



Countering disinformation in the Baltics: collaborative strategies and innovative solutions

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The Baltic states are continuously targeted by Russia's ongoing information warfare. Russia's disinformation campaigns, which encompass false narratives spread through Kremlin-controlled media outlets and the manipulation of social media trolls, pose a significant threat to the security and stability of the region, while distorting the truth and influencing public opinion.

Since 24 February 2022, Russia has utilised disinformation in the Baltic states as a means to conceal the war crimes committed by its soldiers, justify its assault on Ukraine and erode Western support for Ukraine's defensive operations. The Baltic republics have responded by taking significant measures to combat Russian propaganda and disinformation from both external and internal actors. These initiatives include promoting independent journalism, enhancing media literacy and implementing stricter measures against Russian disinformation tools.

Organised by Friends of Europe and Google on 21 June 2023 in Vilnius, Lithuania, the roundtable gathered various stakeholders involved in countering disinformation and foreign malign influence in the Baltic region. The participants included high-level policymakers, activists, researchers, civil society leaders, as well as representatives from technology and data companies. The objective of the discussion was to address the challenges faced by the Baltic states in countering disinformation, along with exploring possible strategies and solutions to overcome them.

To set the scene, Google and YouTube representatives delivered a presentation to outline their approach on countering Russian disinformation campaigns in the Baltics, focusing on the three pillars of responsibility used by both companies to assess whether specific content qualifies as disinformation. The three pillars include removing violative content, connecting to authoritative information and reward creators that meet a high bar. The presentation also highlighted that Google's actions go beyond removing harmful content, such as election misinformation, as their anti-disinformation policies also include partnerships with local civil society actors aimed at enhancing media literacy, fact-checking initiatives and projects enhancing plurality and quality of local media environment. After the scene-setting, Friends of Europe's Senior Fellow and former Reuters Brussels bureau chief, Paul Taylor, opened the debate.

Regarding the challenges, several participants emphasised the effectiveness of the Baltic states in combating disinformation originating from Russia. Local authorities have developed a robust understanding of Russia's disinformation tactics, such as the use of troll farms, manipulation of political narratives on social media and use of pro-Kremlin TV channels and newspapers. To counter these threats,

“ The Baltics have enacted a whole spectrum of legislation on disinformation.

and taken robust and highly restrictive executive actions, such as banning Kremlin-backed TV channels and websites.

However, there are still weaknesses that the stakeholders involved in countering disinformation in the Baltics need to overcome in order to enhance the efficiency of their strategies to counter and mitigate the impacts of information manipulation. Firstly, the participants highlighted the lack of transparent communication about the efforts to combat disinformation and foreign malign influence. In this regard, almost all participants agreed that there was a need for more transparency from both governments and online platforms on what criteria they use to identify disinformation and how efficiently they are limiting the spread of harmful and false narratives.

Given the specific geopolitical, cultural and historic context of the Baltic states, many participants highlighted that they saw the difficulty to convince online platforms to acknowledge “their role in the geopolitical game” as a significant challenge, in particular when it comes to halting the spread of Russian disinformation on the war in Ukraine in the Global South. According to several participants, online platforms need to accept this responsibility and act accordingly, focusing more on achieving goals rather than getting entangled in bureaucratic processes.

“ Increasing society's resilience to disinformation and fake news is a crucial aspect that must be addressed in the Baltic region.

Establishing dialogue with the population, particularly with groups vulnerable to disinformation, is important and a better way to empower people to confront disinformation as opposed to shaming them for falling victim to fake news. To enhance societal resilience against disinformation, many participants highlighted the need for greater support for public broadcasting to rebuild trust in the media that has been eroding on a global scale. To achieve this, strengthening independent media and establishing media support funds are key to fostering trust in the region.

Another key role in countering disinformation and raising societal resilience against this phenomenon must be played by the education system. Schools and the education system in general play a vital role in raising awareness about disinformation among the younger generation.

“ Schools should emphasise critical thinking, media literacy and the importance of verifying information through multiple reliable sources.

Video games and popular culture can also be utilised by governments, schools and civil society campaigns as efficient tools to reach the younger generation.

Several civil society representatives emphasised that Baltic governments need to take further steps to shut down channels aligned with Kremlin’s views and enhance monitoring of the information environment and media to identify potential hostile influence and disinformation campaigns. They should also impose stronger sanctions on individuals responsible for such actions.

Civil society in the Baltic region, including independent researchers and NGOs, should receive support in their research and awareness-raising efforts. They can effectively reach different audiences through events, working groups, conferences and other discussions, thereby increasing awareness of disinformation and its dangers. Strengthening the multistakeholder aspect of civil society campaigns designed to counter disinformation is crucial.

Tech and data companies play a pivotal role in countering disinformation in the Baltic region too. They must adhere to EU regulations on combating fake news and disinformation campaigns, rather than relying on self-regulation. Furthermore, they need to collaborate more closely with the media and governments in the fight against disinformation. This includes removing false narratives and disinformation campaigns from social media and other platforms. They should also enhance their tools to identify and combat misinformation, based on an unbiased and neutral approach.

Overall, the key message from the roundtable participants emphasised the need for increased cooperation among all actors involved in countering disinformation.

“ Online platforms, governments, civil society actors and academics must increase their cooperative efforts and work closely to combat hostile influence targeting the Baltic states and their citizens.

Despite the good standing of the region when it comes to its vulnerability to external disinformation, more needs to be done by all stakeholders involved in the fight against disinformation in the region, including public institutions, tech and social media companies, activists, NGO leaders and researchers. The goal is to build a more resilient society that can resist the spread of fake news and disinformation in the region.

Recommendations

For governments:

- **Increase transparency:** Governments should communicate more transparently about their efforts to combat disinformation in the Baltic region.
- **Strengthen legislation:** Governments should enact stronger legislation to counter disinformation, including banning Kremlin-backed channels and implementing laws to restrict the spread of fake news by bots.
- **Monitor and sanction:** Governments should increase monitoring of the information environment and media to detect potential hostile influence and disinformation campaigns. They should also impose stronger sanctions on individuals responsible for these actions.
- **Support public broadcasting:** Governments should provide support to public broadcasts to rebuild trust in the media within the region.
- **Empower education systems:** Governments should focus on incorporating education programmes that promote critical thinking, media literacy and the importance of verifying information from multiple reliable sources.

For online companies:

- **Collaborate with media and governments:** Private companies should work closely with media and governments in combating disinformation. This includes removing false narratives and disinformation campaigns from social media and other platforms.
- **Enhance tools and policies:** Private companies should strengthen their tools for identifying and combating misinformation, based on an unbiased and neutral approach. They should also develop stronger policies dedicated to countering disinformation.
- **Support civil society:** Private companies should provide support to civil society organisations, including researchers and NGOs, that are actively engaged in countering disinformation. This can be done through funding, collaboration and raising awareness.



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