



Centre for East European Policy Studies
Austrumeiropas politikas pētījumu centrs



Voices of Central and Eastern Europe

Latvia Country Report





Introduction

Though conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon, they have growing pertinence in an age of information overload. Members of society can now choose their preferred outlet for news unhindered. Blind trust in one-sided sources, in turn, can lead to detrimental consequences when these sources disseminate misinformation and conspiracies.

Misinformation and conspiracy theories are widely employed as tools to influence public opinion and often specifically to manipulate attitudes on critical topics like democracy, the political elite and numerous social issues in different countries and regions. Certain groups in society are more receptive to misleading information, leading some malign actors to exploit them to diffuse misinformation and conspiratorial narratives to pursue geopolitical goals.

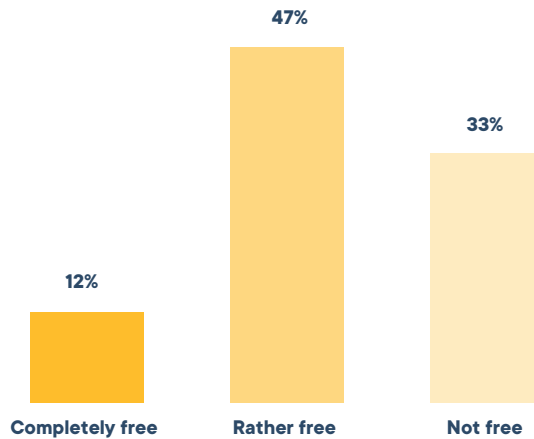
Turning to the case of Latvia, Russia has played a major role in taking advantage of Latvia's complex media environment to spread misinformation narratives aiming to polarise society and undermine Latvia's capabilities as a state.¹ Against this backdrop, with a view towards protecting democracy over the long-term, there is a need to better understand the prevalence and salience of disinformation and conspiracy theories in Latvia and the vulnerability of different groups in society to this information.

¹"Russia's Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment 2019/2020", NATO Stratcom Centre of Excellence. Available: <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/russias-footprint-nordic-baltic-information-environment-20192020>; Mārcis Balodis, "Why is Latvia called a failed state? ", Centre for East European Policy Studies". Available: <https://appc.lv/eng/m-balodis-why-is-latvia-called-a-failed-state/>



Media environment in Latvia

Media in Latvia are:



Playing a pivotal role in informing the public, the Latvian media ecosystem is a complex one produced in two languages, Latvian and Russian. A 2018 study revealed that 62 percent of the population speaks Latvian at home, 37 percent Russian and 1 percent a different language. By ethnicity, similarly, 62 percent are Latvian, 31 percent Russian, Belarusian, or Ukrainian and 7 percent other minorities.² Russian language content, notably, is generated by a range of different outlets, some based in Latvia, others in EU countries and many in Russia. Those outlets coming from Russia can be further categorized into two groups: 1) Russian

state media oriented towards backing the official position of the Kremlin and 2) those (e.g. Meduza) not controlled by the state that abide by journalistic standards.³ The difference between media available in Latvian and Russian rests both in content and target audience. Latvian speakers report primarily consuming media content in their native language, whereas Russian speakers indicate a higher propensity for engaging with both Latvian and Russian media spaces.⁴

According to a GLOBSEC survey⁵, 58 percent of Latvians trust mainstream outlets and 59 percent judge the media to be either

completely free or rather free. A total of 47 percent of Latvians, meanwhile, believe that the media is controlled by the government and 54 percent that oligarchs and prominent financial groups exert a powerful influence on mainstream media in the country.

² "The Influence of Russia in Latvia's Information Space. Synthesis report. [Report in Latvian]". Saeima of the Republic of Latvia, 2018. Available: https://www.saeima.lv/petijumi/Krievijas_ietekme_Latvijas_informativaja_telpa_elektroniski.pdf

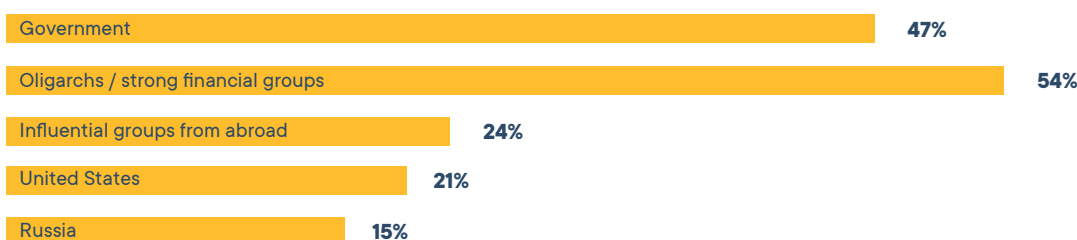
³ "Media Market Risk Ratings: Latvia", Global Disinformation Index, 2020. Available: <http://appc.lv/eng/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/10/Latvia-Risk-Ratings-Report-ENG.pdf>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://www.globsec.org/publications/voices-of-central-and-eastern-europe/>

“Who do you believe has the strongest influence over the media in your country?”

(The question was asked only to those who responded that the media is rather free or unfree in their country but the results were re-tabulated to include the entire sample of respondents.)



Oligarchy particularly stands out as a strong reason for distrust in power and media. Since the national independence in 1991, three of Latvian oligarchs stand out: former Ventpils Mayor Aivars Lembergs, former leader of People's Party Andris Skele and leader of former political association LPP / LC Ainars Slesers. Their influence on Latvian voters has been significant, reaffirming the belief that the political system in Latvia reflects interests of specific individuals, rather than public.⁶ By definition, only Ainars Lembergs currently fits the criteria of an oligarch including power over the media and political and economic sway.⁷ Though oligarchs were primarily confined to the 1990s and early 2000s, a segment of society is prone to still labelling the existing Latvian political elite as a continuing remnant of the past.

Distrust in the media and adherence to the belief that the media is not completely free is

associated with a lack of trust in government and democracy in general. Only 36 percent of respondents are indeed satisfied with the functioning of democracy in Latvia even as 78 percent are satisfied with their own lives. Those holding these views could be more susceptible to believing that the media is controlled by the government, which, in turn, is argued to pay little heed to the concerns of citizens.

Despite Latvia's rapid democratic transition, participation in political affairs remains low. Based on data collected by the Central Election Commission, voter turnout has seen consistent annual declines for more than 20 years.⁸ Only 54.60 percent of eligible voters, in fact, went to the polls for elections this year, the lowest level of participation in 25 years.⁹ While there is no definitive evidence on why specific voter groups elect not to participate in elections,

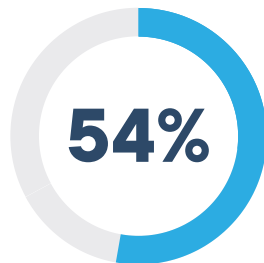
it can be deduced that these voters likely feel alienated from government and political parties and institutions. The same is true with respect to direct participation in democracy including citizen- and government-initiated referendums. Disaffected members of society are associated with the sentiment that change is impossible and a lack of faith and trust in government officials working on behalf of the public good.

⁶ Una Bergmane, "The Three Little Oligarchs: Latvia's Corruption Scandal," 2017, Available: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/11/three-little-oligarchs-latvias-corruption-scandal/>

⁷ Guntars Laganovskis, "Kas tie par oligarhiem?" 27.07.2011. Latvijas Portāls. Available: <https://lvportals.lv/norises/233676-kas-tie-par-oligarhiem-2011>

⁸ The only exception was the 10th Saeima (Parliamentary) elections in 2010, when turnout increased by 2.1 percent compared to 2006.

⁹ Centrālā vēlēšanu komisija, "Vēlētāju skaits", <https://www.cvk.lv/lv/velesanas/veletaju-skaitis>.



of Latvians believe that who holds the power in the government does not matter, since nothing will change.

It is, furthermore, noteworthy that a new wave of populism has impacted Latvia. In the 2018 parliamentary elections, for example, populist parties ran on slogans that called on voters to join the struggle against a corrupt and deceitful government that works for its own interests rather than those of the public.¹⁰

One popular slogan that was propagated also targeted the role of the EU in policymaking in Latvia – "Brussels has instigated the collapse of the Latvian industrial economy".¹¹ This argument especially features prominently in Russian disinformation campaigns promulgated in the media that aim to reduce confidence in the EU. The bloc, these narratives assert, is to blame for unemployment, poverty and mass emigration of the population away

from Latvia. The claims, moreover, hold that NATO and the US are being employed by the Latvian government as a strategic ploy against Moscow. These conspiracy theories are, nonetheless, rather consistent with recurring pro-Kremlin narratives that pit Russia against an "Evil West". The spread of these conspiracies has become a daily part of Russian targeted disinformation operations in Latvia. Combined with rising populism and day to day challenges in the EU (witnessed most recently with the COVID-19 crisis), people can easily fall prey to these false statements and become victims of Russian disinformation that aims to divide Latvian society and destabilise the country.

¹⁰ Andis Kudors, "Mediji un populisms – izpratne, mijiedarbība un attieksme," 21.08.2018. Latvijas Portāls. Available: <https://lvportals.lv/norises/297976-mediji-un-populisms-izpratne-mijiedarbiba-un-attieksme-2018>

¹¹ "Russia's Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment 2019/2020", NATO Stratcom Centre of Excellence. Available: <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/russias-footprint-nordic-baltic-information-environment-20192020>

Subdued buy-in to globally prevalent conspiracy theories

The fact that Latvians consume news in both Latvian and Russian language opens up opportunities for conspiracy theories and misinformation to seep in through a variety of channels. The overall inclination for Latvians to believe in global conspiracy theories, however, remains low. Only 25 percent of Latvians generally believe in conspiratorial and misinformation narratives.

A total of 29 percent of respondents think that Jewish people have too much power and covertly control governments and institutions around the world (51 percent reject this notion and 21 percent do not know).

The claim that the Latvian movement for independence in 1990 was orchestrated by the United States solely to cement its dominance in the region is rejected by

52 percent of Latvians, with 21 percent expressing agreement and 27 percent unsure.

A majority of Latvians, 61 percent, rebuff the assertion that Latvia and the Baltic states more generally are under NATO occupation (only 26 percent agree with this statement).

The belief that matters of world affairs are not decided by elected leaders but by secret groups aiming to establish a totalitarian world order is the second most accepted international conspiracy theory among Latvians – 43 percent agree and 36 percent dismiss it.

Only 30 percent of respondents disagree with the claim that the EU dictates Latvian policy with no say from Riga, with 63 percent expressing agreement.

⁸ <https://www.zf.ro/politica/basescu-se-razboieste-cu-mogulii-de-presa-3044182>

⁹ https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.wall-street.ro/articol/Marketing-PR/176099/mediafax-group-si-a-cerut-insolventa-trustul-de-presa-este-inglodat-in-datorii.html#gref>

¹¹ <https://www.b1.ro/stiri/economic/dan-voiculescu-blocare-vanzare-grivco-280983.html>

¹² <https://www.dw.com/ro/o-nou%C4%83-%C8%99Beap%C4%83-tv-possibil%C4%83-cu-gu%C8%99%C4%83-realitatea-plus-pe-o-firm%C4%83-cu-pierderi-%C8%99i-datorii-mari/a-51035885>

¹³ https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/67815/romania_results_mpm_2020_cmpf.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

¹⁴ <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2019/romania-2019/>

¹⁵ <https://pressone.ro/romania-colonia-europei-o-poveste-cu-propaganda-care-nu-se-mai-termina>

The prototypical profile of a respondent who strongly believes in different conspiracy theories is a male, aged 65 and older, with primary school education only. This individual also tends to come from rural areas, especially the Latgale region, and is a supporter of the political party “Harmony” (“Saskaņa”).



Latgale shares a border with Russia, with most residents of the region's largest cities – Rezekne and Daugavpils – Russian speakers at home. They largely consume information from Russian media outlets and vote for the political party “Harmony” that has previously been linked to Moscow.¹² This sub-group is vulnerable to misinformation and conspiracy theories that are brought in directly from Russia and the Kremlin.

Four central narratives can be identified as emanating from pro-Kremlin oriented media outlets:

- 1) Latvia as a failed state (unstable economy and social system);
- 2) Latvia as an undemocratic state (oppression of non-citizens, nationalist regime; the political elite does not take society into account);
- 3) Latvia as a “Western puppet state” (Brussels and Washington broadly dictate policy);
- 4) Russia as a pragmatic and beneficial partner that provides all the advantages needed for Latvia. Examples of these narratives from 2020 included accusations by pro-Kremlin media outlets that the Latvian government was guilty of Russophobia¹³ due to the implementation of U.S. sanctions against a Latvian politician notorious for his pro-Russian and anti-NATO sentiment. The pandemic provided an additional opportunity for the Russian media to target the country, witness reports declaring that the Latvian medical system is weak¹⁴ and the virus itself designed by Latvian scientists.¹⁵

Deceptive information disseminated by the pro-Kremlin oriented media and internet trolls in Latvia is both a threat to democracy and national security. This manipulation equates to interference in Latvian democracy, with voters mobilized to be sceptical that Latvian politicians are working in their interest and instead turn to parties that are either populist or pro-Kremlin. Although Russia was not an active participant in the 2018 Latvian parliamentary elections nor did it lead a disinformation campaign during the election period itself, Moscow had already inflicted damage during the four years preceding the casting of ballots.¹⁶

These Russian disinformation narratives underscore the fact that even as Latvians eschew global conspiracy theories, those that are regional in orientation may still resonate.

¹² Leonid Ragozin, Sanita Jemberga, “Muscles Of Harmony,” 31.05.2018, RE: Baltica, Available: <https://en.rebaltica.lv/2018/05/muscles-of-harmony/>

¹³ Александр Носович, “Получите, что заслужили: русофобия погубила транзитную отрасль Латвии”, 13.02.2020, RUBALTIC.RU. <https://www.rubaltic.ru/article/ekonomika-i-biznes/13022020-poluchite-cto-zasluzhili-rusofobiya-pogubila-tranzitnyuyu-otrasl-latvii/>

¹⁴ “Денег мало, умирают рано: Еврокомиссия вновь указала Латвии на бедность медицины,” 02.06.2020, Iv.Sputniknews.ru, Available: <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/Latvia/20200602/13831363/Deneg-malo-umirayut-rano-Evrokomissiya-vnov-ukazala-Latvii-na-bednost-meditsiny.html>

¹⁵ “Коронавирус изобрели в Латвии? А почему бы и нет,” 15.03.2020, Iv.Sputniknews.ru, Available: <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/Latvia/20200315/13379140/Koronavirus-izobreli-v-Latvii-A-pochemu-by-i-net.html>

¹⁶ Andis Kudors, “Krievijas dezinformācija un reakcija uz to 2018. gadā,” 10.01.2019, Latvijas Portāls, Available: <https://lvportals.lv/norises/301246-krievijas-dezinformacija-un-reakcija-uz-to-2018-gada-2019>



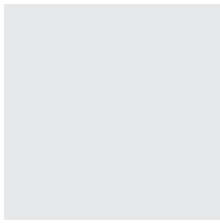


Conclusions

While some globally infamous conspiracy theories are not widely accepted by Latvians, this does not exclude the possibility that similar narratives with a regional undertone, also a threat to national security and democracy, can gain traction. These theories mostly originate from pro-Kremlin oriented media outlets that are popular in Latvia.

Latvia's complex media ecosystem, in generating a wide range of content through conventional forums (newspapers and television) and the digital sphere, is a source of consternation. The regulatory oversight necessary to combat misinformation and conspiracy theories is lacking in the sector. The coronavirus pandemic, nevertheless, has served as a turning point underscoring the fragility of politics in Latvia and the risks of rampant online disinformation. When populist parties and politicians use misinformation for political advantage, democracy becomes a potential casualty





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