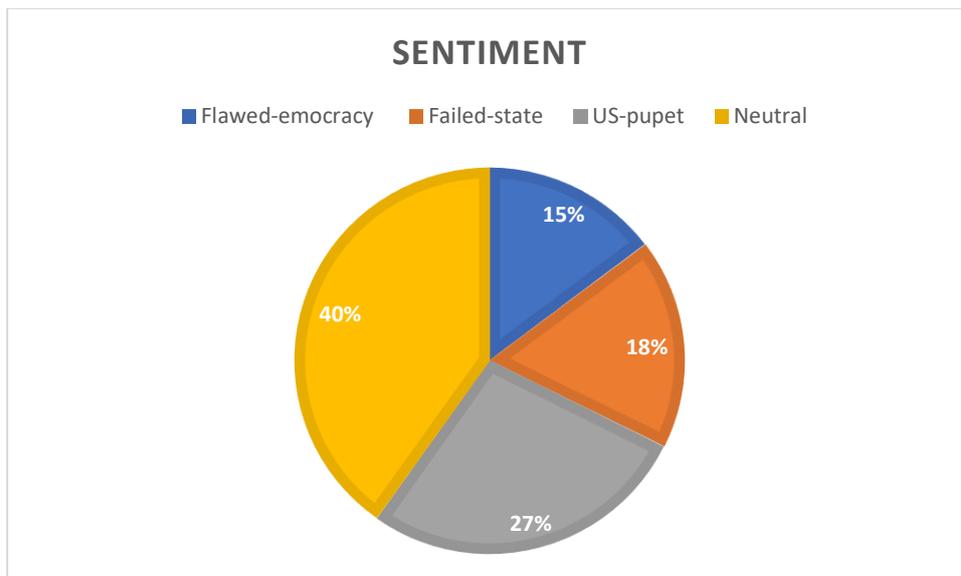


US Sanctions against Aivars Lembergs

December 9, 2019, - January 8, 2020

SUMMARY & KEY POINTS

Pro-Kremlin-minded media outlets use US sanctions against businessman and politician Aivars Lembergs to tarnish Latvia. Latvia is being described as a US-puppet - the Latvian ruling coalition is serving Washington. Also present is the 'failed-state' narrative, where the Latvian and US governments are destroying Latvia's transit business and the country's economy is on the verge of collapse. In addition, the situation is often labelled as an attempt by the Russophobic government to weaken a popular Pro-Russian politician, calling it an undemocratic act in a country with a flawed democracy. The terms "seizure", "panic", "economic disruption", "worst crisis" and others, are also regularly used. Misleaders focus on the risks and ignore the benefits of sanctions against A.Lembergs for the development of transparency of political processes in Latvia.



At first the coordinated campaign of deception focuses on the internal political aspects - the government of Latvia is settling accounts with a pro-Russian politician. Later a more economically driven narrative prevailed: "The Latvian government, with the help of the US, seizes ports and destroys Latvia's transit business." Deceivers claim that Washington does not care about the Latvian economy, hence it first destroyed the Latvian financial services sector, and now is the turn for Latvia's transit business. They also purposefully avoid analysing the disruptive influence of Aivars Lembergs and other oligarchs on Latvia's development in general, including the economy.

Key Terms

'United States' 'Latvia' 'Ventspils port' 'US Treasury' 'Aivars
Lembergs' 'US Sanctions' 'nationalization'

Context

Latvian businessman and politician Aivars Lembergs was named on a U.S. Treasury sanctions list on December 9, on International Anti-Corruption Day. Sanctioned are also four organizations associated with Lembergs: Ventspils Freeport Authority, Ventspils Development Agency, Business Development Association, and Latvian Transit Business Association. The U.S. Department of the Treasury declares: "Lembergs controls entities through political parties and corrupt politicians, and systematically exploits those entities and individuals for his own economic gain. Lembergs has used his influence over leadership of political parties to shape government personnel and place certain government officials in positions, as well as to obstruct other government officials from obtaining leadership positions. Additionally, Lembergs has corrupted law enforcement officials to protect his interests." The Treasury said: "This U.S. action underscores the U.S. commitment to Latvia and our determination to hold corrupt oligarchs accountable for their actions against a key European ally."

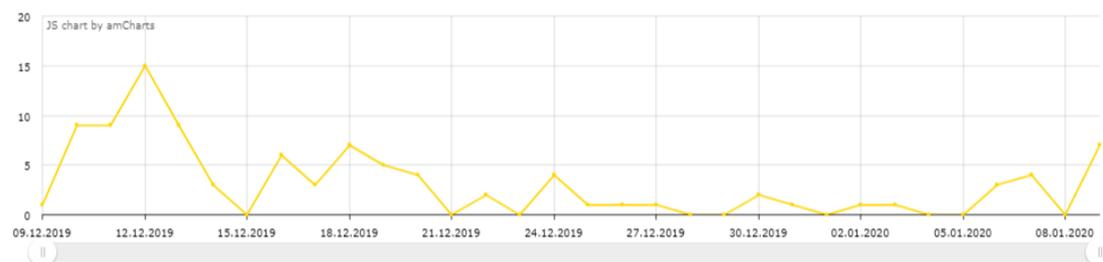
Leading Media - Key Outlets

During the period of 09.12.2019 - 09.01.2020 102 articles Published

Outlets

lv.sputniknews.ru

bb.lv



Associated Themes

"Latvia is a US puppet", "Government crackdown on pro-Russian opponents",
"Latvia's economy is on the verge of collapse"

Why This Matters – Key Takeaways

Kremlin-controlled and pro-Moscow media are spreading the message of Latvia as a puppet state under the control of Washington, which also dictates Latvia's aggressive policy against Russia. Such interpretation of the Baltic states' policy is consistent with Kremlin-spread conspiracy theories about supposed dominance of elites, in which individuals or even entire states do not have any say about their destiny. Thus a misleading picture is created – that being in close cooperation with Moscow is the only way for Latvia to be genuinely sovereign. Aivars Lembergs has been very well suited for spreading Russian propaganda due to his periodic anti-NATO and anti-USA statements. Russian propagandists often use opinion leaders of target audiences or at least opinion leaders of certain groups within the society (ethnic or social) who regularly voice opinions favourable to Kremlin's foreign policy. In this context Lembergs has repeatedly helped Russian media with statements about NATO being an occupying force in Latvia or that Latvia should implement a Russia-friendly foreign policy.

Positions of sides involved

Russia: The government of Latvia, with the help of the USA, is settling accounts with a Russia-friendly businessman and politician. As a result of following the orders of the USA, Latvia is suffering losses in transit business. USA is using its sanctions to interfere in interior matters of Latvia.

Latvia: To limit its impact on transit business, the sanctions placed on Ventspils Freeport Authority must be lifted as soon as possible (which was achieved in a short time). To strengthen democracy and the rule of law, Latvia must reduce the influence of oligarchs in Latvian politics. In the future we must deal with these issues ourselves, not waiting and relying on outside help.

USA: Lembergs has been involved in political corruption for a long time. He has inserted persons loyal to him in important positions within governmental institutions, thus gaining personal economic benefits. Therefore the development and strengthening of the rule of law in an US ally – Latvia – has been hindered.

PMESII -Key Points:

Political (avg. 1.25): There are two dimensions – foreign policy and domestic policy dimension. In the context of foreign policy one can see this as a reference to Latvia's service to Washington. Within the discussion of the interior, the takeover of the freeports of Riga and Ventspils is positioned as an excuse to undermine political parties that allegedly gain benefits from said ports, namely *Union of Greens and Farmers* in Ventspils and *Harmony* in Riga. Thereby deceivers are attempting to trivialize the motive of the US – from tackling corruption to simply interfering in interior matters.

Infrastructure (avg. 0.45): Some 8% of the total GDP is made by industries associated with the transit sector and a large part of the business is serviced by the ports in Riga and Ventspils. Russian has stated its intentions to redirect its freight away from the Baltic ports towards its ports on the Baltic Sea. The reasons vary, however, undoubtedly a willingness to show that the Baltic countries need Russia more than it need them is predominant. Also in this situation, this aspect is often mentioned as the result of the strategic failure of the Latvian government.

Economical (avg. 0.36): The Latvian government sacrifices its economic interests in favour of US geopolitical goals. This results in the loss of Latvia's transit business. The only road to prosperity for Latvia is through tight integration with Russia. Messages like these are used to further the narrative of Latvia being a failed state.

