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Latvia Reacts: Confronting Russian Manipulation Techniques

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Executive Summary

A Latvian writer for the news and information service *Delfi* noted that Russian propaganda is like carbon monoxide gas, since it flows into a room unnoticed, cannot be smelled, and puts people's logic to sleep. It disinforms, demoralizes, and destabilizes audiences. Latvian journalists and state officials believe that efforts to confront Kremlin propaganda cannot be accomplished alone with only simple bans or protests. Latvia needs to reinforce its own value system to strengthen its culture and self-confidence. These attempts to limit Russian disinformation have met with some success. Latvia has proposed laws, developed an ideological foundation to overcome susceptibilities, and developed messages and images to stabilize Latvian values. Latvia is encouraging its citizens to educate themselves on Russian media techniques and methods of argumentation. Educational opportunities are further supported by studies being conducted at Latvian think tanks, which are available for downloading and reading. This report will discuss Latvia's successes and disappointments in this information struggle to educate Latvian society in critical thought and thereby immunize them from Russian propaganda.

Introduction

For many years, Latvia has been fighting against Russian soft power advances. Otto Ozols, writing for *Delfi*, noted that Russian information and propaganda utilizes three D's in its manipulation effort—disinformation, demoralization, and destabilization. It is lies and half-truths (disinformation) that demoralize and destabilize audiences through the erosion of trust. The same author noted that propaganda is like carbon monoxide gas, since it flows into a room unnoticed, cannot be smelled, and puts people's logic to sleep.¹

Russia's propaganda is aimed at manipulating information on Latvia's TV, websites, and printed forms of communication. In response, Latvia has developed specific counters. A primary one has been a focus on educating its population about Russian methods that attack Latvian susceptibilities and weaknesses. It is important to teach Latvians how to be skeptical of media and news releases and how to recognize the covert (trolls, etc.) and sometimes the overt methods, such as fake news, that Russia uses. These Latvian counters, however, battle alternate Kremlin-sponsored sites available to Russian members of Latvian society, to include satellite TV and the Internet, and EU penalties that would be assessed if Latvia outright bans Russian TV. In addition to TV, other Russian influence tools include pseudo-academic and expert organizations, tools of economic influence, and spying and cyberspace activities.

This article initially will provide a short background summary of Latvian efforts to stop Russian propaganda from 2013-2016. It will then look at Russian efforts and Latvian counters in more detail from 2017-2019.

How and Why Should Russian propaganda be Countered? Some Latvian ideas (2013-2016).

One article in the Latvian journal *Delfi* noted that soft power cannot be combatted with simple bans, protests, normative acts, or government decisions. Latvia needs its own soft power to not only counter Russian advances but also to strengthen its culture and self-confidence. It is primarily Latvian values that facilitate social integration² and act as a soft power buffer against Russian aggression. These values should work in conjunction with a skeptical approach to Russian media advances and focus on educating the public about Russian techniques.

Russia has often proposed that the history of Latvia is different than that taught in Latvian schools. Latvia has warned its citizens of these Russian efforts to change history. Latvia's parliament has approved amendments that propose criminal liability and even imprisonment for glorifying, denying, white-washing, or doubting the Soviet occupation of the country.³ It is important to study the Russian clichés and narratives that help establish how Russian propaganda efforts are disseminated in Latvia's information world, and to unmask the lies and falsehoods emanating from the Kremlin.⁴ One Latvian article noted that because of Russia's information war against Latvia, scholarly conferences and discussions are needed and the creation of information

¹ Otto Ozols, "3D Kremlin Carbon Monoxide Flowing Freely into Latvia," *Delfi*, 1 June 2016.

² Janis Kazocins, "Russian Soft Power: Normal Phenomenon or Challenge for Latvia?" *Latvijas Avize*, 2 September 2013, p. 3.

³ *RAPSI*, a Russian website (in English), 16 May 2014.

⁴ Sarmite Elerte, "Kremlin's Trolls," *Ir.Iv*, 18 July 2014.

defense plans should become a priority. Such measures help to ensure that society is protected against both the degradation and destruction of peoples' consciences.⁵

A member of Latvia's parliament offered other ideas. First was a recommendation to ban certain TV channels and strengthen Latvian media outlets. Second was a need to improve state and local government services in line with what any normal society would do. Third was an attempt to develop cooperation with the only liberal Russian media outlet, *Dozhd*, which would offer Latvian citizens a more realistic view of Russian policy and thinking from an actual domestic source in Russia not in bed with Russia's propaganda offensive. Finally, there was a recommendation to establish a news studio in Latgale (a province in the Eastern part of Latvia, with little access to local news) so that local stories and government activities will be better equipped to counter Russian propaganda in such regions. Quality education is required but the availability of universal information to all of Latvia is equally as important.⁶

Russia has let Latvia know that national security is not just the business of the defense sector, as Kremlin behavior aims to influence the mindsets of Latvia's people and sow seeds of doubt against the nation's government. The *Baltic News Service* estimated that 70-80 percent of the information that Russia produces about Latvia is negative, such as Russian claims that there is a rebirth of fascism in Latvia, that the oppression of Russian-speakers there continues, and that only Russia, not NATO, can save Latvia.⁷ Latvia needs countermeasures to these asymmetrical threats, and the Defense Minister has called for measures that include nonmilitary ones. After Russia's incursion into Ukraine, Latvia desired greater energy independence, greater coordination of its national efforts with those of other Baltic nations (such as border guard cooperation), and a greater need for the creation of a common information space with Estonia and Lithuania that reflects common values and ties.⁸

One 2016 report stated that it is not important to provide a separate TV channel that only operates in the Russian language, as that makes it appear there are two ethnic groups in Latvia. Rather, Latvia's media environment in just the Latvian language should be strengthened.⁹ Latvian authorities also took a strong stand against the pro-Kremlin news site *Sputnik* in March 2015, shutting it down and calling it a propaganda tool and not a credible media source. Russia, of course, labeled this as blatant censorship,¹⁰ ignoring the accusations against it.

Discussion of Latvian and Russian Information Positions from 2017-2019

Countering Russian disinformation and propaganda in Latvia is difficult for two reasons. First, the size of the Russian diaspora from Soviet times still residing in Latvia is huge and desires Russian news sources. Second, much of the news on Russian channels is slanted against Latvian politics. This makes it difficult to keep both Russian and Latvian members of the population happy.

⁵ Viktors Avotins, "Misinformed Ones Will Lose," *Neatkariga*, 27 November 2014, p. 7.

⁶ Juris Vilums, "Informational (in)Security in Latgale," *Delfi*, 17 December 2014.

⁷ No author provided, "80 Percent of the Information about Latvia Broadcast on Russian TV is Hostile," *Tallinn BNS* (in English), 28 February 2015.

⁸ No author provided, "Ukraine's Situation Holds Valuable Lessons for the Baltics," *Tallinn BNS* (in English), 6 February 2015.

⁹ Edvins Snore, "Russian World Paid for With Latvian Money," *Irir.lv*, 20 March 2015.

¹⁰ "Latvia Blocks Russian Sputnik Site as Kremlin 'Propaganda Tool'," *stopfake.org*, 30 March 2016.

In May 2018, for example, five Russian Television and Radio (*RTR*) stations were under investigation for content involving “vividly negative propaganda.”

Latvia, like some of its other colleagues, doesn’t think it wise to close a TV channel completely but instead develop amendments that would reduce the operations of offending Russian channels. Initially fines should be levied against channels that do not abide by the rules of neutrality in presenting facts.¹¹ A Latvian National Security Commission member stated that basic cable television packages eventually should exclude those propaganda channels supported by the Kremlin who continue to violate Latvian laws. Commission members were also informed of a 2018 Saeima [Latvian Parliament] Analytical Services study, whose goal was to describe “Russia’s influence in Latvia’s information world and ways of limiting this influence.”¹² Politicians were advised to make sure that they do not become a problem through offering Russia a rationale or reason to claim that Latvia is a failed state.¹³

2017

It was noted in May 2017 that educating Latvia’s population remains at the top of a list of potential counters to Russian propaganda. President Raimonds Vejonis, whose term ran from 8 July 2015 to 8 July 2019, advocated for teaching critical thought to the public in order to prepare them for a confrontation with fake news. Janis Sarts, the Director of NATO’s Strategic Communication Center of Excellence in Riga, noted that independent thought is the best weapon against fake news. An expert on Russia, Mark Galeotti, stated that the three main directions of fake news are to divide, distract, and demoralize society. To him, as to President Vejonis, educating society and helping them think more critically is a vitally important asset to teach.¹⁴ Inese Vaidere, a member of the European Parliament from Latvia, suggested a pilot project to the European Commission (content unknown) for countering Russian propaganda, and requested three million Euros for European Commission countries (especially the Baltic nations) to use in their efforts to counter Russian fake news and its disinformation campaigns designed to undermine Western democracy.¹⁵

Latvia’s Foreign Minister in 2017, Edgars Rinkevics, noted that Russia may probe NATO’s resilience to full-spectrum hybrid warfare. He added that this type of warfare includes propaganda and cyber-attacks. Power grids, banks, and security systems all could be left without power if Russia decides to conduct such activities. He noted that Russia’s Zapad-2017 exercise, which was performed in its Western Military District that borders on the Baltics, were offensive and not defensive, as Russia advertised them.¹⁶ The implication was that Russia used the exercise as a planning venue for future operations if needed.

2018

¹¹ Ausma Orupe, “Want to Reduce Russian Propaganda with the Force of Law,” *Neatkariga*, 15 May 2018, pp. 2-3.

¹² Baiba Lulle, “Answers Exist—What about Political Will?” *Neatkariga*, 15 May 2018, p. 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ No author or title provided, *Riga BNN* (in English), 7 December 2017.

¹⁵ No author or title provided, *BBC Monitoring* (in English), 9 May 2017.

¹⁶ Roland Oliphant, “People Are Going to Die. West Warned over Covert Russian Cyber Attacks,” *The Telegraph Online* (in English), 4 September 2017.

There are numerous tools in Russia's manipulation bag of tricks. For example, some Russian propaganda pieces start with a "discovery" of some kind. Russian information agents pass off this information as important for the world's consideration. These "discoveries" often do more to hide or obfuscate the truth than to expose it. The technique offers misleading narratives to throw Western analysts off course with alternative versions of the truth made to seem as plausible as possible.

Russia believes it is engaged in an information war with the West for credibility.¹⁷ To participate in an information war against Russia, Latvia needs to stimulate critical assessments of media content in society and not simply react to Russian propaganda with propaganda of its own. Latvian Foreign Ministry's Parliamentary Secretary Zanda Kalnina-Lukasevica reinforced this point in response to a question about the impact of Russian propaganda on Latvia.¹⁸

In a Latvian report titled "Russia's Influence in Latvia's Information World," it was noted that the differences between propaganda, fake news, and disinformation on the one hand and legitimate freedom of speech on the other are harder and harder to differentiate. Two issues must be addressed before fake news can be considered criminal: the law must define what kind of information is good and what kind is bad; and it must define which institutions have the right to differentiate between the two types of information. Most likely that job will be entrusted to the National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP). In addition to laws, Latvia must strengthen its public education, media skills, and investigative journalism.¹⁹ Internally strategic patience is important as it takes time to explain the goals behind Russia's messages. One expert at the Eastern European Policy Research Center, Andis Kudors, stated that people in Latvia live in different information bubbles. Latvians are very self-critical, such that when the Kremlin calls Latvia a failed state, some in that information bubble of self-criticism think that the state really is weak. Thus, the ideological foundations of the population must be strengthened. The goal is to provide "an elementary approach to media intelligence and an understanding about the political process so that the Kremlin's propagandists cannot manipulate" either.²⁰

In a 2017 report from Latvia's Constitution Protection Bureau (CPB), it was noted that Russian propaganda uses cyber-attacks to spread fake news and that its secret services are developing extensive communication control systems to monitor and control data flows. Other Russian influence tools include pseudo-academic and expert organizations, tools of economic influence, and spying and cyberspace activities.²¹ In its 2018 report, the CPB noted that Russian methods of influence start with propaganda and end with military and cyber threats. Nonmilitary instruments of influence are usually the most discreet but have long-term effects, and their methods of disseminating provocative and discrediting information is becoming more specific. Specifically the report noted that "Russia has tried to influence internal processes in the EU and NATO member

¹⁷ Atis Klimovics, "Russian Propaganda Must Not Be Spread in Latvia," *Rīga Latvijas Avīze*, 13 February 2018, p. 3.

¹⁸ No author provided, "Only by Cooperating Closely with the United States, NATO, and the European Union Is It Possible to Tackle New Security Risks," *Rīga BNS* (in English), 19 February 2018.

¹⁹ Girts Zvirbulis, "Seeking Weapons against Fake News," *Rīga Latvijas Avīze*, 29 March 2018, p. 4.

²⁰ No author or title provided, *Rīga Neatkarīga*, 12 November 2018, pp. 6-7.

²¹ No author provided, "Activities of Russian Intelligence and Security Agencies Pose Major Threat to Latvia's Interests," *Rīga BNS* (in English), 10 April 2018.

states in its own favor by using political and diplomatic resources, economic relations (especially in the energy sector), a demonstration of military potential, the development of cyberattack capabilities, as well as the targeted distribution of disinformation and propaganda.”²² In regard to military uses of propaganda (not noted in the CPB report), a source stated that Russian propaganda is aimed at NATO and its soldiers in Latvia. News reports are meant to sow distrust in Latvia and show that it is a failed state.²³

Latvian TV channels are perhaps the biggest point of concern to most government officials, since so much of the Russian diaspora in Latvia accesses this forum that in turn is used to foment disinformation. Violations have been exposed by Latvian monitors of several Russian-language TV channels. However, Latvia’s National Security Committee will have to produce some new proposals for restricting these propaganda outlets,²⁴ as Russia continues to find ways to work around proposals currently in effect. In early May 2018 criticism mounted against Latvia’s National Council for Electronic Media, which, in the opinion of some members of Parliament, is toothless and has done little to suspend the broadcasting of Russian TV that is imbedded with inappropriate content. One member noted that “Russian propaganda channels are not journalism in the traditional sense of the word, but rather a weapon in hybrid war.”

A Latvian commentary noted that 90 percent of the channels available to Latvians would be in the languages of the European Union and of the 47 channels available, four would then be in the Russian language. Of those four, it is doubtful that the Russian *Dozhd (Rain)* channel, which is not subordinate to the Kremlin, would be part of the offering. Latvian TV budgets are less than those of Russian TV. For example, it was noted that Russian TV channels are sometimes registered in EU member states, which “means that Latvia cannot unilaterally ban their rebroadcasting.” While Latvia’s citizenry is fairly durable against Russian trolls, the latter should not be allowed to conduct messaging in an unlimited fashion. Germany, for example, in 2017 adopted a law in which networks with two million registered users must remove hate speech, fake news, and other unlawful material or risk a 50 million Euro fine. Latvia must prevent its soil (ethnic issues, economic situation, reasons to be called a failed state) from being a place where Russia’s propaganda seeds can be dropped and grow. Media skills and media content oversight are needed to help self-regulate the media.²⁵ Further, it was noted that Russian propaganda channels should not be available on basic cable networks.²⁶

To confront Russia’s information war in specific parts of Latvia, new ideas are under discussion, according to media expert Rita Rudusa. Techniques include messages and visual images, where the most important thing is creating the emotional idea of a sense of belonging. The NEPLP wants to improve transmission in Latvia’s border zone, where many inhabitants currently live in Russia’s media world. Latvian Radio 4 needs to be used more as well in frontier regions. Latvian public TV needs to be strengthened and media outlets need to reflect events in a precise

²² Jolanta Plauka, “Changing Russia Becoming More Aggressive,” *Rīga Diena*, 12 April 2018, p. 5.

²³ No author or title provided, *Rīga Latvijas Avīze*, 30 May 2018, p. 3.

²⁴ No author provided, “Unity Urges Latvian Media Watchdog to Counter Kremlin Propaganda More Actively,” *Rīga BNS* (in English), 25 April 2018.

²⁵ Baiba Lulle, “Answers Exist—What about Political Will?” *Rīga Neatkarīga*, 15 May 2018, p. 2.

²⁶ No author provided, “Electronic Mass Media Council, Culture Ministry Not Doing Enough to Improve Protection of Latvia’s Information Space,” *Rīga BNS* (in English), 2 May 2018.

way. The Russian *Perviy Baltitsky Kanal* (*First Baltic Channel* or *PBK*) channel, in contrast, makes people feel that Europe is amoral, and NATO does not protect anyone. Russia is focused on the young, because those over 50, the Kremlin believes, have fossilized media usage habits.²⁷

There are other ways to influence Latvia than just via propaganda. Threats are another tool in play for the Kremlin. Latvia's ambassador to Russia, Maris Riekstins, noted that if Russian Iskander missiles, which are capable of carrying nuclear warheads, are permanently deployed in Kaliningrad, then NATO states will need to reassess ways to respond. Latvia is already in range of other Russian missiles. Still, the ambassador added, it would be madness for a non-NATO country like Russia to challenge NATO's safety and territorial integrity.²⁸ The Bucharest Nine (Poland, Romania, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) met in June 2018 to state that NATO's presence has complemented the alliance's deterrence policy.²⁹

Riekstins also noted that a portion of Russia's society understands that it is important to separate what to believe and what not to believe in the Kremlin's propaganda. There is a parallel world of information there, where even in Russia some of the public understands that Russia is trying to manipulate the West while others believe the West is out to harm Russia.³⁰ In Latvia's society, there is the realization that Russia does a good job of manipulating and brainwashing with propaganda and influence in the Baltic states. That being the case, Latvians who are Russian and residing in Latvia are worth a pot of gold³¹ due to their ability to serve as surrogates and influence the population toward Russia in other ways.

2018—a Russian Perspective about Latvia

In February 2018 Russia's *Sputnik Latvia*, a website of the Latvian branch of the Russian Government news agency, discussed a study recently concluded by Latvian scientists. The study, by Latvia's Center for East European Policy Studies, analyzed how Latvian and Russian media assess the same or similar events. The analysis was contained in the book *Reflection of International Developments in the Latvian Internet Media*. Eight events were covered that had caused a "great response" in Latvia's media: Crimea; MH 17; Western sanctions; Syria; the refugee crisis in Europe; Brexit; the NATO summit in Warsaw; and the doping scandal involving Russian athletes. In the discussion period, Brexit was mentioned but the focus was on the doping issues. These were the only two items of the eight discussed in this Russian report.

The comments that follow are Russia's discussion of the report, and the author, Andrey Solopenko, makes references to the study and the opinions of the researchers who were involved in putting it together.³² It offers a good example of how Russian specialists stress some issues and ignore others.

²⁷ No author or title provided, *Riga Ir.*, 24 May 2018, pp. 12-13.

²⁸ No author or title provided, "*Riga BNN* (in English), 6 February 2018.

²⁹ No author provided, "Latvian President Urges NATO Members to Keep Strengthening Resilience to Hybrid Threats," *Riga BNS* (in English), 8 June 2018.

³⁰ No author or title provided, *Riga LETA* (in English), 18 December 2018.

³¹ Maris Krautmanis, "Russia against Usakovs," *Neatkariga*, 26 January 2018, p. 7.

³² Andrey Solopenko, "How Russian Media Hinder Democracy and How They Split Latvian Society," *Sputnik Latvija*, 7 February 2018.

Solopenko noted that the study considered the content in six Latvian online media, the most popular being the *Delfi* portal, in its Latvian and Russian versions. The content of *TVnet* was also viewed in both the Latvian and Russian versions. Two other portals, Latvia's *LA.lv* and Russia's *Vesti.lv* were viewed separately, the first in Latvian and the second in Russian.³³ According to Latvian researcher Didzis Berzins, it was stated in the study that the Latvian language versions contained more facts or ascertaining information, whereas Russian texts offered an estimation or expression of an attitude. Latvian language sites offered exact quotations whereas Russian ones paraphrased them, which is due to literary tradition according to Berzins. With Brexit the Latvian media cited the words of British officials and with the doping scandal, Latvian sources cited the international anti-doping organization. In Russian publications, people connected with Russia, such as the Minister of Sports, were quoted in regard to the doping issue. Russian sources in the latter case did not use the term "disqualification," the study noted, and hardly discussed the athletes who were accused but rather stated that the findings offered a prejudiced attitude toward the athletes. The *LA.lv* (Latvian portal) accused Russian authorities of wrongdoing and stated that the athletes should be punished. *Vesti.lv* (Russian portal) noted that the incident was an international conspiracy against Russia.³⁴

Solopenko notes that the study's conclusions are that the use of Russian information used on Latvian news portals "multiplies the risks of the polarization of Latvian society."³⁵ Solopenko finishes his article noting that audiences view the sources that they trust, and the Russian-speaking population remembers "very well how this state's representatives have deprived them of their citizenship"³⁶ and have closed their schools and called them occupiers. These people have not forgotten that Russia expresses its support in defending their rights. For a cohesive society, Solopenko concludes, Latvia needs to cease such discriminatory policies.³⁷

This article has been highlighted since it represents a very good example of a Russian propaganda argument, one that is meant to put Western logic to sleep. The outcome of the doping scandal is that the findings offered a prejudiced attitude toward the athletes. The logic of the Russian argument is thus focused on prejudice against Russia, not their implication in wrongdoing. More major cases, such as poisoning a former officer or invading and taking a slice of another country, are ignored as well. Likewise, the conclusive arguments that Solopenko makes are designed to highlight the problems of Russian-speaking Latvians, with no mention of the work that has gone on to integrate these people into Latvian society and absolve them of these problems. Issues are cherry-picked to suit the *Sputnik* style and method/logic of argumentation.

Russian language media note that there have been several ways that Latvia has used to stop or limit Russian news outlets in the country. First, even if a decision was made to ban "Kremlin" channels on Latvian TV, consumers can still receive them via satellite TV or on the Internet. This

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

means all attempts to combat Russian propaganda are doomed to failure.³⁸ Several Russian language TV programs have been registered in the UK and Sweden. If Latvia prohibits these channels from being viewed in Latvia, then the nation, according to EU regulations, will fine Latvia for each case in the amount of 464 thousand dollars. So, to keep this from happening, politicians decided to work through amendments to the Latvian Law on Electronic Media. The draft idea indicates that there would be no room for Russian channels at all in this law. But such measures can hardly be termed effective, the Russian source explained, since extended packages could be purchased and the alternate venues mentioned above (satellite TV, etc.) and smart TV are also available.³⁹ A second method of stopping Russian media was to separate Latvia's media from the Russian media (and the press of other countries) from one another in kiosks and on store shelves too, so that it was more obvious where Russian sources were located; and there may be attempts to impose increased import duties on Russian newspapers and magazines.⁴⁰

Here are other Russian charges against Latvia's use of media:

- As a counter to Latvian methods to limit Russian media, Russia has stressed that the Baltic states used threats of a Russian bear and little green men to "deceive NATO" to get security guarantees and to get more funding.
- Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics stated that Russia's hybrid war has allowed it to interfere in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. As a counter, Russia's *Sputnik Radio* commentator Armen Gasparyan noted that the Baltics have used threats of Russian occupation to squeeze money out of NATO. Where has the money gone? It was noted that it went for corruption, nothing else, according to Gasparyan.⁴¹
- Russian authorities note that Latvia needs to cease its discriminatory policies if it wants to achieve cohesion.⁴²

The last two charges here, made in August 2018, are almost identical to the ones Solopenko made in February, a good example of Russia's use of themes they think have traction.

Russian media source *Vesti Segodnya* discussed how Latvia's CPB has accused Russia at every opportunity of conducting illegal activities. The CPB, the Russian source noted, should have issued a 2018 report on the work they had done. The report was used instead to describe how to counteract Russian activities. The report stated that information operations are the main way Russia confronts Latvia to create distrust and challenge Latvia's geopolitical course. The Russian source added that, in addition to Russia's media, Latvians like to cite "pseudo-academic and expert organizations" that they say try to negatively influence the Baltic state by creating distrust in the population. Finally, the Russian journal stated that Latvia believes organizations also work at discrediting Latvia at the international level. This includes exacerbating ethnic, linguistic

³⁸ Eduard Eldarov, "Murniece: More Frequent Bans Are Needed. Recipe for 'Freedom of Speech' from Saeima Speaker," *Riga Vesti Segodnya*, 10 May 2018.

³⁹ Abik Elkin, "Russia Is Being Removed from Broadcasting," *Riga Vesti Segodnya*, 15 May 2018.

⁴⁰ Abik Elkin, "According to the Laws of Wartime," *Riga Vesti Segodnya*, 26 May 2018.

⁴¹ Armen Gasparyan, "Where Latvia Has Squandered the Money That the United States Allocated for its Defense," *Sputnik Latviya*, 21 August 2018.

⁴² Solopenko, 2018.

contradictions, and differences in history's interpretation; and challenging Latvia's geopolitical course toward NATO and the EU. Organizations named by Latvia were the Historical Memory Foundation, the Russian Association of Baltic Studies, and the Kaliningradsky Blogpost.⁴³

2019

Latvian discussions about Russian propaganda continued into 2019. One article noted that Russia has two kinds of destructive influence on Latvia's population. First, Russia's institutions that organize propaganda and information streams aim to deform democracy. Second, they are designed to reduce feelings of security in Latvia. On 31 January 2019, Latvia's NEPLP shut down *Rossiya RTR* for three months due to hate speech. It should have shut the channel down for a longer period of time, some believe, and if such hate speech continues, the channels license could be taken away.⁴⁴

In another report, Latvia's main news outlet *LETA* cited a RAND study on Russian aggression in the Baltics and discussed several suggestions made in the study. The study advised Latvian security planners to prepare a wide range of technologies to enhance total defense capabilities, to coordinate strategic communication efforts among the Baltic countries to thwart Russian information warfare activities (and to create intelligence fusion centers to integrate civil, police, and military analysis capabilities), and to establish decentralized stockpiles and caches of relevant nonmilitary supplies to sustain resistance capabilities in case of war.⁴⁵

Finally, an article published in *Delfi Online* discussed a Russian article that focused on Kremlin themes designed to divide Latvian society. The Latvian commentary noted that Vairis Godmanis and Viktors Domburs, who write often on Latvia but in English, usually discuss poverty in Latvia, crises in the nation's political life, and threats to the nation caused by NATO's presence. Some wonder if Godmanis and Domburs are really people. Maybe they are trolls. Articles sometimes appear on the little-known portal *Balticword* (already caught spreading fake information about the Baltic States), and from this portal they are sometimes republished in opinion-related news websites or other webpages and forums. One such webpage is *News Front*, which has been identified as an active Kremlin propaganda web portal headed by Konstantins Kniniks, a participant in Russian political TV shows.⁴⁶

Conclusions

Latvia is faced with an aggressive information war from Russia. Riga has a number of Russian-speaking citizens (at the beginning of 2018 it was noted that one-fourth of the population was Russian),⁴⁷ who are mostly those individuals or families left over from the time Latvia was part of the Soviet Union and decided to remain in Latvia. They tend to feel a need for more information from the Kremlin, as it more closely resembles their remembrance of how news sounded instead of what Latvia is providing. Russia is more than happy to accommodate that desire and, where possible, to overfill the plan with some information aimed at dividing Latvian society.

⁴³ Eduard Eldarov, "Moscow's Hand is Shaking Latvia," *Riga Vesti Segodnya*, 12 April 2018.

⁴⁴ No author or title provided, *Riga Delfi Online*, 1 April 2019.

⁴⁵ No author or title provided, *Riga LETA* (in English), 16 April 2019.

⁴⁶ No author or title provided, *Riga Delfi Online*, 16 June 2019.

⁴⁷ See *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russians_in_Latvia

Latvian attempts to limit Russian disinformation have met with some success. They have proposed laws, developed an ideological foundation to overcome susceptibilities, and are developing the messages and images to stabilize Latvian values. Latvia is encouraging its citizens to educate themselves on Russian media techniques and methods of argumentation. Educational opportunities are further supported by studies being conducted at Latvian think tanks, which are available for downloading and reading, and by the work of the CPB to follow Russian efforts and help ensure Latvian digital and psychological security. Starting in September 2019 all secondary schools will transition to the Latvian language of instruction as well, a decision that was naturally protested by many Russians, protests covered by Latvia's Russian-language media.⁴⁸

Russia, however, continues to contest any legislation and to protest democratic issues as moves to censor Russian material or to declare Latvian proposals as showing a lack of respect for the Russian diaspora. Russian messages are often provocative or demeaning, and the Kremlin continues to state that any move contrary to its intentions is due to an international conspiracy against Russian interests. That is, Russia believes only its understanding of objective reality is the correct one. Further, Latvia's desire to limit Russia's use of propaganda is often hindered by other issues, not the least of which are the alternate Kremlin-sponsored sites available to Russian members of society (Internet, etc.) and the penalties that would be assessed by the EU if Latvia bans Russian TV. Thus, it is clear that Latvia must continue to battle Russian propaganda while continuing to search for resources and outlets to improve their propaganda-battle worthiness.

Recommendations:

All Western nations need to realize that Russia's view of objective reality is far from agreement with that of the West. The outcome of the Russian doping scandal was that the findings offered a prejudiced attitude toward the Russian athletes, not that they were caught red-handed. The logic of the Russian argument is thus focused on prejudice against Russia, not their implication in wrongdoing. More major cases, such as poisoning a former officer or invading and taking a slice of another country, are ignored even though photographic evidence or fingerprints or other pieces of evidence are available. Russia fails to mention, in the case of Latvia, the work that has gone on to integrate Russians into Latvian society. Russia's media cherry-picks issues to suit the *Sputnik* style and method/logic of argumentation. Russian TV, at times loaded with fake news or hate speech, has been chastised in several nations yet Russia hangs on to the belief that it is a besieged nation on all sides, to include from Western media. The issue is that the West has to be aware that no matter what is offered to Russia, the latter's view and manipulation of reality differs from that of a democratic society.

US defense organizations, like Latvian citizens, should be made aware of Russian dissemination techniques, which include not just the Internet but attempts to manipulate many other organizations. The development of a strong education program was needed for the public in Latvia. The familiarization with Russian techniques includes how the Kremlin manipulates or infiltrates public organizations, information movements, and social media, among others. Russia often finds elements in these groups that are receptive to its arguments, since some Russian themes, hidden in various sources and presentations, are accepted without deeper research

⁴⁸ No author or title provided, *BBC Monitoring* (in English), 8 May 2018.

about their potential manipulation capability. Learning how to think critically was noted several times in Latvia's discussion of its educational development.

Analysts need to be aware of Russian efforts to fracture democratic unity and to destabilize societies. Russia's institutions that organize propaganda and information streams aim to both deform democracy and reduce feelings of security in Latvia. One set of Russian writers usually discussed poverty in Latvia, crises in the nation's political life, and threats to the nation caused by NATO's presence. These efforts are aimed at Latvia's public and indicate that the focus of Russia's propaganda is flexible in format but focused on traditional goals, such as the division of society through the introduction of mistrust in local officials. The RAND report (noted above) seemed to be taken to heart by Latvian analysts and thus its recommendations may become part of how Latvia prepares the public to confront Russian propaganda.