



Experience of the Baltic States in Countering History-Linked Kremlin Propaganda: A Case Study **13**

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Abstract

The Kremlin is weaponising historical narratives and using them against neighbouring countries to spread propaganda and disinformation. This is a big challenge because historical memory could be represented as one of the pillars of the modern state and society, and, therefore, the ground of the social resilience itself. The research showed that the process of countering the narratives of the Kremlin propaganda linked to historical events in the Baltic states is based on three pillars: (1) considerable attention to one's own history and restoration of historical truth after (and about) the period of the Soviet occupation; (2) activities of the mainstream media to countering the Kremlin's propaganda and disinformation in general; (3) certain initiatives of civil society and the so-called influencers. The strength of all three processes mentioned above ensures the sustainability of social resilience (especially in the field of information security).

13.1 Introduction: Russia and the Weaponisation of History

In one of his books, Mark Galeotti (2022) talks about the weaponisation of everything made by Russia. We could apply a similar conception to history. The past is not only something that happened long ago. It is also a pillar of understanding our contemporary reality, and historical narratives become an argument in modern political communication. The negative phenomenon in the information field (propaganda, disinformation, black political PR) also often targets history and tries to use

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narratives of history for manipulation. Russia is one of the states that is advanced in this strategy.

The most significant historical disputes have been between Russia and neighbouring countries. The historical narratives were the grounds for the aggression against Ukraine: first in the form of the so-called hybrid war since 2014, and later as open unprovoked aggression since 24 February 2022. Among the narratives of the president of Russia, Vladimir Putin, there were publicly provided statements that Ukraine is a state artificially created by Lenin and the Bolsheviks and that, at the same time, it is the homeland of the Nazis (Plokhii, 2022).

Ukraine is not the only target for re-interpretation or even faking of history in modern Russia. The Baltic states have also been facing this issue for the past few decades. Especially in focus was the period of the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States in 1940–1990 (1991).¹ The Kremlin denies the fact of occupation and represents the incorporation of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia into the Soviet Union as a voluntary decision of the Baltic States.

However, disputes with neighbours about the interpretation of historical events are typical for many countries. Russia is doing so in an especially aggressive way. Nerijus Maliukevičius (2008, p. 134) pointed out that Russia is actively pushing historical discourse into actual relations with Lithuania which influences bilateral affairs. Especially hot are topics related to the Great Patriotic War/GPW (part of WWII, 1941–1945) and the period of the occupation of Lithuania (and other Baltic states) in 1940–1990 (1991). One of the first and most important information attacks against Lithuania and the other Baltic States was implemented in 2004–2005 in the context of the 70th anniversary of the Victory in GPW, which Moscow celebrated on a grand scale (Ibid, p. 137–140).

Quite similar conclusions about the Russian instrumentalisation of narratives of history in the context of relations with Latvia were made by Solvita Denise (2008). She monitored the Russian press in the period 2002–2005, which shows that the focus was mainly on the events of the twentieth century. The hottest point, like the case of Lithuania, was the discussion about WWII and its role in the history of Latvia:

The most sensitive period is linked with the Second World War—was it “liberation” or “occupation?” In the Russian media itself, there is no question, as “liberation” is an axiom that requires no proof. The Russian media construct the “wrong” perception of events by stressing certain kinds of information and keeping silent about other aspects, using a black and white approach, and avoiding all shades of grey (Ibid, p. 107).

The narratives about World War II are among the most visible in modern Kremlin propaganda. It is linked to a dominating historical narrative in Russian ideology—a narrative about Russia (the Soviet Union) as the victor of WWII (Vaišnys et al.,

¹ Juridically, Lithuania ended the period of occupation by declaring the restoration of its independence on 11 March 1990. Moscow did not recognise that decision and changed its position only after the fall of the Soviet coup attempt in August 1991.

2017, p. 56). Through this narrative, Moscow also creates some narratives about the Baltic States, that is; by using confronting historical narratives (especially about World War II) it is trying to create a myth about Lithuania as a neo-Fascist state (Ibid, p. 57). A similar myth is created about Latvia and Estonia too.

The story of the liberation of Europe from Nazism is especially important for Russia. Until 2014, when Russia still tried to keep more or less constructive relations with the West, it was important for Moscow that Western countries also recognise the role of Russia (the Soviet Union) in the victory against Nazi Germany during WWII. From this position, Russia also tries to impose an interpretation of the history of the twentieth century on the Baltic states. We are talking about “the Russian view that the Soviet Union saved Balts from the throes of Nazism” (Ellis, 2022, p. 41).

The Baltic States have a different view of history compared to the Russian version of the Soviet past. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia lost their independence in 1940. All three Baltic states were occupied by the Soviet Union as the direct result of an agreement between the USSR and Nazi Germany (also known as the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact) in 1939. The Pact included secret protocols which divided spheres of influence in Europe between Moscow and Berlin. The resistance movement in the Baltic States tried after WWII (in fact, from 1944) to re-create the independence of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Russia resists the interpretation of the mentioned battle as the fight of the Baltic states for freedom:

While the Baltic states are attempting to reconcile the history of collaboration with that of the history of genuine anti-Soviet resistance, Russia has painted this history with a rather large, and much less nuanced, brush. Russian attempts to brand all acts of anti-Soviet partisan warfare during this period as “fascism” and “Nazism”—including the forest brothers’ resistance—obscure the delicateness of the issue at hand (Ibid, p. 48).

At the same time, Russia is using an interpretation of historical narratives to establish a perception of the present (Jakniūnaitė, 2007, p. 100). It is presented in a declaration of Russian active measures “to resist” to the so-called re-writing of history, that is, “for the purpose to defend Russia’s interpretations of history even a special ‘Commission for Counteraction to the attempts of the interpretations of history contrary to the interest of Russia’² was created” (Pelns, 2009, p. 325).

The contemporary ideology of Putin’s regime in Russia also is linked to re-Stalinisation (Khapaeva, 2016). It includes the denial of the crimes of the Soviet era and especially the cultivation of the Myth of the Great Patriotic War. This Myth becomes the ground for “the ideological consensus between the authorities and society” (Ibid, p. 66) in modern Russia.

Dina Khapaeva explains the nature of the Myth in this way:

According to this myth, the Russians single-handedly rescued civilisation from the global evil of fascism and secured world peace under Stalin’s leadership. The Soviet Union and the Russian nation are presented as the messianic nation, which

² The Commission worked in the period of 2009–2012.

sacrificed itself for the happiness of the mankind. Therefore, any crimes committed in the name of this global victory are considered justified (Ibid).

The interpretation and re-interpretation of history in some way became the *idee' fixe* of the Kremlin. Sergey Medvedev called it “the epidemy of historical revisionism” (Medvedev, 2017, p. 217). According to him, Russian elites are using the re-creation of narratives of history to counterbalance strategic mistakes made in the present. History, in this situation, is only a “servant of the government, just one more source which state could use for purpose” (Ibid). In fact, the Kremlin tries to rewrite history by itself (or establish one “right” interpretation of history) and accuses other countries of doing the same.

In the context of resilience, it is important to stress once more that narratives of history are a part of mass concessions and the memory of society. In other words, history is an essential factor in society’s identity. At the same time, social resilience is described as “the ability or capacity to withstand, recover, and maintain” (Qamar, 2024). This means that the stability of historical narratives is a significant pillar of social resilience towards acts of information warfare from the perspective of hostile actors. Logically, historical narratives have become a target of the aforementioned acts.

In the context of relations with Russia, the core problem is also that “national identity constructions of the Baltic states and Russia, together with the historical narrative they are based upon, are incompatible, and indeed, antagonistic” (Ehin & Berg, 2009, p. 9). Moreover, Russia aspires to set its own vision of history and historical events to other countries and does not recognise any narratives which do not match the Kremlin’s “grand narrative”. In these circumstances, dealing with Kremlin propaganda linked to historical events is a big challenge for the Baltic countries. Modern Russian historiography, in general, is hostile to the Baltic States: “the politicization of history writing on the Baltic states to purposefully create a negative discourse about them and its integration into social memory is part of Russia’s history policy” (Želče, 2011, p. 58). The cases presented further will show how Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia try to manage this issue.

13.2 The Baltic States and the Process of the Restoration of History

The reaction of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia to Kremlin-backed manipulation of narratives of history includes a wide spectre of measures from recent attempts to reach a compromise on the earlier stages of relations to grassroots actions.

First, we should mention attempts to resolve contradictions on the professional level. The bilateral commission of historians from Lithuania and Russia met for the first time in 2006 in Vilnius (Švietimo, sporto ir mokslo ministerija, 2008). The purpose of the Commission was to establish professional ties between historians from both countries.

The creation of such kinds of commissions is not an unusual practice. For example, in 1992, Lithuania and Poland created a similar bilateral commission of

historians to eliminate problems of interpretation of the common past (Kasperavičius, 2011). The practice of cooperation in the frame of the bilateral commission of historians from Lithuania and Russia was not as successful. The work of the Commission was temporarily suspended after events in Ukraine in 2014 when Russia illegally annexed Crimea and incited conflict in the Donbas region. “It is obvious that in such kind of an atmosphere, historians could do nothing, and any work becomes just impossible”, said Alvydas Nikžentaitis (BNS info., 2015), the head of the Commission from the Lithuanian side, about the situation. Despite this, later the Commission tried to re-establish cooperation. In 2018, the Commission prepared a workshop at the Russian Scientific Academy in Moscow as part of the celebration of 100 years of restoration of the Lithuanian statehood (*Lietuvos respublikos ambasada . . .*, 2018).

There is no later news about the activities of the Commission. It is possible to predict that after 24 February 2022 (the beginning of the full-scale military aggression of Russia against Ukraine), such cooperation became impossible.

The same fate struck the Bilateral Commission of Latvian and Russian historians. This Commission began activities in 2012 (Antonenko, 2012). The purpose of the Commission was to start the dialogue about “painful historical questions”, including the incorporation of Latvia into the Soviet Union in 1940, the question of belonging of the Pytalovski district,³ and the role of Red Latvian riflemen in the Russian Revolution of 1917 (Ibid).

The activities of the Commission were suspended after the events of 2014. In 2017, the cooperation was renewed (RIA Novosti, 2017) but did not last long. The activities of the Commission were terminated for a second time in 2018 (EurAzija Daily, 2018). As explained by the head of the Latvian Science Academy, Ojars Sparitis, the reason for the closure of the activities of the Commission was the lack of interest in the common work of members of the Commission and tensions in bilateral relations between Latvia and Russia (Ibid).

The ambassador of Latvia to the Russian Federation, Maris Riekstins, said in 2020 that the work of such a commission would still be useful (EurAzija Daily, 2020). On the other hand, it is hard to imagine a continuity of cooperation with official Russian historians after February 2022, when the Baltic States see all kinds of cooperation with official Russian structures as toxic.

It should be also mentioned that even during short periods of the activity of the Bilateral Commission of Latvian and Russian historians, this cooperation was criticised by Kremlin-backed sources of propaganda. The creation of the Commission and its activities was seen as a “shame” (Diukov, 2015). At the same time, the international journalistic investigation based on analysis of leaked Kremlin documents showed that Russia had seen the possibility of renewing the activities of the Commission as its tool of soft power (DV.ee, 2011).

³ A district that belonged to Latvia (Latvian name Abrene) but was transferred to Russia after the second Soviet occupation of Latvia in 1944.

In the case of Estonia, the idea of a similar commission was discussed but not implemented. The initiative to create such a commission was offered by the ambassador of the Russian Federation to Estonia, Yury Merzliakov, in 2011, but this offer was met with scepticism. The ex-prime minister of Estonia, Mart Laar, evaluated this idea as “pointless” (Ibid). Estonian historian Toomas Hiio said that the idea, in general, is positive but politicised (Delfi.ee, 2011).

Professional expertise on historical events of the second part of the twentieth century also should be seen as the measures against the Kremlin’s weaponisation of history. These activities have a broader context. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Baltic States together with their independence needed to get back their history, as well as clean the history of the last half of a century from Soviet ideology and manipulations.

The Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania was established in 1993 (Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, 2024). This institution grew from the State Residents Genocide Centre of Lithuania, established by a resolution of the Lithuanian parliament in 1992. Since 1997, the activity of the Centre has been regulated by special law, which describes the tasks of the institution:

The tasks of the Centre comprise restoration of historical truth and justice, investigation of the physical and spiritual genocide of the Lithuanian population perpetrated by the occupation regimes during the period 1939–1990, resistance against these regimes, perpetuating the remembrance of the freedom fighters and victims of genocide, initiation of a legal assessment of consequences of the occupations. The Centre shall also investigate the policy implemented in the Vilnius region in 1920–1939 and the processes of the resistance against it (Republic of Lithuania Law on the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, 1997).

In Latvia and Estonia, work to explore the painful history of the Soviet period on the official level was also implemented. The Commission of the Historians of Latvia was established in 1998 by the initiative of former president Guntis Ulmanis (Crimes against Humanity, 2024). The task of the Commission was “to study the issue ‘Crimes against Humanity Committed in the Territory of Latvia under Two Occupations, 1940-1956,’ as well as to organise the production of the final report on the theme” (Ibid). The Commission focused on Soviet and Nazi crimes. As stated by Andreis Plakans (2018, p. 92), “an unquestionably innovative step taken by the CH was to bring the period of the Nazi occupation (1941–1945) under the same detailed scrutiny as the Soviet years”. As a result of its work, the Commission presents regularly by publishing research reports as well as performing presentations at conferences.

The same work is implemented by the Estonian Institute of Historical Memory. It is noted that “since 1998, the Estonian Institute of Historical Memory and its predecessor have been investigating international crimes and human rights abuses committed by totalitarian regimes [Soviet and Nazi] in Estonia, as well as the ideologies that have given rise to such regimes” (Eesti Maalu Instituut, 2024). Historically, first, it was the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity, established in 1998 by President Lenart Meri. The

Institute was established in 2008 to continue the research of the International Commission which concluded its work the same year (Tamm, 2013, p. 656).

What Estonia and, in fact, the other Baltic states, did after the collapse of the Soviet Union possibly equate, in Tamm's words, "the search of lost time" (Ibid.). For Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, the period of Soviet occupation was a period of lost statehood, a period of repressions, and the political and ideological dictate of Metropolia (Moscow). Russia disagrees with this view. Soviet times are represented in modern Russia as a kind of "golden age". Even Vladimir Putin himself claimed that the collapse of the Soviet Union was "a major geopolitical disaster of the century" (Bigg, 2005). This view also becomes the grounds for Kremlin propaganda and information attacks against the Baltic States.

13.3 Role of the Media in Countering Historical Propaganda

The role of the media in activities to counter propaganda is important. Free mass media is still one of the pillars of democratic societies. On the other hand, the Kremlin's propaganda uses principles of freedom of speech and Western standards of journalism for its own purposes. Russia uses possibilities to integrate its own media (including sources clearly acting as sources of disinformation) into the European market, registering it as "European media", but at the same time keeping the Russian information sphere closed to Western sources of information (Denisenko, 2018). Another example could be the attempt to undermine Western standards of journalism, principles of neutrality and objectivity. Peter Pomerantsev (2015) concluded in this context: "If a commitment to the impossibility of objective reporting means that any position, however bizarre, is no better or worse than any other, the ultimate effect, which may be the intended one, is to suggest that all media organisations are equally untrustworthy—and to elevate any journalistic errors by the BBC or New York Times into indisputable signs they are lackeys of their own governments".

Despite all the attempts of the Kremlin, the quality of journalistic and analytical publications in mainstream media still is an important barrier in the way of propaganda and disinformation. The experience of the Baltic States shows it.

The so-called fact-checking⁴ initiatives should be mentioned first. In Latvia, the initiative "RE: Check" was created by the public broadcaster of Latvia LSM.lv together with the Centre for Investigative Journalism "RE: Baltic". This initiative deconstructed and unmasked fakes linked not only to historical events, but some publications targeted historical issues too (e.g. propaganda narratives about the period of World War II in Latvia). For example, we could mention the attempt of the Kremlin's propaganda to represent the Nazi concentration camp in Salaspils as "one of the most terrific camps" and a "special concentration camp for kids where 12,000 children were imprisoned and 7000 of them died". This narrative is not accurate. The

⁴ The media genre when journalists check whether publicly spread information fits the facts.

fact-check showed that the concentration camp in Salaspils had no special status. Some kids (together with families) were indeed imprisoned but their numbers were not so impressive. According to Latvian historians, there were 3000 children in Salaspils from 1941 to 1944, and 400–600 of them died (Petrova & Purna, 2022). This example does not disprove the horror of Nazi crimes but shows the intentions of the Kremlin’s propaganda to some kind of falsification and hyperbolisation.

The popular media in Lithuania have their fact-checking initiatives. For example, the most popular news portal Delfi.lt has a section “*Melo detektorius*” (Engl. “Lie detector”). The second most popular Lithuanian news outlet on the internet, 15min.lt, has a section “*Patikrinta 15min*”⁵ (Engl. “Checked by 15min”). Both outlets are checking narratives of propaganda in general. Naturally, some of the checked fakes are related to history too.⁶

The media reactions to the Kremlin’s use of narratives of history for propaganda purposes are quite natural. Different sources of Kremlin disinformation try to “trash” the information space of the Baltic States (and other Western countries) with large numbers of fake narratives and messages. Mass media stays in the role of gatekeeper for now, not only choosing news for media agenda-setting but also not allowing narratives of propaganda to enter the official sphere of information.

13.4 NGO and Grassroots Movements for Resistance to Narratives of the Kremlin Propaganda

Different NGOs, academic initiatives, and grassroots movements could be marked as the third pillar of resistance to narratives of Kremlin propaganda in the Baltic states.

The Defence League of Estonia (Voluntary national defence . . . , 2024) take the responsibility to fight propaganda since 2017. It created the blog [Propastop.org](https://propastop.org) which has similar functions as media fact-checking initiatives in Lithuania and Latvia. The creators of the blog (there are no names of contributors to the blog, only declared clear affiliation to Defence League) explain their own modus operandi in this way: “If we detect that someone is disseminating lies, biased- or disinformation in the media or somebody wants to influence processes concerning Estonia by manipulating information, we will bring it to the public. We will juxtapose lies with real facts, show motives behind the actions and bring out the ones interested in manipulating information” (Propastop, 2017).

Propastop.org deals not only with the manipulation of historical narratives. Authors of the blog show general attention to other kind of narratives—cases

⁵ *Patikrinta 15min*, 15min, <https://www.15min.lt/projektas/patikrinta-15min> , last accessed 2024/10/17.

⁶ See for example: Vorobjovaitė, M: Riebus pareiškimas: Rusija istoriškai gynė ne tik save, bet ir JAV, 15min, (April 4, 2023), <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/pasaulis/riebus-pareiskimas-rusija-istoriskai-gyne-ne-tik-save-bet-ir-jav-57-2033258> , last accessed 2024/10/17.

when Kremlin propaganda is targeting NATO and membership of Estonia in the Alliance, or fakes linked to conspiracy theories about COVID-19, etc. At the same time, some publications were made regarding attempts of Kremlin propaganda to manipulate discourses of history. We could mention the publication exploring and debunking manipulations of Kremlin narratives, which aim to deny the fact of Soviet occupation of Estonia (Propastop, 2021). The publication detected that Kremlin propaganda used for this purpose is the so-called Soviet nostalgia and in some ways such kind of nostalgia is “even more dangerous than an explicit denial of occupation” (Ibid.).

The most prominent NGO initiative to counter propaganda in Lithuania is DebunkEU.org. It is “an independent technology think tank and nongovernmental organization that analyzes disinformation and aims to improve societal resilience against disinformation through educational media literacy campaigns” (Denisenko, 2022, p. 175). DebunkEU grew from the earlier project Demaskuok which in 2017–2019 ran the media group Delfi.lt with support from Google’s Digital News Innovation Fund (Ibid). DebunkEU acts on an international level today. Its activities are not limited by the borders of the Lithuanian informational space, and it is also involved in the actions of the so-called Elves.⁷ They act legally and reject illegal activities such as hacking. Elves voluntarily collect and analyse information from social media, identifying messages of propaganda and disinformation, and preparing reports about it for politicians, media outlets, or security services (Klečkova, 2022, pp. 10–11).

Just like other initiatives focused on countering Kremlin disinformation, DebunkEU does not specialise in specific historical narratives. The analysis of disinformation is most focused on topical challenges such as Russian aggression against Ukraine. The deconstruction of history-related narratives of propaganda is just a part of the ongoing works of DebunkEU. Narratives related to the history of WWII and post-war resistance to Soviet rule in the Baltic states⁸ were explored, as well as principles of use of Soviet nostalgia in narratives of Kremlin propaganda 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁹

An original initiative implemented by Vidzeme University of Applied Science (Latvia) should be mentioned too. The site of the University launched a specific section as “part of the initiative on media and information literacy” (Vidzeme University, 2024). The section included publications (and links to publications in various media) about media literacy, debunks of propaganda narratives, etc. A

⁷ Grassroots movement born in Lithuania. “Elves” aim to counter the actions of Kremlin Internet “trolls”.

⁸ See for example: Vencauskaitė, L.: “May 9th is celebrated by victors” and other pillars of pro-Kremlin disinformation”, DebunkEU, (2021/06/09), <https://www.debunk.org/may-9th-is-celebrated-by-the-victors-and-other-pillars-of-pro-kremlin-disinformation> , last accessed 2024/10/17.

⁹ See: Eidimantė, A.: Use of Soviet Era Nostalgia in Russian media, marking 30 years since the fall of USSR, DebunkEU, (2021/06/03), <https://www.debunk.org/use-of-soviet-era-nostalgia-in-russian-media-marking-30-years-since-the-fall-of-ussr> , last accessed 2024/10/17.

big number of publications analyse historical narratives of Kremlin propaganda. Here, we could mention a publication about the research of the former rector of the Vidzeme University of Applied Science, Gatis Krūmiņš, which debunks myths about Soviet investment in the Baltics (Krūmiņš, 2017). The research results were also presented in a Russian-language video¹⁰ created by Vidzeme University of Applied Science. The video aimed to reach a wider audience potentially influenced by myths of Kremlin propaganda about modernisation and assumed prosperity brought to the Baltic states during the Soviet era.

Other activities which could be mentioned in the general discourse of the topic belong to the sphere of grassroots activism and actionism. The next example belongs to the sphere of practical discussions about historical justice: a protest action in 2007 in Riga during the signing of the agreement about the Russian–Latvian border. According to the agreement, Latvia gave up claims to the Abrene region (nowadays, Pytalovo district of the Russian Federation), transmitted during the Soviet occupation in 1944 to Russia. Moscow, in the context of non-recognition of the fact of the occupation of Latvia, looked to this transmission as a legal decision and internal affair of the Soviet state. The protest in Riga was implemented in the form of a performance—young representatives from the political party “Visu Latvija!” protested topless in minus 17 °C weather (Redakcija Press, 2018). It represents the message of the protest that “lands afforded by the blood of grandparents are more important than health (of protesters), comfort and selfish interests” (Ibid.). The protest should be interpreted as part of an information struggle against narratives of Kremlin propaganda (first of all denying the occupation of the Baltic States) and against the Kremlin version of history in general.

Another meaningful performance with the aim of countering the Kremlin’s manipulations of historical narratives was a virtual protest action organised by well-known Lithuanian journalist Andrius Tapinas. This case should be presented in a broader context.

On 11 July 2017, the official NATO channel on Youtube published the short movie *Forest Brothers—Fight for the Baltics* (NATO, 2017a). The movie was dedicated to freedom fighters in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia who resisted Soviet rule after WWII. On the NATO Twitter account, the movie was presented with an explanation: “This is the story of the Forest Brothers who fought the Soviet army for their homelands after WWII” (NATO, 2017b).

Russia reacted to the movie quite painfully. The official spokesperson of the Foreign Affairs Ministry of the Russian Federation, Maria Zakharova, in a post on Facebook repeated the Soviet view of the resistance movement in the Baltic States. She wrote that the resistance in the Baltic States “was created on the basis of fascist remnants who collaborated with German occupational authorities” (Bajoran, Nimmo, 2017). The propaganda campaign against NATO and the Baltic States

¹⁰ See: Vidzeme University: Hranit’ postojanno. Latviiskii istorik: Baltija dotirovala drugie strany SSSR, Youtube, (2017/03/17), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Idq-dwAnl98>, last accessed 2024/10/17.

was supported by some Russian politicians (i.e. Dmitry Rogozin) and state-backed media (i.e. RT) (Ibid.).

One of the most famous Lithuanian journalists Andrius Tapinas mobilised followers on his account on Facebook to respond to the Kremlin. He posted instructions for the performance, so everyone volunteering could participate:

1. Go to Russia's MFA [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] page on Facebook and find the Russian version of the post discussing the video
2. Comment [#Кремльвашуисториюнеперепишешь](#) (Translation: #Kremlinyouwillnotfalsifyyourhistory)
3. Leave a one-star review for the page (Ibid.)

Users left more than nine thousand comments (mostly with hashtags) on Russia's MFA page on Facebook. The page got 13,000 one-star reviews (Ibid.). Reacting to it, "the Russian MFA even had to shut down the rating instrument on its Facebook page" (DRFlab, 2017).

The performance showed that grassroots activism could be an effective tool to counter propaganda and influence sources of propaganda. The Internet era in general allows using volunteers and activists for social actions and performances (as well as using them for state offensive actions on the other hand¹¹).

At the same time, examples of grassroots activities against disinformation are still rare. There are no spontaneous moves and, as we can see, every action needs a leader or some leaders and a clear idea. In the case of A. Tapinas' performance, the basic aspects were the popularity of the initiator of the performance, the large number of followers (270,000 followers on Facebook by October 2024) and the clear instructions for action. The elimination of any of the mentioned aspects potentially would change the efficiency of the action.

13.5 Conclusions

Russia sees history as a tool of ideological and political influence. Historical narratives continuously appear in the discourse of modern Kremlin propaganda. Moscow implemented the process of weaponisation of history in the frame of the information war Russia fought against the Western world. History also is a tool of the Kremlin regime for the legitimisation of its actions. Historical "arguments" were invoked to justify Russian military aggression against Ukraine in 2022. The

¹¹ Russia used volunteers for cyberattacks against Estonia in 2007 during the removal of the so-called Bronze Soldier (monument for Soviet troops) from the centre of Tallinn to the Military Cemetery. Instructions on how to voluntarily participate in offensive cyber action against the Estonian sector of the internet were published online (see more: Ottis, R.: Analysis of the 2007 Cyber Attacks Against Estonia from the Information Warfare Perspective, Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, (2008), https://ccdcoe.org/uploads/2018/10/Ottis2008_AnalysisOf2007FromTheInformationWarfarePerspective.pdf, last accessed 2024/10/17).

illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 was vindicated by Russia using historical argumentation too (claims that Crimea is the historical and spiritual land of Russia, that Crimea “always belonged to Russia”, etc.).

During informational attacks against the Baltic States, the most visible is the orientation of the Kremlin on historical events of the twentieth century. Moscow primarily takes regard to the Baltic States’ painful period of Soviet occupation from 1940 to 1991. This period is linked to the biggest disagreement between Russia and the Baltic states. The Myth of the “Great Victory” in the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) is especially important for Russia. Moscow wants to present the Soviet Union (and Russia) as the liberator and saviour of Europe during WWII. The Baltic States, in turn, stressed the fact of the Soviet occupation and oppression against the inhabitants of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. For the Baltic States, afterwar resistance to Soviet rule is especially important. Moscow denies the legitimacy of the resistance movement in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia after WWII and tries to represent these historical events as the struggle of Nazi collaborators against the legal Soviet rule.

The Baltic States have begun restoring their historical narrative at the same time as the restoration of independence in 1990–1991. Historical memory could be represented as one of the pillars of the modern state and society, especially for the small states. It means that Russian attacks of disinformation on narratives of the history of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia should be evaluated not only as problematic discussion about the past but also as an offensive action against the modern Baltic States too.

It was obvious from the very beginning that the Baltic States and the Russian Federation could hardly find a consensus about the historical past. In the earlier stages, before the clear radicalisation of the political regime in Russia (in fact, before 2014 and even a little bit later) it was an attempt to find common points in the interpretation of historical events and solve disagreements through the dialogue. Lithuania and Latvia have a special bilateral commission of historians working with colleagues from Russia. Estonia was an exception. Tallinn did not see the point of having such kind of Commission with Russia despite offers from Moscow.

The work of the Lithuanian–Russian and Latvian–Russian Commission of historians did not provide big results. Since Russian hybrid aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and the annexation of Crimea activities of these Commissions mostly were postponed. After 24 February 2022, when Moscow started the war against Ukraine, any kind of political cooperation with Russia was seen in the Baltic states as unacceptable and pointless.

The mainstream media in the Baltic states has become one of the most effective tools against Kremlin propaganda, including historically oriented narratives of disinformation. Publications about the challenge of Kremlin propaganda, debunking of narratives of disinformation, and initiatives of fact-checking strengthen the national media spheres of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. On the one hand, these publications neutralise the narratives of Kremlin propaganda. On the other hand, they educate people about issues of propaganda and warn the audience about the threat of disinformation. At the same time, these initiatives are often not

focused especially on historical narratives but addressing the challenge of Kremlin propaganda in general.

The small media market of each of the Baltic states, in this case, could be evaluated as a kind of advantage. It means that a small number of mainstream media (and media initiatives of fact-checking and countering Kremlin propaganda) reach a large part of the national audience.

Concern about the actions of Kremlin propaganda becomes an incentive for civil society in the Baltic States to act too. Here, first of all, should be mentioned the initiative of the so-called Elves, acting separately or with the DebunkEU organisation. Another significant illustration of the power of private initiatives in countering hostile disinformation is the case of internet performance by Lithuanian journalist Andrius Tapinas. Thousands of users responded to his call to show the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that Lithuanians will not tolerate attempts to misconstrue the history of the post-war resistance movement.

The analysis of the cases showed that the process of countering historical propaganda in the Baltic States is based on three pillars: (1) considerable attention to own history and restoration of historical truth after (and about) the period of the Soviet occupation; (2) activities of the mainstream media to countering Kremlin propaganda and disinformation in general; (3) certain initiatives of civil society and the so-called influencers.

It is possible to discuss some lessons learned from the relations between Russia and the Baltic states in the context of Kremlin's weaponisation of historical narratives. The recommendations are formulated keeping in mind three dimensions of social resilience: "social actors' capacities to cope with and to overcome all kinds of immediate adversities (coping capacities), their capacities to learn from past experiences and adjust themselves to pressing new challenges in the future (adaptive capacities), and their capacities to craft institutions that foster individual welfare and sustainable societal robustness in the event of present and future crises (transformative capacities)" (Keck & Sakdaporlak, 2013, p. 14). The recommendations are presented as follows:

- Consensus regarding the narratives of history with modern Russia is impossible. This means that Baltic states should focus on stronger communication of historical narratives and argumentation about the interpretation of historical events both in their own societies and in societies of allied countries. This action strengthens coping and adaptive capacities.
- Cooperation between Baltic states and other countries to preserve the fact-based interpretation of history is essential. First, alliances in this field could be made with countries of common experience, shared history, and similar values (i.e. Ukraine, Poland). Thus, it is important to solve the possible historical issues between these countries. This action will strengthen coping and adaptive capacities.
- It is important to support non-governmental organisations, the media, and grassroots movements that voluntarily defend historical narratives. This action strengthens transformative capacities.

The strengths of the three processes mentioned above ensure the sustainability of social resilience (especially in the field of information security).

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