furthermore, it was reported that the Swedish regional newspaper *Sydsvenskan* had been roundly criticised for succumbing to political correctness by rebranding Christmas as 'winter celebrations'.<sup>20</sup> *Sputnik* reported that Norway's anti-immigration Progress Party wanted to stop mosques from broadcasting the 'call to worship' through loudspeakers, calling it noise pollution.<sup>21</sup>

The narrative **Finland and Russia are good partners, no matter what** was identified in both 2016 and 2018, portraying the special relationship between the two countries. *RT* reported that Finland had proven itself to be a trusted partner, a sort of umpire between Russia



” According to Russian media all fears of Russia’s military actions should be considered paranoid.

and the United States when hosting meetings between US president Trump and Russian president Putin, and between top Russian and US military officials.<sup>22</sup> Putin was given special mention for congratulating Finnish president Sauli Niinistö on his re-election, stressing that, largely thanks to him, Russia and Finland had good neighbourly relations and were able to cooperate constructively.<sup>23</sup>

The narrative on **discrimination against minorities** was identified in stories on Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The majority of the articles focussed on Latvia and its school reform; they claimed that discrimination was aimed only at the ethnic Russians. A story in *Sputnik* stated that: ‘Anti-Russian slogans are frequent in the Baltic States since they regained their independence in the wake of the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. In recent years, Baltic governments have made efforts to ‘squeeze out’ the Russian language and, in some cases, Russian speakers themselves. In Latvia, for example, a law has recently been passed transferring all minority secondary schools to education in Latvian only.’<sup>24</sup> This narrative also includes the claim that the Baltics are opposed to freedom of speech—that the Baltics routinely pressured journalists to report the ‘right’ point of view and were concerned with the growing popularity of *Sputnik* websites.<sup>25</sup> Some of the articles raised the question of why Latvian was the only official state language when 37.2% of the population spoke Russian at home.<sup>26</sup>

The narrative that **certain NB8 countries glorify Nazi collaborators** was identified in stories about Latvia and Lithuania. In the 2016 study Lithuania was not mentioned at all in this context, but Estonia and Latvia were accused of glorifying Nazi collaborators.<sup>27</sup> However, in 2018 Estonia was not mentioned, but a story in *RT* portrayed the Lithuanian parliament as being sympathetic to Nazis: ‘A Lithuanian bill that would allow the banning of materials ‘distorting historical facts’ is designed to hide the country’s past, which is ‘not exactly a source of pride’, Israeli historian and Nazi hunter Efraim Zuroff told *RT*.’<sup>28</sup> Another article described Jonas Noreika, one of the leaders of the Lithuanian Activist Front, as follows: ‘Noreika, who led an uprising against the pro-Soviet government shortly before the invasion of Nazi Germany, was a key figure in organizing the killings of thousands of Jews by Lithuanian nationalists and was a collaborator under the occupying Nazi regime. [US author Silvia] Foti [a granddaughter of Noreika who was researching his role in WWII] told her story of discovery and personal crisis in the journal *Salon*.’<sup>29</sup>

The narrative **May 9<sup>th</sup> is commemorated around the world** appeared more often in 2016. However, in 2018 *Pervyi kanal* pointed out that on May 9<sup>th</sup> commemorations of the Immortal Regiment, marking the Soviet victory over the Nazi’s in WWII, had taken place in more than 80 countries all over the world,



mentioning Canada, the UK, Serbia, Greece, Brazil, and Romania as examples. In the NB8 countries commemorations were reported as having taken place in Denmark, Iceland, and Norway, and especially in Riga, Latvia.<sup>30</sup>

The narrative **NATO is luring Finland and Sweden to join** has lost significance since the 2016 study. However, in the news coverage of NATO's Trident Juncture 18 exercise the participation of Swedish and Finnish armed forces was emphasized, hinting that NATO was training aggressive manoeuvres against Russia.<sup>31</sup>

Oddly enough, the last two narratives were found only in *Pervyi kanal's* news production. There are two possible explanations worth considering. These narratives might have been missed elsewhere due to the sampling methodology used in this study. However, a more plausible explanation might be that these narratives, disseminated in Russian only, were meant primarily for domestic audiences.

## NEW AND ALTERED NARRATIVES APPEARING IN 2018

The new and elaborated narratives identified in the 2018 study will be described in more detail as they provide genuine new findings.

In 2016, **Russia does not agree that the Soviet Union occupied the Baltics** was one of the narratives detected. In the year 2018, this narrative was broadened to include another theme, namely **Baltic people disrespect the Great Patriotic War and the Soviet legacy**. This narrative was present only in stories on the Baltics. The original theme was well described

in *Sputnik* in April 2016:<sup>32</sup> 'Russia, the Soviet Union's successor state, disputes the Baltic republics' classification of the Soviet period as 'occupation' and maintains that their inclusion in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) adhered to international norms of the time. The Russian Foreign Ministry argues that the term 'occupation' does not apply because there has been no military action between the USSR and the Baltics, while troops have been deployed based on mutual agreements and with the explicit consent of national leadership. Moscow further maintains that national authorities continued to operate in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, with the exception of German occupation in World War II.'<sup>33</sup> In January 2018, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement in which it claimed to be outraged at the Latvian President for having signed a law that granted the '[...] status of World War II participant to Latvian citizens who fought in the armed forces both against Nazi Germany and against the Soviet Union'. The ministry declared that this legislative act was blasphemous, because it supposedly desecrated the outcome of World War II. Moreover, the ministry threatened serious consequences for Russian-Latvian relations.<sup>34</sup>

The Russian word '**spy mania**'—'*shpionomaniya*'—originated in the terminology of the Soviet secret service KGB and has a long tradition in Soviet propaganda. It means groundless fear of Soviet espionage in the West.<sup>35</sup> Back then, it was used in conjunction with the assertion that such espionage did not exist. In 2018, both the word and the assertion were revived in Russian on *Pervyi kanal*.<sup>36</sup> This narrative was widely used in connection with the Skripal case when numerous countries expelled Russian diplomats as a sign of







support for the UK. This action was labelled a retaliatory measure for the alleged poisoning of Sergei and Julia Skripal in Salisbury in March 2018.<sup>37</sup> The poisoning of the Skripals was not the only context in which the narrative was used. It also appeared in the aftermath of the revelation that the well-known Soviet Lithuanian actor Donatas Banionis (1924–2014) had been a KGB collaborator.<sup>38</sup> This narrative was not present in the same manner in 2016. However, it could be taken as a redefinition of the narrative Spy scandals.<sup>39</sup>

The narrative **Russophobia, anti-Russian sentiment** is an elaboration of the narrative **the West conspires to make Russia scapegoat for everything** identified in the 2016 study. This narrative was present in 2018 in stories about Denmark, Norway, and Lithuania. The story about Lithuania had included the theme that Russia was unjustifiably blamed for the migration crisis. The overall idea was that the

hypocritical West had been using propaganda to demonize Russia while at the same time denying that the West itself had been breaking international law or taking part in unjust military actions.<sup>40</sup> Russia's main enemy seemed to be NATO, which was described as follows: 'the US-led NATO Alliance is operating on a systematic, ideologically-driven war plan against Russia. [...] NATO is a machine, a system of war, impelled by war profits and a deep-seated ideology of conflict, and in particular by Russophobia. It should be disbanded.'<sup>41</sup> In 2018, this theme was continued in part, although the wording usually changed to 'anti-Russia hysteria' or to 'Russo-phobic' as a label for some actions, e.g. describing an interview given by Lithuanian president Grybauskaitė to the German journal *Der Spiegel*. In this interview Grybauskaitė stated that the likelihood of a Russian invasion was high and Lithuania needed to defend itself against this threat. This statement was countered by

Irina Yarovaya, a Deputy Speaker of the State Duma, who claimed 'Ms Grybauskaitė [...] as a president should not taint the soul and heart of the Lithuanian people with her black lies and Russophobia, but instead use her conscience and mind for reasonable political thinking and acting.'<sup>42</sup> 'Anti-Russian' seems to be the new phrase most often used to describe any NATO military activity, including the Trident Juncture 18 exercise.<sup>43</sup> The Russian government categorizes any anti-Russian sentiment as 'troublesome'. An article in *Sputnik* cited criticism by General Petr Pavel, chairman of NATO military committee (2015–18). Allegedly the general had warned that it was not justifiable to use the term 'Russian aggression' with regard to the Baltics, because 'there are currently no open hostilities going on'.<sup>44</sup>

Another narrative detected in 2018 focused on **NATO as incompetent and destabilising**. It aimed to discredit and ridicule NATO member states, their soldiers, and their efforts. The media studied reported that, during a military drill in Iceland, US soldiers needed medical help after overindulging in local alcoholic beverages in their spare time.<sup>45</sup> During Trident Juncture 18 'NATO troops—mostly Swedes and Americans—were reportedly caught relieving themselves near kindergartens, schools, and sports facilities.' Furthermore, *RT* claimed that Swedish, American, and Italian troops caused traffic accidents on slippery Norwegian highways.<sup>46</sup>

Another new narrative described how **NATO's military build-up in Europe undermines regional stability**. NATO's activities in Europe were labelled 'NATO's military build-up'<sup>47</sup> and described as 'ramping up military presence'.<sup>48</sup> Typical assertions include 'Moscow has

repeatedly voiced its protest against the Alliance's build-up, saying that it will undermine regional stability and result in new tensions'<sup>49</sup> and 'Moscow has responded to this perceived threat on its doorstep by improving its own military readiness.'<sup>50</sup> Russia's Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu claimed that NATO was constantly using the myth of a 'Russian threat', therefore, Moscow has reiterated on multiple occasions that a NATO military build-up would undermine regional stability and inevitably lead to a new arms race. Moscow has repeatedly stated, in connection with the increased presence of NATO forces at its borders, that it does not pose a threat to anyone, but will not disregard actions that potentially endanger its interests. The subheading to an article published in *Sputnik*— 'Moscow has repeatedly voiced its concerns over NATO's military build-up, saying that it is dangerous and provocative'<sup>51</sup>— is an example of this narrative. However, the article reported again that Belgian troops deployed to Estonia did not have proper winter equipment even though the temperature was likely to drop below -30 °C. Moscow's position on the deployment of Belgian troops was not mentioned again in the article. Some anomalies were encountered in the sampling method e.g. when searching for the keyword 'Lithuania' the article 'Increasing NATO Forces Near Russian Borders Will Only Increase Tensions—MoD' was found on the sample date, however, the keyword 'Lithuania' could not be found in that article, or in related ads or articles. This article returned by the search algorithm merely described how General Valery Gerasimov stated that NATO's military presence near Russia's borders increased tensions.<sup>52</sup>

The narrative **liberal gender policy** was present in articles about Finland, Iceland, and Sweden,



” ‘Anti-Russian’ seems to be the new phrase most often used to describe any NATO military activity, including the Trident Juncture 18 exercise.

with Sweden receiving the most gender-related coverage. This new narrative depicts how gender topics have changed. This is one of two new narratives that provide examples of the supposed absurdity of Western liberal values, implemented in extreme form by the Nordic countries. It could be argued that the purpose of this narrative is to ridicule sarcastically everything connected to gender equality, e.g. *Sputnik* refers to a Swedish government institution with the quotation: ‘NATO has a “long way to go” before it finally becomes gender equal’.<sup>53</sup> In this article Sweden is picked on because of its ‘overly feminist government’. The article reported that 1% of young Swedes (aged 22–29) wanted a sex change, 2.2% felt they were living in a wrong body, and 2.8% felt they should be treated as a person of a different gender. According to this article, Sweden’s government was in favour of permitting children to undergo legal gender change from the age of 12, and as being eligible to apply for surgical intervention from the age of 15.<sup>54</sup> In another article it was reported that a Swedish professor had been accused of being ‘transphobic’ and ‘anti-feminist’ because he had claimed that ‘differences between men and women are biologically founded and cannot be regarded as “social constructs alone”’.<sup>55</sup> In addition, it could be argued that seemingly critical articles turn out to be click-bait, with headlines such as ‘Swapping gender norms in the name of equality: Icelandic school that makes boys paint their nails’. The article does mention

that at some point boys were encouraged to experiment with feminine activities such as playing with ragdolls, painting their nails, and giving massages, but at the same time the reasons for this encouragement were well explained.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, the intention of this and similar articles remains unclear. People who are so inclined can certainly corroborate their prejudices. However, anyone consciously taking an open-minded approach and reading these articles can find impartial aspects to the news coverage. It can be argued that these articles are not simply black-and-white, however they provide many opportunities to ‘read between the lines’.

The narrative **extreme human rights and liberalism** was present in articles about Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden, describing how these countries have gone to absurd extremes in their understanding of human rights to a level that includes perversities. Most of the stories single out Sweden and its liberal values. *Sputnik* published an article about Stefan Borg, a right-wing politician who had been criticized for his views on current Swedish politics: ‘Everything is for everyone, no limits here, in Hörby everyone should be included, everyone should feel pride, necrophiliacs, paedophiles, coprophagists, bestialists—you name it’.<sup>57</sup> The same article explained why Russia preferred right-wing politicians: ‘Borg also expressed his wish for Russian election observers to be



invited to Sweden, called to celebrate Russia Victory Day on May 9 rather than Europe Day and ventured that the Swedish Civil Protection Agency (MSB) was wrong to warn of Russian influence campaigns. This obviously contradicts Stockholm's stance, which commonly describes Russia as assertive and aggressive.' Another story in *Sputnik* reported on former Swedish Prime Minister Frederik Reinfeldt (Moderate party) criticizing leaders such as Donald Trump who wished to 'put their countries first', demonstrating the paper's political agenda.<sup>58</sup> He also criticised other right-wing leaders: '[...] Reinfeldt warned against 'strong men' coming to power in other countries, such as Brazil's newly elected President Jair Bolsonaro. The Swedish mainstream media spared no effort in labelling him a 'far-right extremist' and a 'right-wing populist.' The article included a selection of Reinfeldt's critical tweets and closed with a paragraph describing the former Prime Minister's position and his place in Sweden's political system, in which we can see that *Sputnik's* image of the former PM was not entirely positive: 'Until the Sweden Democrats became politically prominent, the Moderate party (previously known as the Right) was the largest counterweight to the centre-left Social Democrats who governed Sweden for most of the 20th century. During Reinfeldt's tenure, the party moved to the centre and embraced multiculturalism.' The hyperlink for 'multiculturalism' directed readers to another story in which Reinfeldt praised immigration and an increase in the retirement age insinuating that Swedes shall continue to pay for supporting foreign-born residents.<sup>59</sup> Another aspect of this narrative is a phenomenon called 'the Nordic Paradox', which seems to depict the pointlessness of the fight for human rights. According to *RT*, an

EU report had found that Sweden's 'domestic violence rate is ranking fourth out of the 28 EU states, and half of the Swedish women surveyed had reported physical or sexual violence in general'. This problem was said to concern not only Sweden but also Denmark, Finland, and Norway: 'All countries have excellent gender equality ratings, but similarly high rates of domestic violence against women.'<sup>60</sup> This statement was supposed to establish that the efforts of the Nordic nations with regard to gender equality are meaningless.

### NARRATIVES IDENTIFIED IN 2016, BUT ABSENT IN 2018

The narratives presented below were detected on multiple occasions 2016. However, in 2018 they either did not occur at all or appeared only once.

The narrative **NATO is a threat to Russia** presented Russia as a peaceful country which was constantly the target of NATO aggression. It could be said that the narrative has changed, now describing Russia as strong and ready to confront an aggressive NATO. It can be argued that the main idea of this narrative has been discarded—namely, the idea that Russia is an innocent, victimized country. The new narrative depicts NATO as expanding in Europe, while Russia is also depicted differently, as having been forced to react and rearm itself against an **incompetent and destabilizing NATO**.<sup>61</sup>

The narrative **small European countries are vassals of NATO and the European Union** was previously identified in stories on Estonia, Iceland, Latvia, and Lithuania. The aim of this narrative was to belittle these small countries by showing them as being puppets of bigger





countries and/or international organizations. Interestingly, this narrative no longer appeared in 2018.

The narrative **if Finland and Sweden join NATO, Russia must react** was a follow-up narrative to the 2016 narrative *NATO lures Finland and Sweden into joining the organization*. The updated narrative is based on the assumption that NATO's goal is to start a war with Russia. The aim of this narrative is probably to deter the aforementioned countries from joining the Alliance. Only one example was found in 2018, which is not sufficient for inclusion according to the current methodology.

The narrative **diminishing European Union unity** appeared only once in 2018. In the 2016 study, the narrative appeared mostly in articles reporting on segments of the population in certain countries that had a positive view of Brexit and attempted similar outcomes in their own countries.

The narrative **Finland does not see Russia as a threat** was identified in the previous study. Articles depicted a special relationship between Finland and Russia, which was described as mutually beneficial and practical. The relationship was likely meant to serve as an example to other countries that a peaceful and positive relationship with Russia is possible. No samples were returned for 2018.

No examples of the narrative **questioning the rearmament policies of the NB8** appeared in 2018. Articles from 2016 used this narrative to question the need for the Nordic-Baltic states to rearm, since Russia was portrayed as peaceful and posing no threat to anyone. The conclusion being countries that chose to allocate significant funds for military spending are actually planning some sort of military action against Russia.

The narrative **economic sanctions against Russia hurt the European Union, incl. the Nordic-Baltic countries** was mainly used to

” The narrative is based on the assumption that NATO’s goal is to start a war with Russia. The aim of this narrative is to deter Finland and Sweden from joining the Alliance.

show that the economic sanctions imposed on Russia because of the Ukraine crisis had little or no effect, and that it was the NB8 countries that were suffering because of the export ban. This narrative aimed to show the ineffectiveness of the sanctions. It did not show up in 2018.

The narrative **Sweden is part of an unjust hunt for Julian Assange** did not appear in 2018. In 2016, most stories about Julian Assange included this narrative—even those that were not about Sweden specifically still mentioned that Sweden treated Assange unjustly. While articles appearing in 2016 used this narrative, in 2018 Sweden was mentioned only as the country that had arrested him. Those stories might have constituted a narrative, but as they were not connected to Sweden, they were not relevant for this study.

The narrative **the Arctic is a territory of dialogue** states that all territorial questions regarding the Arctic are still under debate, and can only be resolved within the Arctic Council. This narrative portrays Russia as a peaceful and cooperative partner in discussions concerning the Arctic. No examples could be found in 2018.

The narrative **Russia does not violate borders** argued that accusations against Russia were

unjustified, as no Russian military ships or aircraft had violated international borders. No examples were detected in 2018.

The narrative **the Baltics are an ideological playground for Soros and Washington elites** conveys the message that the three Baltic States are ‘just like laboratories, where specifically George Soros and Washington’s elite dictate all the key questions concerning these societies and their politics’.<sup>62</sup> No examples could be found in 2018.

The narrative **the West does not consider Ukraine a fully sovereign country** claims that, according to some Western sources, Russia’s annexation of Ukraine is considered justified. Compared to Western countries, Ukraine was portrayed as not fully sovereign. This narrative had lost its relevance in 2018.

The narrative **fear of Russia is being used to justify an increase in defence spending** was also missing in 2018. The intention of this narrative was to persuade readers that Russia is being unjustifiably portrayed as an aggressor. This so-called lopsided view was said to have been used by military corporations, especially those from the United States, which profited from sales of military equipment to most of the NB8 countries that these countries would never use. The lack



of such stories in 2018 illustrates that the fear-mongering stories Russian state-owned media previously used extensively have lately been toned down.

One must bear in mind that the mere fact that some narratives did not appear in 2018 as they did in 2016, does not mean these narratives did not appear in any of the articles published that year—only that they did not appear on the sampled days. Nonetheless, it should be taken into account that all *RT* articles for 2018 were analysed for this study.

## CONCLUSION

Compared to the data found in the 2016 study, the Russian news coverage of the NB8 countries in 2018 seemed to be more restrained. Moreover, in 2018 the narratives were less clearly defined and showed floating transitions from one narrative to another; in other words, one article often referenced more than one narrative. On the other hand, several new narratives appeared in 2018, namely **NATO's military build-up in Europe undermines regional stability; liberal gender policy; extreme human rights and liberalism; and NATO is incompetent and destabilising.** Unfortunately, this study is too narrow to give a definitive answer to the questions raised: 'Are the Russian state-controlled media becoming more moderate in general?' and 'Is the focus shifting to other countries?'

The previous study did not identify differences between Russian media that targets audiences abroad, such as *Sputnik* and *RT*, and *Pervyi kanal*, which addresses the domestic market. However, this study did identify some

significant variations/distinctions that could provide a basis for future monitoring.

Furthermore, this study shows clearly that the quantity of news coverage for the NB8 countries has changed considerably between 2016 and 2018. In a longer perspective such data may be useful in identifying correlations between the national policy of a country and the respective news coverage by Russian state-controlled media. Even more important, trends might be detected that could serve as a basis for making forecasts.

The subjects of articles about each of the NB8 countries separately differed more obviously in 2018 than in 2016. Most of the coverage about Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden was related to sport events and culture or ambiguities. For the countries sharing a longer common border with Russia—Estonia, Finland, Latvia, and Lithuania—the share of political and economic news was much greater. However, it seems that this phenomenon can only partially be explained by poor performance in sports by the Baltic States and Finland. In 2018, the Russian state-owned media showed a more hostile attitude towards the UK, as well as towards the US and Ukraine—countries occupying the top positions in *Figure AA*. This study once again confirms that there is a difference in perception and treatment of individual NB8 countries by Russia. One group of countries were fully occupied by the Soviet Union during much of last century, (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), or fought against the Soviet Union and lost substantial territory to it (Finland). The other group (Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) have had comparatively calm relations with Russia basically all the time.<sup>63</sup> These groups are treated very differently in the Russian media.





### Sputnik on DENMARK in 2018

Refugees and migrants as a destabilising factor  
 The Nord Stream 2 project will not fail  
 Child welfare issues  
 Radical Islam is a destabilising factor  
 Rise of far-right nationalists  
 Islamic culture is a destabilising factor  
 May 9th is commemorated around the world  
 Russophobia, anti-Russian sentiment  
 Extreme human rights and liberalism



### Sputnik on ICELAND in 2018

Refugees and migrants as a destabilising factor  
 Rise of far-right nationalists  
 May 9th is commemorated around the world  
 Liberal gender policy  
 Extreme human rights and liberalism



### Sputnik on LATVIA in 2018

Refugees and migrants as a destabilising factor  
 The Nord Stream 2 project will not fail  
 The idea of a Russian threat is ridiculous  
 Rise of far-right nationalists  
 Discrimination against minorities  
 Certain NB8 countries glorify Nazi collaborators  
 May 9th is commemorated around the world  
 Baltic people disrespect the Great Patriotic War and the Soviet legacy



### Sputnik on LITHUANIA in 2018

Refugees and migrants as a destabilising factor  
 The Nord Stream 2 project will not fail  
 The idea of a Russian threat is ridiculous  
 Discrimination against minorities  
 Certain NB8 countries glorify Nazi collaborators  
 Baltic people disrespect the Great Patriotic War and the Soviet legacy  
 Russophobia, anti-Russian sentiment  
 NATO's military build-up in Europe undermines regional stability



### Sputnik on NORWAY in 2018

Refugees and migrants as a destabilising factor  
 The Nord Stream 2 project will not fail  
 Child welfare issues  
 The idea of a Russian threat is ridiculous  
 Rise of far-right nationalists  
 Islamic culture is a destabilising factor  
 May 9th is commemorated around the world  
 Russophobia, anti-Russian sentiment  
 NATO as incompetent and destabilising



### Sputnik on ESTONIA in 2018

Refugees and migrants as a destabilising factor  
 The Nord Stream 2 project will not fail  
 The idea of a Russian threat is ridiculous  
 Discrimination against minorities  
 Baltic people disrespect the Great Patriotic War and the Soviet legacy  
 NATO's military build-up in Europe undermines regional stability



### Sputnik on FINLAND in 2018

Refugees and migrants as a destabilising factor  
 The Nord Stream 2 project will not fail  
 Child welfare issues  
 The idea of a Russian threat is ridiculous  
 Radical Islam is a destabilising factor  
 Rise of far-right nationalists  
 Finland and Russia are good partners, no matter what  
 Liberal gender policy  
 Extreme human rights and liberalism



### Sputnik on SWEDEN in 2018

Refugees and migrants as a destabilising factor  
 The Nord Stream 2 project will not fail  
 Child welfare issues  
 The idea of a Russian threat is ridiculous  
 Radical Islam is a destabilising factor  
 Rise of far-right nationalists  
 Islamic culture is a destabilising factor  
 NATO as incompetent and destabilising  
 Liberal gender policy  
 Extreme human rights and liberalism



# Endnotes

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# AN INTRODUCTION TO INFORMATION LAUNDERING IN THE NORDIC-BALTIC REGION

By Belén Carrasco Rodríguez

## INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly dynamic digital information environment, online communication patterns are constantly shifting, and hostile information influence activities are continuously adapting to spread influence faster and reach wider audiences. The use of Information Laundering techniques by Kremlin and pro-Kremlin actors is an outcome of this trend.

Information Laundering (IL) has emerged as a security challenge in a context where global audiences are becoming highly reliant on online sources to obtain the information that will shape their opinions about current socio-political issues. Previous studies confirm<sup>1</sup> that the Nordic-Baltic region (NB8) is exposed to attempts by foreign and domestic pro-Kremlin actors and their proxies to sway public opinion and consolidate influence in the region. IL plays a key role in this, allowing actors to manipulate information in a way that is difficult to debunk. NB8 governments and relevant institutions must comprehend, detect, and disrupt IL to counter the Kremlin's influence within the region.

This chapter provides an overview of a study conducted by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE) during the previous 16 months, exploring IL processes and networks in the Nordic-Baltic region. The upcoming publication used a case study analysis to explore IL campaigns in eight countries: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden. In total, 854 interventions in information influence processes were considered, resulting in a dataset of 570 single actors across 52 representative IL cases. The research was conducted in the respective domestic official languages, as well as English and Russian. The results confirmed that IL is conducted in every NB8 country, with domestic actors enabling the spread of Kremlin's influence within the country and in the region. The upcoming publication will provide a comprehensive approach to the theoretical construction of IL as well as an in-depth analysis of its tangible impact in the NB8.

The definition of IL used in this paper has been constructed from the combination of a metaphor of money laundering and the approach to IL from the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) in 2018<sup>2</sup>.



Hence, IL is understood as<sup>3</sup> 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<sup>4</sup>.

In the context of this research, 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 hostile actors select information from an earlier 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 (SM).

**As a metaphor of money laundering, IL consists of three phases:**

- 1. Placement, when the first actor, accidentally or intentionally, applies the first IL technique on the original source;**
- 2. Layering, the progressive application of IL techniques by a set of actors that increase the level of distortion of the piece of information;**
- 3. Integration, wherein the laundered piece becomes part of the public discourse.**

The main objectives of IL are:

- To subtly and progressively manipulate data, making it difficult for the audience to identify the inaccuracy of the information;
- To obscure the source so the laundered information is more difficult to debunk;
- To consolidate proxy actors that consistently spread the Kremlin's influence in the region.

Some of the intended effects of IL are:

- Sowing dissent and/or increasing polarisation of public opinion surrounding a particular socio-political issue;
- Reducing confidence in state institutions and the opposition or discrediting of national authorities;
- The disruption of democratic processes;
- Spreading confusion around a particular topic which, as we have seen recently with the COVID-19 crisis, can imply a direct risk to personal health and people's lives.

Based on the results of the upcoming publication *Information Laundering in the Nordic-Baltic Region*, this chapter will explore the implications of IL in the Kremlin's information activities targeting the region, analysing **to what extent the use of Information Laundering techniques supports and enables the spread of Kremlin or pro-Kremlin information, and by extension, assessing the effectiveness of this stratagem to consolidate networks and influence in the NB8**. For this purpose, this paper will firstly present a summary of the main insights of the research, followed by two case examples that illustrate how IL techniques are employed to spread Kremlin or pro-Kremlin information, and finally giving a brief overview of the NB8 actors identified as using IL techniques, enabling penetration of the Kremlin's influence in the domestic media environment.



# CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS REGARDING INFORMATION LAUNDERING TECHNIQUES AND ACTORS









## Information Laundering *versus* Disinformation

In the context of this research, disinformation is one of the eight IL techniques. Whereas the former is essentially linked to the content of a news piece, IL represents a way of delivering information that may involve (though not always) disinformation. Broadly, IL is a sophisticated and complex process of manipulation of audiences involving techniques such as disinformation which gradually alters, i.e. launders the information delivered. **Disinformation, as an IL technique, refers to false or fabricated information meant to mislead or deceive a target audience. It is utilised in combination with other techniques such as deceitful translations, misleading headlines, or misappropriations to contribute to the progressive distortion of the piece of information.** The effect of disinformation within an IL scheme is to accelerate the distortion of the information by introducing a blunt falsification of the events.

Disinformation remains an important threat to democracies. Increasingly sophisticated influence methods are being used globally. Combining IL techniques with misappropriation (see below) makes it harder to debunk a piece than one that only contains disinformation.

## What other techniques are used in Information Laundering?

Figure 1. Information Laundering techniques

	<b>Automated translation</b>	Articles are translated using machine translation services; these often contain grammatical errors and/or incoherent sentences.
	<b>Deceitful translation</b>	Articles are translated imprecisely, excluding pertinent information or incorporating targeted messages in order to modify or spin the content, context, or meaning of the original text.
	<b>Disinformation</b>	An article includes false or fabricated information meant to mislead or deceive a target audience.
	<b>Misappropriation</b>	Factual data, contexts, or connections are used strategically to mislead audiences; this may include incorporating unrelated information to frame a topic or event so as to align the message with the aims of a HIIC; providing references that do not contain the alleged information; framing real information in a fabricated context; using headlines, pictures, or other elements unrelated to the content to support the messages promoted by the HIIC.
	<b>Misleading headline</b>	Biased or misleading click-bait' headlines are used to attract readers' interest; these may be ambiguous and sensationalised, but not necessarily false.
	<b>Potemkin villages</b>	Articles are created by a network of deceptive, illegitimate, 'fact-producing' platforms that endorse each other to create the appearance of truth and to build credibility to mislead target audiences. Potemkin villages attempt to hoodwink audiences into believing disinformation by leveraging the bandwagon fallacy; they directly contribute to SM.
	<b>Smurfing</b>	Various accounts or websites controlled by the same actor (as opposed to a Potemkin village network of actors) to disseminate information that is difficult to attribute and thus difficult to debunk. Smurfing also contributes to SM.
	<b>Woozle effect</b>	Fabricated or misleading citations are included repeatedly in laundered news items to seemingly provide evidence of their veracity.



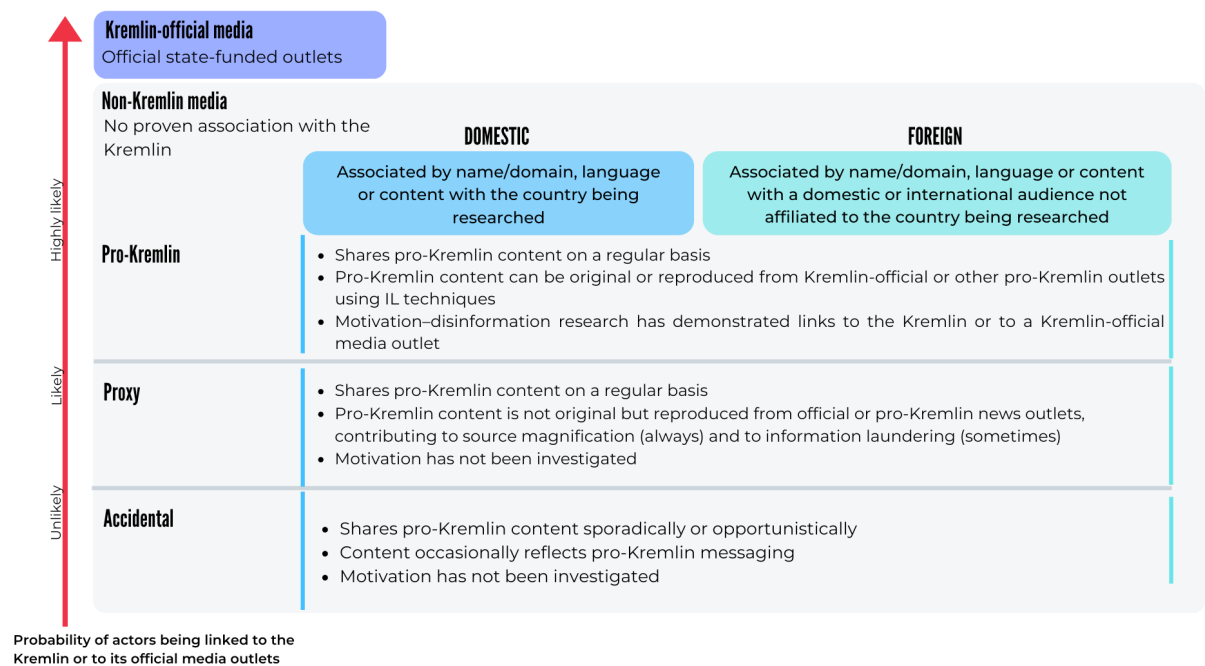
Different techniques are used for different purposes, and the right combination is required to accomplish effective IL. Each of the IL techniques described above has a different intent:

1. **Directly altering the content (disinformation, deceitful translation);**
2. **De-contextualising the information or a part of it (misappropriation, woozle effect);**
3. **Setting up a bias in the audience a priori (misleading headline, misappropriation);**
4. **Incrementing the legitimacy of the laundered information (smurfing, Potemkin village).**

Potemkin villages and smurfing indicate a degree of coordination or organisation within an IL. A mix of misappropriation and woozle effect, i.e. taking a quote from a reputable public figure and altering its meaning with subtle modifications in the context through misappropriation, was identified as the most effective and commonly used combination of techniques in IL. The use of both techniques together obscures the source of the information and misleads audiences without requiring substantial effort. Examples of smurfing and the use of woozle effects combined with misappropriations will be provided in the following pages.

In the context of this research, actors conducting IL in the NB8 were categorised according to their roles within the IL process (Kremlin-official media, pro-Kremlin actors, proxy, or accidental actors). This approach aims to provide a targeted focus when investigating information influence operations, using a concrete way of zooming in on the particular behaviour of an actor toward a specific piece of content or event:

**Figure 2.** Actors involved in Information Laundering networks



## KEY FINDINGS ON INFORMATION LAUNDERING IN THE NORDIC-BALTIC REGION

Previous studies<sup>5</sup> and recent examples<sup>6</sup> have consistently provided evidence that Russia's strategic approach and ongoing information influence campaigns against the NB8 are, for reasons yet unknown, legitimised and spread by domestic networks. By exploiting connections in complex information environments, the Kremlin can strategically mislead audiences without incurring substantial political or military costs.<sup>7</sup>

In the NB8, IL occurs along three different dimensions, depending on the actors involved and the target audiences, i.e. domestic, transnational or foreign.

**1 Domestic:** National actors launder domestic news events, deliberately or accidentally, thus enabling the spread of the Kremlin's influence in the domestic media environment.

- Actors: Domestic;
- Language: Domestic;
- Stories: Foreign or domestic;
- Target audience: National population – inside or outside the country.

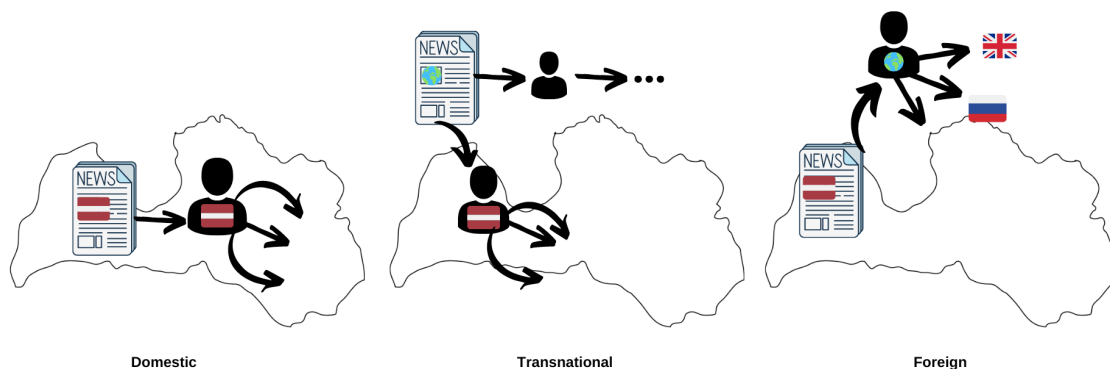
**2 Transnational:** Domestic actors launder international news events, translating them (if necessary) into the domestic language, and enabling the penetration of the Kremlin's information influence in the domestic media environment.

**3 Foreign:** External actors launder domestic news events to shape perspectives about the country for international or foreign audience.

- Actors: Foreign;
- Language: Foreign – mainly Russian and English;
- Stories: Domestic news events;
- Target audience: International or foreign audiences.

Most IL networks are transnational, and use a combination of Russian, English-language, and native outlets. Russian speakers in the region and Russian domestic audiences are identified as high priority targets by pro-Kremlin HIICs. Non-Russian speaking NB8 nationals and international audiences are also regularly targeted by IL activities.

**Figure 3.** How Information Laundering can be conducted in the Nordic-Baltic Region





## Country overview

IL cases were identified in all NB8 countries. They were supported by domestic actors of different nature that were also seen to enable Kremlin's influence in the country. This allowed to map the ecosystem of HIICs in the region.



### Denmark

Most IL networks targeting Denmark strategically exploit domestic news stories to disseminate anti-Western narratives (mainly linked to the idea of 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*.



### Sweden

IL networks composed by actors with foreign domains are very active in the country, with important participation of national pro-Kremlin (*Fria Tider, Nyheter Idag*) and proxy actors (*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 Western moral decay and right-wing narratives.



### 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.



### 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 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.



### 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.



### 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 most relevance – 31% of the total – with *Sputnik Lithuania* playing a key role. It is also the NB8 country where the domestic language is most used for laundering purposes.



### 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.



### Norway

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 outlets *Fiheten* and *Folkediplomati Norge* spread content aligned with anti-NATO narratives and give support to Crimean separatists, respectively. Ukraine is a relevant topic for Norwegian IL networks.

## Information Laundering topics

Within the NB8 region, IL networks are highly active. By augmenting anti-NATO narratives and loss of credibility of Western institutions, they seek to foment distrust of US and NATO troops in Europe by portraying their presence as aggressive and dangerous to local populations. The topic of Ukraine and the European Union's sanctions against Russia after the illegal annexation of Crimea was frequently seen in IL processes (mainly outside of the Baltic States), together with claims of Russophobia and portraying the Russian government as a victim of Western ideas. IL actors also disseminate ideologically charged narratives, commonly overlapping with extremist ideologies.

NATO's activity in general, and NATO military exercises in particular, stimulated the highest level of activity by IL networks across the entire region:

- Trident Juncture 2018 was particularly relevant in Latvia, Finland, Sweden, and Norway
- IL often highlighted human errors and misconduct by NATO soldiers.

## Regional distribution of Information Laundering

Based on the characteristics of the IL networks involved, the topics covered, and the news stories laundered, this study identifies three sub-regions within the NB8:

### 1. The 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 was the country with the highest percentage of pro-Kremlin media outlets conducting IL;
- Estonia had the largest number of single actors involved in IL cases;
- Lithuania registered the highest activity from Kremlin-official media in the whole NB8.

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 per month. Conversely, in Lithuania, proxies are found mainly in the blogosphere (*Socialistupartija.blogspot.com*, *Izbltkauno.wordpress.com*, *Peticijos.com*).



Russian-ethnic groups in the Baltic States were one of the main targets of IL processes, with Russian-domain Russian-language and domestic Russian-language media outlets at the centre of influence processes in the three countries. *Baltnews* and *Sputnik* (in their Latvian, Estonian, and Lithuanian versions) were seen to conduct IL not just in the Baltics, but also across the whole NB8 territory.

## 2. 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 translating Russian and English language IL processes into the domestic languages. Whereas IL actors in Norway and Sweden appear to be also active in promoting political narratives aligned with a particular ideology (i.e. primarily 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 by pro-Kremlin and proxy actors. Finland has the highest number of pro-Kremlin actors outside the Baltic States, while Swedish domestic actors also take part in IL processes that target other NB8 countries.

As well as NATO military exercises, Ukraine and EU sanctions are also important IL themes in this territory. In Sweden, diverse issues are exploited to disseminate the narrative of Western moral decay, e.g. cannibalism, Greta Thunberg or ISIS. Finally, while other NB8 countries are portrayed as aggressive powers allowing NATO troops on their soil to threaten Russia, Sweden and Finland are depicted as paranoid and vulnerable for reinforcing their national defence capabilities to shield 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' that will attack if provoked.

## 3. 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, IL SM 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, e.g. 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.



” The purpose of smurfing is to increase the visibility of a laundered piece. Logically, a piece of information will appear more reliable if it is shared, and thus endorsed, by a high volume of users.

## Analysis of the use of Information Laundering techniques

The manipulation of information in the IL process happens by the help of:

- 1 Techniques that imply organised activity: smurfing;
- 2 Techniques that allow IL actors to obscure the source: mix of woozle effect and misappropriation.

This section will cover how two out of the total of eight techniques mentioned earlier are utilised by IL actors for specific purposes and the effects that these have on the piece of content. The aim is to provide an overview of how IL actors leverage techniques to progressively launder information.

### A) Smurfing

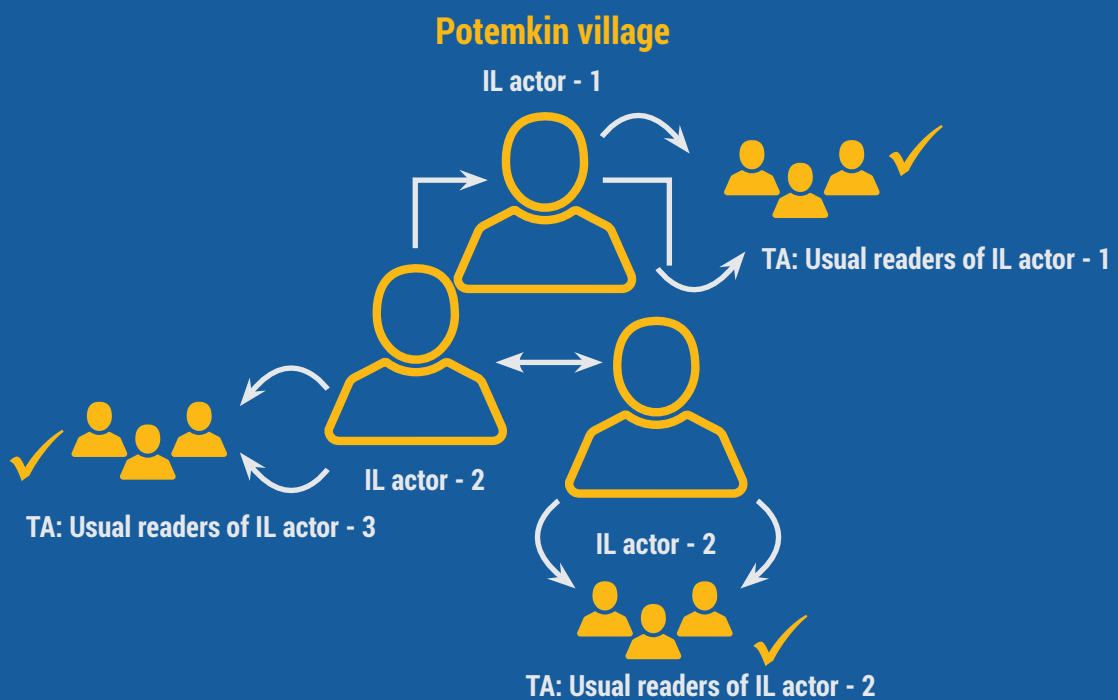
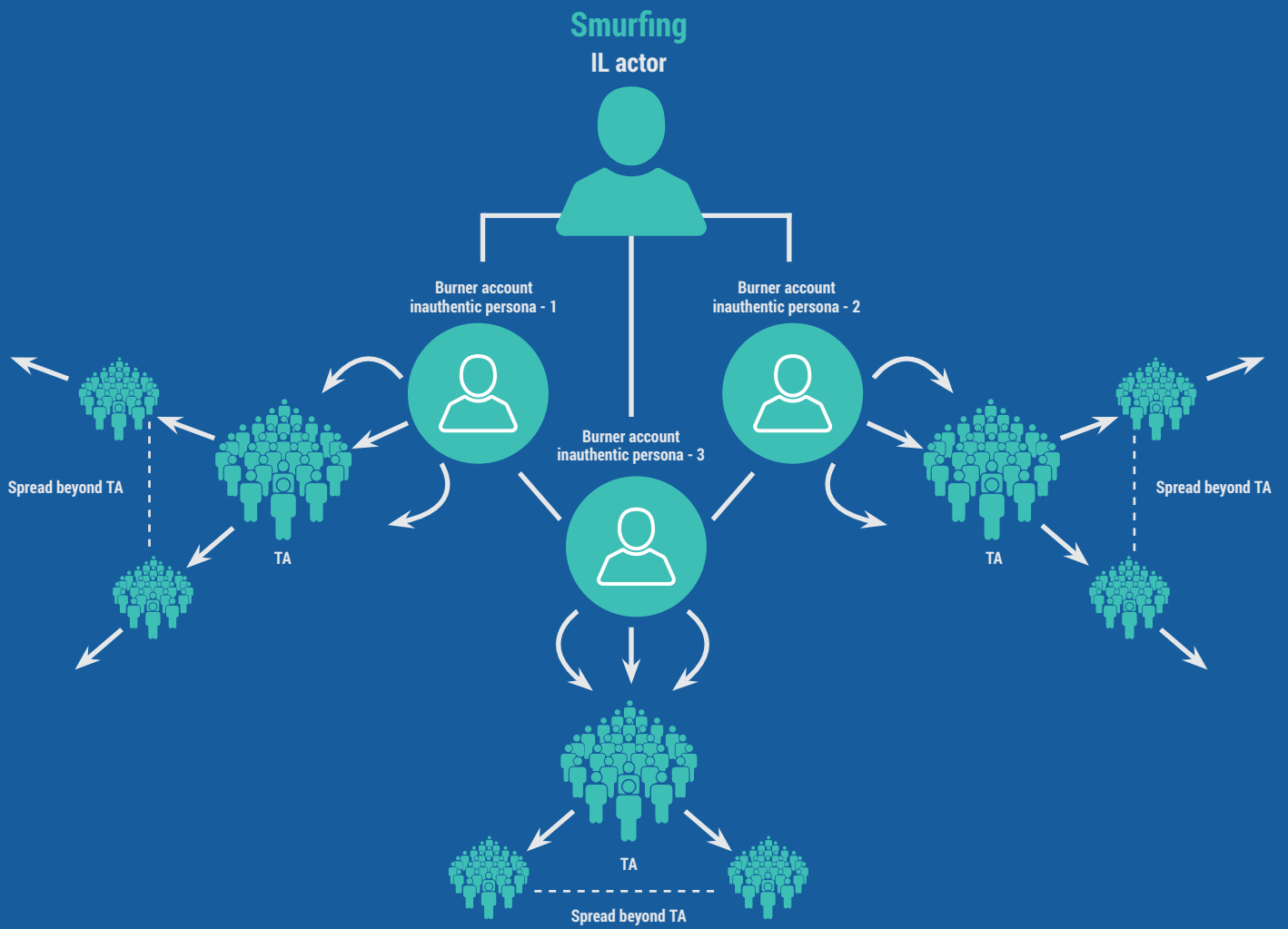
The purpose of smurfing is to increase the visibility of a laundered piece. Logically, a piece of information will appear more reliable if it is shared, and thus endorsed, by a high volume of users. When performing this technique, IL actors distribute the same laundered content across several platforms, increasing the visibility and, by extension, the credibility of the laundered information. For this, IL actors are generally supported by the creation of single-use burner accounts and inauthentic personas.

### Smurfing versus Potemkin village

Both techniques, when utilised within an IL scheme, are consistent with coordinated or organised activity. Smurfing differs from Potemkin villages since the former refers to the use of multiple platforms or accounts by the same user in order to syndicate content and spread the same laundered piece. The latter denotes a situation where multiple individuals endorse and reinforce each other by repeatedly sharing pieces published by the others. This helps the legitimacy-building process in IL.



Figure 4. Smurfing versus Potemkin village



## Case example №1 – Forged letter declaring the independence of Greenland from Denmark

*Context:* A forged letter was published on 5 November 2019 by the user 'Kirk Miller' on the English-language platform Indybay.org, commenting Greenland's position regarding independence from Denmark and possible closer cooperation with the US.

### Summary of findings

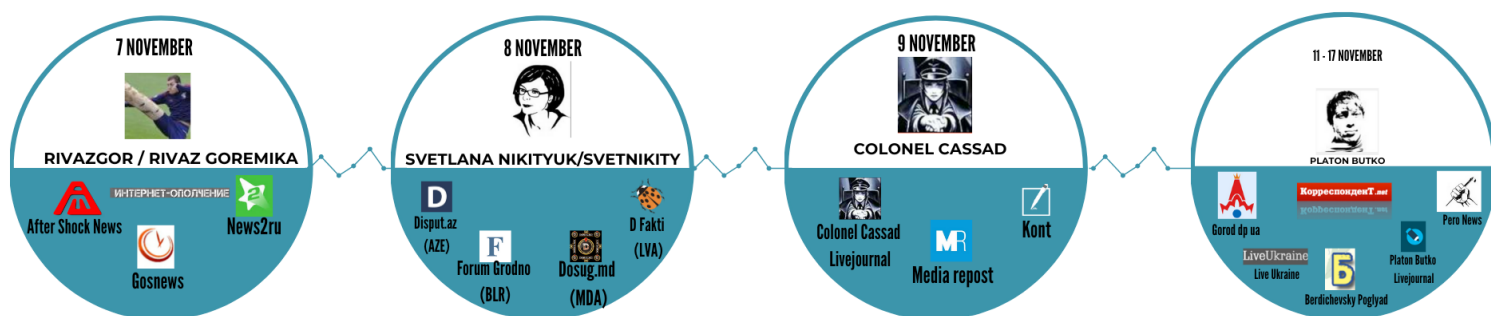
IL research on the case suggests that there was systematic Russian-language online activity as part of an IL process, most likely aimed at disseminating a forged letter from Greenland's Minister of Education, Culture, Church, and Foreign Affairs through the use of smurfing technique.<sup>8</sup>

- From 7 to 17 November 2019, four allegedly different online actors laundered and amplified the letter in several Russian-language websites/forums with domains registered in different countries across Eurasia.
- Three out of the four users consecutively created various accounts in different online media platforms (in total, 14 profiles created). They combined this smurfing process with other IL techniques such as misappropriations, disinformation, and misleading headline.
- The profiles were generated on the same day the letter was published. After this, no further activity was registered by any of the 14 profiles. Their registered activity purely focused on the spread of the letter.

Although the placement source published in English, the layering process was conducted on Russian-language websites and forums.

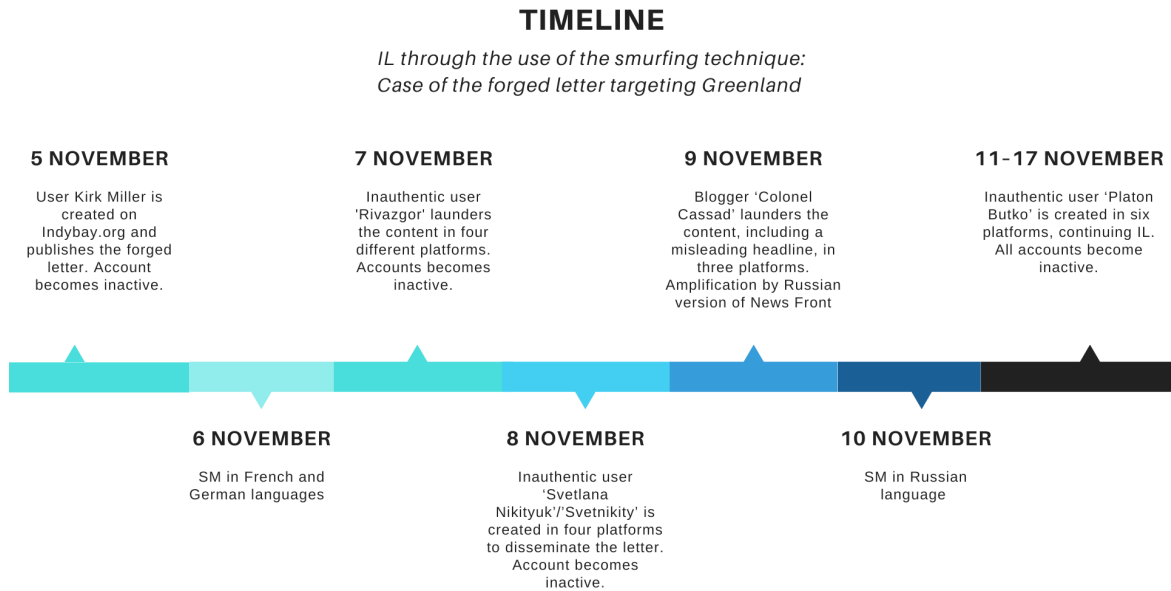
- A total of 37 platforms were involved in the process, 31 of which were in Russian.

**Figure 5.** Smurfing identified as part of the Information Laundering process



## The laundering process

**Figure 6.** Timeline of the Information Laundering case



The original piece was initially published in English, then translated and laundered mainly on Russian-language websites and forums.

Placement:

- User 'Kirk Miller' on *IndyBay.org* on 5 November 2019, 11:29 EEST (English language).
- Placement by disinformation.
- On 5 November 2019, the user 'Kirk Miller' was created on the online media platform *IndyBay*. The same day, the user published a counterfeit letter from Greenland's Minister of Education, Culture, Church, and Foreign Affairs to U.S. Senator Tom Cotton (disinformation).
- No further activity has been registered by this user.

Exposure:

- Politiken: 11 November 2019 (Danish language).<sup>9</sup>
- DFRLab: 13 November 2019 (English language).<sup>10</sup>



**Table 1.** Laundering process of the letter [2019]

Media	Time	Process	Category <sup>11</sup>	Visits/ month <sup>12</sup> (Nov 2019)	Author
<b>5 November</b>					
<i>Indy Bay</i> <sup>13</sup>	11:29	IL	Foreign proxy (USA)	N/A	Kirk Miller
<b>6 November</b>					
<i>Marcperrot. Canalblog</i> <sup>14</sup>	09:13	SM from IndyBay	Accidental actor (France)	N/A	Marcperrot
<i>Meinbezirk.at</i> <sup>15</sup>	10:56	SM from IndyBay	Foreign proxy (Austria)	5.1M	Uwe Kirsch
<b>7 November</b>					
<i>AfterShock</i> <sup>16</sup>	10:04	IL	Foreign proxy (Russia)	3.5M	Rivazgor
<i>Gosnews</i> <sup>17</sup>	10:31	SM from AfterShock	Foreign pro-Kremlin media (Russia)	N/A	rivaz gor – Rivaz Goremyka
<i>Sputnik (ru)</i> <sup>18</sup>	10:31	SM Gosnews	Kremlin-official search engine	314K	N/A
<i>lpolk.ru</i> <sup>19</sup>	12:22	SM from AfterShock	Foreign pro-Kremlin media (Russia)	N/A	Rivazgor
<i>Flashback.org</i>	14:33	SM from IndyBay	Foreign proxy (Sweden)	18M	N/A
<i>News2.ru</i> <sup>20</sup>	Unk.	SM from AfterShock	Foreign proxy (Russia)	351K	Rivazgor
<i>Bullra.com</i> <sup>21</sup>	Unk.	SM from IndyBay	Foreign proxy (Sweden)	N/A	N/A
<b>8 November</b>					
<i>Disput.az</i> <sup>22</sup>	9:58	SM from IndyBay	Foreign proxy (Azerbaijan)	1.2M	Svetlana Nikityuk
<i>Belarus-mt.ru</i> <sup>23</sup>	10:47	SM from IndyBay	Foreign proxy (Belarus)	N/A	N/A
<i>Perevodika</i> <sup>24</sup>	12:21	IL	Foreign proxy (Russia)	N/A	alinadushanina
<i>Grodno.net</i> <sup>25</sup>	12:22	SM from IndyBay	Foreign proxy (Belarus)	521K	svetnikity
<i>Dosug.md</i> <sup>26</sup>	12:57	SM from IndyBay	Foreign pro-Kremlin media (Moldova)	N/A	Svetlana Nikityuk
<i>D Fakt</i> <sup>27</sup>	13:11	SM from IndyBay	N/A (Latvia)	N/A	svetnikity
<i>1 News Press</i> <sup>28</sup>	17:14	SM from Perevodika	Foreign proxy	N/A	N/A
<i>News2.ru</i> <sup>29</sup>	Unk.	SM from Perevodika	Foreign proxy (Russia)	351K	Bazon Hiks
<b>9 November</b>					
<i>Colonel Cassad Livejournal</i> <sup>30</sup>	17:24	IL	Foreign pro-Kremlin media (Sevastopol)	6.2M	Colonel Cassad
<i>MediaRepost</i> <sup>31</sup>	17:24	SM from Livejournal	Foreign proxy (Russia)	101K	Борис Рожин (Colonel Cassad)





<i>Live Internet</i> <sup>32</sup>	18:03	SM	Russian-language Internet portal (Russia)	16.2M	Moskit_off
<i>Voxros Livejournal</i> <sup>33</sup>	18:03	SM	Foreign proxy (Ukraine)	N/A	Voxros
<i>News Front</i> <sup>34</sup>	18:06	SM from Livejournal	Foreign pro-Kremlin media (Russia)	3.1M	N/A
<i>Kont</i> <sup>35</sup>	19:10	SM from Livejournal	Foreign pro-Kremlin media	7.8 M	Colonel Cassad
<i>Oko-Planet</i> <sup>36</sup>	23:12	SM from Kont	Foreign pro-Kremlin media (Russia)	1.3M	N/A
<i>Yandex Zen</i> <sup>37</sup>	Unk.	SM from IndyBay	Foreign proxy (Russia)	305M	Bazon Hiks
<b>10 November</b>					
<i>Kaktus2.mirtesen.ru</i> <sup>38</sup>	05:24	SM from IndyBay	Foreign proxy (Russia)	N/A	'Кривое зеркало реальности'
<i>Ursa-tm.ru</i> <sup>39</sup>	06:58	SM from Livejournal	Foreign proxy (Russia)	776.1K	Tukutis
<b>11 November</b>					
<i>Gorod.dp.ua</i> <sup>40</sup>	09:50	SM from IndyBay	Foreign proxy (Ukraine)	1.2M	Platon Butko
<i>Live Ukraine</i> <sup>41</sup>	11:43	SM from IndyBay	Foreign proxy (Ukraine)	N/A	Platon Butko
<i>Korrespondent (blog)</i> <sup>42</sup>	11:47	SM from IndyBay	Foreign pro-Kremlin media (Ukraine)	314K	Platon Butko
<i>Politinform</i> <sup>43</sup>	Unk.	SM from Livejournal	Foreign pro-Kremlin media (Russia)	N/A	N/A
<i>Za-Russ</i> <sup>44</sup>	15:06	SM from Politinform	Foreign proxy (Russia)	N/A	N/A
<i>Ryb.ru</i> <sup>45</sup>	19:25	SM from Livejournal	Foreign pro-Kremlin media (Russia)	N/A	N/A
<i>Berdichevsky Poglyad</i> <sup>46</sup>	Unk.	SM from Gorod.dp	Foreign accidental actor (Ukraine)	N/A	Platon Butko
<b>12 November</b>					
<i>Platon Butko Livejournal</i> <sup>47</sup>	00:56	SM from IndyBay	Foreign proxy	N/A	Platon Butko
<b>17 November</b>					
<i>Pero News</i> <sup>48</sup>	18:43	SM from IndyBay	Foreign pro-Kremlin media (Ukraine)	N/A	Platon Butko



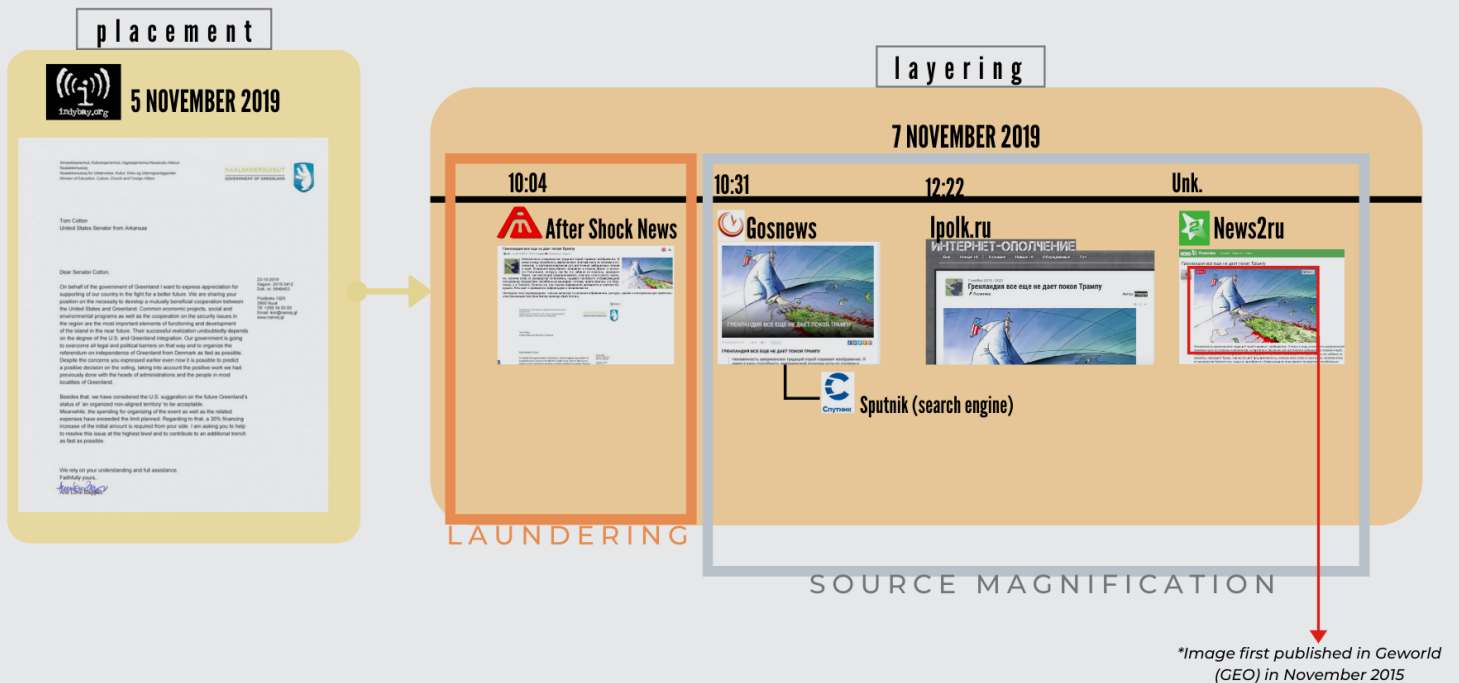
## 6 November

- IndyBay's article was translated into French and German and disseminated in the platforms *Marcperrot.canalblog* and *Meinbezirk.at*, respectively.

## 7 November

- The user 'Rivazgor' disseminated a distorted version of 'Kirk Miller's' article on the Russian-language website *AfterShock*.
  - The news article was laundered through the techniques of disinformation and misappropriation, by tying in US interests in the Arctic region, including conspiracy theories such as US Senator Cotton's 'close links to the CIA', or by claiming that Greenland is seeking independence from Denmark as a result of 'American propaganda' activities.
- 'Rivazgor' was also used on 7 November on the Russian-language online platforms *Gosnews*, *Ipolk.ru*, and *News2.ru*.
  - 'Rivazgor' amplified its *AfterShock* article on the three websites (SM) (Figure 7).
- 'Rivazgor' was created on *AfterShock* on 4 September 2019, but it had only been used previously to comment on pro-Russian and anti-Western discussions in other users' articles.
- No further activity has been observed from 'Rivazgor' after the publication of the letter in any of the platforms.

Figure 7. Information Laundering activity by 'Rivazgor'



- Search engine *News.Sputnik.ru* reposted the article from *Gosnews*.
  - *Sputnik* is a search engine owned by the Russian state-owned telecommunications company Rostelecom.
- All four articles included an image that was first found in *Geworld (GEO)* in November 2015, according to *TinEye* software (Image 1). *Geworld* has been identified as a pro-Kremlin medium that participated in the laundering of information targeting Denmark.

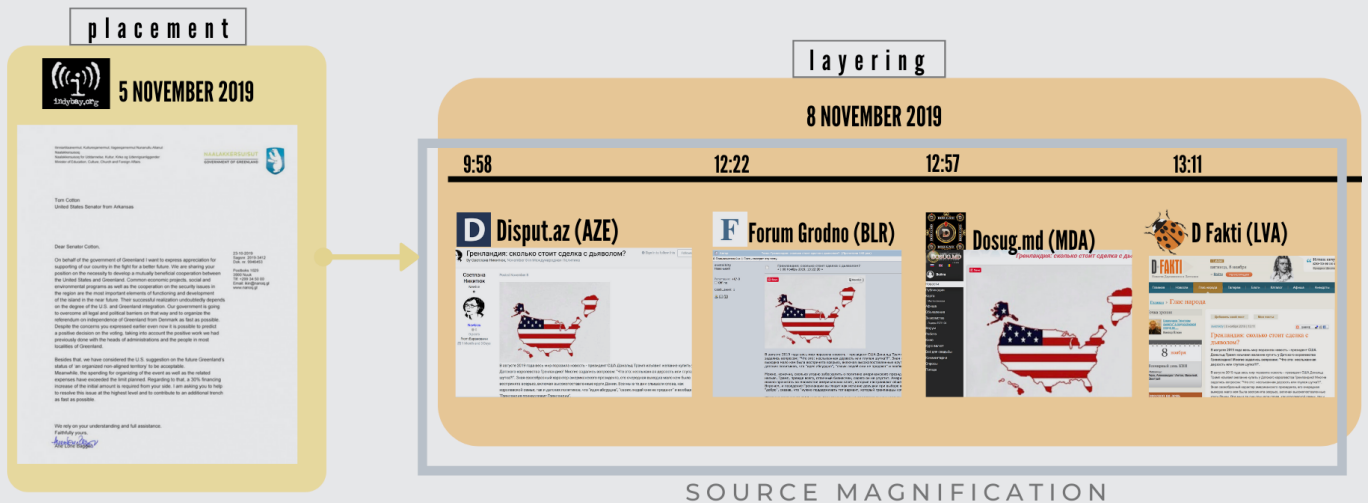
**Image 1.** Image utilised in the articles posted by 'Rivazgor'



## 8 November

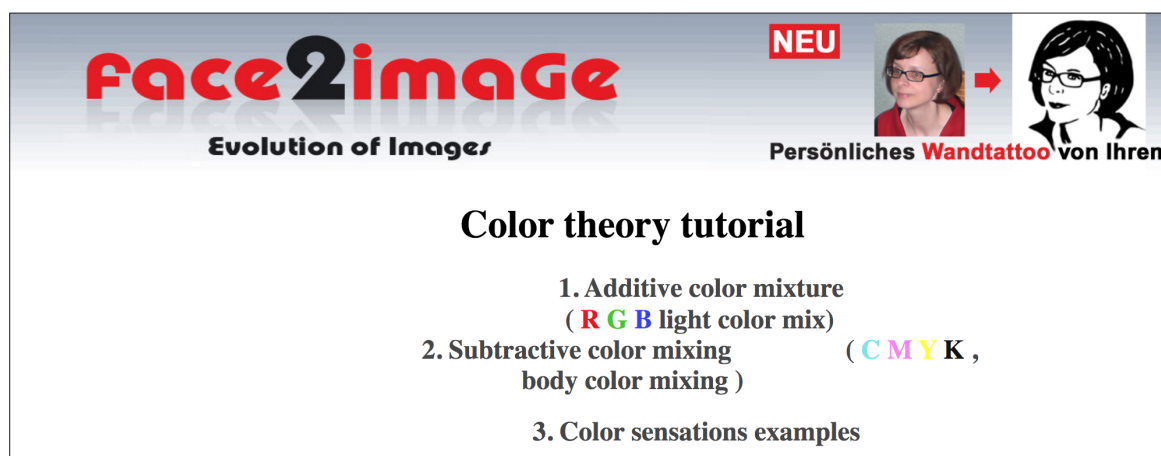
- The user 'Svetlana Nikityuk'/'Svetnikity' was generated in four online platforms with domains registered in different countries: *Disput.az* (AZ), *Forum Grodno* (BY), *Dosug.md* (MDA), *D-Fakti* (LV).
  - On the same day, it amplified the content of the letter at different times in all the platforms (Figure 8).

**Figure 8.** Information Laundering activity by 'Svetnikity'



- No further activity has been observed from this user after the publication of the letter in any of the platforms.
- Research on the user suggests that the profile picture is false and taken from a German platform for picture editing, *Face2image*<sup>49</sup> (Image 2).

**Image 2.** Original source of Svetlana 'Nikityuk'/ 'Svetnikity's' profile



Source: Face2image

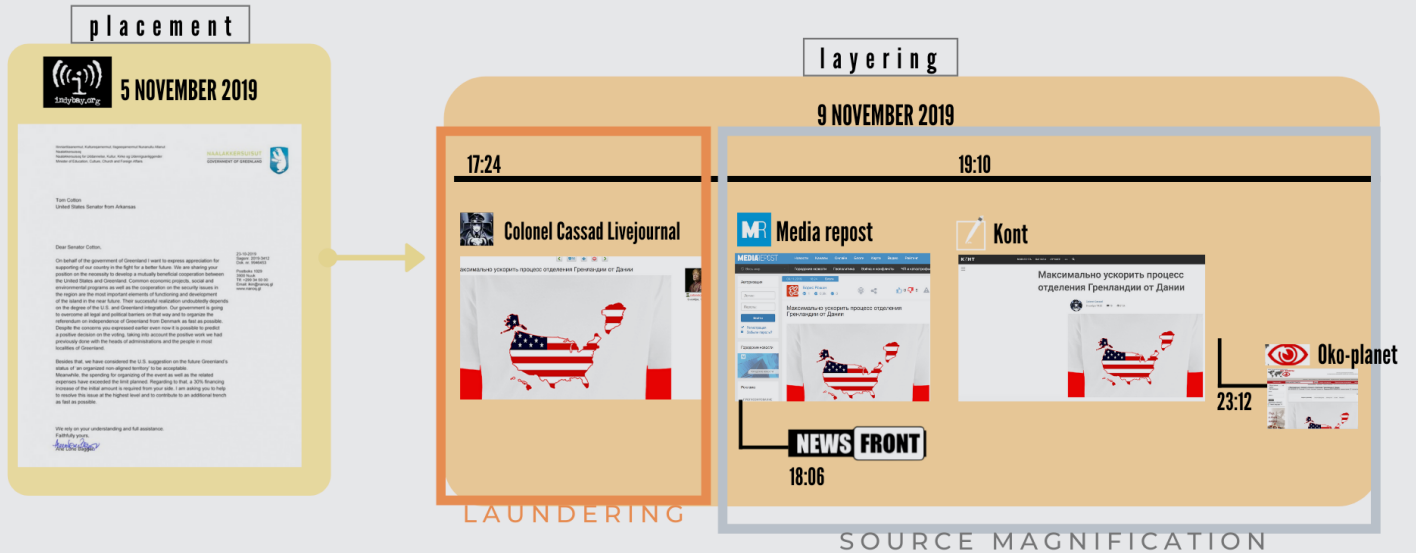
- On the same day, *IndyBay*'s article was amplified on *Perevodika.ru* and later on *1News Press* by a user named 'alinadushanina'.

## 9 November

- Popular Ukrainian blogger 'Colonel Cassad' (self-labelled as 'the mouthpiece of totalitarian propaganda'<sup>50</sup>) laundered content from *IndyBay*, disseminating the letter with a misleading headline in the platform *Livejournal*, where he has over 52.5K subscribers.
  - The misleading headline shifted the angle of the *IndyBay* article from Greenland's approach to the US ('How much does a pact with the devil cost?') to Greenland's independence from Denmark as a reality ('Speed up Greenland's separation from Denmark').
  - The article was rapidly amplified in the Russian version of *News Front*.



**Figure 9.** Information Laundering activity by 'Colonel Cassad'



- 'Colonel Cassad's' accounts in the websites *MediaRepost* and *Kont* amplified the content (Figure 9).
  - In *MediaRepost* (Figure 9), the user used his real name Борис Рожин (Boris Rozhin)<sup>51</sup>. Boris Rozhin is an active pro-Kremlin activist from Sevastopol.
- The article was also amplified in the platforms *Yandex Zen*, *Oko-Planet*, *Live Internet*, and *Voxros Livejournal*.

### 10 November

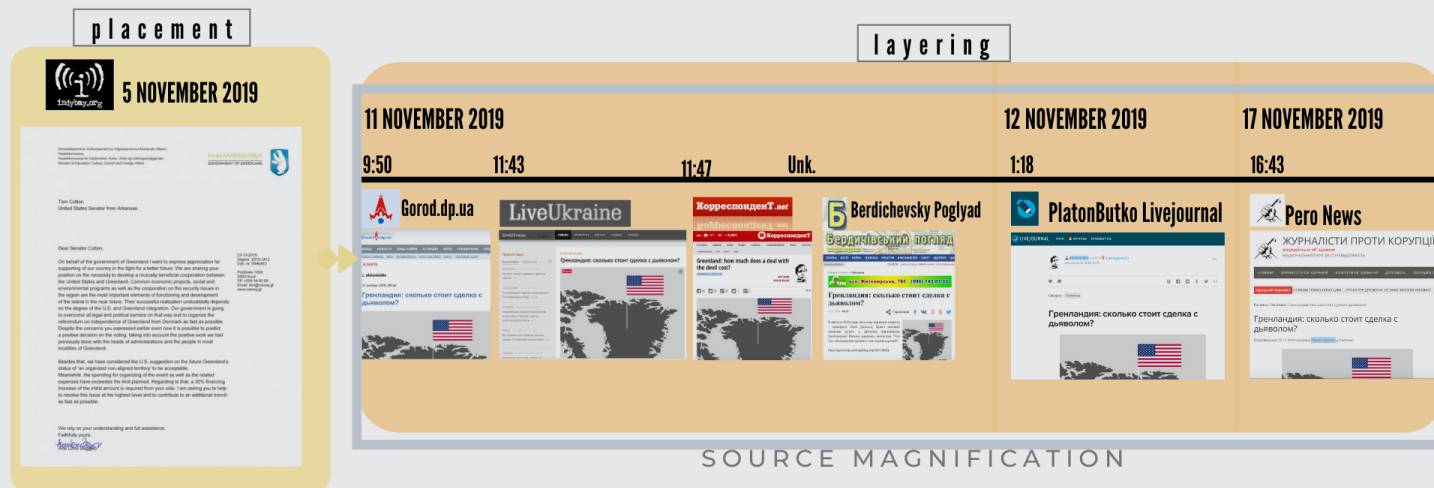
- SM in *Kaktus2.mirtesen.ru* and *Ursa-tm.ru*

### 11–17 November

- On 11 November, the user 'Platon Butko' was created in *Gorod.dp.ua*, *Live Ukraine*, *Korrespondent Blog*, and *Berdichevsky Poglyad*, amplifying the letter from *IndyBay*.
- The same user was created on 12 November in *Uznavpravdu Livejournal* and on 17 November in *Pero News*, sites with Ukrainian domains (Figure 10).
- No more activity has been observed from this user in any of the platforms after the dissemination of the letter.



Figure 10. Information Laundering activity by 'Platon Butko'



In this IL case, the main technique utilised was smurfing, supported by some misappropriations and disinformation, which illustrates how IL actors progressively distort information by increasing its visibility and credibility online. This case also proves that even countries that are considered low priority for IL processes, in this case, Denmark, are also targets of IL actors: in this case, a news event in Denmark was utilised in IL to influence international audiences.

## Observations

- Although the placement was conducted in English, IL took place mainly in Russian-language websites and forums with a relatively small audience and hosted in different countries with Russian-speaking ethnic groups.
  - No penetration to mainstream media was found. However, other IL cases do reach mainstream media.
- From 5 to 17 November, 14 online profiles were created from three allegedly different actors, who disseminated *IndyBay's* counterfeit letter.
  - All of these profiles then became inactive.
  - Although research connects the creation of these profiles with the strategic aim of disseminating the letter, the reason behind it is unknown.
- Activity was mainly focused on the amplification of the letter through SM, and IL was particularly relevant.
  - The most significant IL technique was smurfing through four accounts: 'Rivazgor', 'Svetniki', 'Colonel Cassad', and 'Platon Butko'.
  - Whereas the identity of the users 'Rivazgor', 'Svetnikity', and 'Platon Butko' remains unknown, 'Colonel Cassad's' profile corresponds with a real individual, commonly active in the spread of pro-Kremlin narratives.
- IL processes are supported by cyber capabilities and benefit from inauthentic amplification in social media. Self-publication software like IFTTT and forgery, hacking or leaking of documents are utilised to enable or reinforce IL activities.



### Other examples of smurfing

Other examples of smurfing cases used as part of IL were identified by investigations of hostile information influence activities against European countries, concretely the Secondary Infektion Operation (Graphika, June 2020)<sup>52</sup> and the Ghostwriter Influence campaign (Mandiant, July 2020)<sup>53</sup>. For example, in September 2019, the local Lithuanian news site *kaunas.kasvyksta.lt* was reportedly compromised, with the publication of a false article claiming that German soldiers had desecrated a Jewish Cemetery in Kaunas. IL research identified that on the same day, 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', implying that German soldiers had desecrated the cemetery (deceitful translation). Research on the author confirms that the user was created on 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 several platforms including the English-language *Care 2 Petition* and the Lithuanian-language *Peticijos.com*. The petition was allegedly also posted on the website *Change.org*<sup>54</sup>, but it has been removed<sup>55</sup>.

**Image 3.** A falsified image showing German tanks allegedly desecrating the cemetery



Source: [lzbtkau.no.wordpress.com](http://lzbtkau.no.wordpress.com)

In Sweden, a user called 'Arri Gibbs' (now deleted) 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 uncovered by Graphika as an inauthentic persona utilised in Secondary Infektion.<sup>56</sup> 'Steven Laack' utilised smurfing to amplify and launder news as part of an IL process that involved 11 media outlets in English, Swedish, and Russian.

## B) The combination of misappropriation and woozle effect

The most common and effective combination of IL techniques is misappropriation with woozle effect. This mix makes the laundering process very difficult to unmask. Readers generally commit a short time span to read a news piece, and it is highly unlikely they will realise that a true, accurate quote from a trusted public figure (woozle effect) is being misused to provide credibility to misleading information. Furthermore, as the laundering process progresses, the woozle effect fails to keep the hyperlink to the original source, leading to a total loss of connection with the real news. This allows malign IL actors to use the resulting information in a misleading way.

### Case example N°2 – Finnish President Sauli Niinistö calls for the EU to lift sanctions against Russia

*Context.* In March 2014, the European Council agreed on diplomatic measures in response to Russian actions in Ukraine. One year later, EU leaders agreed to link the duration of these diplomatic and economic sanctions to the implementation of the Minsk agreements.<sup>57</sup> According to the official EU 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'<sup>58</sup>.

#### The laundering process

Placement:

- On 13 September 2019, Russian news agency TASS announced that Finland opposed sanctions against Russia, by de-contextualising a speech given by Finnish President Sauli Niinistö<sup>59</sup> at the Yalta European Strategy (YES) Forum.
- According to the Russian news agency, the president advocated lifting sanctions against Russia after criticising their inefficacy (placement by means of misappropriation and woozle effect).
- TASS began a woozle effect by twisting the president's words to push the idea of lifting sanctions, which was reinforced through 24 Russian-language actors in the IL process.





Exposure:

- As the reputable Finnish media outlet *Iltä-Sanomat* clarified on 14 September<sup>60</sup>, Niinistö explained after the speech that he had sought to highlight that the sanctions had proven to be less effective than initially intended, and that any different interpretation would be wilfully misleading.

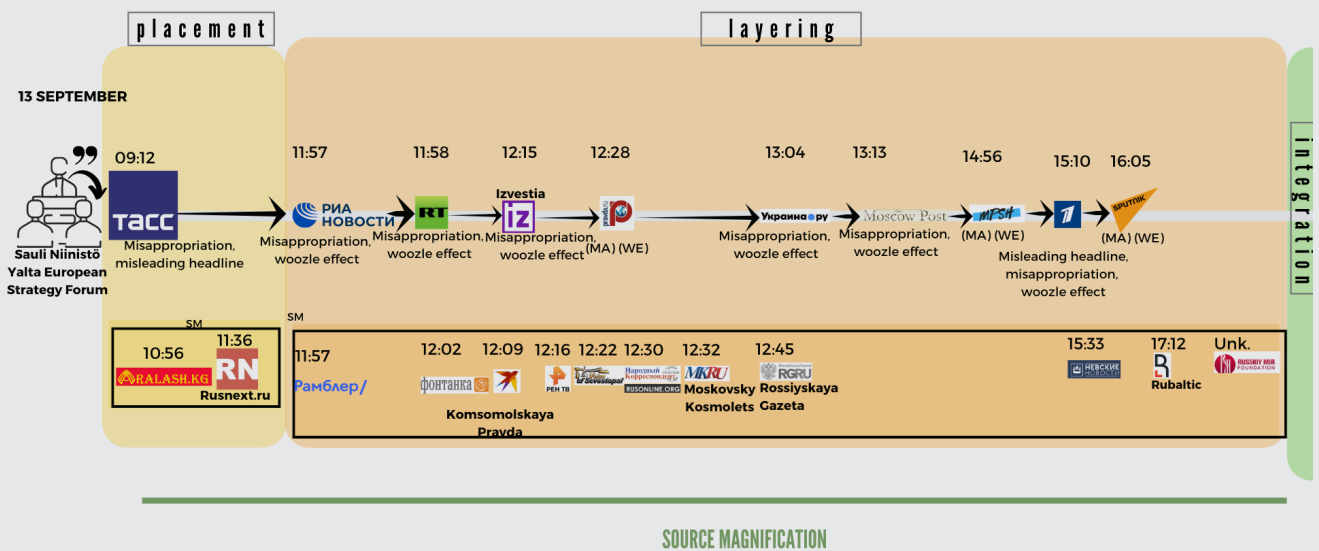
### 13 September

- Several Russian outlets continued the layering phase. First, *Izvestia* mixed Niinistö's speech with a quote from Frank Schauff, the Director-General of the Association of European Businesses in the Russian Federation, to claim that the sanctions were unsuccessful and the Ukrainian crisis is a plot supported by the West.
- Afterwards, subtle misappropriations were applied to build a strong rhetorical link between Russia and Finland; for example, *Pravda* named the Finnish president as 'the head of the post-Soviet republic', and *The Moscow Post* alluded to a meeting between Putin and Niinistö the previous August to illustrate the good relationship between the two countries. The author linked to a press release from the Russian government that described the constructive relationship between the two countries<sup>61</sup>.
- Finally, *Sputnik Lithuania* made use of past statements by French President Emmanuel Macron and US President Donald Trump about the relationship between the West and Russia. Comments such as 'Europe extends from Lisbon to Vladivostok' and Trump's declarations that Russia should re-join the G-7 were detached from their original context and utilized to support the aim of the article, i.e. – the ineffective sanctions should be removed to build a positive relationship between Russia and the West.

### 14 September

- Iltä-Sanomat* publishes an article to disrupt the IL process, saying that the President of Finland Sauli Niinistö was able to experience first-hand how Russian false news is created and spread.

Figure 11. Information Laundering chain utilising quotes from Finnish source magnification



## Observations

- Research identified IL activity strategically aimed at misquoting a trustworthy figure of international prestige in order to support Russia's strategic objective –the lifting of sanctions. A combination of woozle effect and misappropriation was utilised.
  - 24 media outlets were involved in the laundering process on a single day.
  - The most relevant technique utilized was the woozle effect, quoting Niinisto's comments to support the argument about the ineffectiveness of the EU measures against Russia, mixed with several misappropriations.
- 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.
- This IL case can be considered a consolidated woozle effect reinforced by different Russian-language media, accompanied by other IL techniques (such as misappropriation) in order to further distort the original facts.
  - Finland was portrayed as a mediator and partner of Russia, which could bring the two blocs closer together in the near future.
- The level of distortion of the facts was low, since it was a misleading representation and de-contextualisation of the original quotes of the Finnish president.
  - SM was higher than IL, with actors more focused on increasing the visibility of laundered articles rather than on manipulating the content further.
- Results suggest that IL did not involve Finnish-speaking audiences nor targeted Finland to spread a certain image. Media opportunistically used the Finnish president's quotes to spread stories that aligned with Kremlin objectives and pro-Kremlin visions of EU economic measures against Russia.

**Both examples verify that IL techniques are applied differently to achieve distinct aims. The aims will differ according to the audiences targeted and the nature of the actors involved in each IL case. Whereas in the smurfing case targeting Denmark the activities by the actors were aimed at systematic amplification and magnification of the false letter, in the Finnish case, techniques were utilised to shape the perceptions of a specific, more or less stable, audience (mainly consumers of Russian-language news) to create a negative image about EU sanctions and make them believe that the Finnish PM supports the lifting of sanctions.**

## NB8 actors that participate in IL

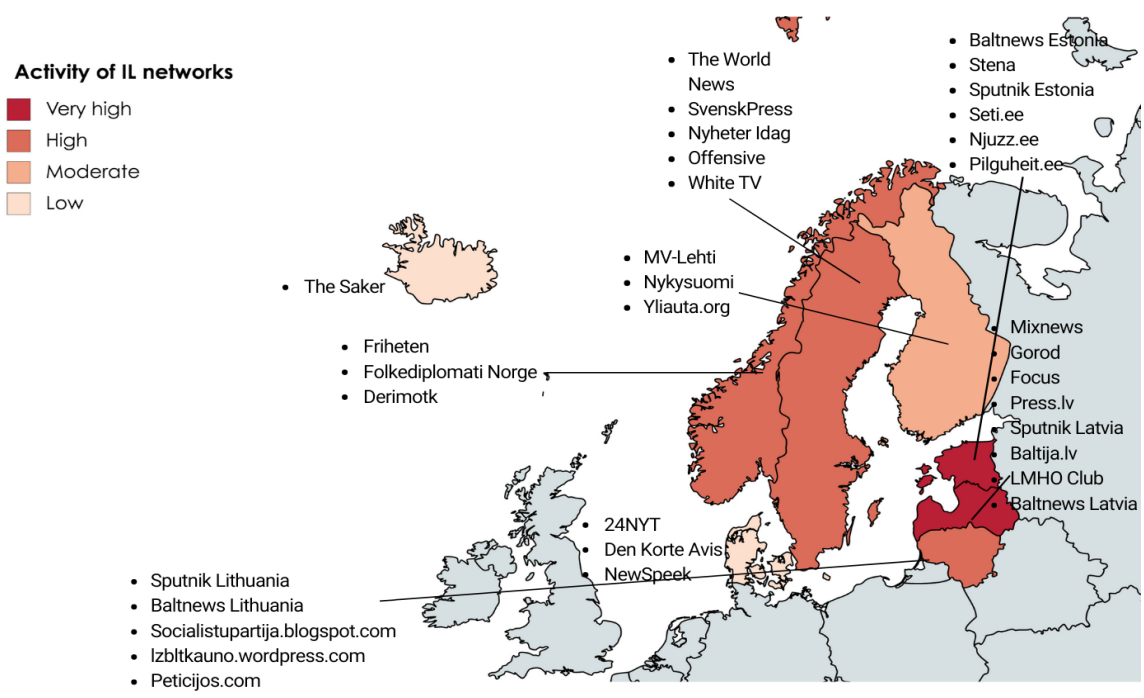
After researching 52 IL cases in the NB8, domestic actors spreading Kremlin's influence in the region were identified in each county. *Sputnik*, in its different versions, stands as the most active Kremlin-official outlet in IL outside the Russian domain sphere. Although only three countries (the Baltic States) out of the eight Nordic-Baltic countries have editions of Sputnik in their domestic languages, these also participate in IL targeting other NB8 countries.



**Table 2.** Domestic media outlets identified by Information Laundering research

Country	Media outlet	Type
Denmark	<i>24NYT</i>	Proxy
	<i>NewSpeek</i>	Proxy
	<i>Den Korte Avis</i>	Proxy
	<i>Indsiget Udsyn</i>	Accidental actor
	<i>Jyllands-Posten</i>	Accidental actor
	<i>Document</i>	Accidental actor
Latvia	<i>Mixnews</i>	Proxy
	<i>Gorod</i>	Proxy
	<i>Focus</i>	Pro-Kremlin
	<i>Press.lv</i>	Proxy
	<i>Baltijas Balss</i>	Pro-Kremlin
	<i>Sputnik Latvia</i>	Kremlin-official
	<i>Baltija.lv</i>	Proxy
	<i>LMHO Club</i>	Pro-Kremlin
	<i>Delfi</i>	Accidental actor
	<i>Baltnews Latvia</i>	Pro-Kremlin
Estonia	<i>Baltnews Estonia</i>	Pro-Kremlin
	<i>Õhtuleht</i>	Accidental actor
	<i>Stena</i>	Proxy
	<i>Sputnik Estonia</i>	Kremlin-official
	<i>Postimees</i>	Accidental actor
	<i>Delfi</i>	Accidental actor
	<i>Seti.ee</i>	Proxy
	<i>Njuzz.ee</i>	Proxy
<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>Fria Tider</i>	Proxy
	<i>Svensk Press</i>	Proxy
	<i>NewsVoice</i>	Accidental actor
	<i>Sv.technocracy.news</i>	Accidental actor
	<i>Nyheter Idag</i>	Pro-Kremlin
	<i>Offensiv</i>	Proxy
<i>White TV</i>	Proxy	
Iceland	<i>The Saker</i> <sup>62</sup>	Pro-Kremlin
Lithuania	<i>Sputnik Lithuania</i>	Kremlin-official
	<i>Baltnews Lithuania</i>	Pro-Kremlin
	<i>Socialistupartija.blogspot.com</i>	Proxy
	<i>lzbltkauo.wordpress.com</i>	Proxy
	<i>Peticijos.com</i>	Proxy
Norway	<i>Friheten</i>	Proxy
	<i>Folke diplomati Norge</i>	Pro-Kremlin
	<i>Derimot</i>	Proxy
	<i>Journalen</i>	Accidental actor

**Map 1.** Activity of Information Laundering networks and domestic Kremlin-official, pro-Kremlin and proxy platforms by country<sup>63</sup>



These outlets interact with foreign actors (publishing mainly in Russian and English outlets) and build transnational networks, reaching wider, multilingual audiences. Some IL processes were considered more effective than others, as they reached mainstream or large media outlets. For example, cases in Denmark, Latvia, and Estonia reached large media outlets such as *Jyllands-Posten*, *Press.lv*, *TV Net*, and the *Estonian National Broadcasting service, ERR*.

Political actors were also seen to participate in or benefit from IL. For example, in an IL case targeting the discovery of a US Special Forces base in Estonia, the Latvian Russian Union Party (Русский союз Латвии)<sup>64</sup> used content from *Sputnik Armenia* in a Facebook post, depicting it as coming from the *Estonian National Broadcasting Service, ERR*. Although the political party linked an article from *ERR*, in its post it utilised the information that had been laundered by *Sputnik Armenia*, using quotes from *Sputnik* contributor Andrei Koshkin to claim that the mere presence of US Special Forces in the country was a threat.

This illustrates one of the greatest benefits 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, made their readers believe this was content from a source considered reliable not only by those with pro-Kremlin views, but also to a wider audience (*ERR*). The gradual distortion that occurs in an IL process made it possible for the Latvian Russian Union Party to disseminate content from a Kremlin-official source while portraying it as coming from a non-partisan source, without any consequences or accountability.



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

**Русский союз Латвии**  
6 September 2019 · 🌐

ЭСТОНСКИЕ ЖУРНАЛИСТЫ УЗНАЛИ, ЧТО В ИХ СТРАНЕ С 2014 ГОДА НА ПОСТОЯННОЙ ОСНОВЕ НАХОДИТСЯ СЕКРЕТНЫЙ АМЕРИКАНСКИЙ СПЕЦНАЗ. ЛАТВИЙСКИЕ СМИ О ЧУЖИХ ВОЕННЫХ ПОД ГРИФОМ "СЕКРЕТНО" ПОКА НЕ СООБЩАЛИ

Эстония провозгласила, что США – наш крупнейший партнер в вопросах безопасности и ее гарант, пишет ERR. До сих пор общественность знала о том, что в Тапа базируются подразделения НАТО, но о секретном американском спецподразделении известно не было.

На существование такого подразделения вышла редакция передачи журналистских расследований "Очевидец"  
<https://menu.err.ee/976799/pealtnagija-viis-vaataja-eestis-alaliselt-asuvasse-eriuksuste-salajasse-baasi> **LINK TO ERR**

Первые догадки появились, когда один из авторов передачи листала документы Министерства обороны США и наткнулась на строку о том, что в 2019 году государство выделит Эстонии 15,7 млн долларов на нужды специфического объекта.

В иностранных и местных СМИ несколько лет спекулировали на тему того, что в Балтийских странах будет постоянно размещаться американский спецназ, но эти слухи всегда опровергались. "Очевидцу" потребовалось почти полгода переговоров, чтобы оказаться на секретной базе, местонахождение которой редакция не имеет права раскрывать.

В Эстонии для нужд этого подразделения будет построена тренировочная база.

"НАТО во главе с США рвется к российским границам, постоянно продвигая вперед инфраструктуру. Сегодня силы альянса основательно освоили территорию Прибалтики и Польши, стремятся разместиться и на Украине. Нахождение в Эстонии секретного спецназа представляет собой угрозу, а сама секретность и колоссальные ресурсы, которые вкладываются в эти структуры, вызывают озабоченность. Это не укрепляет мир в Балтийском регионе, а обостряет обстановку и с военной, и с геополитической точки зрения", - заявил Кошкин.

Военный политолог отметил, что НАТО не прекращает накачивать российской угрозой информационное пространство прибалтийских государств и старой Европы. Цель таких действий - выбить средства на существование блока НАТО и заставить обывателей европейского континента бояться мнимой российской агрессии.

**Russian Union of Latvia**  
September 6, 2019 · 🌐

ESTONIAN JOURNALISTS LEARNED THAT IN THEIR COUNTRY, SINCE 2014, THE SECRET AMERICAN SPECIAL FORCES ARE ON A PERMANENT BASIS. LATVIAN MEDIA HAVE NOT REPORTED ALIEN MILITARY UNDER THE "SECRET"

Estonia has declared that the United States is our largest partner in security matters and its guarantor, writes ERR. Until now, the public knew that NATO units were based in Tapa, but they did not know about the secret American special forces.

The existence of such a subdivision came out of the editorial board of the journalistic investigative program "Eyewitness"  
<https://menu.err.ee/976799/pealtnagija-viis-vaataja-eestis-alaliselt-asuvasse-eriuksuste-salajasse-baasi> ...

The first guesses appeared when one of the authors of the program leafed through the documents of the US Department of Defense and came across a line that in 2019 the state would allocate \$ 15.7 million to Estonia for the needs of a specific facility.

For several years, foreign and local media speculated on the fact that American special forces would be permanently stationed in the Baltic countries, but these rumors have always been refuted. It took the "eyewitness" almost six months of negotiations to find himself at a secret base, the location of which the editorial office has no right to disclose.

A training base will be built in Estonia for the needs of this unit.

"We have been here on a full-time basis since 2014, and our activities often require more space," explained Kevin Stringer, Colonel of the US Army, senior officer of European special forces.

**SPUTNIK CONTENT**

"NATO, led by the US, is striving for the Russian borders, constantly pushing forward the infrastructure. Today, the forces of the alliance have thoroughly mastered the territory of the Baltic States and Poland, and are striving to settle in Ukraine.

The presence of secret special forces in Estonia is a threat, and the very secrecy and the enormous resources that are invested in these structures cause concern. This does not strengthen peace in the Baltic region, but exacerbates the situation both from a military and a geopolitical point of view, "Koshkin said.

The military political scientist noted that NATO does not stop pumping the information space of the Baltic states and old Europe with the Russian threat. The purpose of such actions is to knock out funds for the existence of the NATO bloc and make the inhabitants of the European continent afraid of the imaginary Russian aggression.

Source: Latvian Russian Union's Facebook page

## CONCLUSION

This chapter briefly summarised and illustrated how IL is utilised by actors to spread Kremlin's influence in the region, which can happen by either laundering news events in domestic media outlets to influence national audiences or by targeting domestic news to portray a certain image about a country, addressed to either international or domestic audiences. The involvement of domestic actors in IL networks and their engagement with foreign actors to consolidate transnational networks that launder information makes IL a growing security threat for NB8 countries. Based on the characteristics of the domestic media environments and the behaviour of the networks, this study identified three sub-regions within the NB8:



- 1. The Baltic States, with high activity from Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin actors;**
- 2. Finland, Sweden, and Norway, where proxy actors have become highly relevant;**
- 3. Denmark and Iceland, with frequent exploitation of the activity of accidental actors to amplify laundered information and disseminate it among international audiences.**

Although the effectiveness of IL to consolidate influence networks in the NB8 is not uniform and is contingent on characteristics such as the domestic media environment, IL cases were identified in every country. The ability of a laundered piece of information to reach mainstream media, larger media portals, or the discourse of reputable public figures (government authorities, community leaders, and others), determines the efficacy of the IL process. Due to the presence of consolidated pro-Kremlin networks that enable information influence activities, together with a sizeable Russian-speaking population, IL networks seem to play a more active and successful role in the Baltic States, involving large media portals such as *TV Net* or *Press.lv* as proxies of the actors disseminating the Kremlin's influence. In the non-Baltic countries, IL cases are also frequent, with large networks and active pro-Kremlin and proxy actors.

IL techniques have been proven effective in progressively misleading audiences while increasing the legitimacy of the laundered information and obscuring the source. Their use and combination can be adapted to each particular case. For example, in the smurfing case targeting Denmark, the activity was oriented to a systematic amplification and magnification of the false letter, while in the Finnish case, techniques were utilised to shape the perceptions of a specific, more or less stable, audience (mainly, consumers of Russian-language news) to create a negative image of EU sanctions and make them believe that the Finnish president supports the lifting of sanctions. These techniques are also supported by cyber capabilities and benefit from inauthentic amplification in social media. Self-publication software like IFTTT and the forgery, hacking or leaking of documents were also utilised to enable or reinforce IL activities.

The rise of information influence activities and the multiple threats they pose to society demands that national institutions respond urgently, while continuing to embrace the opportunities to engage with the public in an online world. This constitutes a growing concern in the context of a global pandemic where human interaction is limited and users have to increase their online presence.<sup>65</sup> For this purpose, a wider understanding how IL techniques are used to exploit domestic vulnerabilities is required. Research on Information Laundering allows government and institutions to further their knowledge of domestic actors that participate in the spread of foreign influence in the country, exposing at the same time vulnerabilities in the domestic media environment. The upcoming publication provides a robust methodology to map IL processes in the NB8 and differentiate the entanglement between foreign and domestic actors. Exposing the networks and the domestic actors involved in IL will play a key role in disrupting the networks of influence, since foreign actors cannot succeed without domestic support. *Information Laundering in the Nordic-Baltic Region* study contributes to understanding information influence activities, supporting NB8 institutions in their goal to halt the spread of hostile information influence in the region and acquire mechanisms to effectively detect, uncover, disrupt and counter these practices, building resilience to protect societies from external hostile threats.



# Endnotes

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