LEAKED KREMLIN PLANS CONSIDERING **THE BALTICS**

Ways of influence in Lithuania:
failures and successes

About The Beacon Project

The International Republican Institute strengthens citizen voices and helps make their leaders more accountable and responsive. To put it simply, IRI encourages democracy in places where it is absent, helps democracy become more effective where it is in danger and shares best practices where democracy is flourishing.

Vladimir Putin is actively trying to sway public opinion throughout Europe using hostile propaganda, disinformation, and political subversion as a way to destabilize its neighbors. Therefore, in 2015, IRI launched the Beacon Project to counteract this misinformation.

The Beacon Project does not prevent disinformation from occurring—a laudable but impossible goal. Nor does it confront every instance of disinformation—though we work with partners who do just that. IRI's focus is to dismantle the underlying conditions that allow disinformation to spread. Strengthening democracy is the best approach for nations to respond not just to today's threat, but to better endure in the face of future threats in whatever form they take.

Publication Details

Introduction

Citizens of Lithuania were surprised recently by the **news of a leaked Kremlin documents**. These classified documents were **accessed by the Baltic investigative journalism centre** Re: Baltica. In Lithuania, the documents were obtained by the Lithuanian National Radio and Television (LRT) Investigation Team alongside its partners: Estonia's Delfi, Sweden's Expressen, the London-based investigative journalism centre Dossier, Latvia's Re:Baltica, Germany's Süddeutsche Zeitung, WDR and NDR, Ukraine's Kyiv Independent, Poland's Frontstory, and Central Europe's Vsquare.

The strategic documents prepared by the Russian presidential administration for Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia outline Kremlin plans for maintaining the Russian language in schools, establishing pro-Russian organizations, and preventing the demolition of Soviet monuments. The Kremlin's unique plan for Lithuania is preparing to convince Lithuanian business people about the prospects of the Russian market. The general overview reveals that Russia devotes most of its resources and attention to actions that should weaken NATO's influence in the Baltic states, which significantly corresponds with the NATO Summit in the capital of Lithuania this July. In this report, we will analyze how the Kremlin seeks to influence current events in Lithuania.

Documents' overview

These Kremlin documents were prepared by the Interregional and Cultural Relations Board, directly under the administration of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Approximately one **month** prior to this revelation, an international team of journalists had already announced the plans of the same Kremlin institution for Belarus and Moldova. The plan for the Baltics and similar documents for Belarus and Moldova countries in the Kremlin **were prepared in the autumn** of 2021. At that time, Russia was preparing for a military invasion of Ukraine.

The plans for each Baltic country have two parts. The first document defines the threats to Russia, and the second defines actions to overcome them. Political, military, military-technical and security-related objectives, trade and economic and finally, humanitarian or societal objectives are divided into three different time frames: short-term (up to 2022), medium-term (2025) and long-term (2030).

Among the main goals to achieve in Lithuania, the Kremlin has listed the prevention of NATO members from establishing a military presence in the country, expansion of the Russian culture, protection of Russian economic partners engaged in trade with Lithuania, preserving the monuments and, ultimately, restoring a constructive relationship with Russia. Trying to achieve them, the Kremlin has dived into different measures and used a scope of resources. Selected main Russian activities in Lithuania will be further analysed in separate sections (Spread of the anti-government narrative, Demolishment of Soviet monuments, Anti-NATO narrative, Oppressed minorities), evaluating the Kremlin's main tactics to achieve its goals and analysing their potential successes and failures.

Spread of the anti-government narrative

According to the data provided by CrowdTangle and Station.ee monitoring tools, the anti-government narrative has been the most constant one among the Kremlin-aligned most common narratives. Throughout the last year, it's been the most repetitive one, combining different accusations against the government of Lithuania, including statements that it is an undemocratic, fascist or a Nazi state (e.g. **bukimevieningi.lt**), that it is a "*vassal for U.S.*" (e.g. **bukimevieningi.lt**), that the government is generally incompetent to rule the country (e.g. **respublika.lt**), constantly harms human rights and freedoms (e.g. **laisvaslaikrastis.lt**) or that the government is rather authoritarian than democratic (**ekspertai.eu**). Usually, harshly criticism of the government and ruling officials, commenting on worsening living conditions and other domestic issues comes with the spread of anti-Ukraine narratives. The Kremlin-aligned outlets use this narrative to emphasise the government prioritising Ukraine's matters over domestic problems.

Noteworthy, many complaints targeting the ruling government of Lithuania are usually not supported with any logical or valid reasoning. However, the consistency of this narrative's presence in the data provided by monitoring tools reveals the importance of anti-government sentiments within the audience of Kremlin-aligned media and one of the most permanent tools of pro-Kremlin powers. By constantly mocking the government and persuading that all of the ruling politicians are rigged, incompetent and untrustworthy, Kremlin-aligned actors try to create mistrust of the government, turn the citizens against their own elected officials and make the audience easier to manipulate with malign information, benefiting the spreader of disinformation.

Examples of caricatures used by Kremlin-aligned outlets to mock the ruling government (Dainius Kreivys, Minister of Energy of Lithuania, on the left and Ingrida Šimonytė, Prime Minister of Lithuania, on the right. Respublika.lt and musutv.lt examples)

Recently, the government of Lithuania has been suffering from different kinds of scandals (charges against MP Kristijonas Bartoševičius **for possible child abuse**, the scandal of President Nausėda and his failure to disclose **prior membership of the Communist Party** or the resignation of the Minister of Education, Science, and Sports of Lithuania Jurgita Šiugždinienė who **was suspected of abusing municipal funds**). And even though the most prominent spreaders of anti-government narratives have always been Kremlin-aligned outlets; however, such wide coverage of the scandals within the independent media created the possibility of increasing anti-government sentiments among new audiences. The constant flow of news portraying the whole ruling government in a negative light might have a strong effect and serve a lot of surprises in the upcoming Presidential and Parliamentary **elections next year**, especially when discussions are currently taking place regarding the possibility of organizing **early Parliamentary elections**.
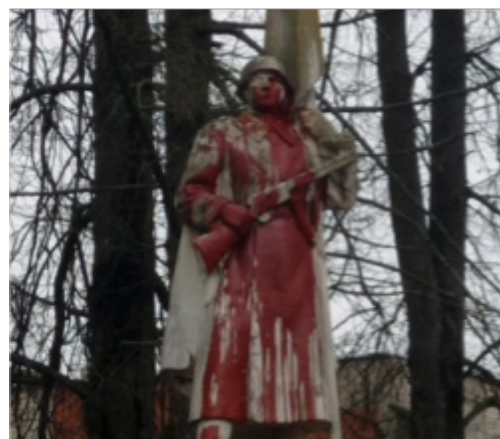
Demolishment of Soviet monuments

Another tactic Kremlin-aligned powers used is searching for retrospective sentiments and praising history through Soviet monuments. The campaign for the defence of Soviet monuments, envisaged in the Kremlin's strategic plan, was launched after Russia invaded Ukraine: it was stated that one of the short-term plans of the Kremlin in Lithunain country in 2022 was to "*create new public structures, foundations, NGOs that would promote and defend closer cooperation with Russia.*" The document also talks extensively about the preservation of historical memory, for example, efforts to stop the demolition of Soviet monuments. It corresponds well with the incidents related to Soviet memorial removals covered by Lithuanian media between April and October of 2022.

As an initiative to remove all 150 Soviet monuments in Lithuania was launched, it received a great deal of support on social media. However, the pro-Kremlin website operating in Lithuania, **bukimevieningi.lt,** offered an alternative view, voicing Kremlin-aligned narratives. Its journalists claimed that cases of "*vandalism*" of Soviet monuments, when they are damaged by red paint (see picture lower on the left), are not only unlawful but are the direct consequence of Lithuanians' Russophobic attitudes. Echoing President Putin's expressed rationale for invading Ukraine, the authors emphasise that if there are more such cases, it would be possible to say that this active "*promotion of Russophobia*" in Lithuania **is a call for Russia** to actually "*come and defend people from Nazis*". Despite that, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania, together with mayors of the Lithuanian cities, was further working on the total removal of Soviet monuments.

In October 2022, Lithuania's plans to remove probably the biggest Soviet sculptures dedicated to the memory of Soviet soldiers at Antakalnis Cemetery were postponed **after the United Nations Human Rights Committee put interim measures in place**. Following this decision, the monument was vandalised (picture on the lower right, the graffiti meaning a homophobic slur). Most political scientists widely quoted by Independent media supported the idea, stating that "*such monuments are marking the territory for occupants*" (**Tomas Janeliūnas**). Meanwhile, society has already then expressed different opinions, with many people either unreservedly praising Lithuania's history, including the Soviet times, or condemning Soviet heritage and supporting the demolition of Soviet monuments.

Meanwhile, Kremlin-aligned outlet ekspertai.eu presented its **own version of the event** and made it more about the LGBT movement rather than a message regarding the former Soviet Union. The author of the article first emphasised that it was the sculptures of "*Soviet soldiers, who bravely fought against Nazi Germany*" that have been desecrated. The author claimed that whoever did this is associated with the "*community of Landsbergiai*", referring to the family of former and current politicians in the country. The article ended by ironically stating that the graffiti was "*disparaging gays, lesbians, transsexuals, other transformers and the rest of the people who profess to be different*" and should be cleaned by a city-owned street maintenance company. The comments section was short but unanimously condemned the vandals and stated that security measures should be taken to ensure that such incidents cannot happen again.

Examples of Kremlin-aligned outlets using the vandalism of or intentions to abolish the Soviet monuments to voice their narratives: Bukimevieningi.lt and ekspertai.eu examples

Anti-NATO narrative

As mentioned before, the greatest attention in the strategic document for the Baltic countries is devoted to NATO's role in the region. Even before the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia was concerned with stopping the growth of the military participation of the United States and other NATO member countries in the territory of Lithuania and the larger deployment of NATO forces, as well as preventing the participation of Lithuania by including the countries of the post-Soviet space into the NATO sphere of influence. Throughout 2022, the narrative agitating against NATO and claiming that "*NATO is an aggressive and offensive military alliance*" **was among the most popular and most spread by the Kremlin-aligned actors**. Station.ee and CrowdTangle tools reveal that main spikes of narrative popularity were visible after the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, trying to ensure that NATO is untrustworthy and incapable of securing the region organisation and around now, as **NATO Summit is taking place in Vilnius** this year is approaching.

The document shows that the greatest dissatisfaction with the Kremlin is not only in the short term but also in the long term until 2030. NATO plans to deploy a permanent base in Lithuania in the future and, in their words, to militarise the territory of Lithuania. The Kremlin plan states that the aim is to prevent the

placement of medium-range anti-missile and anti-aircraft systems integrated into the unified NATO anti-aircraft system on the territory of Lithuania and to reduce the quantities and scope of NATO's operational and military preparedness measures on the territory of Lithuania. And in the long-term perspective, Russia plans to create conditions under which the authorities of Lithuania would be forced to acknowledge the potential damage to the country's national security due to NATO's increasing influence in the region. By doing so, Lithuania could restore constructive relations between Lithuania and Russia, also in the military field. Meanwhile, the population's positive attitude towards the presence of NATO allied forces in Lithuania is strong with 90 percent expressing their support for it and 89 percent of respondents expressing support for Lithuania's membership in NATO of **those interviewed in public polls.**

Efforts of pro-Kremlin powers to part the paths of NATO and Lithuania appeared in different ways. Back in June of 2022, one of the most discussed in Lithuanian media was a possible move by the Russian Parliament – after more than 30 years – **to "*cancel*" the independence of Lithuania**. The law was drafted by a member of the United Russia party, Evgeny Fedorov, and was published in the electronic database of the Russian Parliament. According to the author of the initiative, the decision to make Lithuania an independent country was illegal because it was adopted by a body that was unconstitutional. Commenting on his initiative to the media, Fyodorov explained that in this way, a "*legal basis for Lithuania's withdrawal from NATO*" could be created, as the country would become a disputed territory.

The common narrative re-occurring throughout Kremlin-aligned media claims that NATO is worthless and causes danger instead of ensuring security. Articles holding this narrative usually claim that **NATO causes a fatal threat to Lithuania and the whole world** by providing endless weapons to Ukraine and that it is a **threat rather than a security warranty,** further raising tensions with Russia, causing panic by claiming that **NATO is planning to send Lithuanians straight to the battlefield** to die for Ukraine and many more. Efforts to belittle NATO's role in the security of Lithuania and the region are very constant. And although they do not seem very successful right now, basing it on the public polls conducted in Lithuania, as Kremlin leaked documents reveal, they are not going to stop. Having in mind the upcoming NATO Summit in Vilnius, the prominence and volume of NATO-related narratives are expected to grow further and intensify in the near future.

Oppressed minorities

According to the leaked documents, one of the hybrid measures deployed by Russia to develop its influence in the Baltics is the usage of Russian-speaking minorities. In Lithuania, the Russian minority is relatively small – **only five percent of the population**. The Kremlin plans to rely on ethnic Russian minorities in Estonia and Lativa also, where they are larger in numbers; in Lithuania, this segment is a bit more complicated to use properly. However, soon after the start of the war, so-called **"*anti-Russian psychosis*"** in the Baltic states started.

Naturally, since the invasion started, numerous voices in the digital domain have expressed anti-Russian sentiment. Some discussions on social media were very negative towards Russia and Russians, including the Russian minority in Lithuania. This has been exploited by Russian officials. A spokesperson of the Russian foreign ministry, **Maria Zakharova, announced** that due to the "*situation in Ukraine*", the hostility "*from the countries in the front row of anti-Russian hysteria – Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia*" has grown significantly. She called for immediate measures to protect Russia's diplomatic and consular offices and their employees,

as the Baltics are "*offensive towards Russia, its leadership and its people*". She also managed to drag NATO together with it, claiming that in recent decades, they have repeatedly seen illegal, aggressive actions by NATO that were not based on any legal basis or reality. "*On the contrary, the actions of the alliance or its members led to new conflicts,*" **M. Zakharova told Sputnik radio**. Even though most of these statements were welcomed by laughing emojis in Lithuanian media space and mocking comments on "*friendly Russia*", Lithuanian officials still reacted to increasing tensions between the ethnic groups to properly secure inside relations and stop the spread of hostile Russophobic narrative.

As the increasing pressure on the Russian minority continued to be covered by Lithuanian media, independent media recognised and highlighted that this is a consequence of the Ukraine-Russia war, especially with regard to an increase of ethnically-based bullying in schools targeting Russian-speaking children. In response, Lithuanian public figures issued statements clearly differentiating between native Lithuanian Russian speakers and Putin's regime. Additionally, the speaker of the Seimas, Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen, **met with the representatives** of the Lithuanian Russian-speaking community and stated that "*Lithuania trusts their native Russian speakers and that they can trust Lithuania*". A short summary of this meeting which discussed the key issues and potential solutions to them, was published **on social media by one of the civil activists** who participated in the meeting. In Russian language and translated into Lithuanian, both of the posts received substantial support on Facebook.

Conclusions

Even though the pro-Kremlin efforts to influence the Baltic States are constant and aggressive and do not seem to lessen in the meantime, Lithuania is doing its best to counterattack its main measures. As the question of oppressed Russian-speaking minorities and the removal of Soviet monuments are less relevant to voters, issues of growing anti-NATO and anti-government sentiments in the country are taking their place. The support for NATO presence in Lithuania is currently at an all-time high, but the Kremlin-aligned efforts picturing NATO as a poor guarantor of security can have a strong impact on the election results in favor of pro-Kremlin parties.