

## POLICY MEMO

# Moscow's Disinformation Offensive During COVID-19: The Case of Lithuania

RICHARD WEITZ AND AURIMAS LUKAS PIECIUKAITIS

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Russian media outlets have waged a comprehensive disinformation campaign throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Both the US State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) and the EU External Action Service (EEAS) have identified numerous stories in Kremlin-linked accounts that have sought to discredit the policies and performance of Western democracies, while conversely painting Russian actions in a most positive light.<sup>1</sup> According to the GEC, throughout the pandemic, "the full Russian ecosystem of official state media, proxy news sites, and social media personas have been pushing multiple disinformation narratives."<sup>2</sup>

Though Soviet propaganda made ready use of print and broadcast media, the advent of internet-based social media such as Twitter and Facebook have offered authoritarian governments new opportunities to promote disinformation through multi-dimensional influence campaigns. These practices have included:

- Establishing false persona (inauthentic actors) on social media
- Creating online social communities, such as Facebook groups, organized around political issues or other values (e.g., pro-gun rights groups, anti-racists, militant environmentalists), often by exploiting the hyperlinks and "like" features of software algorithms that reinforce messaging
- Mobilizing so-called "troll farms" of hired shift workers, often physically co-located, who manually engineer mass social media disinformation campaigns; one of the best known of these is the Kremlin-linked Internet Research Agency
- Using automated social media accounts ("bots") that employ algorithms to rapidly disseminate messages that can overshadow other narratives
- Using microtargeting to target messages for precise groups (e.g., communicating one message to right-wing populists and another to left-wing anarchists)

- Undermining trust in government messaging, independent journalists, and established media sources to create space for false messages (i.e., to support the idea that there are no objective facts and that all truth is relative)
- Exacerbating or engineering internet conflicts to boost audience attention and promote divisions among targeted audiences
- Malign actors combine these techniques in comprehensive, state-sponsored information operations.

According to open-source data, Russian disinformation tactics during the pandemic have combined messages in publicly-controlled TV broadcasts, newspaper columns, or other media under government control, with disinformation transmitted through inauthentic social media accounts with unacknowledged or obscured ties to Russian government agencies.<sup>3</sup> These crafted narratives have been directed at the United States, European democracies, and other foreign and domestic audiences. Lithuania, as a front-line state anchoring NATO's eastern defenses against Russia, has long been a target of Moscow's disinformation operations.

In general, Russian government propaganda aims to depict Baltic countries as flawed and failing states. By distorting history, Moscow strives to obscure or justify the Soviet Union's brutal occupation of the Baltic republics. Furthermore, Kremlin-linked media deceitfully characterizes the Baltics' post-independence policies as being under the control of neo-fascists. The latter falsehood helps Russia incite political and cultural divisions within Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Russian information managers also attempt to drive a wedge between the Baltic states and their EU and NATO allies while emphasizing the necessity of Russia's neighbors deferring more to Moscow's priorities.<sup>4</sup>

The presence of NATO forces in the Baltics is a frequent target of Russia's disinformation campaigns. In 2017, the speaker of

the Lithuanian parliament and others received false information that some of NATO's German soldiers raped a young girl.<sup>5</sup> That same year, members of the Lithuanian parliament received e-mails falsely alleging that the commander of a NATO multinational battlegroup was a Russian agent.<sup>6</sup> In 2019, fake stories about German tanks desecrating a Jewish cemetery in Lithuania were shared through e-mails and social media.<sup>7</sup> In the summer of 2018, hacked news sites claimed that NATO-Lithuanian military exercises had tested weapons of mass destruction and that radioactive material contaminated the Neris river.<sup>8</sup> Unsurprisingly, the State Security Department of Lithuania predicts additional cyber-enabled disinformation attacks on the NATO forces in the country.<sup>9</sup>

### The Attack on Lithuania

The COVID-19 pandemic has become another opportunity for Russian propagandists to pursue their goals. The Lithuanian Ministry of National Defense recorded nearly 1,500 cases of disinformation related to COVID-19 between February and June 2020. Social media outlets such as Facebook and YouTube were popular means of disseminating this malign messaging.<sup>10</sup>

This campaign sought to make Lithuanians view Russian policies positively, distrust their own government's response to the pandemic, and question the support they were receiving from their Western partners. The pro-Kremlin public media and its inauthentic social media networks, distributed this misleading and harmful information.<sup>11</sup>

In the former category, the Russian government-funded news channel Sputnik waged a comprehensive propaganda campaign in Lithuania. For example, one Sputnik column with the headline "'Conspiracy' — 'virus 9/11'," claimed that Americans created the coronavirus to promote US national interests at the world's expense.<sup>12</sup>

Much of Sputnik's coverage related to COVID-19 is intended to cast doubt on Western solidarity with the Lithuanian people

in their time of need. For instance, one headline declared that “Brussels Decided to Restore the EU Core at the Expense of the Baltic Countries.”<sup>13</sup> Another “warned” about how Lithuania suffered an “Unexpected Attack” when the coronavirus came to the Baltics from its Western partners.<sup>14</sup> Other headlines included:

- “Expert: EU is Determined to Accuse Russian “Disinformation” in Order to Not Admit Its Own Fault”<sup>15</sup>
- “Crisis of Solidarity: Will Europe Be Able to Rescue Itself?”<sup>16</sup>
- “Senior Partners Do Not Allow Some EU Countries to Ask for Assistance from Russia”<sup>17</sup> and
- “Expert: EU’s Unity Has Collapsed Against the Real Threat of Coronavirus.”<sup>18</sup>

Sputnik further questioned the value of NATO membership with headlines such as:

- “Article 5 Hasn’t Worked: NATO Collapses against Coronavirus’ Blows”<sup>19</sup>
- “Expert: Lithuania is Afraid That NATO Will Fight Not Russia, but COVID-19”;<sup>20</sup> and
- “Expert: NATO Exercises Will Anger Europeans Who Are Afraid of Coronavirus.”<sup>21</sup>

Several social media groups were useful for Kremlin-backed COVID-19 disinformation campaign. Their users spread disinformation about 5G networks; vaccines; Soviet and Russian history; and international developments, in which they highlighted the racial protests in the United States. Some of them also belittled Lithuania’s donation of medical supplies to the United States.<sup>22</sup> At its peak, the conspiracy Facebook group “Unfollow 15min.lt” had 50,000 members. After it was banned by Facebook, other groups (“Unfollow Delfi.lt”, “UNFOLLOW MAKARONAVIRUS MEDIA”, “UNFOLLOW 15MIN.LT - Lithuania

Real”) continued to spread disinformation about Lithuania and COVID-19. The word “unfollow” in the name of those groups is used to discredit Lithuanian mainstream media for falsely hiding “the truth” about COVID-19.

Furthermore, social media accounts favorable to Russia shared a planted article in the Lithuanian news site bukimevienigi. It that claimed the Polish government had prevented Russian planes from conveying humanitarian aid to Italy through Polish airspace (even though Poland and Italy were, like Lithuania, NATO allies).<sup>23</sup> Additionally, fake news circulated in Baltic web sites that a contingent of the Canadian-led NATO battle group in Latvia had “a high number” of COVID cases.<sup>24</sup> The Russian disinformation campaign likely included the standard so-called “hack and pack” attacks. For example, fake news stories about a US soldier in Lithuania having COVID symptoms were published in several Lithuanian news sites that had been hacked.<sup>25</sup> By the same token, Lithuania’s Defense Minister and various news outlets received a fake letter purportedly from the NATO Secretary General, alleging that the alliance had decided to withdraw NATO troops from Lithuania.<sup>26</sup>

These actions against NATO are part of the so-called “Ghostwriter” campaign that was recently analyzed by the cybersecurity firm FireEye. Their experts examined 15 operations from the past three years in Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland. According to the report, anti-NATO and anti-US themes were spread by using hacked news websites. Falsified quotes, correspondence, and other documents from officials and politicians have supplemented fake messages. Meanwhile, inauthentic personas posing as journalists, analysts, or local citizens have been using this content in articles published on pro-Russian sites or blogs. Propagandists also used falsified emails and social media accounts to share messages castigating the presence of NATO forces and other allies in the region. Although FireEye does not attribute these operations to a specific actor or group, it notes that the narratives of the Ghostwriter campaign “have aligned with Russian security interests.”<sup>27</sup>

Russian media outlets also sought to depict the leaders of the Baltic countries as failing to protect their people from the crisis. Headlines in Sputnik include: “The War of All Against All? Outbreaks of Aggression in Lithuania During COVID-19 Quarantine.”<sup>28</sup> Lithuanian authorities reported how bots or fake accounts attempted to undermine trust in public institutions by attacking key government institutions, such as the President’s Office or the Ministry of Health. A favorite tactic was spamming the Internet with comments to the effect that the Lithuanian government was failing its people.<sup>29</sup> Other social media groups, such as “Unfollow 15min.lt” tried to organize protests against the government’s quarantine.<sup>30</sup> Local influencers who were critical of the government’s response were regularly cited in these sources.<sup>31</sup> One article in Sputnik complained about the treatment of NATO soldiers with COVID-19 in Lithuania and mentioned a so-called “expert” who claims that the Lithuanian medical system has been “destroyed” and now suffers from the same healthcare problems as Italy, Spain, and France.<sup>32</sup> The Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Lab analysis of messaging in the pro-Kremlin media that primarily targeted Baltic audience found claims that that the COVID-19 crisis was causing a collapse of their economies, which would lead them to turn back to Russia.<sup>33</sup>

A satirical article in Sputnik, in the form of a concocted dialogue, accused Lithuanian officials of not caring about their own people and instead diverting scarce medical supplies needed at home to provide assistance to Ukraine, Armenia, or the United States. The satire further contrasted how Americans, despite being held in high regard by some Lithuanians, had not sent COVID-related medical aid to Lithuania, while China had done so, despite the Lithuanian government’s support for Washington’s policies regarding Tibet and Hong Kong.<sup>34</sup>

Disinformation related to COVID-19 followed the pattern of depicting Lithuania as a malfunctioning state in dire need of Russia’s help but suffering from excessive Russophobia and

misplaced faith in Western assistance. A likely planted story in *EurAsia Daily*, with fake statistics and fabricated comments from Lithuanian officials, warned that the COVID-19-related restrictions on Russian and Belarusian visitors meant that tourism to Lithuania “fell to stagnation.”<sup>35</sup> Another story claimed that Lithuania had failed to control the crisis because of its “infection of anti-Russian sentiment.”<sup>36</sup> Russian-linked media similarly argued that “Russophobic people in Poland and [the] Baltics were seeking to discredit Russian medical assistance to Italy” due to their anti-Moscow biases.<sup>37</sup>

Although these examples demonstrate how the Russian propaganda machine used COVID-19 to undermine the Baltic populations’ trust in the West and attack Lithuania’s alliance with the West, other articles aimed to discredit the US media as a reliable source of information by depicting its coverage as a form of official propaganda. For example, when US officials warned in May that Chinese hackers were targeting research on coronavirus vaccines, a Sputnik headline disparaged the warning as “Spies’ Mania,” suggesting that the US government sought to exploit the pandemic to score propaganda points against China.<sup>38</sup> Sputnik likewise defended China’s “mask diplomacy” and influence campaign in Lithuania.<sup>39</sup> One article in Sputnik claimed that Washington’s criticism towards China is dangerous not only due to its harm to the world economy but also because it obscured how “China was the first [country] to deal with the pandemic and to restore [its] economy.”<sup>40</sup> Another story criticized the United States for seeking to discredit the COVID response of the pro-Moscow Syrian regime led by Bashar al-Assad as benefitting the fighters that both the Russian and Syrian regimes consider as terrorists.<sup>41</sup> Several reports accused the US media of denigrating Russian successes in fighting against COVID.<sup>42</sup> The stories likewise praised Russians for containing the virus at home, while rendering valuable assistance to other countries.<sup>43</sup>

Sputnik has different versions across countries which adapt similar themes to different local circumstances. For example,

after Lithuania sent financial humanitarian assistance to Belarus, Belarusian Sputnik belittled the amount and observed that China “regularly” provides such humanitarian aid.<sup>44</sup> Additional articles in Belarusian Sputnik stressed that, despite the pandemic, Lithuanians remain hostile not only to Russians but to the people of Belarus.<sup>45</sup>

### The Way Ahead

After Lithuania lifted many COVID-19 restrictions in June, officials reported a decrease in virus-related disinformation. That month, the reported number of new cases fell to half as many compared to the pandemic’s peak in March or April.<sup>46</sup> Other topics such as the protests in Belarus, upcoming parliamentary election, national economic or social issues, and the Kremlin’s historical revisionism of World War II became more frequent targets for Russia-related media postings and information attacks.

Surveys of Lithuanian public opinion about the issues targeted by Russian propaganda found that the views have not changed dramatically during the first months of pandemic. More importantly, Moscow’s disinformation campaign failed to undermine popular support for Lithuania’s association with institutions like the EU or NATO, or for the government’s response to the crisis. For example, a poll published in the Baltic News Service showed that in March some two thirds of the respondents said that government institutions were responding properly to COVID-19.<sup>47</sup> In June, this number was only slightly lower, at almost 59%.<sup>48</sup> A survey in April by Spinter Research also found that more than two thirds of Lithuanians were willing to receive a vaccine against COVID-19 despite the anti-vaccine misinformation spread by conspiracy theorists.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, a poll conducted in April and May by Spinter Research and the Eastern Europe Studies Center found that one-third of Lithuanians were dissatisfied with democracy, a figure that has decreased slightly in recent years.<sup>50</sup> This figure is important since studies show that people who are dissatisfied

with democracy tend to perceive Russia in a more positive light.<sup>51</sup> In addition, 64% of Lithuanians polled in June identified Russian foreign policy as threatening, and three-quarters of the respondents described the United States as a friendly state. Analysts in Lithuania also find a strong connection between society’s resilience against propaganda and people’s trust in NATO and support for the EU.<sup>52</sup> Although only 26% of the respondents agreed that the EU had responded to the pandemic properly, the poll found that Lithuanians remain strong supporters of both the EU and NATO.<sup>53</sup>

It is unfortunate then that social media groups supporting COVID-19-related conspiracy theories have attracted tens of thousands of followers. Through these channels, users have organized an anti-quarantine protest in the vicinity of the national parliament.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, the groups formed during the pandemic are becoming channels to spread disinformation unrelated to COVID-19. The current crisis has been a valuable opportunity for the Kremlin to refine its methods for spreading disinformation in future information operations against Lithuania and other democracies. Another serious challenge is that social media and other online platforms comprise only a part of the Russian disinformation assets targeting Lithuanians. Television, the main source of news for many Lithuanians, remains a major channel of Russian propaganda.<sup>55</sup> Unrelated to the COVID-19 crisis, the Lithuanian government in July followed Latvia’s example and banned the broadcast of RT due to the channel’s connections with Dmitry Kiselyov, who has been sanctioned by the EU for promoting propaganda in support of Moscow’s annexation of Crimea.<sup>56</sup>

On balance, the institutions and people of Lithuania proved able to thwart COVID-19-related disinformation threats in line with the guidance offered in Lithuania’s 2017 defense policy white paper.<sup>57</sup> The Strategic Communications Department constantly monitors information flows and alerts the government and public about disinformation threats. The Lithuanian military specialists assigned to the State Emergency Operations Center

managing the response to the COVID-19 crisis have adeptly coordinated the response to disinformation. At the same time, the Lithuanian media have been debunking conspiracy theories and Russian disinformation narratives in social media. Most popular news outlets have run fact checking initiatives, collaborated with disinformation experts and think tanks, and educated audiences on how to identify COVID-19-related fake news. In response to the Russian information warfare in social media, Lithuanians have formed groups to discuss and counter this threat. One of the most prominent group, which fights against online trolls, is called “Elfs.” Even before the pandemic, volunteers, experts, government specialists, and the country’s leading media companies launched demaskuok. It (in English – debunk.eu), a website devoted to combating disinformation in real time.<sup>58</sup> These civic actions have helped debunk false narratives during the pandemic. Public awareness about foreign-sponsored disinformation operations have been increasing. A recent poll found that 68% of Lithuanians said they had encountered fake news.<sup>59</sup>

Nevertheless, Western democracies must remain vigilant about Russian disinformation threats. Russia’s COVID-19 related disinformation campaign against Lithuania is just one of many

Moscow’s attacks against Western democracies. Russia’s recent disinformation campaign during the pandemic has included major foreign medical assistance operations; more targeted manipulation of existing social media debates; greater coordination with China’s foreign-influence operation; and an overtly focused effort at securing sanctions relief for Moscow and its partners. Nonetheless, the campaign has failed to obscure Russia’s own COVID-related setbacks, induce even Russian aid recipients to relax their economic restrictions, or gain visible high-level official support in Moscow. As Russia upgrades its disinformation arsenal, Lithuania’s case presents valuable lessons for other governmental and civic groups fighting Russian disinformation.

*Richard Weitz is the Senior Fellow and Director, Center for Political Military Analysis at Hudson Institute.*

*Aurimas Lukas Pieciukaitis is a Baltic-American Freedom Foundation Intern at Hudson Institute.*

*Edited by Gabriella Small, former Research Intern at Hudson Institute and currently a student at the University of Iowa College of Law.*

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### **Hudson Institute**

1201 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Fourth Floor  
Washington, D.C. 20004

+1.202.974.2400  
[info@hudson.org](mailto:info@hudson.org)  
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